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GUY HALEY



A THIRD WAR FOR
ARMAGEDDON STORY

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‘There’s definitely something there!’

Brother Sunno leaned over to look through the open door of the driver’s cab, shouting to make himself heard over the throb of Rhino’s engines. He had his helmet off. The atmosphere in the tank was thick and bitter, but better, he said, than breathing endlessly recycled suit air. The four Black Templars in the battered passenger compartment, two novitiates and two initiates, shifted their gazes from whatever internal space they’d been examining and glanced at the forward comms panel. The novitiates blinked slowly, as if perplexed. It had been a hard few days for them all.

‘Bring *Cataphraxes* to a halt,’ ordered Brusc, sword brother of the Ash Waste Crusade, commanding officer of this sorry remnant. He drummed metal-clad fingers on his armoured thigh, rattling out a brief, tinny tattoo in the Rhino’s passenger cab. Near silence fell suddenly as Sunno cut the engine. Small sounds grew large: the wind whistling over the tank’s fittings, muted by thick armour; the almost inaudible whine of power armour at rest; the thunderous breathing of the five giants within the tank.

The communications array on the forward wall hissed unhelpfully, its screen set to seeking auspex and fizzing with green static snow.

Brusc exhaled contemplatively, his eyes shifting to each of the warriors with him. Osruc, Sunno in the cab, the novitiates Marcomar and Doneal, not yet initiates, already mightier than fully grown unenhanced men. The tight scar tissue on his face itched as it always did when he was tired. He did his best to ignore it.

‘Brother Osruc? What say you?’ asked Brusc eventually.

Osruc frowned, stood, took a couple of bowed steps forward and slapped the comms array with his armoured fist. The screen jumped. Thick lines crawled

down from the top. Electric snow returned.

‘Are you sure you should do that, brother?’ asked Brusc. ‘It is not the manner in which I’ve seen the tech-priests address the machine.’

‘Half of what they do is striking things,’ muttered Osruc.

Brusc barked out a laugh. The boys jumped at the noise, they were not yet acquainted with his ways.

‘That’s as may be, but you not know the correct preparatory prayers.’

‘It still works, sword brother, and I’ve got something. Listen!’

‘Fall bac... ..o sector 15... Enem... eeee...’ The vox broke off into a cascade of menacing buzzes.

‘The signal’s getting worse,’ grumbled Brusc. His good humour deserted him as quickly as it came. He was mercurial like that, as Osruc well knew. It made others wary of him, but not Osruc.

‘The Season of Fire on Armageddon. What are we to expect?’ asked Sunno.

‘The Kannheim tower must be down again,’ said Osruc. ‘The orks knock it down as quickly as Munitorum put it up again.’

‘First the satellites, now this,’ said Sunno. ‘The orks are smashing every broadcast tower and mast they come across. They are no fools. We have our orders. Retreat, regroup. Give the word, sword brother, and I’ll add more dust to this accursed storm.’

Brusc said nothing. The wind outside hooted. Storm-blown gravel pattered against the hull.

‘What do you think then, brother? Do we investigate?’ asked Osruc. ‘There’s supposed to be a field hospital hereabouts. It might be that. Standing orders from High Command are to keep watch for stragglers. They might not have heard.’

‘And it might be a nest of orks,’ said Sunno. ‘We are not subject to the orders of any but Marshall Ricard, and he said only to regroup. Let standard humans look out for their own. I say we move on.’

‘Come now! A nest of orks would be well. I could do with wetting my blade, not sitting in this box day in day out,’ said Osruc with a broad smile.

That pleased Brusc. He smiled too, a somewhat hideous expression on his disfigured face, and jabbed his finger at Osruc. ‘Very well. Come on, you’re with me.’

‘Not a waste of time then, brother?’ asked Osruc, addressing Brusc but speaking chiefly to Sunno.

‘Maybe, maybe not,’ said Brusc, ‘but if I leave you in here hitting the machinery you’re likely to so offend Catrphaxes that the Machine-God himself

will seize up your armour. Sunno, stay with the neophytes.'

'Yes, sword brother,' said Sunno. He turned back to the Rhino's drive console, irked that his counsel had not been followed.

'Best cover your mouths, boys,' said Brusc.

'Yes, my lord,' said the neophytes. Already the veterans of fifteen battles, they still cast their eyes down and spoke humbly whenever Brusc addressed them. They called him the Old Man, and not just the neophytes. True, he was the oldest living Black Templar, or so it was reckoned. Perhaps even the oldest of all the Sons of Dorn, saving Captain Lysander of the Imperial Fists, but it was not a name he encouraged here; there was another Old Man on Armageddon. Although far more ancient than Yarrick, Brusc thought the commissar deserved the affection and respect the name best represented.

He regarded the men. Five of the crusaders left from ten, a pitiful score, and a tally of dead he was not relishing relaying to Marshall Ricard. Marcomar had taken the loss of his master particularly hard. His knee jogged up and down, and he gripped his sniper rifle too tightly across his knees. By Brusc's assessment, Marcomar was close to failing the final stages of his initiation. 'Cover your mouths,' he repeated, more gently. He scratched his unnaturally smooth cheek then nodded at Osric. Both of them put their helmets on. Live displays burst into life across Brusc's field of vision as his sensorium engaged. After checking his visual markers to ensure his armour was hale, Brusc activated *Cataphraxes's* door rune with a thought. He and Osric retrieved their weapons from the rack: a chainsword and bolt pistol each.

