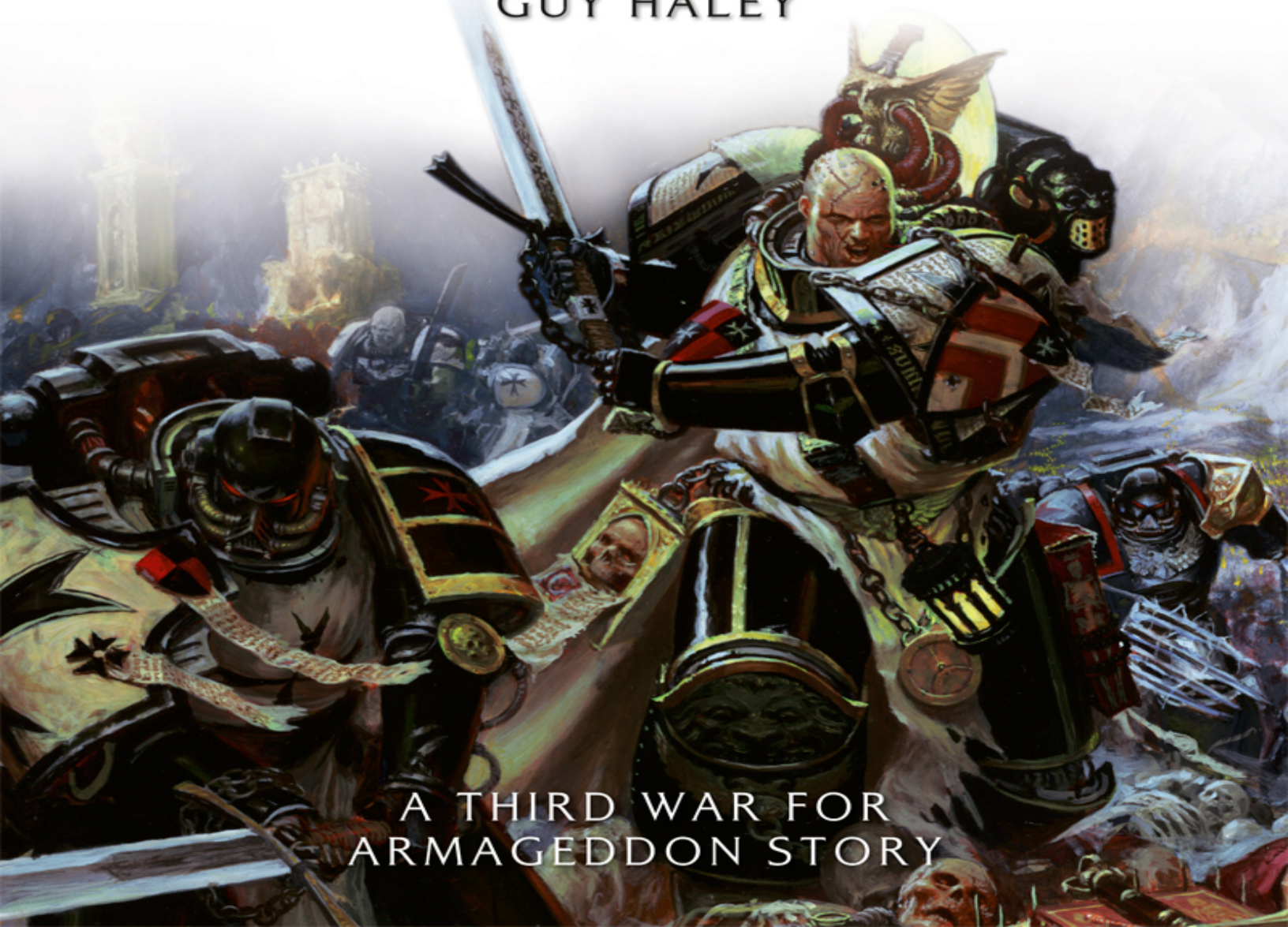


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SEASON OF SHADOWS

GUY HALEY



A THIRD WAR FOR
ARMAGEDDON STORY



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The Season of Fire abated. The last plumes of ash coughed from Armageddon's volcanoes. Dying winds hurried the season's final storms to stillness. Searing heat gave way as the world was plunged into a short, volcanic winter. At Armageddon's poles, dirty snow fell.

The Season of Shadows had begun.

In peaceful times this cessation of the storms was a respite for men. The season was well named, for the land was dark and cool. It was a time for quiet doings, although thunderous industry never ceased. This year was different; the choking ash would be missed. As soon as the skies began to clear, the fires of war rekindled. Orks came out from their hiding places and marched upon the hives of Armageddon once more.

'Another charge brother! Quickly!'

In a twilight-noon born of ash the shrouded sun smouldered upon a field-hospital, recently attacked and soon to be abandoned. Within its broken confines Black Templars Space Marines worked with haste.

Sword Brother Brusc, the leader of this much depleted reconnaissance group not long on Armageddon, tossed a bulky demo pack at Brother Sunno as easily as a normal man might throw an egg. Sunno grabbed it from the air and slapped it onto the leg of the comms tower. Made redundant by the shattering of the world's data network, the tower was to be felled just the same, as insisted upon by Adeptus Astartes thoroughness.

A fitful wind moaned through tension cables, wrapping short-lived veils of dust around support struts. Brusc glanced skyward. The sun was a round

circle, a hole punched in dark cloth. Brighter than in the storms of the previous day, still it could be stared at with unshielded eyes.

Sunno's neophyte, Doneal, signalled from a roof on the other side of the compound, hand in the air and forefinger describing a circle.

'That's the last, brother,' Sunno said, dragging Brusc's attention from the dark skies. 'Doneal and Marcomar are done.'

'Good. We shall leave nothing for the orks,' said Brusc, his voice projecting from his helmet's vox-grille.

'To *Cataphraxes* then,' said Sunno.

'Immediately. Neophytes, rejoin us.'

'Yes, my lord,' the two young Space Marines said in unison.

The field hospital heaved with activity. Ork corpses from the recent assault lay along every road. Dying men screamed. Shouting squads of Jopal Indentured hurried about, stripping equipment from the prefabricatums and the dead, moving debris from the evacuation's path. Machine noise roared high periodically, drowning out the voices of men. Earth movers grumbled, shunting aside squealing piles of metal. In the marshalling yard, tanks pattered as their drivers ran engines gently to clear them of dust.

This lone subgroup of the Black Templars Ash Wastes Crusade gathered before their Rhino, *Cataphraxes*.

'How long until they come, my lords?' asked Doneal.

'Not long, boy,' said Sunno. 'Not long.'

'At least the clear skies are holding.'

Brusc shot the boy a dark look. Ordinarily light of spirit, Brusc was not currently disposed to optimism. 'The Season of Shadows is yet to begin in earnest. It might not last,' he said. He looked up again, searching for something the others could not see. 'In truth we are at the mercy of the weather, whatever it does.'

Doneal wordlessly asked for clarification.

'Ash storms might mask us as easily as they could kill us, neophyte,' said Sunno. 'When our dust plumes go skyward, the orks can see us from miles away.'

Brusc acknowledged Sunno's statement with a noise in his throat.

The Black Templars Rhino *Cataphraxes* waited at the mouth of the complex's central square, black armour rubbed down to its undercoat by

the fury of Armageddon's abrasive winds. A pintle-mounted storm bolter topped its front.

Inside his blank-faced Crusader helm, Sunno smiled. '*Cataphraxes's* engine is cold, but he is ready, brother. Can you feel his anticipation?'

'I cannot,' said Brusc. 'I do not share your affinity for the machine's soul.'

'Such a shame, brother. His is a holy soul, vengeful. He hears news of Osric's fall and wishes to avenge his brother.'

Osric had fallen in battle with the orks. He had been Brusc's last neophyte before he won through to the Sword Brethren. He had been Brusc's friend.

Seven large haulers were behind the tank, nose to tail in a convoy line wrapped round all sides of the hospital's central square. Double-decker tractor units provided motive power. Their armoured cabs were equipped with stacked pairs of ball-mounted heavy stubbers. Each tractor unit was motivated by six double tyres as tall as men. Massive, articulated trailers already loaded with a container apiece waited behind them. These were built to the same basic standard template construct pattern as the prefabricatums. Had they time to properly dismantle the hospital then the wards would have been stacked atop the containers, fitting together like child's construction bricks, but there was no time, and the hospital was to be destroyed.

