



WARHAMMER
40,000

IAN ST. MARTIN
**DEATHWATCH:
SWORDWIND**



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DEATHWATCH: SWORDWIND

Ian St. Martin

Screaming fire hurls me into eternal night. Silence swallows the flames as the boarding torpedo darts through the void, dark iron and ceramite against the infinite desert that is at once nothing, and everything.

Our shipmaster slips in with audacious grace to knife us into the xenos vessel of our target, trading broadsides with migraine-bright energy weapons. She loses most of her port side getting this close, and by the time she breaks off she trails fire and atmosphere from a thousand points. Servants of the Holy Ordos stream into the void as decks blow apart, tumbling away to suffocate alone in the dark.

It is inconsequential. Billions have died; a few thousand more are beneath notice. They are as expendable as I am, a fact I accept without rancour.

Our quarry has guided its foul kindred through the razing of thirteen Imperial worlds, leaving nothing but corpses in their wake. Our pursuit fleet engages them over the ashes of the thirteenth planet. We have never got this close, and will never get another chance. Four kill-teams are dispatched to take the target's head.

Mine is among a shoal of torpedoes hurtling towards the alien warship. Most, loaded with arcane ordnance of the Inquisition's design, detonate short of the craft, releasing shrouds of null-field particles designed to disrupt psychic ability.

In the pod's ochre light, I regard the ebon giants within. We are indistinguishable in sable ceramite armour but for a shoulder pauldron of each warrior's native brotherhood.

Ero repeats the operations order and his guiding intent. Wasted words. We have all had extensive briefings, hypnotic preparations, repeated drills through mock-ups of what we believe we will find inside. We have pored over data, learned

their disposition, pulled apart their corpses to study their anatomy. We have killed them on world, moon and between the stars. We are as ready as we can be.

Apothecary Cornac sits beside our commander, his Death Spectres Chapter mark contrasting with the golden iconography of Ero's Imperial Fists. He cycles through the tools of the reductor bolted to his arm. The whining drills set my teeth on edge, a reminder of the almost certainty that we will return with fewer operators than we began with, if any return at all.

The Wolf is singing. The lamentable bastard always sings during insertion, and I have long since resigned his howling to my awareness's periphery.

I glance at Sobor, silent and focused as I am. It was providence that saw us, both Mortifactors, seconded together. To serve within the same kill-team rarer still. A veteran of countless crusades, he has anchored me through our silent wars.

The ident-runes for two of the kill-teams blink out. Dead before contact.

Ero's vox clicks. 'Orders changed,' he says. 'We are realigning as primary assault element, acquisition and destruction of Primary Target One. Emperor guide our hand.'

I open my eyes, the memory clinging behind them as my senses embrace the now. I stand in an umbilical of interlocked iron discs, freezing and thick with the scorched metal scent of the void. Behind me is the *Crystal Saint*, of the Inquisition's Ordo Xenos. Before me the *Endless Night*, system monitor frigate of the Mortifactors Chapter.

My Chapter.

The umbilical is silent. I am alone with what I carry from duties past to future. My hold tightens on two items. I rise and move forward. My service to the Deathwatch is ended.

We barely make egress from the pod before the xenos are upon us. One might mistake them for human from a distance, but their movements put the lie to the thought. Inhumanly tall and slender, the eldar pirouette through our bolter fire, their weapons lashing us with gales of monomolecular shuriken that part ceramite like flesh.

The eldar close into melee. We advance, leveraging our strength against their speed. We must be the swift spear-tip plunged into their throat. Faltering will doom us all.

Five Mortifactors command the *Endless Night*. They incline their heads in deference to their kindred, but remain silent as the frigate follows the Sundered Path, the trail of death and wreckage marking Leviathan's march to Posul, from the system's edge. The hull shivers as we plough through clouds of iron and wreckage.

I have not released what I carry. It is my charge alone; I will bear it the rest of the way as we approach the planet of my birth.

The Wolf is dying. His head thrashes, hanging by sinew as Cornac fights to stabilise him within our defensive circle. Aspirated blood sprays from his lips between Fenrisian curses.

Cornac cannot save him, and instead seeks to save his legacy. He locks the Wolf's head to the deck, punching the reductor into his throat to tear out the progenoid. We do not have time to wait until he dies.

