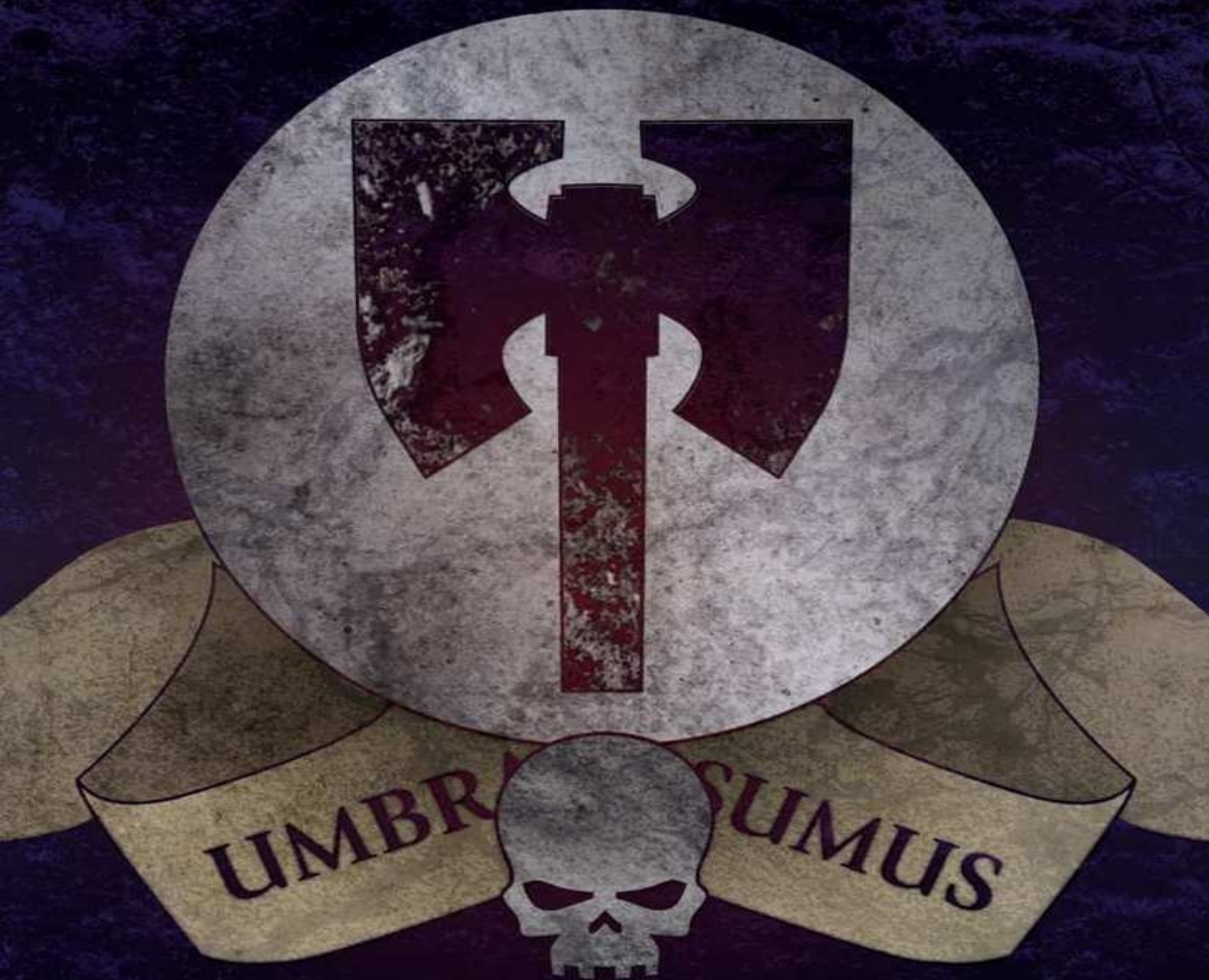


**WARHAMMER**  
40,000

# DARK HUNTERS

THE BLIND KING



**PAUL KEARNEY**

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# **DARK HUNTERS: THE BLIND KING**

**Paul Kearney**

*Phobian. System Phobos. Sector Finial. 3.839.936.M38*

*'I never knew that ice could catch fire,' he said, and his words betrayed some of the wonder that remains in the neophyte. There is still a little of humanity's weakness and credulity even in those of us who are close to attaining the full brotherhood.*

*But as I turned to look at his face, I will admit that I felt some of that same wonder myself; I, Mauron Aekin, who has walked and bled upon worlds without count.*

*Brother Rausa caught my stare and frowned. He bent in the trench and retrieved his helm. The starlight caught the dark lenses, each a momentary, tiny universe in itself. Then he set it upon his head and became faceless, one battle-brother among many others.*

*'The plasma cannon it bears will burn up anything. It will make magma out of solid stone. What you see is the glare as it engages our forces on the glacier, brother.'*

*'Yes, brother-sergeant. It is just...' Again, that human hesitation. 'I have never seen a Titan in battle before.'*

*I grunted at that and stared out across the icefields again, blue under the stars, winnowed by a chill gale that sped drifts of granular snow across it in bitter clouds.*

*'Not many have.'*

Perhaps some thirty kilometres away, in the foothills of the mountains, there burst and flared a light show fit to make shame of any planetary aurora. Bolts of yellow, red and green snaked through the thin atmosphere. Flashes went up and

died. And in their wake, there carried across the intervening plains a low rumble, like the ominous chuckle of some twisted god.