Medicae orderlies and sisters hospitaller were coming out of the emptying wards, carrying the last, most seriously wounded patients aboard. Brusc wondered which truck carried Osric's body.

'Brother Sunno, go to *Cataphraxes*,' he ordered. 'Neophyte Doneal, you are to remain with your master. Man *Cataphraxes's* armament. Keep your eyes sharp.'

'Yes, my lord.'

'Neophyte Marcomar, you have no master. Until you are chosen again you will remain with me.'

The neophyte fell in behind him silently. He had lost his own knight several days before the squad had come upon the hospital, and remained withdrawn.

'You have replaced your rifle's dust cover,' Brusc said approvingly.

'Yes, my lord.'

‘Good. A warrior should guard his wargear with his life. Honour your weapons the way you honour the Emperor, and both will shield you.’

‘Yes, my lord.’

They went to the administration building, a prefabricatum identical to all the others, marked out only by the wind-scoured image of a cracked chalice emblazoned upon the side.

The doors to the unit were open. Sister Rosa, administratrix of the hospital, directed her staff. She was framed in the building’s interior light, bright in the grim noon.

‘We are ready,’ said Brusc.

‘As are we,’ said Sister Rosa. Her rad-marked face was harried, features drawn with stress and lack of sleep. ‘There are seven we cannot move. They will suffer if we try.’

‘Do you wish us to administer mercy?’

‘We do not need you to perform our duties for us, brother. My sisters do so now.’

‘Do they die well?’

‘They do, brother,’ said Sister Rosa.

Brusc shifted, looked over his shoulder at the men and women striving to get everything done. ‘That is good,’ he said eventually. ‘Record their names and we will honour them in our prayers. They do not die in battle, but their sacrifice is no less noble.’

An Imperial Guard officer came into the square, five squads jogging behind him with purpose. He halted and his men formed up behind him. Not one of the squads was at full strength. Most of the soldiers bore minor wounds. All of them were tired. They stood tall nonetheless.

‘Lieutenant Ghaskar,’ said Brusc.

Ghaskar bowed. ‘My lord. We are prepared. All we wait for is your word.’

‘Then you have it,’ said Brusc.

Ghaskar yelled orders in his odd Gothic dialect. His men broke from attention, some running for the tractor cabs, the rest running for ladders attached to the sides of the trailers.

Around the top of each container was a low rail, part of the locking mechanism of the stacking system, scant protection for the Jopali. The men jammed themselves against these, lying flat, guns pointing out all

round. The wiser ones lashed ropes around their ankles and rails then urged the less experienced to do the same.

‘Sister Rosa,’ said Brusc. ‘We shall ride the lead hauler. My brothers will watch from the front. We will do all we can to ensure that as many as possible can survive.’

‘I will be praying for us all,’ she said.

Brusc marched back to the Rhino. The men atop the trucks nodded at him, warrior to warrior, or worshipfully made the Jopali’s triple version of the aquila, each according to his temperament.

‘Wait here,’ he said to Marcomar.

As Brusc walked up the ramp into the Rhino, Sunno spoke to him over his shoulder through the open door of the driver’s cab. He had taken his helmet off, a direct line ran from his spinal interface socket into the tank.

‘I am in communion with *Cataphraxes*, brother. We pray together.’

‘My bolter,’ explained Brusc. ‘Some range may be advantageous here.’ He retrieved the weapon from the rack at the forward right of the compartment, but did not remove his bloodied chainsword or bolt pistol from his waist, he would need all his holy tools before the day was out. He checked the Rhino’s augur suite. ‘No sign of them,’ said Brusc. ‘The Emperor may yet be with us.’

He collected Marcomar and headed for the lead hauler. As he mounted the ladder the men above fell silent. The truck trailer rocked as he climbed. Once on the roof, he took one step to the centre and mag-locked his boots to the metal.

There were six Jopali on top of the truck. Lying at his feet they looked like children. Two of them made obeisance to him, bowing repeatedly and pressing their heads to metal.

‘Stop,’ said Brusc. ‘Do not bow to us.’

‘But you are the Angels of Death!’ said one. He had his goggles off, exposing a strip of dark skin between his helmet and scarf. His eyes were luminously white in his dirty face.

‘We are the instruments of the Emperor. We are not gods. Do not bow to me,’ said Brusc gruffly.

Marcomar took up station behind the Sword Brother, lying as low as his physique and carapace armour would allow. He unwrapped his sniper rifle.

‘Brother Sunno, beseech *Cataphraxes* to take us from here,’ Brusc voxed.

‘Yes, brother.’

A second later *Cataphraxes*’s engine roared into life. The shouting in the camp became frantic. Stragglers scrambled into the side and rear doors of the containers. Six muffled bolt shots sounded from inside the complex. Six Adepta Sororitas Combat-Medicae, cowled and clad in light power armour, came walking slowly out from the buildings. Their songs of loss were drowned out by igniting engines as one by one the tractor units started up, making a toneless choir of their own. The heavy stink of burning hydrocarbons washed back from their tall exhausts, the kind that, were Brusc’s air not filtered by his helmet, would have coated his throat with greasy particulates.

Brusc surveyed the camp. Smoke rose from a couple of burning prefabricatums torched by the greenskins. Orks lay where they had fallen. There were a great many of them. Brusc was impressed by the Jopali’s mettle.

The few troopers remaining outside the trucks were throwing down the barricades on the road leading to the gate. Vox chatter between the Jopali increased as roll calls were undertaken. Doors slammed.

Sister Rosa was the last to leave the administratum building. She looked up at Brusc standing upon the roof, her gaze piercing. Both of them were scarred. She by radiation burns gained in the course of their duties, he from battle. Both of them served, in their own way. Brusc acknowledged her with a nod.

‘All are aboard,’ Ghaskar notified him. ‘We may depart when you command, my lord.’

‘Then may the Emperor guide us all through storm and foe to safe harbour.’ Brusc spoke grimly. His usual humour was absent; he could not think joyous thoughts while Osric lay dead. He closed his eyes and prayed silently.

Emperor, I would gladly have left fifty lesser men here dead, if Osric could have lived. I should not feel this way, but I do. Have mercy on me that I recognise it, though I cannot prevent my feeling it.

A final door slammed. Sister Rosa was reported aboard.

‘Brother Sunno, lead us out.’

Cataphraxes gave a satisfied roar and rumbled forward, pushing the remnants of barricades aside, crushing dead orks and dead men alike into pulp underneath its treads.

Brusc lurched as the truck set off. Away to the west side of the camp dust swirled around the Jopali's transports, making their way around the perimeter road to the gate – four Chimeras, a Taurox Prime command tank, and a Salamander Scout, its open compartment covered by a taut tarpaulin.

Sunno drove *Cataphraxes* right through the flimsy gates, chain-link wire on a tube-steel frame. They leapt and quivered under the tank like a dying thing, chinking as the following trucks rode over them.

On the plain before the camp the Chimeras fell in either side of the column. The Taurox fell back, trailing the last truck. Orders crackled from Ghaskar, and the Salamander leapt forward, sending twin tails of dust high into the air.

All around the hospital, ork corpses were black shadows on the ashy sand.

'There is no sign of a single living greenskin,' said Ghaskar.

'I see nothing either,' said Sunno. 'Our escape has gone unnoticed.'

'Remain vigilant,' said Brusc. 'Now we are underway, we are at risk from marauders. There are many operating in this area now that the storms are passing.' He glanced up at the sky. 'I had hoped the storms would return, to mask our passing, but it appears not to be so. The Season of Fire has spent its fury.'

He watched the hospital recede. A detonation rune burned in his visor display.

A difficult choice, he thought. Leave it standing and the greenskins will be enriched. Destroy it, and signal that we are leaving.

The convoy growled up over a low rise, turning to the west to skirt a field of ash dunes. The wind was strong there, sending sheets of dust from the dune's scimitar-ridges.

