

WARHAMMER
40,000

COLD ROADS

A BRAZEN CLAWS STORY

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Save the ship. Save the company.

The words pulsed through Luveran Llir's mind, repeating over and over in a voice that was nearly his own. There was a cadence to them, a singsong quality.

He was a Brazen Claw, born of the mists and myths of Lost Talus, raised in the glorious image of the Gorgon. He was also a Techmarine, taken to Thrice Holy Mars and recast in the logic of the Ommissiah.

Llir stood in the Crypt, surrounded by the undead. His mehadendrites, extended and whirring, performed adjustments. He was lost in his work, lost in the phrases that slipped through his mind. To do otherwise, to pay attention to that which he worked on, was too difficult. His mind slipped. A noise caught his attention. A pained panic-breath. A mechanical growl. They were stirring.

The object he worked on shifted before him. It whispered a denial, an emphatic 'No.' To what it objected, Llir could not begin to guess.

Llir made quiet shushing sounds, soothing chants of binaric lingua-technis. A bad omen. The Castigatii were awakening without prompting. *Castigatii*. The word was enough to bring Llir's truncated emotive functions back online and prompt a shudder response.

Castigatii. The word was High Gothic. The Brazen Claws rarely made use of the language, preferring their own Talusian dialects and linguaforms. But here it sufficed. It added distance between themselves and the broken, the punished. It kept the machines de-humanised, kept the Claws from connecting with the Space Marines the Castigatii had once been and away from the broken monsters they had become.

The Castigatii were murmuring, snippets of language, half seconds of war cries and gear-slipping growls. It sounded almost like a song. It sounded almost like they were chanting. 'Save the ship. Save the company.'

A servitor queried at his sudden lack of attention. Llir stared down at his hands, metal and flesh, and realised that he had ceased to function. He could not remember what he had been doing, nor where he was. Everything looked unfamiliar, new, different and bereft of context. His inner chronolog informed him that he had lost five minutes. He stood, dumbfounded, nearly inactive for five minutes more. The room shuddered around him, sparks flying from coal braziers.

The Crypt. That was where he was. Aboard the Eighth Company vessel *Cold Roads*.

The hull suddenly screamed with a sound like wood tearing, alike to an ancient ship of the line being battered by storms. Battle sounds came from outside the chamber. Llir shuddered. He remembered, just for a moment, a name. Hrtel. A broken planet, adrift on the damning tides of the Great Eye. Figures in black and pale blue. The Emperor's Children. The Third. Sounds that were never meant to be heard. Madness ate through the sky. Now they had dived after their foes, chasing them deeper into this caustic region of space.

Once, the memories would have brought horror and disgust. Now they were curiously free from emotion, unattached and drifting without true meaning.

The servitor chattered at him in a series of ones and zeroes. The data were slurred and distended. One of its eyelids, grey and withered, kept drooping. Odd-coloured sparks danced along its joints.

'Interesting,' Llir murmured. His optics tried to identify the colours and failed. He found it hard to look away. 'Save the ship,' he told the servitor. 'Save the company.'

Scrapcode flashed through his systems, diving through the augmetics that defined him. He shuddered. His teeth gritted and cracked. His limbs danced. A seizure swept through him. He could hear it rearranging his internal processes. It sounded like singing.

The singing continued, ignoring his attempts to track it down, to parse the scrapcode. Divide. Destroy. Recover. His limbs danced. His augmetics sparked. Llir began to scream, but stopped himself. He cut off the neural links to the systems that felt pain. His vision washed out in static as his body complied. 'Weakness,' he whispered.

When it came back online, data streamed past his eyes. The shriveled flesh of his mouth smiled. Some rudimentary version of the ship's manifold still lived. He watched as the ambient temperature, already cold in mimicry of Lost Talus, fell. Mist condensed from his breath.

The singing whispered something new, drew his attention to one point of data. ‘Most alarming,’ he muttered. He voiced the words with the same toneless, detached calm his augmented throat always forced. But his hearts, primary, secondary and tertiary mechanical redundant organs, were beating faster. Stress hormone levels were elevated in his bloodstream. The Geller field was failing.

Llir realized that he needed to move. The singing drove him forward. He turned and waved at the servitor. ‘Save the ship,’ he told it. ‘Save the company.’

The door opened before him with a hiss of inefficient hydraulics. Irritation flushed through Llir’s neural processors. Distraction appeared as a hulking figure stood on the other side.

Llir scanned the Terminator. ‘Dionikean Guard,’ he whispered. The Chapter’s elite First Company, dispersed among the Brazen Claws fleet after they had left Cadia. It took a moment for Llir to further identify the Space Marine. Minor cosmetic modifications and armament selection brought a name, service history and facial features on Llir’s manifold display. Bronze tusks and crested helmet, red claw mark marring the white paint over the right eye socket.

