



STEVE PARKER

# CULLING THE HORDE

A CRIMSON FISTS SHORT STORY



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Steve Parker

They crested the ridge an hour before sundown and stopped, dropping into the cover of the trees and bushes, five of them in all – four in full battleplate, the other only lightly armoured, yet to earn the requisite honour.

This latter was Riallo, the Scout, youngest of the five and bearer of the fewest scars. He dropped into a crouch by Sergeant Grimm, pressed his magnoculars to his dark brown eyes and scanned the valley floor.

Ghosts of grey smoke drifted lazily upwards from the south-facing windows of the farmhouse below. The doors of the barn had been smashed to splinters. Broad, jagged rents had been cut in the metal skin of the grain silos. The corn had spilled out, forming huge mounds, but how long ago? The flow had stopped. It was impossible to tell.

Riallo shifted his gaze to the pasture on the far side of the farmhouse, the north side. There on the short-cropped grass lay three hulking bodies, each over two tonnes of muscle and bone.

‘Aurochs,’ Riallo reported. ‘Typical wound patterns. Mix of close range gunfire and bladed weapons. It looks like they’ve been dragged a little. Perhaps the orks gave them up as too heavy. The fence to the north-east has been trampled. It looks like the rest of the herd fled.’

Grimm’s voice was a muzzle-modulated growl through the vocaliser of his battle-helm. ‘Did the damned greenskins follow them? That is the question.’

‘I cannot tell from here, brother-sergeant,’ said Riallo. He scanned the farm buildings again. ‘No sign of movement.’

‘Then we proceed,’ said Grimm. He stood and gestured for the others to descend with him into the valley. ‘Safeties off, my brothers,’ he told them. ‘Let us be cautious.’

The slope was not overly steep and the footing was good, the ground hard and dry. The Space Marines soon reached the valley floor. Riallo

ranged ahead now, moving in a crouch, scanning the ground for tracks.

Huron Grimm scanned his surroundings too, bolter held ready, thinking to himself that the rains were later this year than ever before. In fact, all over Rynn's World, weather systems had been kicked out of kilter by the war.

The orks had been routed at New Rynn City over a year ago now. Alessio Cortez had left, surrounded by much controversy, to lead a small team off-world. He and the four battle-brothers chosen to accompany him had all made a death-pact. They would hunt down and destroy the warlord Snagrod, the greenskin warlord responsible for all the murder and misery that had engulfed this land, or they would not return at all. Master Kantor had relocated the Chapter headquarters to the Cassar, the Crimson Fists keep in the planetary capital. Throne knew when, or even if, the Chapter's noble fortress-monastery, Arx Tyrannus, would ever be rebuilt. The purge had to take priority for now. The purge had to be absolute. Riallo's voice sounded over the link. 'Definite ork-sign, brother-sergeant. At least ten of the bastards, all of them grown bulls judging by the prints.'

'When, Riallo?'

'One second, sergeant. I've found some spoor.'

Up ahead, Grimm saw Riallo prod something on the ground then press his finger to his tongue.

'This is less than one hour old.'

'They could still be inside,' rumbled Grimm, half to himself.

One of the armoured squad members stepped to Grimm's side. His proud blue ceramite was coated with clinging brown dust after the long march from the last purge site. 'No solid cover on approach. How do you want to handle this, sergeant?'

It was Mandell.

'Two twos,' said Grimm. 'You and Corella will flank left and come at the barn from the eight o'clock position. Veristan and I will approach head-on. Riallo,' he called out over the link, 'I want you on high ground providing cover. Make sure you have solid angles on both the barn and the farmhouse.'

Riallo rose and trotted back towards the others. He holstered his bolt pistol on his thigh, unslung the sniper rifle from his back, and nodded

towards the grassy slope east. ‘You see that fallen tree about two hundred metres up, sergeant?’

Grimm followed the Scout’s gaze and nodded. ‘It looks fine. Go.’

Riallo dipped his head in a short bow and ran off, moving with all the speed and natural grace of a predatory cat. Within moments he was in place.

‘Let’s move,’ said Grimm. ‘Veristan, you’re with me.’