The Rhino's rear ramp squealed open, its mechanisms fouled by wind-blown dust. Brusc muttered quick thanks to *Cataphraxes's* machine-spirit. He worried it might grow angry, and not only from Osric's less than reverent treatment. Few things made by man were suited to Armageddon's Ash Wastes. Billows of dust and ash flooded the passenger compartment, setting off alarms in the rhino's cab.

Brusc and Osric stamped out into the dust storm. The sound of the alarms were lost instantly to the howl of the gale. They spoke the rites of awakening to prepare their weapons for battle, but they did not clip their wrist lanyard chains in place – not yet.

'Ah, I've got a signal now. Imperial marker beacon. It is the field hospital,' said Osric. A moment later, Brusc had it too.

'Any vox?'

'Nothing,' said Osric.

'Then we better knock.'

The Black Templars were virtually blind, would have been blind were it not for the spirits of their armour. Blinking arrows and compass wheels on their visor interface guided them toward the installation. When they grew close to it, wireframe outlines sprang into life, giving hard edges of light to the shadowy buildings coalescing from the brown air. Only when they were close enough to touch the perimeter fence did the shapes become identifiable as prefabricatum units, the same as could be found on hundreds of thousands of worlds across the galaxy.

‘As you say,’ said Brusc, only putting away his weapons when he confirmed by sight what his suit told him. He apologised to his gun and blade as they maglocked to his armour.

‘Are you sure it is still in human hands?’ said Osruc. He was as reluctant to put up his own gun and sword unblooded.

‘Absolutely,’ said Brusc. ‘I see no sign of orkish defilement, no sign of battle, even.’ They spoke via helmet vox. Their speaker grilles were full of sand, any words spat out of them snatched away by the ferocious wind. The rattle of pumice and sand against their helmets was so loud, they were forced nearly to shout.

Osruc did as Brusc had, attaching his chainsword to his left hip, his bolt pistol to his right. ‘We’ll be lucky to get close without them shooting us,’ said Osruc.

‘They’ll be lucky to survive if they do,’ said Brusc. The storm put him in a poor mood, and he was only half-joking.

They followed the edge of the perimeter, a segmented, plascrete defence line losing its feet in the ash. ‘No one about,’ said Brusc. ‘Sloppy.’

‘Not even the orks are out in this,’ said Osruc.

‘No excuse for a lack of vigilance,’ said Brusc. ‘There, a guard post.’

Two hexagonal bunkers guarded a roadway into the camp that stopped approximately spitting distance from the gateway, already buried by the desert. The gate was a section of chainlink fencing in a wheeled frame, less a defence and more a formality. Osruc grunted at the sight of it. ‘That’ll keep the orks out,’ he said dismissively.

The troopers manning the bunker recognised the brothers for what they were and did not present their arms. One came out. Huddled against the wind he seemed tiny and frail, his outline partly hidden by veils of ash so that it looked like he was being abraded to nothing and would be carried off in fragments by the next gust.

The Adeptus Astartes were solid in the teeth of the wind, but the guardsman

did not have their strength or their armour, and rocked unsteadily in the eddies whirling off the hospital's units. The man snapped a salute as best he could, a curious version of the aquila, repeated three times over groin, heart and forehead. The brothers banged their arms together in the mark of the Templars' cross in response.

'Lieutenant Sanjeed Ghaskar of the Jopal indentured squadrons,' he shouted over the storm. A turban clad his head, a continuation of it, a band of cloth, looped around his neck and wrapped about his face tight up against his goggled eyes. It didn't quite cover his cheeks and revealed a hint of a glossy black beard. His obeisance paid, he shielded this exposed part of himself with a gloved hand, and hunched over again, his other arm protectively over his stomach. 'We are glad to see you! Or perhaps not,' he yelled. 'The coming of the Angels of Death often presages disaster.'

'We go only where disaster is, this is true,' said Brusc, his voice now projected from his speaker grille at maximum volume. 'It will come here soon enough, I am sure, but not today. We are passing through. There are orders to investigate all Imperial outposts to ensure they have received the command to fall back.'

Ghaskar looked up sharply at that.

'You have not heard? The fall of Acheron?' asked Osric, who now did have to shout. 'It is good that we give you the courtesy of our visit then, as we are not beholden to act on these orders.'

'We best talk inside. I grant you my permission to enter the Hospice of the Blessed Lady Santanna,' said Ghaskar. He performed a shallow bow.

'Most gracious,' said Osric, somewhat sarcastically. Ghaskar beckoned them on, and the three of them passed through the gate.

Privately Osric added to Brusc, 'It is going to take me a week to repair the finish on my armour.'

'One must honour one's battlegear, did I teach you nothing?' asked Brusc, although his tone was light. This was the way between them – once master and pupil, they had long been friends. Both shared certain characteristics of irreverence. The bond between had always been strong.

