

# SANCTUARY

by  
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# *SANCTUARY*

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MARSHAL BRANT OF the Solemnus Crusade watched as the ochre sphere rotated lazily above the hololithic display plate, projected within the centre of the nave-like bridge of the battle barge. Almost devoid of cloud cover, the hololithic image of the planet flickered and jerked occasionally as grainy static washed through it.

Seven years had passed since they had begun their quest. A quest for vengeance, to recover their honour, stolen from them on that dark day years ago and a thousand light years away. Seven years since the foul ork horde had fallen on the feudal world of Solemnus to wreak untold devastation. Seven years since the aliens' asteroid-fortress abomination had descended on that sacred world and levelled one of the mightiest Chapter keeps ever constructed in the long history of the greatest crusade ever undertaken by the warriors of the holy Adeptus Astartes.

It had been one of the darkest of days recorded in the annals of the Emperor's most devout of Astartes Chapters, a black mark that could only be washed clean with the blood of the alien perpetrators of this heinous crime. And so for seven years the Black Templars of the Solemnus Crusade had hunted the greenskins who followed the banner of the scarred ork across the galaxy, knowing neither where they had come from nor where they were going to, not even knowing the name of the warmongering tribe responsible for the outrage committed against them, nor the savage alien warlord who led the horde in its rampage across the dominion of the Emperor of Mankind.

And after seven years the hunt had brought the Templars here, to a world so devoid of life that it had not been named beyond its initial planetary classification of L-739. According to Imperial records, the world had only been colonised fifty years ago, for the sole purpose of extracting the one thing that L-739 had to offer the hard-pressed Imperium. Survey teams had discovered fulgerium on the planet, an isotope that was used in some of the power sources still manufactured by certain Adeptus Mechanicus forge worlds. It was used to power everything from ancient Titan war engines to interplanetary craft.

But now the colony mining world was abandoned, the only life-sign readings the *Divine Fury's* surveyor and augury arrays registered on the planet below being

those of the away team who had arrived aboard the other vessel in orbit around the dust ball planet.

Slowly Brant circled the hololithic display, his ceramite boots ringing on the stone flags in the vaulted space. Peering closely he could see the spinning, three-dimensional icon of the skull-cross insignia of the Black Templars Chapter denoting the fleet's position in geostationary orbit over the arid wilderness world. Next to it was an altogether different logo - a cog-toothed symbol. Below both the badges a red target icon flashed steadily, gothic runes projected next to it designating it as Fulgerium Mining Outpost Beta-Three.

Through one eye L-739 appeared to Brant as an ochre sphere rotating lazily within the void of space. Through the other - a red-lensed bionic optical implant - the planet appeared as a malevolent crimson orb, as if soaked in the blood of innocents. He had seen a dozen worlds through this blood-tinted augmentic and on those same worlds death had followed in the wake of the Solemnus Crusade. Was what he was seeing now a premonition of what was to come?

A dark chill passed momentarily through the marshal's body. It was not fear: Space Marines knew no fear, for they were fear incarnate. No, this was merely an extra-sensory feeling of impending doom, perhaps a warning sent by the Emperor to this marshal of His Imperial Majesty's most devout and fanatical order of the Black Templars Adeptus Astartes Chapter.

It was not fulgerium that had brought Brant's fleet to L-739. Having no leads as to the whereabouts of his brotherhood's mortal enemy, for the last two years of his noble crusade Marshal Brant had sought out the clandestine keepers of the most secret and forbidden knowledge the Imperium possessed regarding the foul greenskinned aliens. But the Ordo Xenos of His Majesty's Holy Inquisition did not give up such information lightly. During those two years, as well as battling the followers of the warp-spawned dark gods for a time, Brant had had to recover an ancient artefact of alien origin for the shadowy masters of the Ordo Xenos before they would even reveal to him the whereabouts of the sector's foremost, and possibly least well-known, authority on ork-kind - the infamous Inquisitor Arduus Ourumov.

Brant focussed again on the cog-toothed insignia visible next to the *Divine Fury* on the hololith display.

'Open a vox-channel to the vessel in orbit,' he instructed his bridge crew.

'Channel open, my lord,' an initiate informed him a moment later.

‘This is Marshal Brant of the Black Templar battle barge *Divine Fury*,’ the crusader fleet’s master intoned, his booming voice echoing from the buttresses and pillars of the nave-bridge. ‘Identify yourself.’

A voice, less confident or strident than the marshal’s echoed ethereally in response from crackling vox-casters within the bridge: ‘This is Magos-Captain Olandus of the Adeptus Mechanicus Explorator vessel *Antiquitas*.’

‘Am I correct in thinking that the esteemed Inquisitor Ourumov has accompanied you here?’

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MARSHAL BRANT GAZED through the armourplated windshield at the ochre planet that now filled the field of vision through the front of the Thunderhawk gunship. Just visible amidst the crazed fissures of a plateau-plain, still a hundred kilometres beneath them, was the black shape of the mining facility, looking like some alien spider clinging limpet-like to the surface of L-739.

Sanctuary. That was what the colonist-miners had named Fulgerium Mining Outpost Beta-Three. A sanctuary from the months of warp travel. A sanctuary from the humid, stinking squalor of life aboard the transport freighters. But what happened to this one small safe haven for it to have been abandoned? And would it prove to be the sanctuary Brant and the Black Templars hoped it would be from the endless quest for vengeance and retribution? The answer lay below with the elusive Inquisitor Ourumov.

The marshal looked back at the men strapped into their seats within the hold of the Thunderhawk. The *Paladin* had seen worthy service in the seven years since the Solemnus Crusade commenced and in the years before, particularly during the Diabolus Campaign and the insurrection and the Thunderhawk was the object of Brother-Pilot Brehus’s honour and pride.

The three squads of devout warriors arrayed behind him were among the finest in the Chapter. Between them their years of experience, gained on over a hundred battlefields, amounted to more than thirty centuries of combat practice.

Each of the three fighting companies of the Solemnus Crusade were represented here, in recognition of the fact that the mission they were pursuing was one of the utmost importance and shared by all the Templars who had called Solemnus

home. It also recognised the fact that the marshal had complete and utter faith in all of the men under his command.