The four armoured Space Marines split into their fire-teams and made for the barn. Not long till sundown now. So quiet. Eerily quiet. Grimm could hear the wind, though it was hardly strong. A trio of crows cawed to each other as they flew out from the treetops on the western ridge and settled in the pasture to gorge themselves on the dead aurochs. Carrion beetles scuttled away nervously. The barn loomed closer and closer, and still nothing. Grimm and Veristan took positions on either side of the gaping door and waited for Mandell and Corella to converge with them.

The shadows inside the barn were ink-black.

Once all were in place, Grimm ordered them to switch to low-light vision mode, then he gave the ‘go’ command.

Heavily armoured as they were, the four Space Marines nevertheless moved like lightning. In a coordinated blur, they entered the barn and took up position, weapons raised, ready to fire.

But nothing stirred in the barn. It was a scene of gruesome slaughter, but that slaughter was over. The blood splashed copiously over the walls and wooden beams and straw-covered floor was cold.

A dozen white bodies lay in raw tatters. These were Magalanian sheep, a large and sturdy breed with four long curving horns, but they had been no match for their killers. Grimm turned the nearest over with his boot. There was a massive ragged hole in its side.

‘That’s an ork bite pattern alright,’ said Corella. ‘It just took a big mouthful right out of it, wool and all.’

‘Up in the rafters,’ said Veristan.

Grimm raised his eyes and immediately wished he hadn’t. He had seen enough horrors since the damned greenskin filth had invaded. He didn’t need any more to compound his anger and hatred. Still, here were two – the bodies of young male farm-hands, skinned and hung from the barn’s central crossbeam. He blink-clicked his visor’s zoom function and noted

the bullet wounds on the bodies and the stray rounds that had hit the wooden beams around them or had punched neat holes in the ceiling. These latter glowed with the day's dying light.

'The orks used them for target practice,' he spat. 'Look at the blood trails. They skinned them, hung them up, then shot at them.'

Mandell muttered an old Sorrocan curse. The others scowled in silence.

'All right,' said Grimm. 'Sweep the barn for anything else. When we are clear, we storm the farmhouse.'

Outside, from his position by the fallen tree, Riallo watched the others emerge from the barn and move in pairs towards the farmhouse. The sun was extremely low now, and the valley's tall western slope cast black shadows down on its floor. Riallo switched his magnoculars to low-light mode. He saw Sergeant Grimm and Veristan take up position on either side of the main doorway in the south wall of the building. Mandell and Corella did likewise at a smaller side entrance on the structure's west side. Both doors had been smashed in by the orks.

'In position,' said Mandell over the link. 'I don't see anything in there.'

'Riallo,' said Grimm. 'Any sign of movement from your position?'

'Just the feasting crows, brother-sergeant,' answered Riallo. Then something caught his eye. 'Wait!'

'What is it?'

Riallo zoomed in with his magnoculars, muscles tense for a moment. Then he relaxed. 'No, it's nothing. Just the wind causing a slide on one of the big corn spills.'

'Something's not right about this,' said Veristan. 'It feels... off.'

'Just follow the pattern,' said Grimm. 'We enter and clear in three... two... one...'

Riallo's brothers vanished into the shadows within the farmhouse. Above him, the first stars began to appear as evening crept westwards across the sky.

The interior was a mess. No piece of furniture had escaped the violent nature of the orks. Everything was either reduced to splinters or rags, or had been overturned. Embers still smouldered where fire had licked the

walls and window frames black. Large calibre slugs had pocked the plaster-covered stone, biting great craters in it.

Carefully, the squad moved through each room, checking and clearing, but all they found were the butchered bodies of the people who had lived there. With the sweep done, the Space Marines regrouped in the main room.

‘Three generations dead,’ said Veristan. ‘Grandparents, parents, a teenage son.’

‘From the looks of things, the men tried to fight back with kitchen blades,’ added Corella. ‘Not that it made any difference.’

‘How many more times do we have to bear witness?’ spat Mandell, lowering the muzzle of his flamer. ‘All over Rynn’s World, the greenskins are butchering our people like this. A year since the tide was turned, and still they suffer. What must they think of us? Master Kantor should have petitioned the other Chapters for more aid. We should be rebuilding already.’