‘Solvus Tabor,’ Llir told the Terminator.

‘Llir, you’re needed. The—’ Tabor was nearly shouting. Llir could hear something akin to panic in Tabor’s voice and the Techmarine detected a heady chemical taint in the air.

‘Geller fields are failing. I am aware of the issue.’

Tabor nodded and hefted his shield and storm bolter. Tabor began to stomp down towards one end of the corridor.

‘No,’ Llir told him.

‘We need to head to the enginarium, to the field’s housing.’

‘No,’ Llir repeated. ‘The problem is one of software, not hardware. The issue is with command.’

Tabor nodded as best his Tactical Dreadnought armour could allow. Llir listened to the veteran pass orders along the vox. ‘We’re headed to the bridge. Converge there.’

A chorus of ayes and acknowledgements came back.

They left the Crypt behind. Llir deleted all local memories of its inhabitants, as he had done so many times before.

The corridors running to the crypt were dark, broken beyond the perpetual twilight favoured by the Space Marines. Voices bellowed over the vox, underwritten by bolter fire.

The pair set off at a lumbering run, as close to speed as their heavy frames

could manage. Condensed vapour, boiling up from beneath the floor grates, swirled in their wake. Voices followed them. Serfs appeared from down side corridors, from the narrow linking alleys that wormed through the ship. They were rioting with torches in hand. They came charging with twisted faces and crude weapons carved from shards of ship metal.

Llir stared at them. There was no subservience in their features. Hatred glowered from each and every twisted face. The stink of blood washed with them.

Tabor gunned them down. His storm bolter gouted flame and spat shells. The twin stink of expelled promethium and cordite filled the gangway.

Moral Threat Detected, the alarm feed built into the manifold wailed at him. *Decks 12 to 33 Breached. Moral Threat Detected.* A foetid smell wafted through the air. It was at once both foul and enticing. Sounds, discordant and harsh, echoed down the corridors.

Applied bolter fire led the way. Tabor killed without relish. His fury was reserved.

The moral threat provided his justification. The serfs lost whatever claim they had once possessed to life and liberty. Sacrifices must be made, Llir rationalised.

Llir could hear laughter and singing. ‘Do you hear that?’ he asked Tabor as they ran.

The Dionikean Guard did not bother to respond. Llir started humming to himself, tuneless and toneless. It sounded like the singing.

‘Stop that, Llir. The sound is disquieting.’

Questions flashed through Llir’s mind as they ran. One stood out.

‘What of Duro? What of the captain?’

Tabor could not keep the disgust from his voice. ‘He was last seen taking the astropaths to the Navigator’s quarters. He has been refusing to answer any vox hails.’

Llir was not given any time to ponder the implications of Tabor’s answer. The sound hit them first. Llir’s mind searched and struggled to find an appropriate metaphor, to make sense of the aural assault. It tried. It failed.

Tabor provided the answer, his mind less blessed by logic than that of the Techmarine. ‘It sounds like death,’ the Dionikean Guard shouted.

It did. It sounded like whining, pleading, keening, wailing death. They smelled it next.

It smelled like rancid flowers and soldered metal.

Then they saw it. For a second, Llir could only focus on what ran before it –

brothers from Eszram's squad. They were sprinting as fast as their wounded warplate and sparking augmetics would allow, firing over their shoulders all the while. Behind them, in a wave that filled the vast corridor, was a wall of green liquid.

Llir watched as his brothers were swallowed. Tabor was firing and yelling. The bolt-rounds melted into the wall of onrushing water.

The Techmarine wasted no time on futile gestures. Desperation, unwelcome and foreign, drove his actions. Rapidly scanning the manifold, processing data at a rate he would previously have thought impossible, he found the emergency bulkhead controls.

Tortured metal slammed down, in a wave. Three doors fell, one after another, and cut off the water.

Llir slumped, suddenly exhausted. Only now did it occur to him to wonder why the bulkheads had never sealed on their own.

He pretended he could not hear the sound of gauntleted fists pounding on the bulkhead, nor hear the new voices that joined the chorus in his head.

Tabor broke his reverie. 'No rest for the weary,' the Dionikean Guard said without sympathy. 'We have a ship and a company to save.'

The pair moved on at a stunted run. Their heavy footsteps echoed down corridors that were now deserted. Sounds echoed eerily, but no fresh threat presented itself. All along the gangway, Llir's display continued to shout at him in increasingly desperate letters. *Moral Threat Detected.*

The lights flickered. Gravity fluctuated. Bulkhead became ceiling. Floor became wall. Blackness, dark as the void between stars, ate Llir's vision. Tabor cursed.