The Wolf calms once Cornac finishes, making peace with his end. I press a grenade into the hand he has left, and move on.

We do not get far before the crump of the detonation. He will never feel the winds of his birth world again.

Posul. For a moment, I see my home world as I remember it, a cloud-curdled sphere of sunless rock, soaked in the blood of savage tribes scattered across its surface. I remember snatches of a childhood drowned in violence. Eating the dead. The last man I killed, his blood and fat still stringing my teeth when the demigods came for me. I was ten, by the Terran standard. I remember defiant beauty, brutal purity in a land of eternal night. Fertile ground to sow the seeds of demigod killers.

I see that, before reality conquers memory, and I see Posul as it is. A shattered, lifeless husk, one amongst the numberless worlds devoured by Leviathan. Generations had lived and died never seeing the break of dawn. Now the sun will never set, shining over the barren wasteland left behind by the swarm.

In orbit is the *Basilica Mortis*, our fortress monastery hanging above Posul like a dark iron crown. It looms like a headstone over our greatest failure. An orphan's monument to the world we could not protect.

Ero sells his life at a chokepoint. My last sight of him is his thunder hammer, felling swathes of eldar with devastating strikes, building walls of bodies around himself like the fortresses his kin are legendary for.

Cornac is incinerated by brightlance fire. Molten shards of him embed my

armour.

The gene-seed is lost with him. Their legacies now fall upon me. Oaths of silence consign them to oblivion.

I disable my audio receptors as we cleave through squads of Howling Banshees. Their screams craze spider-web fractures over our armour.

Sobor and I are close. Resistance has swollen with every step towards our target's sanctum. We sprint through the curved halls towards light ahead. Our target lies within.

The *Endless Night* reaches the end of the Sundered Path. I see shattered bulwarks. Last stands. Acts of valour and sacrifice, laid bare in the open grave of the void.

A dead hive ship hangs in orbit and marks the path's end, wreathed in a nebula of shattered chitin. None are spared the Leviathan's hunger, even their own dead. All that remains after their consumption is a husk, a skeletal frame, bleached and pitted like dead coral. It twists into broken shards along points, like warped armour on a ship's hull. I remember the suicidal boarding action to kill it as it ravaged our fleet. Desperate fighting within a living nightmare swollen with horrors. Acts that had gained the Inquisition's notice, leading to my recruitment into the Deathwatch. I remember triumph rendered mute by the numberless swarms that devoured my world.

We set melta charges to bring down the corridor behind us, and pass into a portal of crackling light. A searing jolt of nausea. Migraine smears of light in colours human eyes were never meant to see. My retinal display flickers, overloads, and resets.

We stand in a sphere at the spine of the eldar warship. It is wraithbone, so thin it is transparent like glass. Our boots sink into perfectly manicured grass. At the centre, a tree flourishes, swaying in a phantom wind. A figure sits before it, back to us in silent repose.

Our target. The eldar witch is here.

Beside him stands a hulking robotic construct, lacquered in the shade of forest at dusk. A stone set into its chest blinks and glows, and it raises its elongated crown to regard us. It takes the halberd it holds at its side into both hands, heat radiating from its chassis in shivering waves.

The sanctum's temperature plummets as the witch's awareness returns to the present. He looks round, regarding us with golden eyes. He turns back, eyes returning to the tree at the sanctum's centre.

'My ancestors bore this here in the days of the collapse,' he whispers in clipped, mellifluous Gothic. 'Generations of Biel-Tan have stood beneath it, a reminder of our past and hope for our future.'

The eldar stands, facing us. His pearl and ivy robes gleam in the sphere's light. Webs of jade energy shiver up the blade of the staff gripped loosely at his side.

'Cunning, attempting to drown my mind,' he gestures to the clouds of null particles glittering around the ship. 'An aggressive failure, ever your hallmark. I do not revel in the necessary destruction of your race, as many of my kin do. Nor shall I revel in your own. But fate sings clearly to me, Mon-Keigh.'

'Have you seen me then, witch,' asks Sobor, 'taking your head?'

A tired smile creases the alien's features as he lowers a crested helm into place.