When they were a couple of kilometres distant and the compound was receding into the haze, Brusc detonated the demolition charges. Fire leapt up from every part of the complex, bursting apart the prefabricatums and lifting their sheeting into the air. They caught the wind, blowing off to the west as if following the convoy. The sounds of the detonation reached

Brusc a half second later, a series of puny firecracker pops and rippling metallic crashes.

He watched the field hospital burn until it was lost to the undifferentiated landscapes of the Ash Wastes.

The convoy rumbled onward unopposed. The winds rose and fell, sometimes choking the air with fine ash so that visibility dropped to nothing. The great storms of the Season of Fire were nearly done. The wind dropped, the curtains of ash parting to reveal a parched, dead landscape. Regarding the woeful state of Armageddon, mankind had much to answer for. There were abandoned facilities poking from smooth-sided dunes, expanses of sand garishly stained by industrial by-products, roads that went nowhere and hills cleaved in two – all their worth was burrowed out of them, the hints of giant pits in the ground flooded now with ash. Armageddon had never been a gentle world; its yearly volcanic tantrums were proof of that.

Consequently there were few signs of life of any kind. Copses of stumpy venenum marked dust-drowned oases. Thickets of dead men's fingers crowded the leeward slopes of stony hills, as tangled as briars. Sometimes things scuttled within them, but the movements were those of small vermin and rapidly gone.

The signs of war were everywhere they cared to look. Columns of smoke rose on the horizon, and leagues-distant artillery duels rumbled. Contrails streaked the glowering sky. They passed through a field of rusting tank shells, leftovers from the battles of an earlier age. War was all about them yet they were alone.

For a hot day and freezing night the convoy headed west. Twice they stopped so that the Jopali might change shifts, swapping from cab to roof and back again. At night they dozed at their stations. Throughout it all, Brusc and Marcomar maintained an unsleeping vigilance. Only infrequently did he check in with Sunno or Lieutenant Ghaskar.

As a second dawn stained the grey-ash deserts a hostile vermillion, they stopped for a third time. Ghaskar, Brusc and Sunno held a council of war via vox.

‘There’s a dead valley ahead, brother,’ said Sunno. ‘Dry river bed, a good natural road. Danger of ambush, though. Topographical data says it runs right down to the Mortis river. Follow that, and we’ll be at the Helsreach perimeter in another twenty hours.’

‘There are supply convoys and relief columns running up and down the river highway in great numbers,’ said Ghaskar. ‘We would be safe there, back under the protection of Imperial forces.’

‘He’s right about that, brother,’ said Sunno. ‘But we might not survive to get there. The valley’s a prime ambush spot. We will have nearly one hundred kilometres to drive before we hit Imperial pickets.’

‘Where are the enemy?’ asked Brusc. ‘Have we had any sign?’

‘Long range vox is still dead, brother. The orks have destroyed all communications infrastructure out here,’ said Sunno. ‘We are alone. The Emperor is too occupied with greater questions on this world to pay especial attention to us.’

‘Salamander Scout reports no sign of xenos activity,’ said Ghaskar.

‘They are still reporting in?’ asked Brusc.

‘Yes, with admirable efficiency, my lord,’ said Ghaskar. Brusc was growing to like the lieutenant, there was nothing in Ghaskar’s tone that suggested he felt he deserved praise for his Scout crew’s diligence.

‘It is your decision, brother,’ said Sunno.

‘You would advise against such a route ordinarily, Brother Sunno,’ said Brusc.

Sunno was a veteran of many wars, dangerously jaded in Brusc’s opinion, even though he was much younger than the ancient Sword Brother. ‘You know the heart of your brother well. But not this time – we are running out of options. How long can we drive around this Emperor-forsaken wasteland without being discovered? It is a short dash and our other choices are poor. The land either side of the valley is too broken for the haulers. We would have to travel three hundred kilometres to the south, directly to the coast, and take our chances there.’

‘My men will fight to their last,’ said Ghaskar. ‘All you must do, my lord, is give the word.’

‘It will not come to that,’ said Brusc.

Once more, he thought, the decision falls to me. The last time, Osric fell. The thought caused his shoulders to twitch involuntarily.

My laughter will be a long time in returning, he thought. So many of us have died, and yet I remain? Why, O Emperor? What are your plans for me?

‘Brother?’ prompted Sunno. ‘What are your orders?’

Brusc looked ahead. The air had grown hazy again. On the foreshortened horizon, he could make out a bar of caramel hills. A shadow intimated a cleft in the barrier, surely the river valley. He called up overlays from his suit’s logic engine that confirmed this.

Sunno was correct. This would be their last moment of peace.

‘We go on,’ he said.

An hour later, the Salamander failed to make its routine notification call.

‘Here they come!’ voxed Sunno.

Dozens of light vehicles came leaping over the dunes’ ridges. Ork attack buggies, half-tracks, junkers – all equipped with heavy weapons, no two the same. Bikes, ridden by wild-eyed monsters, formed a surging arrowhead around them that constantly threatened to break apart. Four light transports, bursting with xenos, came behind. They were so caked in dust and ash that it was impossible to see which sub-grouping they belonged to. Brusc suspected speed cultists, but ultimately it did not matter.

‘Ignore the bikes, and prioritise the transports,’ he ordered the others.

The orks were on them quickly, driving at reckless speed. He snapped off a bolt, catching an ork biker square in the chest. Its ribcage exploded, making it flop like a gutted fish. The bike continued on for a dozen metres, before falling and tumbling over and over in a ball of scattering scrap. Cackling ork outriders skidded around it, bike engines howling. They leaned over in the saddle, firing pistols. The Jopali replied, ruby las-light stabbing out from cabs and containers. The socket stubbers on the cabs rattled. The Chimeras either side of the convoy belted out multi-laser and heavy bolter-rounds, while Doneal covered the front of the convoy with *Cataphraxes*’s storm bolter, and the Taurox covered the rear.

An ork bike went hurtling away from the line of trucks, rearing up as it hit the valley sides. Another exploded. But the riverbed was rough, the

orks fast, and many of the Imperial shots went wide.

A line of heavy calibre solid shot stitched holes along the top of Bruscs trailer, punching through the thin sheet metal. The bullets tracked upwards, streaking off Bruscs armour. The Jopali were not so lucky. One was kneeling to get a better aim. He was caught in the shoulder and sent screaming from the rooftop. Another, lying flat, was pierced by bullets coming from below. He jerked twice, his lasgun clattering over the side of the truck. His body slid after it, dangling from his safety rope.

The ork gunner snarled, bashing his driver on the head. He gestured at Bruscs. The buggy wobbled as the driver warded off the gunners blows and glanced up to see what his comrade was so angry about.

‘You will make no trophy of me,’ said Bruscs. He levelled his boltgun. His first shot missed, his aim spoiled by the haulers sudden jolting. His second went true, decapitating the driver. The headless corpse slumped over the steering wheel, sending it caroming away from the convoy. It slammed into the valley side. The gunner recovered, and traversed his gun for a parting shot. He never made it, falling dead over his own weapon, felled by a sniper rifle.

‘A good shot, Marcomar,’ said Bruscs.

The orks pursued undaunted. More bikes came out of the hills to run alongside the convoy, looping far out so that they could come at the trucks again and again with guns spitting. There were so many now that they were swirling around the giant trucks like flies around cattle. Three buggies and a half-track were harrying the last hauler but one, riddling the sides of the trailer with holes. It drove on, but Bruscs doubted there would be anyone left living within. The Taurox Prime rearguard cleared wide areas of the dead river of hostiles, only for them to flood back.

Two of the rickety transports swooped down on a Chimera, chased by a couple of buggies. The tanks turret tracked round, shooting a barrage of fire from its multilaser, and a brave gunner added to the weight of fire with the vehicles pintle stubber. A fusillade of rockets hammered into the human tank. Poorly fashioned, most clanged off the armour without detonating, but one flew true and exploded against the Chimeras turret. The crewman was obliterated, the turret lifted half off its mount. The buggies closed in on the wounded vehicle.