'I enjoy it repairing my gear, and I humbly honour it. Who doesn't? It is a fine time to meditate and pay thanks to the Emperor that one still lives and reflect upon the fight. Only it is unsatisfying repairing damage from the weather rather than that won in good, honest battle. What prayer and glory can I offer to the Lord of Man through polishing out sand scratches?'

Brusc looked around as they passed through the rough streets of the facility. It

was built on the standard Astra Militarum grid pattern, a north-south and east-west road leading to gate sites, although they had instated only one here, at the west. Side roads led off between buildings. It was small, an unimpressive place barely two hundred metres across each side. A difficult site to hold. A challenge.

‘Something tells me brother,’ he said, ‘that you may soon get your wish to offer true praise. I feel the Emperor’s hand at work here.’

They were directed into a long low prefabricatum, one of forty indistinguishable from the rest. Inside was a medicae ward of thirty or so beds. The astonished wounded stared at the giants in their midst as they strode through the flimsy building, showering dust from their scored black armour. The whole prefabricatum rocked under their tread.

Lieutenant Ghaskar led them to a busy woman by a dying man’s bed at the far end of the room. ‘Sister Rosa of the Hospitallers of the Adepta Sororitas,’ he said, then made his leave.

Sister Rosa was a squat, unlovely woman with hard features and grey hair. Her face was blemished with numerous rad-moles. Her pleasure at seeing fellow warriors of the faith was at best guarded, turning soon to outright annoyance when they relayed their message. She stepped away from the dying man, drawing the Space Marines after her as she checked the charts of other soldiers.

‘We cannot leave,’ she said.

‘You must,’ said Brusc. ‘This entire sector is collapsing, thanks to the treachery of von Strab. The orks are regrouping, their warbands joining. Their outriders are heading this way.’

‘We will remain,’ she said stubbornly, ‘until the tempest has expended its strength.’ She moved onto another bed.

‘Sister, this storm will not blow over for several days,’ said Brusc.

‘And when it does blow over, we shall be ready to depart for Infernus.’

‘You must leave now. All forces are falling back to Hive Helsreach. When the storm blows over, the orks will be ready to attack. They will destroy you,’ said Brusc sharply.

‘Come now, show some respect, she is of a holy order,’ said Osric privately. ‘She is as marred as you by her service. You do little honour to our order or your title as sword brother.’ Publicly, he said, ‘Forgive my brother. We are a choleric breed, more given to attack than consideration.’

Sister Rosa pressed her lips tightly together.

‘Nevertheless,’ Brusc continued, with a glance at his ex-pupil, ‘I am correct.

We have orders to fall back ourselves. This is no easy thing for us to do. Every part of our being urges us to go onwards and avenge our losses. But we will not. Considered retreat is the right course of action, if only so we might advance again refreshed and rearmed. You must come with us. This hospice was behind friendly lines. It is no longer. The orks are closing in, and will move on you when the weather allows. The materiel is unimportant. Leave now.'

She withdrew her head, sharply, multiplying her chins to three. Her face was etched with a scowl. 'You do not understand. I do not speak of materiel, but the wounded. Not all of my patients can be moved without great care. I cannot pack up the facility at such short notice. I will not go.'

'Then you must bring what you can, and help those who can move. This is no time to be sentimental. We shall offer the Emperor's Mercy to those who will not survive the trip,' said Brusc.

'I have received no orders from my superiors,' she said.

'You have heard them from me,' said Brusc.

'Neither you, brother, nor your Marshall have any right to order me,' she said. "From many pillars is the Imperium forged, each to its own burden." she quoted. 'I, like you, am not subject to the whims of the Astra Militarum either. We sisters answer to a higher authority.'

'True,' said Brusc. 'But the orders make sense. Our Marshall has followed suit, ordering us in the same manner that other units have been ordered. He is a wise man, well-versed in the arts of war. His wisdom should be enough to convince you. I question your own wisdom if it is not.'

'What do you suggest then?' huffed Rosa.

'We can offer you our protection and guidance back to Imperial lines. Stay here, and you will perish.'

'If it is the Emperor's will, then so be it,' she said.

'She's a stubborn one,' said Osric privately. 'I like her. She's an awful lot like you.'

The sister stood tall, and continued. 'You are correct. Without you we shall perish. So then do your duty. Remain here and protect us while we make ready to leave,' she said.

Osric gave a throaty chuckle. 'She is like you.'

Brusc shifted his weight, his dust-clogged armour plates rasping over one another under his dirty white surcoat. 'Give me one reason, one reason alone why I should defy the orders of my Marshall and stay here to defend this collection of broken men,' he said.