Marshal Brant fixed his men with the blood-red stare of his augmetic eye - gained during a boarding action carried out by devotee-crew of the unspeakable Blood God cruiser *Red Slaughter*. Chaplain Wolfram gazed back at him from behind the ruby-quartz lenses of his skull-faced helm, a grim reminder to every battle-brother who fought with him of their own mortality - and that they could offer the divine Emperor no greater service than to die in his name.

Laid out across the chaplain's knees, gripped firmly in both gauntleted hands, was his combined rod of office and instrument of the Emperor's wrath, his crozius arcanum. No two crozius were ever the same. Chaplain Wolfram's looked like the cross insignia of the Black Templars Chapter, joined to a metal haft incorporating an energy source and disruptor field generator. The blade-edges of the cross had been honed to cruel sharpness. And if that was not enough to penetrate the armour or hide of Wolfram's enemies, the humming blue energy field would mean that any blow struck by the crozius would leave the chaplain's vengeful mark upon them.

Seated next to the chaplain was his personal protector, Bodyguard Koldo. Brant could also see Techmarine Isendur, his crimson armour and additional servo-limb making him stand out from the other Black Templars aboard the *Paladin*.

He caught the eye of Veteran Sergeant Olaf of Fighting Company Gerhard, the gleaming bolt pistol he held proudly to his chest inscribed with intricately incised verses of holy litany. Others from Gerhard's company included Brother-Initiate Meleagant, Rivalin, Initiate Josef and his charge of the last eight years, Neophyte Petrus.

On the other side of the Thunderhawk's interior sat the men Marshal Brant had hand-picked from the guard of his own household, among them Veteran Sergeant Lohengrin, Terminator-Brother Nudd and Protector Folke. In the seven years since their holy crusade began, individual brothers had earned titles that would be unknown amongst other Astartes chapters, in conflicts fought across thousands of light years.

Marshal Brant knew that the sole purpose of this mission was to finally meet with the enigmatic Inquisitor Ourumov and recover the information he possessed that could help the Black Templars pursue their righteous quest. But during that same quest he had come upon many unexpected things on otherwise benign-

seeming worlds - the cultists of Zuhl, the invasion of Yenkatta - and it was only an unwise commander who did not prepare for the unexpected. After all, something had drawn Arduus Ourumov to this Emperor-forsaken planet - and where the Ordo Xenos were involved you could be sure that iniquity, insurgency and alien infestation weren't far away.

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THE *PALADIN* TOUCHED down at the edge of the contorted ruins of the Fulgerium Mining Outpost Beta-Three's spaceport, the backwash from its jets throwing up obscuring clouds of dust and sand, as Brother-Pilot Brehus, quite possibly the best pilot in the fleet, guided the *Paladin* in as smoothly as if he were landing a replica in the simulatio chamber aboard the forgeship *Goliath*.

With a grinding hiss of hydraulics, the disembarkation ramp lowered and the Black Templars exited the craft, the glaring sunlight harsh and unremitting after the gloom of the Thunderhawk's interior. Led by their marshal, his habit-cloak flapping in the wind of the Thunderhawk's engine wash, the Space Marines fell into line as they advanced across the broken plaza before the mining facility, to where two wind-blown figures stood awaiting them.

The rockcrete of the plaza had been thrown up in great fractured craters and was scored with deep, heat-melted gouges. Some of these gouges opened into fissures as if something had sundered the very bedrock of the planet itself.

Outpost Beta-Three - Sanctuary - had fared no better. The mine workings were located at the end of a high-walled and otherwise desolate desert rift valley. The surface structures of the mine workings were centred on a vast cathedral-like building. Gothic-arched and baroque-buttressed cloisters led to smelting works, processing plants, worker habs and storage barns, forming a wheel with the cathedral at its hub.

But those same gothic arches and the baroque, gargoyle-infested facade of the structure were now no more than twisted, blackened ruins. Much of the roof of the Mechanicus edifice was gone and entire outbuildings had been flattened in what must have been a bombardment of phenomenal power. There were girders cut in half by laser beams more furious than those of a Stormblade tank's lascannons and charred impact craters where whole structures had been

obliterated. The droid-skull icon of the Machina Opus, which must once have adorned the lintel over the cathedral-mine's great double doors, was lying on the ground, riddled with bullet-holes and shell impacts, having been blasted from its mountings.

For this was not the result of any natural disaster. All the signs were there of an orbital attack. Brother Ansgar knew, for he had seen such a thing before. With a sharp intake of breath, the Space Marine gasped. He had seen many horrors fighting in the Emperor's name and had visited the ruins left after insurrections and invasions on a dozen Imperial worlds. But what he saw now took him back to Solemnus and the ruins of the mighty Chapter Keep. A fortress that had stood for a thousand years and never been conquered had been levelled in one attack by a host of the foul greenskins of the abominable ork race from an, as yet, unknown tribe. And it was for that one reason that the Black Templars had come now to L-739 in search of Arduus Ourumov.

Brother Ansgar turned and looked back past the landing pad to where the valley opened outwards to a plain beyond. For an area of several hectares the rugged rocky ground had been melted and reformed into a shallow bowl as smooth as glass. It was just as it had been on Solemnus when the Black Templars descended from the orbiting fleet like avenging angels, bringing the Emperor's wrath down upon the sacrilegious orks.

The Space Marine turned back, hearing the marshal's voice raised in annoyance, to observe the interchange taking place between Marshal Brant's honour guard and those unfortunate souls who had been delegated the task of meeting the Templars.

The Space Marines - imposing two and a half metre tall colossi - clad in armour as thick as that of a Leman Russ tank - dwarfed the two men standing at the edge of the spaceport plaza. One was tall and thin, wearing a long leather storm coat and a pair of scratch-lensed goggles pushed up on his forehead, keeping his unkempt shock of dirty dark brown hair out of his face. The second was shorter and appeared to be younger. He was wearing a plain grey tunic, jodhpurs and knee-length leather boots. His hair formed a widow's peak and his beard had been cut into little more than a narrow, right-angled outline, moustache and goatee. Ansgar could not help noticing the Inquisitorial rosette pinned to the man's breast.

But something was wrong: this apparently wasn't the man they were seeking.

Marshal Brant did not appear happy about this either. His authoritarian tones carried across the plaza towards the serried ranks of the other Templars.