Mortai Company was out there now, fighting the desperate fight, dying for their brethren in the other companies. Buying time with Adeptus Astartes blood.

Aekin bowed his head a moment, thinking of his friends in Mortai. Already, the Dark Hunters Third Company was coming to be seen as unlucky. *The Fated Ones*, they were called, and they seemed to take a grim satisfaction in the title.

*Throne watch over them, he prayed silently. Let their deaths be worthy.*

A vast, horizon-spanning flash of light sprang up for a second and then died almost as instantly. There was a bright glow that smouldered under the stars. The light show abated somewhat.

‘That was the end of a Titan, or I know nothing,’ Aekin said softly. Seconds later, they heard the dull roar of the explosion, and a wind went past them, lifting the snow into the air to shroud them in dancing ice crystals.

‘No Warhound either. That was a Reaver, maybe even a Warlord. Rausa, what of the auspex?’

His fellow Space Marine was already consulting the device, its green light flickering upon him, like sunlight seen through deep water.

‘So much interference it’s hard to say, brother-sergeant. But the base readings have dipped. I’m seeing lower energy levels.’

Aekin blinked on the Chapter-wide vox. ‘Mortai, this is Ansar. Report, brothers.’

Silence, then a brief garbled crackle, then more silence.

Aekin’s face tightened. His lips drew back from his teeth inside the beaked corvid helm. He blinked up the Company vox.

‘Brother-captain.’

‘Report, Aekin.’

‘Large detonation in Mortai’s lines. Possible Titan destruction. Vox with Third Company is difficult to impossible.’

‘I read you, Aekin. Hold position.’

He wanted to say more, to ask his captain for a portion of the bigger picture, but he knew better. The vox was not for gossip, or facile enquiry.

‘Acknowledged. Aekin out.’

‘This is the Haradai’s task we are fulfilling here,’ Brother Rausa said, staring out at the dying apocalypse on the horizon. Impatience and a kind of doubt coloured his tone, even over the medium of the vox.

‘Our brethren in the Scout Company are either dead or scattered all over the

glaciers to the south, keeping watch, brother. We fulfil our orders, and we do so without question, complaint or query. Do I make myself clear, Rausa?’

‘Perfectly clear, brother-sergeant.’

‘You are a neophyte, brought into the line companies ahead of your time because we are cruelly understrength. This is your chance to redeem that act of faith. Do not let me or Ansar Company down, Rausa.’

‘Never, brother-sergeant. I would rather die than fail my brethren and my Chapter. By the Throne I swear it.’

Aekin smiled a little at the heat in the young Space Marine’s voice.

‘Would you like to speak to Brother-Chaplain Nurif?’

‘That will be not be necessary, sergeant. His sermon on leaving the fortress was inspiration itself.’

They watched the horizon again, concealed in the trench that they had scooped out of the ice and stone with their own hands. There was no room to turn around in it, and their jump packs were on the lip of the trench behind them, concealed in a mound of snow.

*Rausa is right, though, Aekin thought. This is no job for Assault Marines. But when war explodes out of a clear sky, and the Chapter is caught as badly by it as we have been, then many compromises must be made.*

*I remember the days after the Founding, when we exchanged White Scars livery for the dark of hunter blue. I remember Captain Angnar taking the axe from Mordonai Khan of the Scars at Quan Zhou, the axe which Jaghatai himself had once used: double-headed, millennia old, and still crackling with blue flame as Angnar raised it in the sunlight, a gift worthy of great heroes. We took it as our badge, the twice-bladed symbol of vengeance and justice.*

*We became reborn as the Dark Hunters, even as we bore still the honour scars of Chogoris. We were one company then, ninety-eight Adeptus Astartes of the White Scars Legion. I remember it like it was yesterday, though it was almost three centuries ago now. One company, destined to become a Chapter, to seek out a home in the void and continue the work of those millions who had gone into the dark before us.*

*What glory there was that day, what fresh hope in all our hearts.*

*How has it all come to this?*

Captain Mithryan stood on the battlements with his helm cradled at his hip and a white bearskin cloak billowing about him. He stared at the distant flashes on the edge of the night-shrouded world that was his home and drummed heavy

gauntleted fingers on the granite of the merlon.

Even two and a half centuries after its building, Mors Angnar still had a rough-boned look to it, a welt in the side of great Anghir-Adhon, the mountain which formed the spine of the fortress.

He remembered the first landing on this world, the massive shuttles coming and going on the plains below, the immense labour of carving out the gutrock of the mountainside to make a home worthy of the Dark Hunters. They had built the Reclusiam first and had gathered together under its new dome to offer up a *Te Deum* in gratitude. There had been one hundred and three Adeptus Astartes at that first, simple ceremony, over two and a half centuries in the past.