‘Blood,’ she said immediately. ‘Only the blood of the faithful can hold back the darkness. We are all the Emperor’s proxies. His light shows the way, but he cannot act directly. Through us,’ she pointed at her own chest. ‘Through me, him, them, the ill and the wounded. They are all the Emperor’s instruments, as much as you are, lesser though they are, broken though they are. They are the blades of His will, they have been tested in battle, and come back honed. When they are healed they will fight better for it, and you would waste them without a thought. You stand there before me, ‘brother’,’ she mocked him with the word, ‘and chide me for sentimentality, but you are mistaken. It is not sentimentality that will have me stay here, but the Emperor’s purpose. I know of your chapter, brother. You crusade and crusade and crusade. But you cannot cleanse the galaxy on your own. Even if you could, could you hold your conquests? Every world? To your credit, your order alone in all the Adeptus Astartes I have witnessed count yourself as true believers, warriors of the Divine Emperor. So tell me, crusader, by whose authority do you cast aside the instruments of our God? You discard His tools, and in doing so you defy His will. Not even your vaunted Marshall has the impertinence for that.’

Brusc stared at the woman. Her head came only as high as the heraldic cross on his surcoat. He considered leaving, he considered telling her that, actually, it was by Marshall Ricard’s authority that he would abandon these broken tools of the Emperor to the choking sands because there were others more worthy of his efforts.

He did not. Sister Rosa stared unwaveringly at him, her brows drawn in. Her ruined face crinkled around the eyes. Her hand leapt to her chest when Brusc burst into loud laughter.

She recovered her composure with admirable speed. ‘Do you mock me? Do you mock my words? Do you mock the Emperor?’

‘No, no!’ said Brusc. ‘It is a long time since I have been upbraided so by a woman. You remind me of someone I knew a long time ago.’

‘You ignored her too, I suppose? Go then,’ she said. ‘Leave us here to die. Let your own laughter and shame hound you across the wastes.’

Brusc laid a massive hand on her shoulder, his gauntlet engulfing it entirely. He kneeled in front of her and bowed his head, his mirth gone.

‘I have my reason, holy sister,’ he said. ‘You speak well. I am shamed.’ He looked up at her, and carefully removed his helmet, setting it to the side on the floor. His burned skull – covered in smooth synthetic skin and blotched scar tissue, his scalp patched unevenly with hair – held no horror for her, and she saw

the humour had not entirely left his face, although it was leavened now with the utmost sincerity.

‘The Black Templars will fight by your side,’ he said.

She nodded her thanks. ‘Your Reclusiarch Grimaldus has won a great victory at Helsreach. I hear he clawed his way from the rubble of the Temple of the Emperor Ascendant. If your faith is as true as you say, then you must see the hand of the Emperor in this. He watches over us all. His attention is on this world. If we are true to our purpose and loud in our prayers then we will prevail. I will ensure all that can be done to speed the evacuation, is done.’

‘We will pray for your efforts, and freely offer any assistance you might deem necessary.’

She curtly nodded once and bustled off, giving orders as she went. Activity burst around her like shrapnel from a bomb.

Osric watched her go. ‘See, I knew I liked her,’ he said.

‘Brother Osric, do not speak to me like that again, the way you did in front of Sister Rosa.’

‘I was right to do so, brother,’ said Osric amiably. ‘You were being unreasonable.’

‘Yes,’ said Brus. ‘Yes you were, and yes I was. Diplomacy is not my strongest attribute. Still, do not do it again.’

Osric made a little, dismissive noise. ‘Then do not give me cause to. You are our leader here, brother – we expect the best of you. If you’re not going to live up to the example required then I reserve the right to remind you.’

Brus laughed – he was ever a man quick to anger and quick to laughter. Brother Osric rather relied on that, he always had. ‘You should be a sword brother, not me.’

‘Maybe,’ said Osric. He paused, then spoke in earnest. ‘Recommend me, brother, enter my name into the ring of honour. My sword is ready for the challenge.’

‘Seriously?’ asked Brus. ‘You want me to put you forward? You might find yourself duelling with me for your place. We both know who the better swordsman is.’

Osric nodded. ‘Nevertheless, I am deadly serious. I am ready.’

Brus retrieved his helmet, covered his mutilated face and walked out from the ward. ‘I’ll consider it. Emperor alone knows too many of our best have fallen here. But before you face the blades of the Sword Brethren, we must survive the attentions of the foe.’

Seven hours later, when preparations to abandon the hospice were well underway, the storm lifted. Armageddon's sun peered meekly through the whirling screens of dust and ash spat out by the world's volcanoes. It was so wan that Brusc could look it full on without filtering. It had become a pale smear, the light it shone on the Ash Wastes anaemic. He and the others walked the perimeter. The indentured men of Jopal needed no overseeing, but the presence of the Angels of Death inspired and frightened them in equal measure, and they worked all the harder when they paced by. Ghaskar's small garrison had turned out in full, bolstered by many of the less gravely sick. Barricades were being erected on every street. Fire positions covered the major intersections. Heavy weapons batteries were arrayed to provide linked fields of fire. Men hurried to and fro, stocking the line with crates of spare ammunition and water butts.

'By the Throne,' said Osric as he surveyed the featureless landscape beyond the defence line, 'what a miserable place to die.'

Brusc gave him a look, one Osric could feel even though Brusc wore his helmet. Despite Brusc's intentions, it made Osric smile.

'And we should not die, when so many others have?' said Brusc.