‘Where is Inquisitor Ourumov?’ the marshal was demanding. ‘I was expecting to be met by him personally, not by some ordo lackey. My fleet has travelled countless light years to find him and having arrived at last, after years of searching, I expect to be met by the princeps and not some junior tech-adept, to use an analogy of our Mechanicus brethren. Do you understand?’

This was an appalling breach of protocol. As if the battle-brothers of the Solemnus Crusade had not suffered a terrible enough affront to their honour already, this situation was intolerable.

‘I am Interrogator Helquist, of Inquisitor Ourumov’s staff, and this is Chief Explorator Magos Baldemar,’ the younger man explained. His companion bowed to the marshal.

‘Has the inquisitor been informed of our arrival?’ Brant demanded.

To give him his due, Helquist was not cowed by the ceramite-armoured giant’s dressing down. Brother Ansgar was both impressed and appalled by the man’s audacity, standing up to a marshal of the Black Templars Chapter.

‘Please accept my humble apologies, lord marshal. We are honoured indeed to be graced by the presence of brothers of the Emperor’s most devout Chapter of the Black Templars,’ the man spoke calmly and without any apparent anxiety. ‘It is just that my master is occupied in a matter of pressing importance.’

‘What? This is appalling-’

‘But Master Ourumov did ask me to bring you to him as soon as you had arrived. If you would follow me?’

Without waiting for an answer, Interrogator Helquist turned on his heel and, accompanied by the gangly Baldemar, made his way towards the splintered broad stone steps leading up to the cathedral’s entrance.

A speechless Marshal Brant had little choice but to follow.

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‘INQUISITOR ARDUS OURUMOV, I presume,’ Marshal Brant declaimed

upon entering the broken nave of the cathedral building. How it reminded him of the chapter keep on Solemnus, as he first saw it on returning from his pilgrimage to the Apollo sector.

A small, stooped man, bent over a pile of debris, looked up from his examination of the rubble, his round face an inscrutable mask of indifference even though he was being addressed by a noble warrior of the Adeptus Astartes. The man straightened stiffly and walked over to the towering space marine commander.

‘And you must be Marshal Brant,’ he said, seemingly underwhelmed.

The inquisitor did not appear to be at all taken aback by the giant now addressing him, with his one ugly optical implant of an eye, a scarred face like thunder, and a look like the fury of a rad-storm barely contained behind his good right eye.

However, Marshal Brant was somewhat taken aback by Ourumov. From the man’s reputation he had been expecting someone taller, stronger-looking, younger. Someone who looked like they could at least command some authority.

But instead, here he was faced with a stooped old man with a balding pate. He looked very much like an elderly adept of the Mechanicus cult who had spent too long crouched in the labyrinthine duct-passageways of a Titan war machine, crossed with an aging rogue trader.

His robe and posture looked like those of a tech-adept, whilst his paunch, finest orox-hide boots and master-crafted holstered laspistol were those of an aging merchant comfortably retired to some hive-world palace. There was only one visible sign that anything unusual or exciting had ever happened to Ourumov and that was a three-pronged scar that traversed his head from the crown down to his jaw line.

‘Baldemar, look at this,’ the old inquisitor suddenly said, calling over the explorator and ignoring the Space Marine commander again as he returned to sifting the pile of debris. ‘It’s just as we expected.’ He paused, then looked up at Brant again. ‘Marshal Brant, you might be interested in this too.’

After a few more irritated exchanges with the capricious inquisitor, it became apparent to the Black Templars that the fate that had befallen the Sanctuary colony was indeed the same as that suffered by the chapter keep on Solemnus seven years before.

The findings of Ourumov and Baldemar’s explorator team revealed that the

mining colony had been attacked several months ago by the foul xenos of ork-kind. Just as on Solemnus, the orks had devastated the surface structures and there were signs that a violent struggle had taken place here. The evidence was all around them, from the bullet-holes riddling the stucco plastered walls of the cathedral and toppled columns to the crater impacts and gouges of heavier weapons fire.

But what were missing were the bodies. It appeared that either all of the colonists had been slaughtered, taken by the orks when they quit the planet, or that the miners and their families had abandoned the facility of their own accord. The last option seemed unlikely, as there had been no word from the colony for months.

‘And you say that orks following the banner of a scar-faced greenskin were responsible for the destruction of your great keep?’ Inquisitor Ourumov asked, turning his full attention back to the marshal, his eyes keen and full of curiosity.

‘They attacked without warning, their abomination of a hulk and its attendant terror ships bombarding the site from orbit whilst something I have not seen anywhere else in all my decades of service to the Emperor - a floating asteroid-fortress - descended to the planet’s surface and scoured the site with weapons of apocalyptic power.’

‘Like this place, you mean?’ Ourumov said, bending down and tugging something loose of the rubble at his feet.

‘It would appear so, yes,’ Brant replied.

‘And I would concur.’ The inquisitor brushed the dust from the object he had recovered from the debris with the hem of his robe and held it up for the marshal to see. ‘And this, I believe, is our proof.’

The object was obviously part of something larger. Despite the fact that more than half of it being missing, Brant could still recognise the jagged outline of an orkish head partially disfigured by a red-painted lightning scar. It was the device of the scarred ork.

‘That is it!’ the Space Marine commander declared excitedly. ‘But do you know which tribe marches beneath this blasphemous totem?’

‘Yes, I believe I do,’ the old man said, craning his neck back to look up into the Space Marine’s grim-set visage.

‘Then tell me,’ Brant demanded, fire in his voice. ‘Tell me the name of that

accursed tribe, that I might hunt them down and exact vengeance for the great dishonour they did our noble and righteous brotherhood!’

The old man was frustratingly quiet for a moment. Then he said, even more frustratingly, ‘Before I help you, marshal, there is something that you and your Templars may assist me with.’

‘What?’ Brant fumed, barely able to keep his anger in check.

‘Like for like, marshal. Like for like.’

‘Very well.’

The old inquisitor shuffled over to Brant and lowered his voice conspiratorially. ‘I have stumbled upon something of an anomaly here. You yourself may have noticed the same thing.’

‘Well, yes,’ Brant conceded, his curiosity subduing his anger. ‘Despite the obvious signs of battle, and the ork invasion you tell me took place here, there are no bodies.’

‘Indeed, my dear marshal, indeed. I have spent more years than I care to remember studying the alien ways of orks, and the eco-culture that seems to follow them wherever they go, and I know that orks would not bother to take the bodies of dead humans with them. Trophies in the form of hands or heads certainly but never whole bodies, or at least never in such numbers.’