Three weeks ago, they had numbered over six hundred. It had taken two hundred years to build that, to create a Chapter out of the single company. They had scoured the system, the sector, for suitable candidates, rejecting ten thousand for every one they took on. And then the long, slow, precarious process of implantation, surgical enhancement and biochemical adjustment began. Small wonder it had taken so long to enlarge their brotherhood.

*Six hundred strong we were, at the beginning of this. How many are left of us now?* Mithryan wondered.

He was joined at the battlement by two others much like himself. Adeptus Astartes in midnight-blue power armour, the double-headed axe emblazoned starkly on their shoulder-guards. They stood two and a half metres tall, and their faces wore the ritual scarring of their forebears. One had a topknot and the other's scalp was shaved, the better to accept the nodules and cabling which ran in and out of the skull.

They might have been brothers. In fact they were brothers by blood, by association, and by centuries of loyalty and comradeship, forged in the most hellish conditions the galaxy could engender.

'Things go ill, my friends,' the Space Marine with the scalp-lock said. He had the epicanthic curve to his eyelids that was the legacy of Chogoris, and the scarification on his cheeks whirled and coursed in a pattern that might have been some equine creature at full gallop. His power armour was beautifully worked, damascened with a pattern not unlike that upon his face. The ceramite seemed almost to curl and eddy across it like rippled water.

Mithryan bowed slightly. 'My khan, the pickets report that a Titan has been brought down, but vox with Mortai has been all but lost. We must consider that—'

'Mortai will be reborn, captain,' the third figure said, he of the shaved and

cabled skull. His eyes were cobalt blue, pitiless as frost. Behind his head the glowing curve of a psych-hood reared up, pulsing as though it had a life of its own. 'But only if the Chapter itself endures.'

'Stormseer Korso has sent word to Mortai's Librarian who yet lives. They are to pull back at best speed in the surviving vehicles.'

'Under the guns of Titans?' Mithryan said in soft but urgent inquiry.

The khan held up a hand, his eyes dark slits, cruel as scimitars. 'Wait, Mithryan.'

Seconds went by, and the distant roar of battle gave way to a closer sound. A growing roar of turbofans shrieked in the dark. Mithryan looked up just as a squadron of lights thundered south in the air above their heads, afterburners bright against the stars, navigation lights winking. Another squadron went by, and then a third, all arrowing towards the fires of the southern battle lines.

'Half of our surviving Thunderhawks will assist Mortai's withdrawal. Haroun and Novus Companies are on their way south even now, with the last of the Land Raiders. Ardunai will be inserted as soon as they have engaged.' The Khan paused. 'I will join them. I will lead the veterans myself.'

A Chapter Master taking to the front line in person. Now Mithryan knew how desperate their situation truly was.

'And my brethren in Ansar?' he asked the Khan. 'What of them, my lord? We are Assault Marines, not Scouts.'

And I should be down there with them, he thought but did not say.

The khan set a hand on Mithryan's shoulder-guard and smiled bleakly. 'Do not fret, Mithryan. For you and yours I have kept a special place. You will be right at the heart of this little drama of ours.'

Aekin received the order to pull back with something near disbelief, but his iron discipline kicked in at once, and he immediately issued a series of brief, crisp commands to his squad.

'Primus, gather all gear. Jump packs on. Assemble on me to the rear of our line in four minutes. Vox silence until then. Aekin out.'

He and Brother Rausa helped one another don the bulky jump packs and roll up the cameleoline tarp that had helped conceal their trench. Then they trudged through the blowing snow northwards. As they did, they could see a series of dark shapes come thundering down on them. Blinking on his tactical readouts, Aekin saw the approaching giants for what they were.

'Stand fast, Primus Squad,' he said. 'Let them pass through us.'

*And Throne watch over them,* he added silently.

A trio of Land Raiders in arrowhead formation, massive armoured vehicles that dwarfed even the battle-brothers who crewed them. The ground shook under their tracks, and they carved deep-ground furrows through the ice as they advanced, their exhaust stacks snorting and bellowing. One of the Space Marines who manned the hatch-gun on the roof of a Land Raider raised a hand to Aekin as they passed, and he lifted a fist in return, pride firing through his hearts.

Behind the raiders came smaller vehicles, though each of these still weighed many tonnes. Predator tanks, their turrets already traversing back and forth, seeking targets. Rhinos, their bellies full of Aekin's brethren, and bringing up the rear were square, slow-striding Dreadnoughts, the Elder Ones, woken from their long sleep for this desperate war. Aekin and his brothers bowed their heads as the giants passed, the fists of the great mechanical figures clenching and unclenching, their flamers dripping bright gobbets of burning promethium, and the light of death in their gleaming sight-slits.

The whole strength of the Chapter was on the move – all that remained of it. And yet Ansar Company was being ordered back to the fortress. Aekin ground his teeth. All his soul cried out to be advancing with his brothers, into the maw of that unholy beast which had been tearing at them the last twenty-one days.