'You should not have come here.'

The *Endless Night* slows its approach, and I look upon my charge once more. A simple iron case, and a sword of exquisite craftsmanship, a masterwork of ebon adamantium and steel. A blade worthy of a champion.

'Adoni,' Sobor says calmly as he draws his sword. 'I have the target. Engage the construct.'

I blink-send an affirmation as I draw level with the eldar ghost machine. The halberd in its hands crackles with emerald lightning. My axe comes alive at my touch, its power field hissing with killing force.

I empty my bolter into the automaton as it charges, mass-reactive rounds savaging its armour but failing to slow its advance. It slashes out in a blistering arc, the energy field scorching my armour as I roll beneath it. I raise my bolter in a crouch, firing the last charge in my combi-plasma.

The thing howls, a syncopated dirge like a dying man screaming beneath dark waters. Molten wraithbone drools down its glowing torso like wax. It lashes out with the shaft of its halberd. My cuirass is dented as the blow connects, hurling me across the sphere. I spit blood into my helm and feel warmth pool inside my armour. I stand, breath ragged through cracked ribs. The enemy charges again.

I weather its attacks, dodging when I can, blocking when I cannot, fighting to survive its furious assault. It slashes as I raise my bolter. The weapon spins away, my gauntlet crushed into a claw from the force of the blow.

Roaring, I hack my axe into ruin against its head. We grapple before it backhands me away. I let momentum carry me as far as possible from it. The xenos takes a moment to discover the melta charge locked to its side, but a moment is all I need.

I subvocalise the command through broken teeth, and the xenos construct vanishes in a cloud of searing plasma. The sphere behind it superheats. Wraithbone bubbles and liquefies. I brace as its integrity fails, and the sanctum explodes in violent decompression.

I spin into space through a blizzard of shattered wraithbone. Vertigo assails me in greasy tides as razor-sharp slivers spiral around me. My armour seals against the vacuum as best as its brutalised condition allows. I feel the flesh beneath my warped gauntlet freeze. I turn about amidst the maelstrom, searching for Sobor and the eldar while drawing my combat blade.

I stare at the synthetic skin that covers my left hand. I make a fist. The new flesh creaks like leather as it stretches. Returning to the sword, my eyes trace the scars along its blade.

Posulan runes etch the steel, naming the weapon's bearer before it was Sobor's. I make out a handful of marks, *A-R-T-E*, before the blade ends in jagged termination.

I find Sobor grappling with the eldar witch in the void. His Chapter relic sword is shattered halfway down the blade, his armour broken in countless places. He attacks the xenos psyker with the broken weapon, ferociously displaying the martial skills that made him a Chapter hero. I engage my thruster pack, kicking off from wreckage through the broken shards to reach them.

Sobor bypasses the eldar's guard, slashing into the armour beneath his robes. I am close, yet too far to stop the counter.

The witch gathers hundreds of wraithbone splinters and hurls them forward. Shards tear into Sobor, slicing through armour and sending him spinning away. His ident-rune vanishes from my retinal display. I roar as I close upon the eldar.

I lock the claw of my arm around the xenos and punch my blade into his back. I tear it out, wreathed in gems of his lifeblood, and drive it in again and again.

The present waxes and fades. I am a child again, beneath the sunless skies of Posul. I am hacking a man apart, the length of sharpened bone in my fist sticky with blood. My tribe joins me, prying the flesh apart to feast on the glistening warmth within. We howl to the endless night above. I will eat my fill before he goes cold—

The witch snaps me back to reality, smashing an elbow into my faceplate and sending me reeling. My retinal display crazes, awash with static and warning icons. It resolves and I see him poised to strike, wreathed in emerald lightning reflecting against the blizzard of wraithbone.

The eldar stops short as steel punches through him. Garnet spheres tumble around a broken blade. Sobor appears behind him, armour ruined and straining with effort. He tears the blade up from groin to throat. Vacuum steals the sackcloth-tearing noise of alien flesh splitting. Blood leaps out in arcs.

The eldar spasms.

+Do you fear what the future holds?+ the alien's mind lances into mine with icy spikes.

+You should.+

His mind screams, a thunderous dirge that tears through me with bone-rattling force as he explodes in a blinding flash.