One buggy went cartwheeling away, its tyres blown out. Another of the transports exploded in an orange fireball, destroyed by shots from the trailing Chimera, but the other drew alongside, easily keeping pace. A dozen orks were crammed into it, hanging from handholds along the outside. A broad gangplank crashed down, hooks on the end catching on the tank's fittings. Ball-mounted lasguns along the side blasted at the xenos, but the gangplank was in the way and they could draw no good lines of fire. With a war cry Brusc could hear over the racket of battle, the orks clambering onto the tank, shoving at each other so hard in their eagerness that one tumbled from the locked vehicles. The Chimera swerved from side to side, trying to shake the orks off, but they only laughed at such entertainment. Within seconds, they had the upper hatch up and were slaughtering every man inside. The linked Chimera and buggy stopped, the orks dancing madly on their prize.

'How much further, Brother Sunno?' asked Brusc.

'Another seventy kilometres until we reach the outermost Imperial line. No guarantee there'll be anything there to greet us, Sword Brother. I'm getting nothing on the vox.'

Brusc blasted an ork from the back of a buggy. The roaring of ork engines was deafening. Black smoke billowed around the trucks.

'My lord!' cried a man of Jopal. He pointed to the south side of the valley.

Seven more trucks laden with orks were coming down the slope, swelling the number of greenskins. Orks swinging grappling irons and the boarding ramps held high on both sides of all the trucks left no doubt in Brusc's mind as to their intentions. In the Rhino's cupola, Doneal swung round and gunned for them with *Cataphraxes's* storm bolter. His aim was good: the bolts raking across the bed of one of the trucks, slaughtering orks. Brusc added his fire, killing more. Marcomar slew a driver, sending a truck into a swerve that toppled it, spilling orks all over the valley floor. Others were too well protected and his las-shots were halted by iron plating.

'Brother!' warned Marcomar.

A buggy was driving right by the hauler that followed Brusc's. The tractor unit's heavy stubbers could not reduce their elevation enough, their bullets raising tracks in the desert a good metre out from the buggy. Men

gesticulated, their shouts inaudible as they leaned out from the container roof. One slipped and fell, hanging helplessly by his ankle cord. Another two stood to help him and were shot down. Brusc switched targets, targeting the buggy. He missed twice, a third round bringing a plume of steam from the buggy's engine block to no noticeable effect.

Its gunner had abandoned his gun. He reached down. When he stood upright he held a large bomb.

A daring jink from the driver brought the buggy between the two haulers. The gunner attached the bomb to the radiator grille of the tractor unit. The driver of the hauler accelerated, trying to crush them, but with a flurry of obscene gestures from the gunner the buggy was away.

'Get down!' Brusc screamed.

To the credit of the driver of the second hauler, he realised his fate and turned sharply, taking the vehicle out of the convoy. A selfless move, but too late.

The bomb exploded, hollowing out the tractor unit. It bounced as it came to a halt, jackknifing into the path of the remaining north flank Chimera. The tank ran into it at speed, clanging to a sudden stop against the flaming wreck. The trailer detached, rolling over the towing bed of the tractor, and reared up. Men flew from it, helpless as ragdolls. It twisted, carried forwards by its own momentum, to land diagonally across the river bed.

The third hauler ploughed into it, sending men skidding off its roof. The stricken vehicles were immediately assaulted. The amount of return fire from them was inadequate. Brusc held his breath, but the other haulers avoided the smash, swerving around the wreckage. A small measure of retribution was earned when one ran over a careless buggy, crushing it under massive wheels. The Taurox gunned down a good number of the orks attacking the survivors as it sped by.

'Do not stop! Drive on! Drive on!' ordered Ghaskar. 'If we stay to aid our comrades, we shall all die!'

'We lost two,' said Brusc to Sunno.

A gleeful howling drew his attention. Two of the fresh ork trucks had survived and were running hard by his trailer. Orks slammed hooked lines into the thin sides of the container, catching the access ladders with others, and swarmed up onto the roof.

They were quick, roaring with battle lust. Two were dropped by lasgun shots and fell back, knocking another ork from his purchase, then the rest were on the roof. The four remaining men of Jopal were dead before Brusco could shout at them to get behind him. Marcomar went on as if nothing were happening, coolly sniping high-value targets away from the truck. Commendable, thought Brusco.

Brusco dropped his boltgun. It clattered on the metal, skittering across the bouncing roof. His chainsword and bolt pistol were in his hands in an instant. He had no time to attach their lanyard chains to his wrists.

‘No pity. No remorse. No fear!’ bellowed Brusco. In truth, there was no need for such words; he could feel none of these things for the greenskins, they were vermin to be slaughtered. His hatred of them constricted his throat, strangling his battle-hymns. He stood firm, locked to the roof, as the orks attacked.

The first died from a bolt-round to its thick skull. The second fell screaming from the roof, holding its entrails into its belly. Marcomar drew his bolt pistol, shooting down orks trying to crawl up the rear of the truck. To the front, Sunno pulled *Cataphraxes* clear of the convoy, allowing Doneal to target the orks still aboard their trucks next to the hauler. He shredded the rearmost with a concentrated burst of fire, and it came away smashed to nothing by the convoy.

‘Die!’ screamed Brusco, his spittle coating the inside of his visor. His fury was unbounded. ‘You will pay for the death of Brother Osric! You will pay for the lives of every human your miserable kind has taken!’

An ork managed to get a blow past his guard, slamming down a crudely fashioned axe into his pauldron. The force behind it was phenomenal and he swayed back, with only the maglocks of his boots holding him in place. His sensorium buzzed his system with pseudo-pain, informing him that his pauldron was cracked. The ork did not get a chance to strike again. Brusco blew its guts out of its back. It was still snarling as it fell away.

Something landed at his feet. He caught sight of a fizzing stick grenade before it exploded and the roof collapsed beneath his feet.

He landed hard on his back, looking up at a hole in the ceiling of the trailer container. Panicked men were packed into bunks lining the inside. Medicae personnel reached for their sidearms. Brusco got to his feet as a pair of monsters jumped in after him. The first landed on Brusco’s chest. He

caught its foot and sent it sprawling backwards. It crashed back into a rack of bunks, the weight of it alone enough to kill the injured men lying there. The second landed behind him. Before the first could rise, it died, its face blown apart. Sister Rosa nodded at Brusc from the far end of the container, a small calibre bolter in her hand.

He had no time to thank her. The second ork was on him, wrenching at his power pack with huge grasping hands. Brusc and the ork staggered backwards. He reached over his head, slapping at the plasteel of his armour before finding the flesh of the ork's hand. He grasped it in a crushing grip, tearing it free of his battleplate. Turning around under the ork's arm, he yanked hard, pulling it off balance and locking its arm. The ork was a mass of knotted muscle, stronger in truth than Brusc, but Brusc was the more skilled warrior. A blow of his forearm bent the thing's elbow the wrong way, shattering it. The ork roared, maw revealing a wealth of yellow fangs. Its uninjured hand went for a big knife at its belt. Brusc smashed the knife from its fingers with his fist, his returning swing throwing the ork's arm wide and exposing its torso. Brusc knocked it down with a kick to its sternum. Such a blow would have pulped the chest cavity of a man, but the ork was not even stunned. Brusc leapt onto it before it could get up again, pinning it to the floor with his knees. He held its good arm down and closed his other hand around its throat.

'Suffer not the unclean to live, suffer not the alien, suffer not the usurper of worlds!' The ork thrashed about, but Brusc would not be dislodged. His armoured fingers dug deeply into its throat. Dark blood ran over them. He wrenched backwards, ripping out its throat. 'O lord Emperor!' he cried, holding up the scrap of flesh. 'Accept this token of blood!'

Incredibly, the ork still lived. Dirty talons scraped at its opened neck, blood bubbled between its teeth, but its eyes gleamed still with hateful life.

'My lord,' called Marcomar from above. 'A brother should guard his wargear with his life.'

Marcomar let Brusc's bolter fall. The Sword Brother stood and caught it in one movement. He levelled it at the ork's head. Unthinking fury glared back.

'I grant you release from your unclean existence.'

The double report of the bolter and the bang of its munition blasting apart the ork's skull killed all sound in the container.

Brusc stared at the thing's ruined face, only vaguely aware of his surroundings.

A massive detonation outside snapped him back to his senses. Brusc's vox crackled into life.

'The orks are retreating, Sword Brother,' said Sunno matter of factly.

'Praise be,' said Brusc, and felt some of the shadow retreat from his heart.