But he had his orders.

'Move on,' he told his squad. And over the tactical readout in his helm he could see the Company's other squads congregating on the rendezvous point. Ansar had sixty-three Space Marines in its ranks. They had lost eleven battle-brothers in these last weeks, and yet they were still one of the most numerous companies. Tenth Company, the Haradai, was down to a couple of squads. Makran was not much better off. And now it seemed that Mortai had been decimated also.

Even for Adeptus Astartes, to contend the field with Titans was a grim and costly business.

'He calls himself the Blind King,' Captain Mithryan said, 'that we know. In the last days, we have had word from the Sol System itself. Our enemy is a renegade from the Missionary Order of the Divisio Mandati, part of the Collegio Titanicus. He comes from Mars, brothers.'

There was a silence as this sank in.

'Somehow, he has suborned elements of the Eighty-Sixth Legion, the Gladio Imperatoris, and convinced them that they are here on a mission sanctioned by

the highest echelons of the Adeptus Mechanicus. He has brought well-nigh a third of the Legion here with him, some fifteen Titans of varying classes. The word from sources on Mars is that most of his machines are Reaver or Warhound class. He has two Warlords, the big beasts, and one of those has just been destroyed by Mortai Company.'

The assembled brethren of Ansar Company murmured approval at that, a deep muttering of anger and fierce exultation. Captain Mithryan held up one gauntleted hand and the noise died instantly.

'The khan wishes you to know that of the seventy-three members of Mortai who took the field yesterday, there are fourteen battle-brothers remaining. Three Land Raiders and several troops of Rhinos were also lost bringing down the Warlord. Brothers, Mortai Company has been all but destroyed, but they have held to their faith and to their honour. The enemy, this Blind King, is now staking all in one last assault upon Mors Angnar itself. At present, nine Titans are now advancing on this fortress. They mean to wipe us from this world, my brethren, and take it as their own.'

No sound this time; not a single word. But Mithryan could almost feel the simmering fury of his battle-brothers as they stood before him.

'My brothers, it gladdens my hearts to be able to tell you that Ansar Company has been chosen to take the head of the beast. While the rest of our Chapter assault the enemy machines on the glaciers to the south of this position, we are to attack the last remaining Warlord. It is our privilege to bring an end to the abomination that has dropped upon our world.

'Our mission is simple. We are to kill the Blind King.'

'If we accomplish this thing, the Adeptus Mechanicus assures us that his cohorts will become confused, fearful, uncertain. Whatever hold he has over them will die with him.

'My brethren, in our hands today, the khan has placed the survival of this Chapter. Either we do this thing, or it is likely that the Dark Hunters will be overwhelmed and go into the dark unmourned and bereft of glory.'

'Never!' someone hissed over the vox.

'Mithryan nodded, his narrow eyes shining. 'Then, brothers, let us be at it.'

All along the southern horizon the fighting went on, and the dark sky of Phobian was full of light. It seemed that the glaciers were ablaze with fire, and huge shattered craters smouldered in the ice. Here and there, a column of smoke and flame rose in a tortured spiral, marking the end of a Dark Hunter vehicle. The

Space Marines were engaging the Titans both at long and short range, but the immense war machines had weaponry enough for every eventuality.

The Warhounds were out in front, three pairs of them, loping across the ice and hosing down every Adeptus Astartes position with fire from their megabolters. If the Space Marines drew too close, they opened up with plasma blastguns. Their power and defence lay in their swiftness. Shell after shell was fired at them from the predators and whirlwinds, and they jerked and ducked and leapt as a forest of pyrotechnics exploded around them.

At their feet, battle-brethren on foot inched closer with shoulder-carried missile launchers, hunkering down, waiting for a weak spot to be revealed. These hunter-killer teams had painted their dark armour with cameleoline paint so that they blended into the smoke-stained snow and blasted ice of the battlefield. The Dark Hunters had learned the hard way that to advance on foot openly against Titans was to invite annihilation.

At the back of the line, the remaining Land Raiders of the Chapter slugged it out at longer range, exchanging fire with Reaver Titans and changing position with every salvo. To remain in one spot for more than a few seconds was death.

In their midst, the only two Vindicators of the Chapter that still survived were unleashing demolisher shells at high elevation to impact on the Reavers at shoulder height and take out the apocalypse missile launchers the war machines bore there. These multiple launch weapons made the battlefield into a shrieking hell of fire and shrapnel and high explosive. But the Vindicators were not as manoeuvrable as Land Raiders. Their crews fought on knowing their lives could be measured only in minutes. Around them, Rhinos and Razorbacks of the line companies fired off smoke canisters, and sought to dazzle the enemy with searing magnesium-bright searchlights.

Every trick and trap of war that the Dark Hunters had learned over the centuries was utilised against the foe, but the sheer firepower and weight of armour they were contending with made the fight an uneven one. At best, the Hunters were conducting a holding action. At worst, they were being driven to the brink of destruction.