Inquisitor Ourumov raised a hand to his face, subconsciously tracing the indenture of his scar.

‘Neither have we seen evidence of any colonists scratching a living here in the months since the ork rok attack. Therefore we can surmise that none of the colonists survived to bury their dead. Besides, Chief Baldemar’s team have not found any obvious gravesites in the vicinity and nor have there been any responses to numerous hails to the planet. There are no indigenous life-forms on L-739, so the question we are left with is: who took the bodies?’

Ourumov paused, letting the implications of what he had said sink in.

‘Despite all the evidence to the contrary it would appear that there is something still here.’

‘What do you want me and my men to do?’ Brant asked resignedly. He knew when he was being given an order by one of the Emperor’s Inquisition, no matter how masked it might be, and he knew better than to refuse. He had waited two

years for this moment. He would simply have to wait a little longer.

‘Chief Baldemar has a number of servitor teams scouring the mine-workings already but with your presence here I am rather minded of the old Necromundan saying, “Why have blindsnake when you can have amasec?” Two of your squads of noble warriors should be enough. It might be wise that the rest remain above ground. Just in case.’

Brant was suddenly aware of a commotion some metres away, where the chief explorer was now in heated discussion with a panicked adept. The adept in tow, Baldemar suddenly turned and strode towards Brant and Ourumov, his coat tails flapping around his legs.

‘Excuse the interruption, my lord inquisitor,’ the tall man said, ‘but something dire has happened.’

‘What?’ the inquisitor asked urgently.

‘We have lost contact with servitor-teams secundus and tertius,’ Baldemar said.

‘Recall Team Primus,’ Ourumov instructed.

‘Fintor is doing that now, lord.’ Baldemar indicated the adept standing behind him who, Brant noticed, had a vox-set slung around his neck.

‘Control to Team Primus. Return to initial location,’ Fintor said into the vox-caster horn.

‘Team Primus to control,’ an electronically augmented voice, that might once have been human, grated back through a wash of static. ‘Message received and understood. Returning to b-zzzkkkzzz’

There was a sudden sharp burst of interference, then the link went dead.

‘What happened?’ Baldemar demanded.

‘I’ve lost contact with Team Primus, magos.’

Inquisitor Ourumov turned to Marshal Brant and looked up into his eyes, one steely and unforgiving, the other a soulless red-lensed augmetic.

‘It would appear we have need of you sooner than I thought,’ he said. ‘Shall we go?’

At Marshal Brant’s behest, Veteran Sergeant Lohengrin headed up a squad to safeguard the *Paladin*. The rest of the landing party formed up into three squads under Marshal Brant, Chaplain Wolfram and Inquisitor Ourumov. Without

further delay the three squads entered the extensive mine workings beneath planet L-739's surface, intent on discovering the fate of the servitor-teams and what had happened to the human colonists of Sanctuary. Each squad was accompanied by a nervous member of Baldemar's exploratory team, the chief explorer himself guiding Inquisitor Ourumov's party into the dark echoing depths beneath this Emperor-forsaken world.

There were kilometres of tunnels, shafts, galleries and natural caverns extending from the wreckage of the stricken facility on the surface world down into the planet's mineral-rich crust. It seemed an impossible task to search them all, but then again they would not need to. They knew roughly where the servitor teams had been when contact was been lost and that was where they would begin their search for answers. One squad for each lost team. That was how Ourumov was going to play this.

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THE CLUMPING STEPS of the Space Marines' armoured boots resounded through the vaulted tunnels of the mine as they marched on, the ground uneven beneath their feet. The only light was provided by the lamps built into their armoured suits, the mine's own system of glow-globes having been down since the orbital attack on the outpost destroyed the generators that powered them.

The beams from Brother Ansgar's armour illuminated occasional black puddles on the floor of the tunnel Ourumov's party were proceeding along, and also picked out endless sagging cabling hanging from stanchions hammered into the high rough roof of the passageway. The tunnel, cut by some burrowing Mechanicus machine, no doubt, was wide enough for Ourumov's party to all walk abreast had they so wished. It was one of the main access shafts running through this level of the mine, rail tracks running the length of the passage next to the crude roadway the Templars, the inquisitor and the Chief Explorer were walking along. It had survived the devastation of the ork attack above remarkably well, the only obvious damage being a series of fractures in the ceiling two hundred metres back, detected by Initiate Rivalin's auspex. The party walked on for perhaps another two hundred metres before Chief Explorer Baldemar called a halt.

'You're sure this is the place?' Inquisitor Ourumov asked.

‘Based on the average pace of the servitors, the last clear signal we received from them and the time reference we have for that transmission, we should have come across them in the last fifty metres or so,’ Baldemar confirmed.

‘Sigismund’s sword, there’s no sign of them now,’ Veteran Sergeant Olaf of Castellan Gerhard’s company muttered gruffly.

‘Yes there is,’ Initiate Josef contradicted. Rivalin trained one of his suit lamp beams on a section of tunnel wall, revealing the smear of blood and grease-oil for all to see.

‘So where are they now?’ Neophyte Petrus asked, uncertainty in his voice.

‘That’s what we’re here to find out,’ the inquisitor said.

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‘IT’S A DEFINITE contact, Chaplain Wolfram,’ Brother Wuhur stated, adjusting a knurled brass dial on the side of his auspex.

‘And it’s just the one?’ Wolfram asked.

‘Yes, brother.’

The chaplain peered through the ruby-eyes of his skull-face helmet into the gloom at the other end of the mine-tunnel, hefting his crozius arcanum in both gauntleted hands. Veteran-Brother Elidor trained his boltgun on the cave-in, while Gauthier aimed his plasma pistol into the enveloping darkness that was barely penetrated by the illumination of their suit lamps. Chaplain Wolfram took a step forwards.

‘Be watchful, lord,’ Koldo, Wolfram’s sworn bodyguard, warned his master.

‘But of course,’ the chaplain chided. ‘After all, does not the Emperor protect?’

Offering a swift prayer to the Emperor, that he might indeed protect his inquisitive servant, Wolfram continued his advance towards the rockfall. He assumed the damage had been caused by the orks’ orbital bombardment. If it had happened before the attack, the miners would surely have made the necessary repairs or cordoned off the area.