'We should save our thanks, brother,' said Sunno. 'There's a storm coming in.'

Armageddon had not quite finished with its convulsions. One last wall of razored ash blasted across the wastes and into the hives. All across the twinned continents of Primus and Secundus the fighting stopped again.

The convoy drove on through the furnace winds laced with cutting ash. The vehicles slowed to a crawl, the remaining haulers rocking on their suspension in the wind.

'Visibility's down to twenty metres,' said Sunno. 'I'm driving blind.'

'Keep on,' ordered Brusc.

'I never said I would not. I trust *Cataphraxes*,' said the dour initiate, his vox roughened by the storm's static.

Brusc sat alone in the damaged trailer. The wounded had been crammed into the other containers as soon as Sunno reported the storm. The Jopali had fixed a tarpaulin over the rent in the room, but it had been torn away as the storm strengthened. Wind whistled through the teeth of the gash. Already ash was building up on the floor, and the air was grey-yellow with suspended particles, coating Brusc's armour.

'Brother,' said Sunno. 'There is an abandoned facility upon my cartographia, very old, but it might give us somewhere to wait this mess out.'

'Head for it,' said Brusc. 'We shall die if we do not.'

A cleft in the rock appeared, wide enough to take the trucks. Brusc stood on loose gravel, eyeing it thoughtfully. After a moment's consideration, he

ordered Sunno forward and he walked alongside. Crag materialised out of the haze, tall and wind-worn. He checked the poorly detailed map imagery projected by his helmet. The sole large building and open pit it sat in on the far side of the canyon were unlabelled. 'Is this a mine?'

'Must be,' said Sunno. 'Even if not, we'll be out of the wind. Hidden. No orks are going to be out in this. The humans need their rest.' An edge of derision crept into Sunno's voice.

'That they do,' said Brusc. He did not upbraid Sunno for his tone; it was a sentiment all of the Black Templars expressed. Their crusading spirit, the desire to head ever onward and to destroy the enemies of the Emperor bred into them a certain impatience with weaker men. Brusc was well aware that he felt it; indeed, he had said something similar only days before when they had come to the hospital. Osric had picked him up on it. He always had more patience for the unenhanced, for citizens. Contempt for the weakness of common men was not something Brusc was proud of feeling, but feel it he did. Osric had always been the better man.

He voxed back to Lieutenant Ghaskar, telling him to follow *Cataphraxes* in.

'I will go first,' said Brusc. 'Follow me slowly. Marcomar and Doneal, cover me as best you can.'

Brusc unclipped his bolter. Holding it up to his eyeline ready to fire, he walked into the cleft.

According to his auto-senses, the way through was twelve metres at the nearest widest point. Stone walls rose up either side of him, trammelling the sky into the semblance of an ash-grey river. In the upper reaches of the canyon the wind moaned over the fluted strata of the rock, booming where it encountered cavities. But at the base of the canyon where Brusc walked, the air was unnaturally still. *Cataphraxes*'s engine bubbled behind him, a mechanical chuckle quiet enough that Brusc could still hear the dust falls hissing down from the wastes above. Visibility in the canyon was better than it was in the maelstrom outside, but he still could not see the end. Bulges of rock loomed in the murk, semblances of trees or mythical giants. The red tint of his helmet lenses intensified the effect, making them eerie despite its efforts to delimit the objects it saw for him.

If we are going to be attacked during the storm, it would be somewhere like here, he thought.

He proceeded carefully, gun up, reticule flicking to every dark place in the canyon's wrinkled sides. None proved to be anything more than shadows. The deepest crack was a metre and no more – a simple faulting of ancient stone. The wrong kind of rock for caves, the wrong kind of environment. There was nowhere for anything to hide. Even so, he could not shake the feeling that they were being watched.

He thought he caught a voice and spun round.

'*Brussssscccc*,' he heard. He could swear he heard it, barely louder than the engine and the whine of his armour. '*Brussssscccc*.'

'Anything wrong, brother?' asked Sunno.

Brusc's targeting reticle danced over an ash fall sheeting down, seeking a threat and finding none. His finger relaxed on the trigger of his boltgun.

'No, nothing. The wind. Come on.'

'You are getting nervous, brother,' said Sunno.

'Vigilant,' corrected Brusc. 'Let's pick up our pace. There's nothing here.'

The Sword Brother jogged on. *Cataphraxes*'s engines growled louder as Sunno re-engaged the tracks.

After another hundred metres, the canyon ended.

Brusc took in the wide space before him. Visibility had improved again, the clogged air forming a diffuse ceiling over his head. He could see all the way to the other side of the pit, a disused open-cast mine or quarry. The canyon gave every impression of being naturally formed, but the topography here was anything but. They emerged into a perfect square, the half-kilometre-long edges sharp as if cut out with a knife. On the far side were the dilapidated remains of a facility of some kind. Held off the floor on thick metal pillars, it climbed to the top of the pit wall opposite to a steep roadway that went from floor to edge via several switchbacks. The facility was made of local iron and had reddened in what little moisture there was in the air. He took in the corrosion from both ambient moisture and acid rain squalls and calculated that it had been unused for at least fifty years. More than that, Brusc could tell little about the place. His reticle flicked from point to point, unable to give him any more information than how far away it was, and what windshear would effect his bolts if he were to open fire.

'The mine,' said Sunno.

‘Any indication what they were doing here?’ asked Brusc. His voice sounded too loud in his helmet.

‘It doesn’t say,’ said Sunno. ‘Minimal information. Does it matter, brother?’

‘No,’ said Brusc. He walked forward until he was standing at the edge of a roadway similar to the one opposite. Evidently, the canyon had been co-opted into being a secondary entrance. The floor of the pit was not uniform. Cuboid sections had been lifted from it. the road headed immediately right from the canyon mouth, a generous arc provided for the turn at the top, three switchbacks taking it to the pit floor. He judged that the trucks would be able to go down, if they were careful. The road continued onwards, skirting the diggings, to the facility. ‘I am coming aboard, brother,’ said Brusc. ‘We will be stopping here tonight.’

Night fell quickly, hurried in by the ash’s gloom. The sky remained thick with ash and glowed strangely with the refracted lights of distant cities, but the pit itself remained clear. Were it not for rare gusts of wind, the mine would have felt like a cave. A stuffy stillness filled the place, the dying gasp of the Season of Fire.

Brusc walked around the camp set up beneath the broken facility. Chutes opened above truck bays ranged against the raw stone of the pit wall. The convoy did not occupy these, but had drawn up in a defensive horseshoe, ends anchored against the pit side. Within this corral there was little activity. Few without orders felt like daring the night; everyone was tired.

Loose sheets of metal banged when the wind gusted. When it did not, the facility groaned as the temperature changed. Bickering voices announced the approach of a Jopali patrol. When they saw Brusc they fell silent. Their sergeant acknowledged him with a nod. Once they thought he was out of earshot they resumed their arguments, their sergeant’s threats having little effect.

Brusc watched them go. It was dark under the facility, but his suit picked out their shapes clearly. They reached the inner edge of the camp, and tramped up a set of rickety stairs into the building. Another group was patrolling the road leading out of the pit. He could not see them from his position but they too were arguing and he heard them.

‘Keep your men quiet, sergeants,’ he growled. ‘Unless you want every ork within twenty kilometres to know we’re here.’

The Black Templar passed the stairs and headed past the lone sentry guarding the gap between trucks. The man stared at him, afraid of Brusca and the night in equal measure.

He walked along the edge of the trucks, passing more men keeping watch over the pit floor and the road they had entered by. Brusca had the same impression of nervous energy from them all. He walked on until he was clear of the camp and the facility. It towered over him. He should have felt safe beneath it, but somehow he did not.

‘The Jopali are staying in their trucks. They don’t much like this place.’

‘Brother Sunno,’ said Brusca as Sunno joined him.

‘I have been walking the pit floor.’

‘There’s nothing down there,’ said Brusca.

‘It does not hurt to be diligent.’

‘You are uneasy?’

Sunno did not reply immediately. ‘I’d be a liar if I said I was not.’

Brusca was silent a space. Both of them spoke quietly, but even in the privacy of their helmets their voices felt like an intrusion into the quiet of the pit, as if the animus of the place were offended.