And to the rear of the Warhounds and the Reavers, the towering, ominous giant that was the remaining enemy Warlord strode on, launching long-range shells from its quake cannon, and tearing up the sky with gatling blaster fire. Bright explosions blossomed all over its frame, but so far nothing had penetrated the immense machine's void shields. It marched on – inexorably, invincible and unstoppable – and the Adeptus Astartes died by the dozen at its feet.

‘Thirty seconds,’ the loadmaster of the Thunderhawk said over the vox, and the light in the bay changed from red to green.

‘Prepare to jump,’ Mithryan intoned. The aircraft shook and shuddered under him as it flew through a hail of heavy fire, and around him the other brethren of the Company swayed and lurched as the pilot threw the big, angular craft into a series of evasive manoeuvres.

‘Gunship assault going in,’ the pilot said, grunting as he tugged on the Thunderhawk’s yoke. The craft’s frame was tested to the limit as he hurled it around in the air.

‘Ten seconds.’

A flight of eighteen Thunderhawk and Stormtalon gunships swooped down on the Warlord Titan, jinking and banking to avoid a torrent of gatling rounds that the war machine sprayed into the sky. Three of the strike craft were caught in swift succession, despite the efforts of their pilots, and blown to pulverised wreckage in the black, starlit night. But the rest described a tight, beautiful arc, like the swallows of Old Earth in full career, and as they came around they unleashed their entire payload at the enemy. A vast spread of stormstrike missiles streaked out, trailing vapour and flame, and they slammed into the enemy Warlord.

The concussion of their own strikes blew two more Stormtalons out of the sky, but the rest pulled up, shrieking at supersonic speeds, an eruption like that of a roaring volcano opening up below them.

Blue light flickered and fizzed and lightning-white spasms of flame crawled across the upper hull of the Warlord, within that corona of fire. The void shields of the enemy machine had been knocked offline by the airstrike, but the crew of the Titan would be doing their utmost to bring them back.

‘Jump!’ Mithryan bellowed over the Company vox, and was the first one to leap out of the open bay of the Thunderhawk, igniting his jump pack as he did so.

The troop-carrying Thunderhawks coursed through that inferno, systems overloading, shorting out and screaming static. They were at five hundred metres, directly over the head of the Titan. The vast machine turned and seemed to peer up at the aircraft that swarmed about it. One gigantic arm was raised, and the plasma blastgun upon it roared out, a foaming river of white, scalding energy searing up at them. Mithryan watched helplessly as an entire squad of his brethren were engulfed by that channel of plasma fire and destroyed like moths

that have blundered into a candle flame.

‘Hell take you,’ he ground out through clenched teeth, dropping the power to his jet pack and accelerating his descent to a plummet.

‘All squads, drop power, maximum descent velocity. Get below that plasma, brothers!’

Another blast of plasma fire passed over his head, sweeping through the diving Adeptus Astartes of Ansar Company, burning them up in the air.

Half the company died in the space of eleven seconds.

Mithryan crashed into the hull of the Titan like a stone. For a few seconds, his auto-senses shorted out and he was deaf, blind and immured in a broken metal coffin. Then the fail-safes kicked in and his helm display flickered into life again.

He was lying upon the shoulder plates of the Warlord, sprawled like a bug which has struck the windscreen of a speeding vehicle, and all around him, his battle-brothers lay likewise. So pitifully few of them. Perhaps two dozen of Ansar Company had managed to land or crash around him.

‘Charges!’ he bellowed hoarsely, and he rose to his knees, checking the gear strapped to his belt. ‘We must set the charges, brothers.’

They did not have long. Like Astartes’ power armour, Titan systems were built with several layers of fail-safes and redundancies.

The foundries of Mars made these things well, Mithryan thought with a wordless snarl, and there was kindled in his hearts a deep, abiding hatred of those who had constructed these great machines of war. Culpable or blameless, he hated them all for what they had done to his Chapter, these priests of Mars.

Brother-Sergeant Aekin shook his head to rid himself of the concussed grogginess of the fall. There was blood trickling down his face inside the helm, and his teeth had been smashed through the flesh of his cheeks, but already his superlative restorative powers were at work, coagulating, and reknitting the shattered bones of his face. He heard his captain’s voice nearby, and thumped one side of his helm until the fizzing display in front of his eyes settled. He could see and hear again, though there were red warning lights all over the display, and when he blinked on tactical, so few of his battle-brethren came up that he was frozen for a moment in horror.

Only for a moment.

‘On me, Primus,’ he said, gargling blood with every word. He spat out a tooth. Looking at his jump pack sigils, he saw that the thing was smashed beyond

repair, and instantly hit the quick release switch at his breastbone. The heavy equipment clanked onto the hull of the Titan and he felt at once lighter.

*Well, here I am and here I'll stay,* he thought grimly.

The charges had been maglocked to his thighs and belly. Some had been knocked free and lost by the impact, but over half were still there. He clicked them free and scabbled over to his captain on all fours while the vast carcass of the Warlord lurched and swayed underneath him. He felt like a flea on the back of some great cantering, equine beast.