There was a scrabbling sound ahead of him and a swift-moving shadow passed before the chaplain’s enhanced vision and behind a broken spar.

‘Chaplain Wolfram!’ It was Wuhur again. ‘Am now reading four contacts - no, six, seven... multiple contacts, and closing.’

‘Sons of Sigismund!’ Wolfram declared with furious zeal. ‘Prepare to be enlightened!’

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‘NOTHING,’ THE SPACE Marine commander stated, his voice heavy with foreboding. ‘The place is clean, just like the outpost above.’

Marshal Brant’s party was standing at the edge of a vast gallery that had been cut through the rock of the planet to a height, or depth, of a hundred metres. High above them a network of gridded metal walkways criss-crossed the hollowed out space that looked large enough to contain the exploratory vessel *Antiquitas*. His suit’s auto-senses and his own heightened olfactory senses told him that the still air in the chamber was dust dry. But there was something else too.

‘So what happened to the colonists?’ Brother Hale asked uneasily.

‘Something took them,’ Apostle-Brother Uchdryd suggested ominously. Uchdryd had an uncanny sense of the otherworldly, although there was nothing of the psyker about him, otherwise he would never have been admitted to the holy order, but his prophetic sixth sense had marked him out as a potential chaplain, a warrior-priest amongst an order of warrior-monks.

‘Marshal Brant, I have multiple targets incoming from the west,’ the crimson-armoured Tech-Marine Isendur stated, no hint of emotion, excitement or anxiety, in his voice, his servo-arm twitching as if with a life of its own.

Brant cast his gaze to the far end of the gallery. Even through the genitor-engineered enhanced vision of his good right eye he could not yet see anything. The optical implant that stood in place of his left eye whirred and clicked as lenses strained to see into the distant gloom. There was a dull click and then an image came into resolution. There was something moving at the far end of the gallery.

‘We have multiple incoming contacts, men. Offer yourselves to the Emperor, pray that you might know the righteous zeal of Lord Sigismund and prepare to engage.’

There was the clattering of weapons being readied behind the marshal. Brant raised his left arm into the air, his black-painted power fist crackling with a scintillating blue energy field.

‘No pity!’ the Black Templar marshal bellowed, commencing the traditional battle cry of his holy Chapter. ‘No remorse!’ The first of the rapidly advancing attackers came within visual range of the other battle-brothers. ‘No fear!’

A crashing cacophony of sound swelled into the darkened vault of the mine as the Black Templars fired their battle-consecrated weapons.

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WITH A GRINDING, descending pitched whine the elevator slowed and stopped with a rattling clunk and Inquisitor Ourumov’s party stepped out. Brother Ansgar took in this new location, ever watchful for signs of danger, defensible positions or, if necessary, potential escape routes.

They were standing outside the bottom of the service elevator shaft in the deepest part of the mine. The scoping beams of the Space Marines’ suit-lamps partially illuminated a large, natural cavern. Ancient stalactites hung from the domed roof while organic matter growing on the mineral deposits glowed with a faint luminescence. The air down here smelt damp and musty.

Some alterations had been made to the cave-chamber. Power couplings snaked from the spools of wire at the foot of the grilled elevator shaft across the uneven cavern floor to unlit glow-globes, and a number of anonymous packing crates and barrels had been stacked seemingly haphazardly at various points throughout the cavern.

The whole space was as large as the nave of the command bridge aboard the battle-barge *Divine Fury* waiting in orbit a hundred kilometres above their current location, Ansgar thought. But the one thing that dominated the chamber was the solid steel bulkhead built into the wall on the other side of the cavern space.

‘Aha!’ Inquisitor Ourumov announced abruptly. ‘Just as I thought.’

‘You know what lies beyond this bulkhead?’ Veteran Sergeant Olaf inquired, his distrust of the erratic old man apparent in his tone.

‘Yes, my dear sergeant,’ Ourumov replied, almost condescendingly, ‘the answer to the question of what happened to the colonists.’

They all heard the sudden panicked bleeping of Rivalin’s auspex and turned as one to face him, Brother-Initiate Meleagant raising his chainsword and preparing to activate its ignition rune.

‘Inquisitor, brothers,’ Rivalin said, ‘I am picking up multiple contacts moving this way at speed.’

‘From where, brother Templar? From where?’ Ourumov demanded.

As he did so, Brother Ansgar and the others shone their suit beams into the shadowed corners of the cave and up at the stalactite festooned dome above them. Things were moving there, clambering among the jagged rock formations and crawling from crevices in the cavern walls, using their unnatural, taloned limbs to maintain a purchase.

‘From everywhere,’ Rivalin replied.

THE ROAR OF bolter fire, the zealous shouts of the Marines and Chaplain Wolfram’s own bellowed battle-prayers urging the Templars on, echoed deafeningly from the tunnel walls: The cacophony was swelled by the screaming cries of their attackers. Amidst the press of the black-armoured giants, the explorator assigned to Wolfram’s squad screamed in hysterical fear, no use to anyone.

The inevitable battle had begun in the confined, half-collapsed tunnel, the fighting hard and furious. And the enemy was relentless.

The mine was infested. They came at the Templars in their dozens, armoured hides mottled pink, purple and blue, glistening wetly, springing forward on muscular legs, grabbing with clawing hands, while a third pair of limbs slashed at the holy warriors with oversized talons. Where these dreadful claws struck the verse-inscribed ceramite of the Black Templars’ armour they gouged great grooves in the surface, even cutting through as deeply as the Space Marines locked inside them.

A ravening creature sprang at Wolfram, beady black eyes set in the dome of its bulbous head fixing on his behind the ruby-quartz visor of his skull-helm. It opened its fang-filled jaws, emitting a screeching cry that cut through the veteran chaplain.

With a roar born of righteous fury, Wolfram brought the blazing head of his crozius arcanum up into what passed for the monster's midriff. In a mess of purple ichor, ropes of intestines flopped from the creature's body, coiling around the haft of the power axe as the flaring razor-edged blades of its Templar-cross head burst from the alien's back in a blaze of blue sparks.

Genestealers, the chaplain thought. *An abomination in the eyes of all Emperor-fearing people and their presence a foul stain on the face of His Imperial Majesty's galaxy-spanning realm.*

Oh, how he hated the foul xenos spawn.