‘I have had to break up two fights. It is affecting them. I admit something about it sets my teeth on edge too,’ said Brusca.

Sunno looked about himself, his lenses glowing in the flat face of his crusader helm. ‘I feel it, I feel it brother. A... A rage.’

‘A geologic oddity,’ said Brusca. ‘Tectonic infrasound, localised magnetic field...’

‘Does your armour’s spirit detect any of those things? Because mine does not,’ interrupted Sunno. ‘Perhaps we should not have come here.’

‘Perhaps not.’ said Brusca. ‘Your diligence is correct. Stay so. The storm appears spent. We shall move out at first light.’ He looked around. ‘You are right, I do not like this place.’

‘Yes, Sword Brother,’ said Sunno.

Brusca resumed his circuit, skirting around outside the line of giant metal columns supporting the facility. The effect of the sky pressing down was claustrophobic. He experienced a sudden desire to remove his helmet and, seeing no reason not to, he did.

The neck seal hissed as it came undone. The air hit his face like a blast from an oven. Nevertheless, he breathed deeply of it, glad to be able to smell something other than himself and his suit's coolant system. His mutilated face itched terribly, and he rubbed at the patchwork of scars and plasti-skin with armour-clad fingers. Without the red staining of his helm, the mine should have looked less sinister, but his sense of wrongness only grew.

For a moment he closed his eyes. It was so quiet there the silence became almost audible, washing out the distant voices of the Jopali sentries with its roaring hush.

'Brussssscccc.'

Brusc had his bolter in his hands before his helmet hit the floor.

'Who's there?' he shouted. The voice had been louder this time, his name clear. 'Who's there?'

He hunted through the murk. His eyes were keen, but he regretted removing his helmet for he saw nothing. A new set of sounds reached his ears: footsteps scrabbling on loose ash, the thump and jangle of kit bumping on running bodies and the click of respirators.

'My lord, we heard you shouting. Is there something amiss?'

Brusc cursed the men for their clumsiness, no matter how well intentioned. 'Something is out there.' He did not tell them it had spoken his name. 'Gone now.' His delivery made sure they were left in no doubt it had gone because of their racket.

'My lord, I...'

A scream rent the air, confined, bouncing from metal walls.

'The facility,' said Brusc.

The Jopali had no time to respond before Brusc was away running from them. He easily outpaced them, reaching the bottom of the stairs within the camp in seconds. They shook dangerously as he pounded up them, the camp behind him going into a commotion in his wake.

His entrance into the bottom floor of the facility burst the door from its hinges. He squinted into the gloom. The room had been stripped of useful materials, flimsies and yellowed sheets of paper were scattered everywhere, square pale islands on the dark floor. Insubstantial partitions had once divided the place up into administrator's cells. Most were gone, only jagged edges remained where they had been ripped away. A long row

of broken windows looked out over the pit. Many had their shutters down. All of these showed signs of storm damage, and several shutters were missing altogether.

The far wall backed onto the rock, the panels that covered it fallen away in places. Only the chutes seemed permanent, giant square pipes pitted by corrosion yet still whole. Everything else was in decay. Acid rain had rotted through large patches of the floor. Through them, past the lumpen silhouettes of broken processing machinery, Brusca saw clear to the roof, an expanse of blackness punctured by holes that, together with the windows, let in the muted glow of the sky. For a moment, he saw the holes as a leering face. Only for a moment. Up there, near the edge of the pit, it was windier. He heard ventilation cowls rotating to face the wind, fans spinning, directing air into spaces that had long since opened themselves to the elements.

That was six floors up. Down at the bottom was only stillness. The room stretched on into an infinity of silences.

A pale figure moved in the gloom.

‘Who goes there?’ Brusca shouted. The figure stood still for a moment, then walked away out of Brusca’s sight, right into the rear wall.

Brusca swore, held his bolter at chest height and advanced.

Army boots clattered on the stairs behind him. The soldiers, seeing Brusca’s watchful stance, fanned out with their weapons at the ready. Feeble munitorum torches poked yellow beams of light into the dark.

‘Anything to report my lord?’ asked Ghaska.

‘Only laxity! I thought you said your men had checked this place?’

‘Suflimar!’ Ghaska shouted out of the door. A few seconds later one of his men came up from outside. Ghaska had a furious exchange with him. Their dialect was so thick that Brusca caught one word in every four.

‘He says he did check it, my lord.’

‘There’s somebody up here. I saw him. About halfway down the hall.’

‘Maybe it was Bapoli, or Srinergee. That’s who Suflimar left up here, my lord.’

‘Where are they now?’

Suflimar called the men’s names out, his voice wavering. There was no reply. Vox clicks and mutters asking the sentries to check in produced static hiss.

‘Is there another way out of here?’ asked Brusc.

‘The stairs, down the far end.’ Torches converged to pick out a door ajar many metres distant, and broke apart again.

‘No. He went out there.’ Brusc pointed his gun. ‘Halfway down.’

‘There is no way out there, my lord,’ said Ghaskar.

‘The chutes, is there a way into the chutes?’ demanded Brusc. ‘Or behind the panelling, between the room and the rock?’

‘Nay, lord,’ Suflimar answered for himself. ‘Tere is notting, notting like tat.’

Brusc had thought the lieutenant’s faith in his men admirable. Now he saw it as weakness, putting trust in such as these.

‘There’s one there. You must have missed it,’ Brusc snarled. He went forward. The Jopali, unasked, covered him. His armoured feet crunched on broken glass and drifts of ash. The floor was unsteady, and he took care to stick to the joins in the panelling where structural beams ran.

‘Brother!’ shouted Sunno from outside.

‘Enter!’ said Brusc over his shoulder.

Sunno jogged up to join his brother. When he reached Brusc he handed him his helmet.

‘You dropped this.’

‘My thanks, Brother Sunno.’

Sunno’s bolter clicked as he brought it up. Brusc maglocked his bolter to his chest while he replaced his helm. Its features revealed to him more clearly by his sensorium, the room looked no less empty. ‘Where are the neophytes?’

‘Watching over the camp, and keeping Sister Rosa in her trailer. She wanted to come up here.’

‘We will not allow it. Something is gravely amiss here. I saw someone. Ghaskar’s men are missing.’

‘Understood, brother.’

The pair of them spread out, then took oblique lines across the floor toward where Brusc had seen the pale man. In the dark, Sunno’s white shoulder pads were a muddy grey, the black templar cross stark upon them. Brusc’s own red Sword Brother’s cross was invisible on black. He was a shadow giant, armour whining eerily along with the wind above. The

weakened floor shifted alarmingly under their great weight, but they did not take their eyes or their guns from their target.

‘Brother,’ said Sunno. He held his bolter up one handed, pointing with the other. Behind a pile of debris was a body. Brusc’s auto-senses showed him what it was before he’d registered it. Data flicked before his eyes. A threat indicator unfolded in the lower left of his vision, and ticked steadily upwards.

‘Dead,’ said Sunno.

Brusc crunched over to it as stealthily as he could. Close inspection revealed a catalogue of horrors.

‘Not just dead. Mutilated.’

The man’s jaw had been pulled off, his tongue nearly cut around so that it remained rooted in his head and poked into the air. His eyelids were gone, giving him a crazed stare, as were the tips of his fingers. His stomach had been neatly excised, the guts and the tissue that covered them were neatly piled next to him.

‘Temperature reading suggests death occurred recently. Who is this?’ Brusc asked. The Guardsmen approached fearfully. One of them clawed off his respirator to be noisily sick.

‘Tat Bapoli, lord,’ said Suflimar. ‘Ork do it?’

‘One of their torturers maybe. One of their infiltrators, but I see no trace of their presence. Even the most cunning ork gives himself away.’ He searched for dung or disturbances in the rubbish strewn the place, and found none.

‘That’s not the work of an ork, brother,’ said Sunno privately.

‘No,’ replied Brusc. ‘It is not. Speak carefully.’

‘Yes, brother.’

‘Emperor preserve us,’ said Ghaskar.

‘We shall all pray that he does,’ said Brusc publically. ‘Be on your guard! The Emperor will not help those who do not help themselves.’

Sunno advanced further. ‘Here’s our door.’