'Emperor willing, no,' said Osric. He spat ashy sand from his mouth with an irritated expression. The air was thick with it still and he had unwisely removed his helmet. 'Death is our ultimate reward, but I am not yet ready for it. My crusading days are far from done. I have much blood to spill for the Emperor yet. If he decrees I am to die here, then that is His will and I accept it, but...' his voice trailed off. 'Still, visibility's back up to several hundred metres,' said Osric. 'We'll be able to select targets at maximum range. I hate firing blind.'

'The way you fire, I doubt it would matter.'

'Blade work's more my forte, I admit,' Osric said. 'You should have trained me better.'

'Defence in depth – these Jopali are impressive,' said Sunno. 'What forces do we have?'

'Two hundred and fifty-three healthy men, almost that again walking wounded. Seven Hospitaller Warrior-Medicae, twenty-six medical servitors. Fifteen pieces of light ordinance, not counting those mounted the external bunkers. Four chimeras, a taurox, our own *Cataphraxes*, us and a preacher.'

'Not the greatest army on Armageddon,' said Sunno. 'Will it be enough?'

'We had better hope so,' said Brusc. He clapped Sunno on the pauldron. 'But I have fought worse odds.'

'I have met some ferocious preachers in my time,' said Sunno.

‘Brother Osric is right, of course...’ said Brusc.

‘When am I not?’

‘...the Jopal Indentured will need every advantage. The further they can fire, and the less atmospheric dissipation to their weapons, the better.’ Brusc eyed a trooper’s lasgun disdainfully. ‘They would be better served by other guns.’

‘That is all they have,’ said Sunno grimly.

‘Then they will have to do, as they have done on a million battlefields across the galaxy since the Emperor took his crusade to the stars.’

‘Listen to him, novitiates!’ said Osric, turning to face the two squires trailing them. He gestured expansively. ‘He speaks well, it is not our right to dismiss any servant of the Emperor. For He has ordained that we fight together on this battlefield! It is his will that brings us here, just as it is His will that we are made to protect the likes of these unaltered men. Too many of the Adeptus Astartes allow their superiority to turn to contempt for the Emperor’s subjects. Never forget what we were made for, and that valour can be contained in the most fragile of vessels. Service can be rendered by all.’

‘Praise be,’ said Sunno and Brusc.

The Guardsmen stood taller at mention of their valour. Doneal and Marcomar nodded solemnly. Osric let them pass him then slapped them on the back, staggering them. ‘Be of better cheer lads, for soon we fight the ork!’

‘I would have vengeance,’ said Marcomar quietly.

‘And you shall have it novitiate, fear not,’ said Sunno.

Brusc brought his small squad to a stop. ‘Now, Brother Marcomar, up on that roof with your sniper rifle.’ Brusc pointed to the highest roof in the battered facility, a delta-level comms tower, its dishes and antennae useless. ‘Tell me, when the battle is upon us, what do you aim for?’

Marcomar’s response was leaden but quick. ‘Aim for the largest, their officer cadre and specialists. Track and eliminate threats. Destroy those that would threaten the weakest points of our line.’ His eyes slid slowly to his left, toward the Guardsmen dragging open crates of lasgun packs to the defence line.

Osric cleared his throat, a slight shake of his head. ‘Remember what I just said, neophyte.’ Marcomar nodded his understanding and stared ahead.

‘Go on then,’ said Brusc. ‘To your station.’

Marcomar nodded, shifting his grip on his gun bag, and went to his post.

Sister Rosa was passing and stopped at Brusc’s shoulder. She made little concession to the harsh environment beyond a snug rebreather, an apron and protective sleeves over her robes. Brusc suspected that was more to protect them,

not her.

‘Your preparations go well? My sisters and laity are ready to aid the wounded. For now they pack apace.’

‘As well as can be hoped, sister,’ said Brusc. ‘We have little to do. Your Lieutenant Ghaskar is a capable man.’ He looked her up and down. ‘Do you not have something... Do you not have more appropriate attire for war?’

She shook his concerns away with one hand, the other clutched rolls of bandages tight to her chest. ‘I have performed my duty as Warrior-Medicae to both the Astra Militarum and Sisters of Battle, brother,’ she said. ‘But my armour no longer fits, and my fighting days are long behind me. The Emperor’s grace is enough protection for me.’ She rapped on his chest with a knuckle. ‘Not all the faithful have need of such unsubtle shields.’

Brusc ignored her jibe. ‘And how are the preparations?’

She pointed away to the square at the centre of the compound where men loaded seven massive haulers standing nose to tail in a circle. The Space Marine’s Rhino waited silently at the entrance to the road leading to the gate, a dog guarding a herd of kine.

‘We are nearly done. We shall have to abandon the structure, of course, but I have loaded all movable supplies and equipment. Those wounded that cannot fight are ready to be put onboard. The most critical cases we shall leave until last, but they are prepared.’

‘Be ready. If we beat this attack back, we shall need to depart immediately, because orks will come quickly to any rumour of battle. Do you understand?’

‘I understand.’ She followed Brusc’s gaze, her eyes lighting on Marcomar as he made himself ready. He carefully removed his weapon’s dust cover, and was beginning the rituals of preparation.