\* \* \*

LETTING OFF CONTROLLED bursts of weapons fire into the mass of alien bodies scrambling towards them, Marshal Brant and his men held their position at the entrance to the gallery. As the grotesque genestealers flung themselves at the embattled Space Marines, in wave after wave, the ardent Black Templars cut them down with sustained bolter, melta and plasma fire.

One or two rapidly moving creatures managed to evade this curtain of fire, flinging themselves at the gunning Templars with phenomenal bursts of speed. These were felled by chainsword, combat knife and crippling blows from armoured fists powered by muscles strong enough to lift the end of a truck.

Brant heard a stifled cry behind him. Darting a glance backwards he saw Brother Taran, his meltagun dropped on the ground in front of him, trying to stem the geyser of blood fountaining from his neck where one of the alien abominations had punched a taloned limb right through his power armour and into the flesh beneath. Even Taran's genetically altered body could not hope to overcome such a terrible injury and he collapsed to his knees before keeling over onto his face, his lifeblood pumping from his dying body.

Taran's killer was crouched behind its victim like a spider about to spring.

The marshal leapt at the genestealer, blasting at it with his bolt pistol as he brought his crackling power fist down on it. Shards of chitinous armour flew from the genestealer's body where the explosive bolts impacted, its elongated skull bursting like an overripe fruit as the club-like fist connected.

The Solemnus Crusade had come to this Emperor-forsaken world hunting orks, Brant considered, but had found the advance forces of the even more alien Tyranids - and death.

‘Lord marshal!’ Brother Hale called, his voice almost drowned out by the roar of Terminator-Brother Nudd’s storm bolter. ‘Inquisitor Ourumov informs that his party are encountering heavy resistance at what he believes to be the heart of the enemy’s operations.’

Genestealer uprising, Brant thought. It was obvious now.

‘Brother Hale, be so good as to inform the inquisitor that we too are engaged in combat with elements of the xenos cult,’ Brant stated darkly.

Another hissing alien sprang at him, mouth wide open. Brant put a bolt between its jaws, blowing out the back of its skull in a mess of what passed for alien blood and brain matter. The creature fell at the marshal’s feet, half way through its lunge, twitching in its death-spasms, purple ichor spurting from the ruined dome of its skull and splashing the hem of Brant’s habit-robe.

‘Marshal Brant.’ It was Hale again. ‘Inquisitor Ourumov says that his squad will contain the menace and that the rest of us should exit the mine, return to the fleet and purge this world from orbit. He has given the order for Exterminatus.’

An unreal silence seemed to descend over the Black Templars, even amidst the storm of battle.

Brant bristled at being given orders, even if they did come from an Imperial inquisitor.

‘What, and condemn my men fighting with him to death?’ he railed. ‘We are brothers of the Black Templars Chapter, warriors of the holy Adeptus Astartes. We do not run from battle. We face it head on. No, this is our last crusade. By Sigismund, I will not leave a single man behind if I can help it!’

Another two screaming alien creatures fell by the marshal’s hand, one to blasts from his bolt pistol, the other decapitated by a flat-handed chop from his lethal power fist.

‘Tell the inquisitor that there is another way. This place has already survived one orbital bombardment where our own mighty chapter keep fell to the self-same attackers. And after the Merethyl affair our fleet does not carry any Exterminatus measures.’

‘What is that other way lord?’ Initiate Carrado spoke up. One of the longest serving of Marshal Brant’s men, he could say what others dared not. ‘We are outnumbered. Uland has reported that Chaplain Wolfram’s squad are in the same position as, it would seem, are our battle-brothers who fight at the inquisitor’s side.

‘There has to be another way to bring this accursed mine down upon the foul xenos!’ Brant bellowed in frustrated anger.

‘I have a suggestion,’ Tech-Marine Isendur announced calmly in that infuriatingly unemotional tone of his, hacking down a multi-limbed monstrosity as he did so. His crimson armour was awash with sticky purple fluid, as was the blade of his Mechanicus-forged power axe.

‘Well, what do you suggest?’ Brant growled over the roar of discharging weapons and the screams of the aliens.

‘Readings relayed to me by my suit’s machine-spirit suggest that the isotope vein that has been tapped in this gallery is unstable. It would not be difficult to set the appropriate explosive charges that would detonate the isotope, effectively turning it into a massively destructive bomb.’

‘Then do it!’ Brant commanded. ‘Inform our brethren that we will scour this place clean of its genestealer nest. And tell them to get out now, the inquisitor included!’

Tech-Marine Isendur and Brother Hale gave their affirmative responses and the other brothers prepared to cover them as they carried out the marshal’s orders.

‘Hale,’ Brant added, the commanding tone of his voice causing the Templar to pause. ‘What of Chaplain Wolfram?’

\* \* \*

CHAPLAIN WOLFRAM SWUNG his sacred weapon in a wide arc, removing both the arm and half the head of one of the alien abominations. The widely swinging beams of the Templars’ suit lamps and the stuttering blasts of bolter fire threw the battle at the cave-in into stark strobing clarity, moments of battle caught in a tableau formed by the intermittent flashes of frozen light.

Wolfram suddenly reeled, as a bolt of intense, raw emotional energy seemed to

rip through him and twist in his gut. It felt like his mind had been stripped of all the emotional barriers he had built up in his life - devotion to the Emperor, zealous pride, righteous fury - until all that was left was primal fear, devouring him from within, and he was like a tiny child curled in foetal fear before the overwhelming evil of an alien-spawned psychic power.

The chaplain, unprepared for such a devastating mental attack, fell to his knees, many of his brothers collapsing around him even in the face of the aliens' attack. Both Naois and Kier were cut down, whilst at their most defenceless, as a result. Wolfram gripped the haft of his holy weapon in one hand taking hold of his blessed rosarius in the other and immediately felt the Emperor's divine power start to fight back against the coldly burning psychic fire scouring the surface of his mind.

*Warpcraft*, he thought, the word itself expressed as a curse in his mind. Whatever else the attack might have taken from him, he still had his faith.

Wolfram opened his eyes, only then realising that they had been closed tight in light of the psychic strike. Standing behind the broken beams of the roof fall was a curiously robed figure, the bald and heavily boned dome of its head highlighted by the crackling nimbus of energy surrounding it. Its eyes glowed from within the shadowed pits beneath its heavy brow.