With the barrel of his bolter he pointed to a rectangle of blackness in the stone so deep their armour senses could not penetrate it. Suflimar babbled a long stream of his nonsense Low Gothic at the sight of it. The other Jopali became agitated, jabbering back.

‘He says that this door was not here three hours ago when he checked, my lord, nor when the last patrol came by,’ said Ghaskar.

‘And now there is a door, and it is open,’ said Sunno. Unlike every other edge in the pit, square cut by mining machinery, this had a rough look, as if hewn by primitive tools. ‘It looks like it has been here for a thousand years, brother.’

A whisper came out of the darkness. ‘*Brussssscccc.*’

Brusc’s bolter clicked against his armour as he pulled it in tightly to himself to steady his aim.

‘What?’ asked Sunno.

‘You didn’t hear that?’

‘Hear what?’

‘A whisper,’ said Brusc. Realising that their conversation was spooking the men, he switched to vox.

‘I heard nothing,’ said Sunno.

A scream sounded from the door. Up and up it rose, reaching a crescendo of terror, then collapsed into despairing laughter.

‘Now that I heard,’ said Sunno. He shifted, seeking a target in the dark.

‘Something fell is at work here,’ said Brusc. He switched back to helmet speaker. His words were harsh, the voice of the Emperor’s deadly angels, and it reassured the men. ‘Remain here with my brother. I will enter the dark and see if I can find your comrade. If I do not return within an hour, break camp and depart immediately. Is that understood?’

‘Yes, my lord,’ said Ghaskar. The men quietened, grateful to have orders.

‘Do not waste yourself for one man, brother,’ said Sunno.

‘There is more at stake than a life,’ said Brusc.

‘Then let me come with you, brother. Let me help you,’ said Sunno.

Brusc was already walking towards the door. Whispering came at him, seemingly from within his helmet.

‘If I am right about what I think might be down there, brother,’ said Brusc. ‘Then only the Emperor can help me.’

He stepped into the door with a prayer on his lips, disappearing from view instantly, his black armour swallowed by the dark.

‘What did you hear?’ voxed Sunno. ‘What did you hear, brother?’

Only static answered.

The darkness was fleeting. Firelight took its place. Brusc walked down stairs unsuited to human feet. Torches flickered in sconces, too few for the illumination provided. The stairs wound in a spiral, down and down.

‘The lord Emperor is my protector. He is the shield of humanity,’ said Brusc. ‘I am His sword.’

Brusc was old, very old. Six hundred years he had fought for the Imperium, his blood taking place in the Kalidar Crusade, yet another war against the orks. The following years saw the Black Templars criss-crossing space bled dry to supply Lord Solar Macharius’s glorious adventure, and he had fought all manner of foes before he was made an initiate.

But not daemons. He encountered them much later. The Adeptus Astartes were better informed about the nature of the warp, but even amongst them few knew the whole truth. As a Sword Brother of Dorn’s black knights, Brusc was one who did.

He had fought daemons. He had killed them. He had seen them suck his brothers’ souls from their bodies. He had seen the horror the daemons brought, how they twisted reality about them.

There was a daemon here. The hatred burning unasked for in his twin hearts made him sure of that. His teeth itched, a metallic taste was in his mouth. A sure sign of sorcery. That was the only word fit for it.

‘Let the Emperor’s light show me the way. Let his light cast perfect brilliance, dividing that which is true from that which is not true. Let it show lies for lies, deceit for deceit.’

His prayer grew louder, until it rang from the walls of the tunnel. In response, his vision shifted, the tunnel becoming the pulsating gut of a great creature. A brief vision that mocked his pleas for veracity, but this falsehood was driven aside by his will.

‘Let his light blind my unholy foe. Let his light show me my enemy. I am a son of Rogal Dorn. I am the chosen of the Emperor. I am a vessel for his wisdom and his vengeance. I am a Space Marine of the Black Templars, an adept of the stars, and I know no fear. Show me yourself, I command it.’

A deep, throaty laugh answered, an entirely inhuman sound blended with the purring of predators and the gurgle of sucking wounds. This was a laughter that brought madness.

‘Little soldier, little soldier. How you amuse! What power is yours to command me?’

A rasping noise followed, as of scales on stone. A hideous shriek directly blasted Brusc’s ears, bypassing the aural dampers of his battleplate. He stumbled, ears ringing, which brought forth another burst of laughter from his unseen opponent that ended in a menacing, polyphonic growl.

Brusc staggered around the final turn of the stairs and came into a stone chamber bathed in blood-red light. An obelisk stood at its centre, made of dark crystal. Multifaceted and irregular in shape, it was pointed at the top and thinned near the base to the width of Brusc’s thigh. A domed ceiling, covered in flaking paintings of things out of nightmares, curved over it.

The daemon watched. Long snake coils looped around the obelisk, black scales glinting. The thing was entirely serpentine but for the head. In place of a serpent’s face it bore the features of three men. The leftmost and centre were shrunken, dead things, wizened as mummies, but the one on the right regarded Brusc with a vile amusement. A strange smell came from it, not the acerbic stink of reptiles, but an unexpected muskiness, pleasant until deeper breaths revealed undertones of rotting meat.

The chamber resounded with an unsettling babble, many voices, many languages. This uncanny chatter was inconstant in volume, falling below hearing and rising up again until the words were almost clear. The voices were in pain, or they mocked Brusc and his Emperor, or they begged him for an end to suffering or cajoled him to join them. Animal growls and hisses competed with the human sounds. Alien voices were there too. There was nothing of purity in any of it.

The daemon reared up high so that it might look down upon Brusc. This display of superiority from something so low spurred the Black Templar’s recovery. Hatred spiked in him, and he pulled himself tall.

‘The power of the Emperor is mine. It is the birthright of all men, should they have the strength to call upon it. I am of the Emperor’s elect. I am one of his chosen.’

‘You are no pysker-soul,’ said the daemon.

‘Through my faith alone is the Emperor’s attention upon me, and He stands by my right hand. Through me, He will slay you.’

‘The Emperor. You worship? He is your god?’ hissed the daemon. The cacophony of the damned swelled as it spoke and the daemon gurgled a laugh. ***‘Well. This is novelty not seen for long ages. Only once have I witnessed the cripple of Terra’s clone children bleating praises. Their devotion did not end well for them.’***

‘No others of the Adeptus Astartes see the truth of the Emperor’s light, nor ever have. We alone are the chosen.’

‘Do not be so sure, little soldier. There were others, until they saw the truth behind your master’s lies. But He is persistent. We grant Him that. Worshipped He is, and worshipped He has been. Foolishness is eternal.’

‘The truth saves.’

‘Ah! It does, it does! That you are right!’ the daemoniac serpent swayed sinuously across the room, its body lengthening obscenely. ***‘Not your truth, for that is a lie. Behold! Here is one who was saved by the truth.’***

The daemon moved aside, revealing a man kneeling beside the obelisk who had not been there before; the second of Ghaskar’s sentries. He was facing away from Brusc. At some prompting he turned slowly, revealing his skinless face. He clacked exposed teeth together and said something unintelligible for his lack of lips. Slowly, he raised his hand, and showed the tattered rag of his face. It writhed of its own accord, an expression of utter horror upon it.

‘If you wish to worship, this is the way it is done, little soldier. Sacrifice and receive. A simple transaction, more honest than the lies of the Golden King.’ The triple head darted forward. A smile played across the thing’s plump lips. The dry smell of old decay came from its dead faces. ***‘Put down your feeble weapon. You cannot harm me. Embrace my masters and know power unbound!’***

Previously unseen runes on the obelisk flared hotly. Brusc took a step back, feeling the heat even through his armour. The disfigured Guardsman held up his arm and burst into flame. He stood unhurriedly, and danced to a toneless song sung by the mocking voices until his entire body blazed. Abruptly, he fell. Even as the fire consumed him in a riot of unnatural pinks and blues, he twitched, jerking along to the daemon-song until he could move no more. Brusc shut off his air intakes, the smell of burning flesh and the daemon’s stink too much. It had no effect, and the smell

somehow infiltrated the machinery of his battleplate, growing stronger, making his head swim. His altered body worked harder to clear his system of toxins to no avail. The daemon leaned in very close, putting its face close to his helmet visor. Brusc found he could not move. The smell of perfume and spoiled blood was overpowering.