‘Captain.’

‘Aekin. Good to see you, brother. Add yours to mine. We do not have much time.’

They went to work and as more of their brethren collected their wits, so the pile of charges was added to. The captain and the sergeant arranged them carefully. Each was conelike, designed to deliver a shaped charge in a tiny, circumscribed space. When they went off, they would superheat the ceramite and adamantium layers of the Titan’s hull in discrete, overlapping circles. Their task was not to destroy the war machine, but merely to open a small gap in its armour.

‘Done. Back away brothers. Fifteen seconds,’ Mithryan said. He slithered across the Titan’s hull. The metal of it was electromagnetically sealed so that even the magnetic soles of the Space Marine’s boots could gain no purchase upon it.

There was a flash of intense light that steadied and bubbled, then speared out like the flash of a tiny supernova, darkening the autosenses of all who looked upon it. There was no noise, at least none that the Space Marines could pick out of the roaring cacophony that was the battle around them. As their systems adjusted, so they saw the hull of the Titan slump inwards, glowing white and dripping molten metal. A hole appeared, perhaps two metres wide, sparking and spitting and weirdly symmetrical, as though a hot wire had been slowly pushed through plastic.

‘They made those charges on Mars,’ Captain Mithryan said, and even behind the blank corvus helm, Aekin could sense the fierce grin that lit up his words.

‘Chainswords and pistols, my brothers,’ Mithryan went on, still with that rabid fury lacing his voice. ‘Let us gut this thing.’

The captain punched the quick release on his own jump pack, and then dropped through the hole, the white-hot edges of it scoring furrows in his power armour as he descended. Aekin went next, and after him came twenty more

Space Marines from every squad in the company, mixed up, many wounded, but all of them burning to avenge the deaths of their brothers.

Khan Jullunai, Chapter Master of the Dark Hunters, watched the flickering screens of the tactical readouts inside the lurching hull of the Land Raider *Mortem Ignis*. He was in full Terminator armour, as were his command squad around him. Stormseer Korso was at his side, the light flaring out of his eyes and his psychic hood glowing.

‘They are inside,’ Korso said simply.

‘The cost to Ansar Company has been ruinous,’ the Chapter Master said quietly, grief and fury vying for space in his tone.

‘It is up to Mithryan now, my khan.’

‘Indeed. We must keep up the pressure ourselves. The Warhounds are being held – Haroun Company has just downed another one. The enemy advance has slowed.’

‘They see the danger,’ Korso said simply.

‘We must keep them preoccupied with their own survival for now.’

‘And be reckless of our own?’ Korso asked.

The khan growled like an animal. ‘I will not stand back and wait. Mithryan deserves better than that.’

‘He is but one captain among many. That die has been thrown – it will land where it may. We cannot help Mithryan now. We must think of the surviving members of this Chapter.’

‘Are you saying we should retreat, Korso?’ the Khan asked. His eyes flashed dangerously.

‘Jullunai, my lord. We must husband our strength and await events.’ The Stormseer set one hand on the aquila of his Khan’s breastplate.

‘We are almost spent. We must rein in the impulse to charge ahead, to meet the foe head on. The tactics of the White Scars cannot help us here. We have lost two-thirds of our vehicles and we no longer possess that kind of mobility.’

‘What are you saying, brother? That we must learn a new way of waging war, now, here, in the midst of this battle?’

‘It is war that teaches us, my khan. That and nothing else. If we do not learn new lessons while in the midst of it, then we will never learn at all.’

The skitarii came at them in the narrow, cable-strewn corridors like raging fiends, thick and fast. The Dark Hunters chopped them to pieces with grinding

chainsaws, blasted them back with bolt pistol fire, and sometimes were reduced to smashing their skulls with raw blows of their fists.

It was like fighting in the intestines of some great animal: congested, labyrinthine, a steam-fraught maze of conduits, tunnels and access corridors. And the minions of the Adeptus Mechanicus attacked them from every side, relentlessly, throwing away their lives to protect the massive machine they were a part of. They were merely the corpuscles in its bloodstream, to be spent without stint or reckoning in its defence.

They died by the score, and the Hunters trod their corpses into the catwalks and gangways and tossed them aside without pause, following their captain. Mithryan had the blueprints of the Warlord loaded into his auto-sense databanks, and he led his brethren forwards unhesitatingly, his armour shining with blood now, flecked with viscera and chipped and scarred by lasgun fire.

But there were also more formidable foes within the Titan. Sagitarii with heavy weapons ambushed the Adeptus Astartes at every turn, melta guns and promethium flammers taking a toll on the survivors of Ansar Company. A quarter of Mithryan's brethren went down within an hour of boarding the Warlord, and many of the remaining Space Marines lifted the heavy weapons from the Sagitarii they had killed and turned them on their former owners.

Three times they had to lay more charges against hatches that had been sealed against their advance. The fourth time this occurred, the charges were all used up, and brother Falca, the only one amongst them with a power fist, had to lever and gouge for fifteen agonising minutes at the ceramite door before they were through, only to be ambushed again a moment later.