‘You have other things on your mind, I see,’ she said, the gentlest words she had spoken to Brusc.

‘His master fell six days ago. We were on long range patrol for our crusade before we were recalled, and were ambushed. We slaughtered them all, but I lost two brothers, adding to three already fallen. It is hard on the novitiates, when their knight is slain,’ said Brusc quietly. ‘But he has taken it especially badly, and it will go against him. There is no room for fear or shock in the Adeptus Astartes. Marcomar’s failure will be a further loss that will be difficult to bear.’

‘Is he certain to fail? I have seen the meekest sister made a tigress in battle, brother, but it takes time. Will another take on his training?’

Brusc shrugged, a mighty movement that set his pauldrons shifting like

troubled mountains. ‘It is not a certainty, we see it as a personal failing to allow our knight to fall. There is little the novitiate can do to protect their masters in most cases – they are not full brothers after all – but even so, some of the initiates regard it as a stain on the squire’s honour if they do not perish with their knight, even though they should know better.’ He regarded the morose novitiate, appraising his actions. ‘And there will be plenty of masterless boys come the end of this war, that is certain.’

He looked out at the desert. Sister Rosa started to speak, but Brusc raised a hand, silencing her. His helmet lenses whirred as they focused on something beyond the reach of human sight.

‘Dust plumes,’ he said. ‘They are coming. They are coming!’ he shouted, his voice blaring from his vox-grille. ‘Stand ready!’

The orks came at them as the sun entered the last quarter of the day. A solid wall of flesh marching over the wastes, their bright totems were caked in dust, whatever boasts they proclaimed lost beneath Armageddon’s grey coat. In the dun light of late afternoon they appeared as an army of ghosts out of the haze, fanged and terrible. Their chanting was a throbbing roar. Already the crackle and pop of weapons fire rang out. Too far away to hit the defenders of the hospital, they fired into the air from excitement. A handful of light buggies and bikes rushed ceaselessly back and forth in front of the horde, throwing up plumes of ash.

‘Well,’ said Osric. ‘No tanks. That’s something. At least you won’t miss, novitiates.’ He had replaced his helmet on his head, and spoke to both neophytes through the vox. Marcomar aside, the Black Templars stood together: Sunno, Brusc, Osric and Doneal. All had their weapons in hand – bolt pistol and chainsword for the initiates, while Doneal carried a pistol the same as his masters, but in his off hand he held a great combat knife the length of a man’s thighbone.

‘Nor will you, Osric,’ said Brusc. ‘Don’t listen to him, he’s the worst shot in the crusade.’

‘You do know, young one, that Sword Brother Brusc here was my knight and I his squire? The pupil learns as much as he can from the master,’ said Osric. ‘In the matter of marksmanship, I learned only as much as I could.’

‘Truly?’ asked Doneal.

‘You seem surprised boy, but we all have been what you are now. Besides, it was a long time ago, when our leader here had a prettier face.’

‘War demands not beauty, but slaughter,’ said Brusco.

‘Ah, but there is art in war. Art indeed. Any art is beautiful, especially that of death.’

‘Praise be, brother,’ said Sunno.

‘We shall pray,’ Brusco said, without preamble. Together, the Space Marines knelt in the dust, crossing their arms and weapons over their chests, bowing their heads. Marcomar followed suit on the platform of the comms tower.

‘Lead us, brother,’ said Osric. No trace of levity was in his voice.

When Brusco spoke next, he did so loudly and clearly through his helmet vox. The men on the defence line looked back over their shoulders away from the foe. They ceased to finger their weapons so nervously. Many of them dropped their heads, and muttered prayers of their own; the rites of the Adeptus Astartes were strange to them.

‘Emperor! Lord of all Mankind, he who came among the weakling children of Terra and stood against the terrors of an uncaring universe. Emperor! We, the sons of Your son, gene-forged to Your design, kneel here in the dust of this far-flung world, far from Your throne. Emperor! We ask not for Your mercy, or for Your protection. We do not ask for Your favour save this: that we fight with all the strength You saw fit to bestow upon us, and in doing so further the victory of Your most holy war, the crusade that never ends. Guide our arms, guide our aim, see that we make good count of the foe so that fewer horrors might assail mankind, Your servants, and stand in the way of Your mastery of the stars! We five, few that we are, so make this oath: That we shall not falter.’

‘That we shall not falter,’ repeated the others.

‘That we shall not fail.’

‘That we shall not fail,’ the response came.

‘That we shall not bring dishonour unto you.’

‘No dishonour! This we swear!’ they all shouted.

Brusco rose to his feet. He held aloft his chainsword and turned on the spot, showing the weapon to everyone around him. The wind, reduced to little more than a hot breath, stirred his dirty surcoat and the fresh oath papers attached to his armour. ‘No pity! No remorse! No fear!’ he roared.

This time, the response issued from everyone within the compound.

He nodded to his followers. They stood.

‘It is time we were about our business,’ he said.

The rattle of oath-chains being attached to sword hilt and pistol butt was the Black Templars’ response.

A hundred metres away to the left, on the far side of the compound, heavy bolters chattered. Explosions rumbled as the ork outriders were caught.