‘Battle you have fought.’ A long black tongue, suckered like the arm of a squid, ran up the crack of his pauldron. ***‘War comes ever to this world. I came for one such war, with the Primarch Angron and his daemon-legions. He has gone, but I remain.’***

‘Liar,’ said Brusc through numb lips. He was salivating furiously, drool spilled down his chin.

‘And who was the First War fought against, oh most noble son of the corpse lord? It is a secret closely kept. Do you know? No rebellion was the first war, but glorious invasion.’ The head darted to one side, then the other, the daemon’s face twisted with wicked delight as it appraised him. ***‘And all the wars before that.’***

Brusc raged inside at his easy subdual, powerless against the daemon’s sorcery.

‘I know you, Brusc, I know much. Honour and glory, glory and honour, these things are everything to you. To fight and to die in noble cause. Six centuries you have scurried from one end of the galaxy to the other on the errands of your false god. What a waste of your potential, such a squandering of devotion.’ The words hissed from the daemon’s mouth, becoming ever more snakelike.

Images of Brusc’s life forced themselves into his mind. His elevation, his bleeding, his time with Brother Adelard... Years and years of war and service, years of suffering.

‘So long it took for your accession to the Sword Brethren. They did not repay you easily for your efforts. So long to wait, and the victory so hollow when it came.’

Brusc could no longer speak. He remembered the honour duels. Three times he had tried his hand in the Circle of Honour. Only on the third did he succeed. Five hundred years old then. So long to wait. He railed against the daemon’s words and was horrified to realise they were, in part, true. He

had been overlooked. He had been neglected. Why, surely he was worthy of a Marshal's badge?

'All that faith and fire. And for what?' the daemon said, its voice become seductive.

A torrent of memories were unlocked in Brusc's mind, all of them of Osric. Osric, his last neophyte. Osric, the finest friend he had had in all his long years. Osric as a boy, as neophyte, as an initiate.

Osric dead, slain by the orks only days before. Osric brought low by the same desire for hollow honour.

Brusc howled, a formless bellow of grief and anger. There had been no time to allow himself the luxury of mourning. There never was enough time.

'Yes, you see, little soldier. The Emperor takes and takes and takes. What does He give you? Nothing. In a moment I will make you an offer. He has already stripped you of your precious humanity. What use to you is a soul?'

Brusc saw it in his mind's eye, the daemon leaning in intimately, its breath tickling his cheek somehow through the plasteel of his helmet.

'This is what you will receive from your new gods.'

Brusc walking through fire, his armour changed. Fanged maws decorating his backpack's vents, spikes on his shoulders. His head bare and tattooed, his broken face a study in delight as he gunned down dozens of Imperial soldiers. Other battles crowded his thoughts, many triumphs.

'In your might you will bestride worlds. In your honour you will be unmatched.'

Great honour was bestowed upon him by raucous gatherings of others like him, renegades and the dispossessed. Men and demigods flocked to his banner. Above all was pleasure, pleasure at his power, to do as he would. This was his true potential.

'There is no pleasure in your life. I can give you much. Others have come to me. Others have accepted. Others have prospered.' Visions now of these men and women. Some drawn here in war, others in peace, all hungering for something more. Mutant, human, and post-human too.
'They had their greatest desires fulfilled. And who can blame them? What does your corpse lord offer, but the ignominy of slow defeat,

hellish suffering as your worlds burn, holding back the fires of the truth. Here is my offer.'

The serpent leaned in as it had in the vision. As it had in the vision it spoke, words that Brusc could never remember, and yet which haunted him nightly for the rest of his days.

The Emperor protects! The Emperor protects! thought Brusc. Release me that I might do my duty.

'What is your response?'

A million memories pounded through his mind, a new humiliation with every heartbeat. He had achieved nothing. He was nothing, but he could be something.

Brusc was tempted, oh, he was tempted. He would spend many days and nights in contemplation, watched over by his Chaplains.

But he did not succumb.

'No,' said Brusc.

His defiance freed him. Brusc's limbs were his own to command. He raised his bolter. His armour thrummed in anticipation.

'Fool, you cannot harm me,' said the daemon. Its eyes glowed dangerously. ***'No mortal weapon can pierce my skin. You will die, and I will remain. I always remain.'***

Brusc opened fire, not upon the daemon, but upon the obelisk.

The creature told the truth regarding its flesh. Where Brusc's bolt-rounds hit they detonated harmlessly on the scales. But the majority of his shots smashed into the stone, knocking chips free as they exploded.

'Stop!' hissed the snake, and the sunken eyes of its mummified face opened and their mouths began to scream. It dived at him, spitting pinkish venom that smoked upon his armour. Brusc rolled under its head, bolter always firing, concentrating his rounds upon the weaker section of the obelisk towards the base. Sparks flew from it. With each shot, the daemon keened louder, and the voices in the air wailed.

His gun ran empty, and Brusc ran at the obelisk. Again its inner fire blazed. His battleplate trilled alarms at him, his coolant system struggling to prevent him being cooked alive.

Brusc dodged the daemon's weaving body, and aimed a kick at the upper part of the stone. He hit it with both feet and fell onto his back. The

weakened neck of the obelisk splintered. It turned on the fracturing stump, and fell sideways.

‘Fool! Fool! Free! I am freeeeeeeee!’ howled the daemon.

There was a burst of light and a hateful snarl, and then all was dark.

Time passed. It could have been an age. Brusc was disoriented, his armour inactive. It took him some time to realise he had been buried alive.

His limbs were immovable. He was trapped.

A lesser man in such straits would have panicked, or fought his fate. Brusc did not. Even with his armour barely functioning he would not die for some time. After trying to mentally impel it to awaken, he gave up and lay there in silent prayer, thinking on what he had seen, trying to deny that he had been tempted. He could not.

Scraping reverberated in his helm. Something grabbed his arm. An armoured hand. Then there were more hands grasping him, slipped under his limbs, pulling at him. His plate rang with the blows of entrenching tools digging.

‘Brother, brother!’ said Sunno urgently. ‘Do you live?’

Brusc spoke weakly; without amplification his voice was muffled.

‘Yes. I am alive.’

‘Praise be!’ shouted Sunno joyously, and was joined by the neophytes. The faces of Jopali Indentured crowded round him.

Readouts flickered in Brusc’s helmplate. A building whine saw his power plant restart, and strength returned to his battleplate’s limbs. He pushed himself up, ash and sand running off his armour in rivulets, and was hauled by eager hands from the hole he had been in. He expected to be deep in the rock, and so it took him a moment to place himself. He was not underground, not in the facility, not even close – the roofs of the building he could see half a kilometre away. He was instead in a square excavation pit in the greater body of the mine delvings. He was outside, exactly opposite to the direction he had gone.

‘What happened?’ said Sunno, taking in the acid-pitting of his armour. He reached out to touch the damage. Brusc caught his wrist.

‘Another time brother. There are too many watching.’ He nodded at the Guardsmen around them.

‘Did you find Srinergee?’ asked Ghaskar.

‘I am sorry to report that he is dead, lieutenant.’

‘How?’

Brusc ignored the question. He examined the delving. He could not be sure, but there was an irregularity to the sides at the bottom that spoke to him of a broken stone dome, and that if they dug downwards they would find the toppled obelisk and the remains of Srinergee.

The day was clear for Armageddon, with yellow skies and a weak sun. The only ash remaining was high in the stratosphere. The rest had fallen, or been blown further on. He listened intently, searching for that seductive voice, but all he heard were the sounds of the men shifting uneasily around him, all eyes on him. Noises came from the camp. Shouts, the sounds of engines being tested, made weak by distance – sounds comforting in their prosaic nature.

His sense of unease, however, had not deserted him. A gust of wind stirred the sand. The last of the day. The last, he always remembered it, of the Season of Fire. Carried upon this breeze, he thought he heard a chilling laugh.

‘We must leave this place,’ he said. ‘We must leave immediately, and we must never return.’

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Newly raised to the rank of High Marshal of the Black Templars, lord of the Eternal Crusade, Helbrecht has led his brethren into the Ghoul Stars, to wage war on worlds where reality itself is in question and the laws of physics do not apply.



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