When they came back on, the hallway was altered. It undulated in an oozing parody of flesh. Strange, coloured smoke puffed out from chitinous vents. The corridor, once the dark, gothic metal of a ship in thrall to the Brazen Claws, was now a pale purple.

Warnings announced to Llir that the passageway was now bereft of oxygen. Llir and Tabor charged through. The bridge lay beyond.

Massive blast doors barred their ingress. A half-moon chamber cupped the doors. Autonomic plates in the floor had risen to provide cover for defenders seeking to guard the bridge. No one crouched behind them.

Tabor slammed his shield into the door. Frustration tore a cry from his throat. Llir ignored him and went straight to the console.

The Techmarine entered into communion with the console's machine-spirit.

He berated it and coaxed it. The spiteful thing toyed with him before accepting his authority. The doors began to whine open.

They rushed inside, Tabor crouched behind his shield, bolter tracking for targets.

Unlight streamed in and illuminated the scene. Llor noted with alarm that the bridge's windows were open, facing onto the core of the Great Eye. Chemicals flooded through his bloodstream. The pleasure centres in his brain were afire. He shuddered despite himself, then hunkered down, drawing on the stubborn will that defined his heritage.

Mewling things, still clad in tattered serf's uniforms, crawled along the floor. Tabor stamped down on one.

A beeping noise emerged from the command throne. The Dionikean Guard reached it first. He grunted in disgust. 'Get it done, Llor,' he urged.

Llor nodded. 'It would be useful if you set up a guard on the door.'

'Acknowledged.'

Other Dionikean Guards arrived and set up an overwatch. They crouched behind their shields and readied their weapons.

Screaming laughter and singing followed them. Llor tried to ignore it as the Terminators opened fire.

'Engaging!' Tabor shouted. 'Restore the Geller fields, Llor. We'll hold off the Emperor's Children.'

The Techmarine focused on his task. 'Save the ship,' he told himself. 'Save the company.'

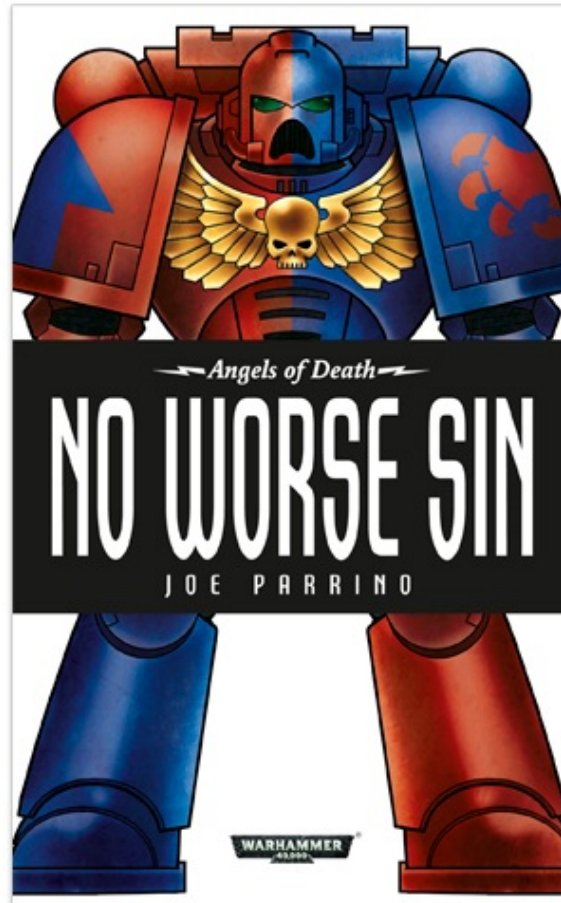
The console before him spat warning sigils at him. Angry binaric cant screamed at him. The console asked for a confirmation. Llor did not even consider his actions. The singing drove him. 'Save the ship. Save the company.'

He deactivated the Geller field.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Joe Parrino is the author of a range of Warhammer 40,000 stories, including the novella *Shield of Baal: Devourer*, the audio dramas *Alone* and *Damocles: The Shape of the Hunt*, and the short stories 'Witness', 'The Patient Hunter', 'Nightspear', 'In Service to Shadows' and 'No Worse Sin'. He lives, writes and works in the American Pacific Northwest.

After decades in the Eye of Terror, the lords of the Brazen Claws entreat their Chapter Master to call off their suicidal crusade. But not all of their brothers have yet arrived, nor are they unchanged...



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