Osric raised his bolt pistol and took aim. The orks were a way off yet, well out of range of his pistol, yet he picked a target, locked his arm, held it steady and waited.

It was an inevitability that the orks would come over the line. They were many, and the men of Jopal of insufficient numbers to keep them back by weight of fire alone.

Nevertheless, many greenskins fell, burned by lasfire before the orks breached the walls. They came through in three places more or less simultaneously. The indentured men of Jopal reeled from this assault, shocked by the orks' brutality and their cunningly coordinated attack.

Brusc found little new. He had fought the orks many times. There were not the unthinking brutes propaganda would have the men of the Astra Militarum believe. He and his brothers separated and went to the breaches, engaging the orks hand to hand. Relieved, the lesser men fell back to barricades in the streets. For a time, Brusc fought alone. Orks roared and hurled themselves at him. The power of their blows rocked him on his feet, but he found tranquillity there in the heat of the melee, and he attained a higher level of intimacy with the Lord of Man through these most holy rites of battle.

He dispatched an opponent with a backwards thrust through the neck. The ork's head juddered as his chainsword's teeth ground their way through its spine. A twisting jerk freed the blade from the neck. The ork's head came with it. The body collapsed to its knees, fountaining dark red blood all over Brusc. Then the Jopali had their position and new firing solutions. They opened up, felling the last of the orks at Brusc's breach. He searched for new targets, but found none.

Brusc barely had time to draw breath when a desperate cry went up over the vox, a signifier in Brusc's helm indicating it came from one of the human officers. If it was Ghaskar, he could not tell for its panicked thickness. 'Keep them away from the transports! Keep them away!'

He turned his back on the defence wall, where the next wave of screaming xenos savages was being gunned down by disciplined lasfire, and looked to the centre of the compound.

Half a dozen leader-orks had forced their way to the very heart of the hospital; giants clad in hissing suits of armour. Fifteen, perhaps more, of the lesser kind loped alongside them, their huge rifles spitting fire. In the midst of them all went

one even greater, a mighty ork-king, half Brusc's height again. Bright yellow patterned with black showed through the dust and ash caking its suit. The armour encased it almost completely, covering its head, its eyes protected by thick lenses of green glass and the jaw hidden behind a serrated metal bevoir cast in the shape of a jaw. Only the joints were their weakness. Brusc's heart soared at the sight of it.

'Here is a foe! Here is honour! Black Templars, to me!'

Without waiting for his men, Brusc ran down the avenue toward the leader orks as they advanced on the trucks. The orks did not fire upon the vehicles, slaughtering only the men. Providence was with humanity – plunder was the orks' intent. As orks approached the silent *Cataphraxes*, the black knights of Dorn crashed into the guard with a noise like thunder. Coming from three directions, they barged their way through the lesser creatures by dint of strength alone, crushing and slashing them down. Their bolt pistols sang the clamorous hymns of death until their ammunition was spent and the weapons were dropped to swing by their lanyards, trailing smoke like censers from glowing barrels.

This was prayer for the Black Templars. War was their worship, the battlefield their temple. Hymns ringing from their vox-grilles, they gripped their chainswords two handed and hewed at the foe. Sunno accounted for two of the guard creatures, ducking below their ponderously swinging arms to despatch them one after the other with artful blows – the first to the neck, the second gutted and beheaded as it fell forward. The snap of Marcomar's sniper rifle was the call of retribution upon the wind – pure and clean it cut through the brutish barks of orkish gunfire, felling one after another of the lighter armoured creatures. Brusc found himself duelling with a pair of giants. Both his hearts pumped hard, flooding his system with the blessings of the Emperor. Time slowed, and he sang the Hymn of Hate to the beat of his blows.

Soon the majority of the orks lay dead, leaking blood and machine fluids into the greedy ash. Over their slumped forms Brusc caught sight of Osric. Alone he had gone to fight with the ork-king. Alone, he had fallen into peril. The ork had Osric in one massive claw, the scissor blades crushing the armour of his forearm. Osric dangled, his battleplate breached in three places. He swung his legs in fruitless kicks at the ork, his curses loud in Brusc's ear pieces.

The teeth-track of Brusc's sword was clogged with tough ork flesh. The motor whined dangerously, smoke issuing from its exhaust. He released its trigger before it burned out, unclipped its lanyard and flung the weapon aside with a prayer of apology. As he ran to Osric's aid he slammed home a fresh magazine

into his bolt pistol. By the time he had snatched his combat blade from its sheath, his armour-aided legs were pushing him speedily at the king.

Osric gave up trying to free his arm and reached for a grenade. Brusc launched himself through the air, smashing into the scrap armour of the ork-king. The plangence of their meeting was the voice of a bell in some temple of belligerence. The ork staggered. With surprising speed it swung round, hurling Osric at Brusc's head. The sword brother ducked, firing as he did. Osric hit a prefab's wall, crumpling it and streaking it with his blood as he fell to the ground. Brusc's bolts sparked off the ork-king's armour or exploded without effect on the surface. One found an unprotected spot. When it blew, gobbets of flesh rained outwards, but the ork was not slowed. Whatever pain it felt only served to stoke its fury, and it came at Brusc fast, the crude pistons on its warsuit hissing gas.