Chaplain Wolfram rose to his feet, fighting against the fear-inducing psychic spell conjured by the cult magus with every muscle movement, hefting his crozius in both hands now. He could feel the hot wetness of blood dripping from his nose.

'No... fear,' he managed through gritted teeth. 'No pity,' he declared, staggering steps becoming a strong stride once again. 'No remorse!' he bellowed as he charged the magus.

\* \* \*

INQUISITOR OURUMOV TARGETED another half-alien, half-human cultist with his laspistol and fired, putting an instantly cauterised hole through the middle of its brain with one clean shot. To either side of him the Templar brothers Ansgar and Meleagant stood, towering over the old man like two heroes from the golden age of the Imperium, firing into the cultist pack with their

furiously-blazing boltguns.

The purestrain genestealers that had initially engaged Ourumov's party had soon been joined by the semi-human members of the alien cult as the bulkhead door had ground open. Where the aliens attacked with tooth and claw, their infected human brethren were armed with all manner of firearms and mining equipment, which was being used as makeshift weapons. The genestealers were deadly up close but posed little threat to the likes of Space Marines at a distance. Now that weakness had been compensated for.

Ardus Ourumov now understood what must have happened here. The genestealer cult had already been well established on L-739 before the orks came but was trapped on this desolate rock, dependant on the arrival of vessels intended to transport the isotope mined here to other Imperium worlds for their means of spreading the xenos corruption further into the Emperor's blessed realm.

When the ork attack did come, the human contingent of the cult must have soon realised that they were outnumbered, and without the weapons silos required to defend against an attack from space, they retreated into the mine, sealing themselves inside the chambers they had already created at the bottom of the mine, shielded behind the heavy bulkhead to safeguard the patriarch, the foul 'father' of their heretical cult.

However, there was now a means for the cultists to get off-planet, so that the perverse 'family' could continue to grow, with the presence of the explorer vessel *Antiquitas* and the Templar fleet. So it was that, as soon as the cult's territory was invaded once again, and this time on a smaller scale, a higher, albeit primitive power spurred its members into aggressive action.

Ourumov felt a sudden, hot stab of pain in his chest and then cold realisation swept through him and his body began to grow numb from that point outwards. He looked down, as if seeing himself through the eyes of another, and saw the spreading red stain around the ragged hole in his robe and the flesh beneath.

A bullet wound, as simple as that, but in the right place fatal.

He had served the Emperor's Inquisition for over two hundred years, fighting the 'enemy without' across the Segmentum Solar and beyond. He had lived through raids by piratical eldar, suffered terrible injuries in duels with the mercenary kroot and even been shot with a hrud fusil rifle and survived. He had always believed that when the Emperor deemed it was time for Arduus Ourumov to join

him in the world hereafter, it would be in some dramatic climax to a life-long career, not simply shot by a lucky half-human xenos cultist.

But that was one of the unpredictable eccentricities of life, he told himself as he slipped into unconsciousness and, more importantly, death.

\* \* \*

TECH-MARINE ISENDUR'S CHARGES having been set, Marshal Brant's party made for the surface again. The Space Marines continued to lay down a hail of fire as they made their fighting retreat, alien bodies piled three or four deep in their wake. They left behind also their fallen Battle-Brothers Taran, Drust and the aspiring Uchdryd.

Twenty metres through the crust above them, Chaplain Wolfram brought his flaming cross-axe down on the head of the magus, splintering bone and splitting it in two down to the stump of the creature's neck. At once the Templars were freed of the malign psyker influence. The wrathful warriors set about extracting their revenge on the remaining alien abominations, avenging the deaths of Brothers Naois, Keir and Wuhur. Their explorer guide also lay among the dead, disembowelled by a claw-handed fiend.

At the bottom of the deepest mine shaft things looked even bleaker.

\* \* \*

THE UNCONSCIOUS INQUISITOR slung over one broad armoured shoulder, Brother Ansgar strode towards the elevator, spraying furious bolter fire into the alien-human pack clawing at his heels.

There was nothing the Templars could do for Ourumov here, in the middle of a battle. Besides, it looked serious for the old man. Not possessing the preternaturally quick-clotting blood of a Space Marine, he was bleeding to death through the wound blasted by the xenos-cursed bullet. Following his marshal's orders, Ansgar and the rest of the squad were making their way back towards the surface, two thousand metres above.

Brother-Initiate Josef and Neophyte Petrus were ahead of him, bundling

Explorator Baldemar between them into the open cage of the lift. Veteran Sergeant Olaf was the one covering their escape now, retribitional fire spewing from his boltgun, Meleagant and Rivalin having already fallen beneath the swarming alien pack.

There would be time to mourn them later. For now the priority for the survivors was to get back to the surface, so that the Black Templars might finish their work and purge Mining Facility Outpost Beta-Three of its infestation.

Brother Ansgar stumbled, almost falling to his knees and dropping the inquisitor, as a bow wave of psychic energy hit them. The surge of warp power made his stomach turn over and his vision grey as he almost blacked out. Ourumov groaned weakly. Taking a deep breath, Ansgar managed to recover himself enough to stumble the last few steps to the elevator cage after his brothers, even as a genestealer sank its talons into a greave of his armour.

Turning, he saw within the open bulkhead the silhouette of a grossly bloated, six-limbed fiend. The creature had the appearance of a genestealer but was many times larger. Everything about it was over-sized, from its monstrous claws to its bulbous distended cranium. This, Ansgar knew, was the first of its kind on this world, the father of the cult, its patriarch.

So imbued with instinctive psyker power was the alien that foul warp energy coruscated across its head, making the musty, stale air of the mine heavy with the tang of ozone and filling the Space Marines with a sick feeling to the very core of their being.

It seemed to Ansgar that the alien patriarch fixed its black, soulless eyes on the Templars as they gunned down the genestealers still rushing towards them across the cavern. Then his knees buckled again as another wave of sickening psyker energy hit the party full on. Baldemar vomited and the other Space Marines also wavered, Neophyte Petrus falling against the side of the cage with a resounding clang of ceramite on steel.