‘And Captain Cortez,’ added Corella, ‘off on a mission of personal vengeance when he is needed—’

‘Enough!’ barked Grimm. ‘Alessio Cortez seeks vengeance for our fallen, not for himself. I, for one, would have him return to a world cleansed of our enemies. Is it not so with all of you? Or am I mistaken?’

There was a moment thick with silence.

‘No, brother-sergeant,’ said Mandell with genuine contrition. ‘You are not wrong.’

Veristan sighed in agreement and looked up at the ceiling. Suddenly, he tensed. ‘What in Throne’s name...’

A series of great gouges had been cut in the wood and plaster above the Space Marines. The cuts formed almost a complete circle, but at three equidistant points the lines broke, just enough to keep the ceiling from falling in.

Grimm followed Veristan’s gaze.

‘Damn it!’ he shouted. ‘Backs to the walls, br—’

He didn’t get to finish. There was a deafening boom, a sudden hard hail of rubble, and the circle of ceiling dropped straight down into the room.

Grimm and the others dived backwards and escaped most of the impact, but Mandell, closest to the centre, couldn’t get clear in time. The circle of

ceiling struck him hard and flattened him to the ground. The darkness was filled with a great billowing cloud of dust, swirling green in the low-light vision of the Space Marine helmets.

From within that cloud came a deep, bestial roar.

Huge, savage shapes emerged, rushing straight forward with weapons raised, frenzied for a fight. They were monstrous hulks of green muscle, armed with heavy chain-bladed axes and swords.

‘Open fire, brothers!’ yelled Grimm even as he pulled the trigger of his bolter and strobed the room with muzzle flare. ‘Damn it, open fire! Kill them all!’

From his sniping position on the valley slope, Riallo heard the detonation of the ork charges. The feasting crows scattered into the air at once. Then Riallo had heard the greenskin roars and the deep bark of bolters. He saw flashes of gunfire strobing the broken windows and doorways of the farmhouse. But he had no line of sight. There was nothing he could do from here to help his fellows.

‘Dorn’s blood!’ he spat, and almost rose from his position to sprint to their aid.

It was well he did not. In the last of the day’s dying ambient light, he saw a sudden flurry of movement. Whipping his magnoculars back to his eyes, he saw two huge, blade-wielding orks explode from the hills of spilled corn. Two others ripped their way out of the damaged grain silos, forcing back the jagged metal with powerful gnarled fists. The aurochs carcasses suddenly shifted, too. They lurched as blood-covered orks scrambled out from pits they had dug underneath them.

*Ambush*, though Riallo bitterly. *When will we stop underestimating them!*

He may have only been a Tenth Company Scout, yet to grow into his full potential, but he was already seeing much that needed to change if the Chapter was ever to reclaim its former glory.

The orks were converging swiftly on the farmhouse. Riallo knew he wouldn’t be able to get all of them, but, pressing his right eye to his rifle’s powerful scope, he swore he’d take as many down as he could.

‘More greenskins converging on your position, brothers! I count seven.’

He squeezed his trigger. A gruesome green head exploded. The body stumbled forward and fell hard. The sound of the shot echoed from the opposite valley wall.

‘Six,’ said Riallo.

He lined up a shot on the next nearest ork, a monstrous brute with a heavy pistol in one hand and a preposterously large iron cleaver in the other. On powerful, tree-thick legs it was thundering towards the farmhouse.

Again, Riallo’s rifle kicked against his plated shoulder.

The round punched a hole in the monster’s clavicle. When it detonated, it cored the beast like an apple. The ork hit the ground dead, dark blood gushing from its slack jaw.

‘Five,’ said Riallo.

*I can take one more of them.*

They were almost at the farmhouse now. He had perhaps two seconds, but they were moving so fast.

Riallo exhaled and squeezed. His next shot took his third and final target in the leg, just above the knee. The detonation of the round blew off the lower half of the beast’s limb and it fell, weapons spinning away as it hit the dirt. The others ran on and vanished into the farmhouse.

‘They’re on you!’ the Scout called out over the link.

He settled his crosshairs on the head of the ork that was now crawling frantically towards its fallen blades.

*See how it craves violence, he thought. So desperate to join the fight, even crippled!*

Once again, the sound of a powerful, high-velocity round echoed off the valley walls.