But though they could be slowed up and held back, they could not be halted.

The last hatch gave way under Falca's insistent fist, and Mithryan, calling up the schematics, knew that they were finally in the head of the Warlord, the command space. The Space Marines had room to fan out. Half a dozen surviving skitarii let off a few las-bolts at the invaders and were blown apart for their temerity.

The ground had ceased to rock under their feet. The immense machine in which they stood was still; it had ceased its relentless march.

'Spread out. Check every space,' Mithryan said. 'Aekin, Falca, Rausa, with me. We should go forward and down.'

A last hatchway. Falca grunted, and the crackling fire of his power fist came to life as he sank his fingers into the metal. It came apart like baked putty in his grasp, and he scooped away at it.

‘Nearly there, brothers. Captain, this door is—’

An immense silence and a blackness – the absence of all sensory input.

So this is the Emperor’s peace, Sergeant Aekin found himself thinking. This nothingness. I had expected something more. Brothers, I wish—

And then there was something coming out of the blackness. A distant din and light, motes of brightness and noise. Even a fragment of what could be speech.

*Brother-sergeant, are you—  
booby-trapped... Captain is—  
we are... I think—  
Sergeant!*

Aekin rolled over. His power pack had been blasted from his back and his helm had a gap in it through which the noxious vapours of the Titan interior were leaking. At once, his lungs closed off and the multi-lung implant kicked in, straining the poisons out of the air. He coughed, spitting out blood and fragments of flesh. His auto-senses were trying to readjust to the massive damage they had incurred.

Now there was firing, but the flash and noise of it came and went. He heard the screaming of lesser men echoing painfully in his blown eardrums. His oculobe was trying to send him into hibernation, but he fought the automatic input of the organ, striving to stay conscious.

He was dying. There were mere minutes left of his life.

Captain Mithryan was a mangled corpse clad in broken armour, and Brother Falca a limbless torso. The neophyte, Rausa, stopped firing.

‘They’re all dead, brother,’ he said, and his voice sounded like it had been wrapped in wool. ‘The hatchway was wired to blow.’

He could stand. Aekin rose to his feet. His right hand and the bolt pistol that had been in it were gone, but somehow he still held his chainsword in his left and there was life in that. He revved the clicking blades, the good feel of that vibration travelling up his arm.

‘Lift off my helm,’ he said to Rausa through his broken mouth.

His brother unclicked the broken shell of the helm from Aekin’s head. Rausa had scorch and blast marks all over him, but seemed to be in one piece.

‘Thank you, brother.’

Aekin turned around again. The corpses of two members of the Adeptus Mechanicus lay there where Rausa had shot them, and behind them was a large, glowing tank of semi-translucent material, filled with bright liquid. In the midst

of that, a human figure floated, attached to many wires and cables.

‘Well, there you are,’ Aekin mumbled. He limped forward past the bodies of the two Moderati and peered at the bulbous tank with its single occupant.

‘Let me introduce myself,’ he said.

He swept the snarling chainsword through the side of the bulging tank, tearing open a huge hole, and the liquid inside gushed out, hundreds of litres of warm, amniotic-like fluid. It tasted as coppery as blood, but with the addition of static, and oil.

The figure in the tank fell to the floor of the command space, glistening, spined with wires and cables, thrashing feebly. Its eyes were open, and it was making a mewling sound, as though it were newborn that very moment.

Aekin fell to his knees, struggling to see, to keep the life alight within himself for this last deed.

The thing had been a man, with a man’s face, but the eyes were milky-white orbs in red-sunken pits, and there was no nose, only a pair of slimed cables snaking into the skull.

‘I am Brother-Sergeant Mauron Aekin of the Dark Hunters,’ Aekin gasped, blood trickling out of his mouth. He smiled at the thing that lay before him – wriggling, whimpering and clawing at the decking – pinioned by the connection it held with the great machine.

‘You are the Blind King, and I am your death.’

He stabbed the chainsword down into that contorted face, grinding it through the skull, tearing the head apart before the thing even had a chance to wail.

Then he dropped the chainsword, still smiling, and turned to Brother Rausa, who stood beside him, boltgun poised.

‘Let them know, Rausa,’ Aekin whispered. ‘Let them know the thing is done.’

His hearts, bruised and punctured, gave up the unequal struggle as his will faded. Aekin toppled forwards onto the corpse of his foe, and there he died.

In the pitching confines of the Land Raider, Stormseer Korso bent his head and closed his eyes for a moment. ‘It is accomplished,’ he whispered.

Voices came over the vox, incredulous reports from battle-brethren out on the smoking battlefield, almost too exhausted to be jubilant.

‘Command, this is Taronai of Makran Company. The enemy Warlord has fallen. Repeat, the enemy command Titan has toppled and is burning.’

‘Command, this is Haroun First Sergeant, the second Reaver is down and the Warhounds are in full retreat. Request permission to pursue.’