The only one who seemed resistant to the psychic attack was Olaf. Before anyone else could do anything, the veteran sergeant turned back to face the alien onslaught, striding away from the elevator. The only word he uttered was, 'Go!' Tearing bodies apart with bolter fire and chainsword, proclaiming the glory of the Emperor and the damnation of the alien as written in the same scriptures inscribed upon his holy firearm, he marched into the midst of the attacking cult.

Without further hesitation, Brother Josef slammed his hand against the ascent-rune inscribed button. With a wailing of klaxons, yellow hazard lights cycling and a noisy grinding sound, the elevator cage began to climb.

Ansgar stared into the cavern below as Veteran Sergeant Olaf fought his way through the cult-pack, against insurmountable odds, towards the grotesquely swollen form of the patriarch, which towered over even this armoured giant, bellowing the battle-cry of the Black Templars, until the scene of carnage disappeared, the lift rising beyond the roof of the cave.

A moment later he saw purple and blue bodies forcing themselves into the shaft itself and begin to ascend, the six limbs of the purestrain genestealers allowing them to move as quickly up the scarred-rock sides of the shaft as across open ground.

‘Brothers!’ Ansgar warned, indicating the approaching aliens through the grilled floor of the cage-lift with his boltgun. ‘We are not rid of the xenos yet.’

Taking careful aim between the bars, the Templars fired their weapons in a deafening clattering cacophony of explosive-shelled retribution.

As the elevator sped upwards through the darkness, the Space Marines’ bolter fire lit up the space beneath the cage, briefly illuminating the scrambling forms of alien bodies racing up the tunnel after the lift, before they tumbled back into the darkness screeching, their bodies ripped open by bolter shells. The openings to tunnels and galleries leading off from the main shaft flashed past, square black holes picked out in the momentary passing sodium light.

Even over the roar of their guns Ansgar heard the dull boom of the explosion. The allotted time having past, Tech-Marine Isendur’s charges had detonated, turning the unstable isotope seam into a devastating seismic bomb. As well as purging the mine workings with fire, the explosion would collapse the tunnels and bury the mine. There was a series of further explosions causing the elevator to rock violently within the shaft. As the isotope vein erupted, and the very bedrock of the planet fractured, genestealers were shaken free of their precarious grasp on the tunnel walls and plunged back down into the bowels of the planet.

For a moment, as the cage rattled on the end of twanging stress-straining cables, Brother Ansgar wondered if the survivors of Ourumov’s party would be joining the doomed aliens. Then the quake subsided and the elevator resumed its ascent. In the distant depths Ansgar could see a point of fiery light blossom in the blackness and swell as the fireball roared up the shaft, consuming those aliens in

its path still clinging to the sides of the borehole.

There was nothing Ansgar and the other Templars could do now but pray to the Emperor, their primarch Rogal Dorn and the saintly Lord Sigismund for their divine protection. So pray they did.

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THE SURVIVING BLACK Templars burst from the mine head, those cathedral ruins previously still standing tumbling down around them. Sergeant Lohengrin's squad, who had been left on the surface, covered their escape, making sure that none of the alien abominations followed their battle-brothers out of the mine.

The men of the three parties that had penetrated the mine sprinted from the facility, despite the strain their bodies were beginning to feel from battling the genestealer cult, escaping just before the entire facility was swallowed by the planet, with a primordial roar, as massive subsidence following in the wake of the devastating explosion caused the mine beneath it to collapse utterly.

Of the twenty-three warriors who had entered the accursed labyrinth beneath L-739, only fourteen had returned to the surface. There had been other casualties too, of course, the explorator guides among them, but most notably Inquisitor Arduus Ourumov himself. The ground still shaking, as Fulgerium Mining Outpost Beta-Three continued to disintegrate behind them, Brother Ansgar laid the inquisitor's body on the ground in the shadow cast by the *Paladin*.

Marshal Brant, his ornate armour and habit-robe drenched with alien blood, looked down at the inquisitor. They were too late. There was nothing more they could do for him. The man who knew the identity of the greenskins who followed the icon of the scarred ork, the man who held the key to them accomplishing their last crusade, the man who had led a hundred purges on a hundred worlds, and who had been a feared and respected member of the Ordo Xenos for the last two centuries, was dead. And so too was the information Brant had crossed light years to recover.

Cautiously Interrogator Helquist approached the glowering Space Marine, the baleful red optical implant making Brant's expression appear even more threatening and malevolent.

‘My lord marshal,’ Helquist said deferentially, ‘I know that had Inquisitor Ourumov survived, he would have told you what you wanted to know.’

‘Had he survived,’ Brant growled.

‘And he still might,’ Helquist went on.

‘How can he? Dead men keep their secrets.’

‘There is a way.’ Helquist cast his eyes awkwardly at the ground. ‘I have some telepathic ability. The inquisitor has not been dead long. I might still be able to glean the information you require from his mind before it is gone forever.’

‘What? Witchcraft?’ Brant riled. ‘You would suggest that a marshal of the most devout Black Templars Chapter - who have persecuted witches across the Imperium of mankind throughout our ten thousand year history - debase himself by using such treacherous, blasphemous means to uncover the secrets of the dead?’

Silence hung in the air between the Space Marine and the interrogator for a moment.

‘It could be the only way,’ Helquist said simply.

\* \* \*

A GRIM-FACED MARSHAL Brant gazed across the bridge of the fleet flagship *Divine Fury*, at the yellow-ochre planet retreating into the void as displaced on the ship’s view-screen. The recycled air seemed touched with cold after the heat of the world below. ‘Two hours to warp jump point,’ a junior bridge officer informed his commander.

‘Prepare for a ship-wide communication,’ Brant ordered.

Comms-slaved servitors opened appropriate channels throughout the five kilometre-long vessel.

‘Brothers, while we mourn the loss of our brethren who fell protecting one of the Emperor’s worlds from the advance of the accursed genestealers, remember that they did not die in vain. For not only is the planet, named here as Sanctuary, free of its xenos infestation and clean again in the sight of the Emperor, I also now have the information for which we have travelled so far and so long.’

‘The aliens who perpetrated the vilest of acts against our chapter on Solemnus, who follow the debased image of the Scarred Ork, are the Blood Scar tribe. Now our enemy has a name, we shall hunt the greenskins down and be avenged upon them for the honour they stole from us, for our brothers who have died in pursuit of this quest, for all that they have cost us so dearly. They shall not escape our wrath, for they can run but they can hide no longer, for this is our last crusade!’