‘Four,’ muttered Riallo to himself. Then he was up and moving.

Slinging his rifle over his shoulder and drawing his bolt pistol, he raced down the slope towards the farmhouse, desperate to give his brothers any aid he could.

The farmhouse interior was a maelstrom of noise and flame, smoke and dust, and huge heavy bodies locked in mortal combat.

Three massive orks had dropped from the ceiling. Two had been cut down with bolter fire as they charged, but the third had got in too close and knocked Corella's weapon aside. Corella's trusty armour had absorbed most of the impact of the follow-up blow, but the experienced warrior was still smashed so hard by the flat of the monster's axe that he flew into the wall behind him and exploded through it, landing on his back in a pile of rubble.

The beast would have finished him then and there if Veristan hadn't unloaded half a magazine into it from behind. Corella struggled to his feet, cursing and raging at himself so hard that he forgot to thank his saviour. Veristan didn't take it personally. They had saved each other a dozen times or more in the last year. Neither was keeping count anymore.

Grimm was hauling broken beams and rubble off Mandell. When the latter was able to scramble to his feet, he loosed a loud string of curses.

There was barely time to draw breath, however, before the warning came from Riallo that others were converging on their position.

'Cover that damned door,' barked Grimm. Three boltgun muzzles and a flamer's hissing maw snapped into position.

The first ork through the door met a wall of bright white flame before being ripped to pieces by the storm of rounds that followed. The second leapt over the burning remnants of its former comrade, but the moment its boots hit the floor, it too was gunned down. The third and fourth knew better than to follow. They crouched just outside and lobbed large wooden-handled grenades in through two of the shattered windows.

It was the ancient techno-sorcery of the Space Marines battle-helms that saved them from death. Projected directly onto their retinas, the four squad members all saw glowing telemetry lines tracing and predicting the trajectory of the explosives as they sailed into the room. Grimm and Veristan lunged forward. The grenades hit the floor and rolled, but only for an instant before they were snatched up and hurled back towards their points of origin.

'Down,' shouted Grimm. The grenades disappeared beyond the sills of the windows.

There was a grunt and a sudden flurry of movement from outside. Two deafening booms sounded just a half-second apart. Chunks of the

farmhouse wall were blown inward. The armour of the crouching Space Marines rattled with a hail of plaster and stone.

Then everything was still and silent apart from the veils of dust slowly settling back to the ground.

The squad moved outside, bolters still raised, to find the ground littered with scraps of ork flesh and shards of shattered bone.

‘Is it over?’ asked Veristan.

Grimm didn’t answer for a moment. He stood listening to the silence. A new sound imposed itself on him. Footsteps. Someone or something moving at a run.

The others heard it, too, and turned with bolters raised just in time to see Riallo sprint around the corner of the farmhouse with his bolt pistol in hand.

‘It’s over,’ said Grimm. He opened a new channel on the link, and said, ‘Squad Leader to Thunderhawk *Aetherius*. Respond.’

There was a crackle of static. A deep voice replied, ‘*Aetherius* hears, brother. Go ahead.’

‘Squad Grimm is ready for pick-up. Lock on to my beacon. You can land in the valley. We’ll be waiting about two hundred metres south of our current position.’

‘Do you have need of an Apothecary, brother?’

‘Negative, *Aetherius*. We do not. See you at the extraction point. Grimm, out.’

‘So...’ said Veristan after the sergeant had closed the link. ‘Another island cleared of the filthy kine.’

‘Leaving just short of eight hundred more to go,’ replied Mandell. ‘Not to mention the mountains and the cave systems.’

‘It that a complaint?’ asked Grimm.

‘Hardly,’ chuckled the big Space Marine. ‘I live for these purges, though I shall be more wary of falling ceilings.’

At that moment, Riallo’s eyes locked onto something above them and went wide. Grimm turned just in time to see a badly injured ork rise up to its full height on the roof of the farmhouse. Its skin was drenched in blood and one arm ended in a tattered stump that was still dripping, but it had enough life left in it to raise a huge axe, bellow at the sky and leap.

Grimm saw it coming straight towards him. He heard someone shout, ‘Sergeant!’ There was a single gunshot and the beast’s head snapped backwards as it dropped.