Brusc dodged a blow, the ork's giant shears clanging shut inches from his helm's muzzle. He riposted with his knife, driving it at the ork's forearm, seeking the gap at the elbow where dirty green skin was visible. The ork was too agile, the knife hit the armour. The plating on the lord shamed a tank. Brusc's thrust gouged a bright silver streak in the metal, peeling away a long curl of swarf, but no more than that. The ork backhanded him, swinging its claw-clad fist into his chest. Brusc flew backwards, alarm signals peeping in his helmet as he crashed to the floor. His visor display jumped, the static of it conspiring with the blood running down over his lenses to limit his vision. The ork was on him again, reaching for him. Then it had him, one shear about his neck, the other around his thighs. Roaring its triumph, the ork-king lofted him upwards, holding its trophy over its head for all his slaves to see.

'Forgive me, Emperor, when we meet,' shouted Brusc, 'for I have spilled too little blood in your name.'

The expected pressure, the crushing of metal and flesh, never came. The ork-king had stopped in his tracks. Brusc twisted around in its grasp, his battleplate squealing against the claw's razored edges.

The ork's face was still twisted in triumph, the great bucket jaw of the armour swung open to roar, but behind the metal his tongue lolled from his teeth. A twist of white smoke rose coyly from its open mouth, the only sign of the sniper shot that had slain it. Its armour held its corpse in position. It toppled slowly over backwards with Brusc still trapped in its claws.

'Forgive me, my lord,' said Marcomar over the vox. 'I had to wait until opportunity presented itself.'

There was a steeliness in his voice that had been lacking before.

‘Then you have had your vengeance, novitiate,’ said Brusc.

‘Indeed. Praise be.’

In that moment, Brusc knew Marcomar would not fail after all.

By the time he had extricated himself from the dead warlord’s grasp, the orks were in flight. Their king slain and his cohorts fallen, the lesser orks broke and ran, leaving many of their dead upon the field. Bright laser light and heavy bolter shells slew more as they fled, the surviving men of Jopal jeering at their rout. The Black Templars stayed with the haulers. Sunno and Doneal worked in tandem, despatching stragglers and wounded xenos. Doneal was savage and skilled. He would make a fine battle-brother.

Only when he was sure that the battle was finished did Brusc go to Osric’s side.

Osric lay with his legs out. He had managed to haul himself into a sitting position, so that his powerplant rested on the wall, but had got no further. The gashes in his armour sparked. Red meat was revealed beneath.

‘That was foolish brother.’ Brusc switched his flickering helm display around, bringing up the vital signs of his ex-pupil and friend as he knelt at the younger Space Marine’s side. Both heartbeats were weak, and growing weaker. Osric’s armour was flooding his body with drugs from its pharmacopeia, but his wounds were deep and neither medicament nor his body’s innate gifts could stem the tide of blood. Bright crimson poured from the rents in Osric’s plate, staining the ground around him; far too much of it.

‘I was trying to impress you, brother,’ said Osric. He attempted a laugh, but it gurgled horribly and became a bubbling cough. It took a moment for him to recover. ‘Perhaps if I had taken his head,’ he gasped, ‘then you would not have hesitated to present me in the Circle of Honour.’

‘Perhaps,’ said Brusc. ‘But his death bought honour for Marcomar instead.’

‘All is not lost then,’ said Osric. ‘You must give him further chance. I would take him to squire myself, if I do not die.’

‘Lie still, do not speak. You have been grievously wounded.’ Brusc spoke softly. He rested his hand on Osric’s helm, an echo of a parent touching the brow of a sick child. The brothers were all the family any of them would ever know, the only blood.

Osric raised a wavering hand and gripped Brusc’s forearm. ‘I fought well, do not deny me that.’

‘You fought well, my friend.’

Brusc stood, Osric's enfeebled hand skidded from his battleplate to lie curled on the stained earth. His head lolled. Orderlies and sisters from Sister Rosa's station were running to the fallen Space Marine. They openly wept to see an angel of their god thusly cast down.

Sister Rosa was with them, bloodied, but still whole. 'We shall do what we can for him, brother,' she said.

Brusc shrugged as if it mattered not if they did or did not, although it mattered to him a great deal. He pointed at the spreading pool beneath Osric. The sand was saturated. 'Witness, sister! It is as you said, there is only blood. We all bleed it, mighty and meek, high and lowly. The blood of the faithful waters the earth of every Imperial world, as is only right. Remember him. Remember the blood he has shed for you.'

The orderlies struggled to move Osric's armoured body onto a stretcher that was far too short for his height. Brusc watched dispassionately. Losing patience with them, Rosa snapped and sent for medical servitors. 'Quickly now! He is dying!'

In Brusc's helmet, Osric's vital signs became erratic. It would not be long now. 'Do not leave his body. He has one more service to render.'

'Yes, brother,' said Sister Rosa.

He stared down at his dying brother. 'See that you are ready to depart, sister. The orks will return. We leave in ten minutes.'

Without looking back, he strode toward *Cataphraxes*.

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 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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