Jullunai Khan of the Dark Hunters opened his armoured palm and set it gently against the side of the Land Raider, feeling the angry thrum and howl of the machine-spirit within.

‘All companies, this is the khan. Pursuit of all retreating enemy elements is authorised. Hunt them down, brothers. Let none escape. Grind these machines of Mars into the ice.’

He blinked onto the Thunderhawk frequency. ‘All Hawks, aim for their legs. Cripple them, brothers, with every bomb and round you possess. I want these things immobilised. Then we shall burn them.’

A glad series of acknowledgements came over the vox. The khan watched the tactical display, narrowed his eyes and had it broaden within his helm, to take in the scattered green arrows that were all the remaining Dark Hunter companies, and the dwindling red dots that were their foe.

‘Korso, did any...’

‘None, my lord.’ The Librarian’s voice was snarled with grief and anger. ‘They all died when the Warlord went down.’

‘I knew Mithryan would do it. He was one of our best.’

Khan Jullunai punched the hull of the Land Raider in which he rode, leaving an indentation in the ceramite. ‘These machines, these children of Mars. One day they will be the death of us,’ he said in a low, venomous whisper.

‘Adeptus Astartes muscle, bone and blood – that is what makes a Chapter. Not the armour that encases them, not the vehicles they ride in. You were right, Korso. This Chapter can no longer fight in the ways it has known.’

The khan was silent as he studied the readouts within his helm. ‘Two-thirds of our brethren are dead. We cannot come this close to extinction again. We cannot.’ He ground his teeth on the rest of the words that were clogging his throat. Even here, in the full career of victory, there was a baffled bitterness at the heaviness of their loss.

‘We are not White Scars any more, my khan,’ Stormseer Korso said quietly. ‘We are the Dark Hunters. Shadows on a dark world. After this, we must rebuild, and take unto ourselves the lessons of the day.’

‘Shadows,’ the khan said bitterly. ‘Yes. That is what we must be, my brother. That is what we shall become.’

So it was, that in the 936th year of the 38th millennium, the Dark Hunters Chapter of the Adeptus Astartes prevailed against the renegade forces of the Adeptus Mechanicus Princeps known as the Blind King.

In that conflict, four hundred and three members of the Chapter died, their names never forgotten, to be revered in the annals of the Chapter forever. But chief among those names enrolled are those of Captain Mithryan, of Ansar Company, and Sergeant Aekin, also of that company. Their deaths and those of their brethren heralded a new beginning for the Chapter and a new method for making war.

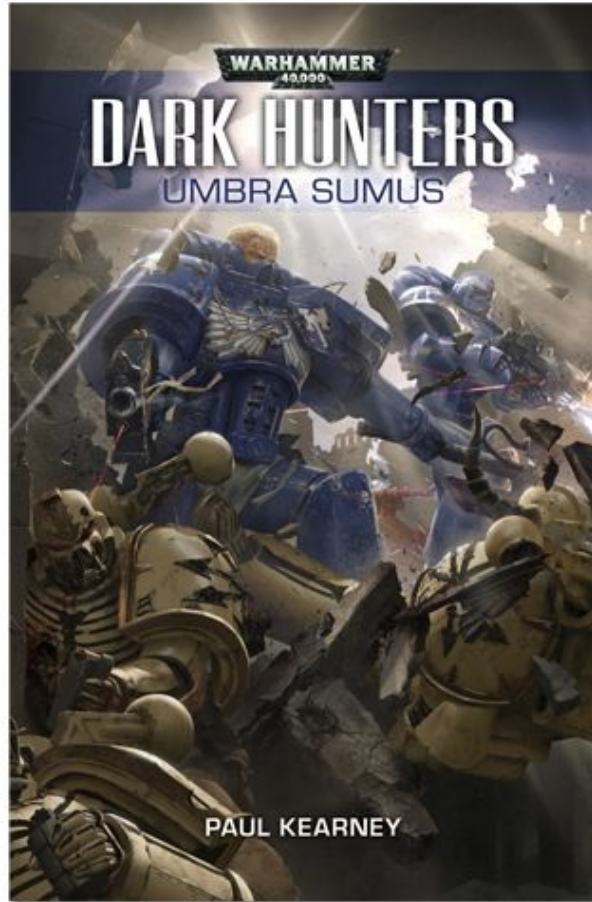
In the centuries that followed, the Dark Hunters became a rumour, a mere legend. They were nothing more than shadows at the edge of the Imperium, whose beginnings were forgotten. And to mark this eclipse, they took a new motto unto themselves.

*Umbra Sumus.*

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Paul Kearney's** Warhammer 40,000 work comprises the short story 'The Last Detail' from Legends of the Space Marines, the Dark Hunters novel *Umbra Sumus* and the accompanying short story 'The Blind King'. He studied at Lincoln College, Oxford and has been widely published, as well as being longlisted for the British Fantasy Award. He lives and works in Port Glenone, Northern Ireland.

Many years ago, the Dark Hunters defeated a traitor warband known as the Punishers. Now the Punishers have returned, seeking vengeance...



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