The sergeant stepped back just in time. The body of the monster struck the ground a metre in front of him and flopped lifelessly to its side. He turned to see Riallo standing there, bolt pistol raised, smoke drifting from its barrel.

They all looked at Riallo for a moment, saying nothing until he lowered and holstered his weapon.

‘Good shot, Scout,’ said Grimm at last.

‘Thank you, brother-sergeant.’

‘How many kills did you make this day, brother?’ asked Veristan

‘Four,’ said Riallo. If he felt pride, he managed to keep it from his voice.

Corella blew out a breath. ‘Almost half the total kill-count. You’re making us look bad, brother.’

‘It was the ork that laid you out which made *you* look bad,’ Veristan laughed. ‘He put you on your back like a helpless turtle.’

‘Mandell,’ said Grimm, ‘you know what to do. Burn the ork bodies. *Aetherius* will do a promethium bombing run once we’re up, but I’d rather not take any chances with spores drifting on the wind. Riallo, scour the place one last time to be sure we got them all. If there are ork tracks leading away...’

‘Understood, brother-sergeant.’

‘Veristan and Corella, follow me. We’ll await them at the rendezvous.’

As Mandell went back inside the farmhouse with his flamer, Riallo mentally quartered the area and began scanning the ground for tracks leading off the property. It was dark. Stars blanketed the sky, their cold light adequate for a Space Marine’s gene-boosted vision. His search eventually brought him near the ruptured grain silos. By the hills of spilled corn, he found two hastily abandoned breathing tubes that the orks had used to stay hidden.

*They were cunning, these ones, the thought. They knew we were in pursuit and laid a fine trap. I must not think of the orks as mere savages*

*any longer. Some of them, it is clear, are not. They surprised us here today. It could have gone ill for us. Our training, our discipline and our reflexes were what saved us.*

He found no evidence that any orks had escaped. As he ended his search and turned back towards the farmhouse, he saw Veristan emerge from the main doorway. The hungry flames were already high behind him, feeding on the dead orks and the debris.

Riallo walked over and, for a moment, the two Crimson Fists stood watching the blaze intensify. Firelight danced on the golden iconography that graced Mandell's ceramite plates. Mandell had earned his fair share of honours defending New Rynn City during the war.

Riallo broke the silence between them. 'This is why it never truly feels like a victory to me, brother. We kill them, but even when dead, the ork spores force us to burn the very things we're fighting for – the people's homes, the fields, the pastures, all the things that support life here. We burn Rynn's World herself.'

Mandell stared into the flames.

'It is from fire that things are born anew,' he rumbled gently. 'Keep your eyes on the future, my brother. The world will heal in time, but only if this accursed infestation is properly ended. What we do now lays the foundations for a return to better days. Be patient and see it thr—'

A shrill scream from inside the farmhouse cut him off. For an instant, they stood stunned. Then there was another.

Riallo bolted forward, sprinting straight for the farmhouse. At the door, he didn't stop. He raced straight into the flaming interior.

'Damn it,' spat Mandell, then he marched off after him.

The Thunderhawk had already touched down when Riallo and Mandell finally rejoined the rest of the squad. Brother Garreon, *Aetherius's* pilot, kept the turbines spinning. Grimm was on the verge of demanding a status report over the link when the two missing Space Marines emerged out of the night.

On seeing them, Grimm understood at once.

Cradled in the thick arms of the Scout were two tiny, soot-covered girls with straw-coloured hair. Their bright eyes were wide with fear as they

peered back at the massive Space Marines standing at the bottom of the gunship's ramp.

*The family, thought Grimm. That's why they didn't run. That's why they stood and fought. I should have seen it.*

The children looked so fragile, pressed up against the Scout's armoured chest like that.

*Too fragile, too innocent, to survive in a galaxy consumed by endless war. But then again, even we five began this life so small and powerless. Beginnings do not always dictate the nature of endings.*

Not for the first time, he gave silent thanks to Emperor and the Primarch that fate had made him a Space Marine. He did not think he could have faced the reality of these times as a mortal man with all of the terrible weaknesses that entailed.

'Where were they?' he asked.

'There was a trapdoor set in the floor,' answered Mandell as he moved past his sergeant and up the ramp. 'Their parents must have hidden them from the orks just in time, perhaps alerted by the screams of the farmhands.'

Grimm nodded. 'Time to pull out. Everyone aboard now.'

As the Space Marines marched up into the belly of the gunship, Grimm spoke to Riallo. As he did, the girls turned and hid their frightened faces against the Scout's chest.

'You honoured the Chapter with your deeds today, brother,' said Grimm. 'When we arrive back at the Cassar, I shall be petitioning for your advancement to full battle-brother status.'

Riallo blinked in surprise. 'Then it is I who am honoured, brother-sergeant. Thank you.'

Grimm waved that aside.

'The Chapter needs you, brother. And many more like you if the Crimson Fists are to once again be a mighty force in this Imperium.'

He strapped himself into his flight harness and settled back. The gunship's turbines whined louder, raising in pitch to a scream. *Aetherius* lifted her bulk up into the air.

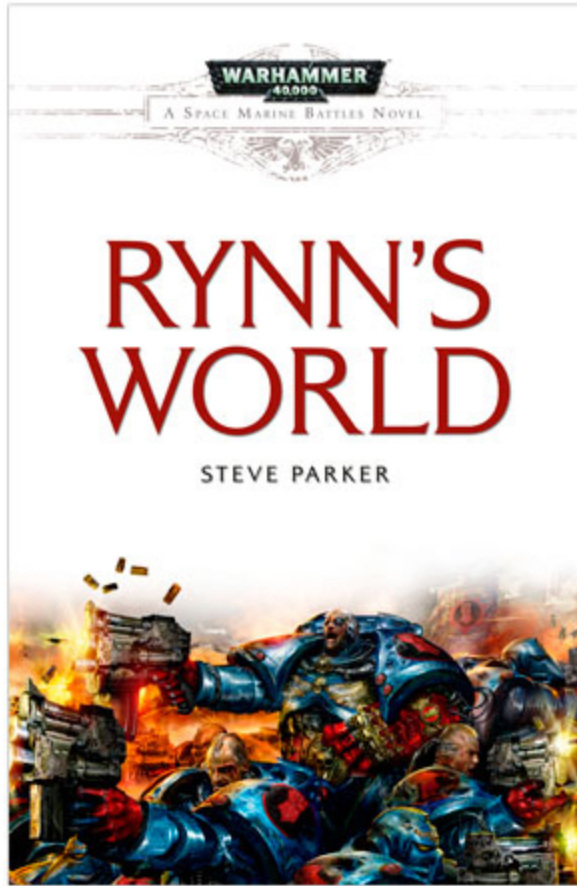
'On that day,' Grimm continued, 'no muck-eating greenskin in Imperial space will be safe from our wrath. In Dorn's name, I tell you, the very thought of us will strike terror into their filthy xenos hearts.'

The others had removed their battle helmets. On hearing their sergeant's words, they turned to face him as one. Eyes hard with rage and righteous zeal, they echoed him.

'In Dorn's name,' they swore, 'it will be so.'

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

STEVE PARKER was born and raised in Scotland, where he recently returned after a spell in Japan. He has been writing for Black Library since 2006, when his story 'The Falls of Marakross' was published in the *Tales from the Dark Millennium* anthology. His first Warhammer 40,000 novel, *Rebel Winter*, was published in 2007, followed by *Gunheads* and *Rynn's World*, the first of the Space Marine Battles series. He introduced readers to the kill-team known as Talon Squad in the short stories 'Headhunted' and 'Exhumed', and revisited them in the novel *Deathwatch*. When he's not writing or destroying himself in the gym, he enjoys martial arts, heavy metal music, military documentaries, supporting wildlife conservation and eating good vegetarian food. One day, he would like to earn the Crux Terminatus.



When ork hordes lay waste to the planet of Badlanding and wipe out the Crimson Fists sent to stop them, Chapter Master Kantor prepares a hasty line of defence on Rynn's World.

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**Published in 2014 by Black Library, Games Workshop Ltd.,  
Willow Road, Nottingham, NG7 2WS, UK**

**Cover illustration by Kevin Chin.**

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**ISBN 978-1-78251-465-7**

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