There is a rumbling clunk as the *Endless Night* docks with the *Basilica Mortis*. The bulkhead rolls open. I behold dark stone catacombs, fires burning from black iron braziers at intervals along the halls that do little to dispel the darkness. I smell the mausoleum scent of stone, dust and metal surrendering to the aeons. I smell death. I fight the urge to drop to my knees.

I breathe deeply, inhaling the dead of my Chapter. My lungs fill with the bone dust of fallen Mortifactors that coats the monastery like snow. I feel the strength of those who have found death course through me. The glorious dead and I are one again.

‘Brother Adoni.’ A robed form steps from the shadows. He draws back the sackcloth hood to reveal a grinning skull. ‘You have returned to us.’

I clash my fist to my chest in salute. ‘Hail, Astador.’

‘What do you bear, son of Posul?’

I raise the sword before him. He knows the blade, as we all do.

‘And that?’ His helm renders his voice a metallic snarl.

I open the case, enough for him to see within.

He is silent a moment before turning down the corridor. ‘Come. The Chapter Master awaits us, brother.’

‘Brother.’ His voice is faint, the vox turbulent as my armour struggles with catastrophic damage. Activating my recovery beacon, I swim through the void to heed Sobor's call.

‘Brother.’

I traverse the madness of the battle's aftermath, through the crystalline tempest. The eldar warship is gone, flown from honest combat. How like all their craven race. My retinal display warns of dozens of breaches, critical power loss, imminent oxygen starvation.

'Brother.'

I find Sobor, nearly indistinguishable from the surrounding wreckage. His armour is scorched and buckled. Torn fibre bundles sputter dirty light, and escaping air gasps through fractures in puffs of freezing mist. His head turns to me as I approach. The relic blade is clenched in his fist.

'I am here.'

Sobor lifts the sword before me. 'This weapon was forged at the Chapter's birth, passed down brother to brother through millennia. It passes to you now, Adoni, as it was passed to me.'

'Sobor, I cannot. I am not worthy.'

'Nor was I,' his voice weakens, wet with blood. 'Fulfil the oath of its return in my stead, brother. This night I join the dead.'

'Enough.' Speaking flecks blood into my helm. 'Your service is not done.'

'See it returned,' Sobor's helmet lenses flicker. His grip on the sword wavers, nearly letting it slip from his grasp. 'Its legacy must not end here, discarded in darkness. Swear this.'

I nod, the grinding of damaged servos muted in the night. 'Upon the sunless world, I swear to you.'

Sobor goes still. I exhale through savaged lungs. Floating beside him, I take the sword as he relinquishes it in death. My vox crackles, detecting exfiltration elements inbound. I slide through the black, forcing blood to my head to remain conscious, watching as the broken eldar tree withers in the darkness, and dies.

'Brother Adoni returns' says Magyar, Chapter Master of the Mortifactors.

I kneel, armoured in the black and bone, left fist pressed to the tombstone floor, right to my chest in salute. He sees me, expecting Sobor to have survived, not the line brother of just three crusades. I could seek venom in the words, but I will not. I agree with him. What I would not give for death to have stolen me into its embrace, for a champion to return to inspire the rebuilding of our Chapter.

Magyar sits in the gloom of the Gallery of Bone, his throne carved from the skeletons of Chapter heroes. Pale slugs of scar tissue pucker his face, old wounds unlike the purple lightning that covers my albino flesh. He wears exquisite Terminator armour carved from bone, its silvered hue matching his dreadlocked hair and forked beard. The very image of death incarnate.

Dark-armoured Terminators flank him, looking upon me from behind death masks carved to resemble howling flensed skulls. Astador stands a step below the throne's dais. Magyar's skeletal winged familiar sits perched upon its master,

clicking against his plate with clattering claws as it chitters into his ear.

Sobor was of First Company, eminent even among the heroes of the Mortifactors veteran elite. Magyar holds Sobor's sword in one hand. In the other, taken from the case and presented to him by Astador, is Sobor's skull. The Chapter Master's features are impassive, save the faintest tightening in his jaw.

'And you will say nothing.' It is not a question.

'One word makes me an oath breaker,' my eyes remain on the headstones. 'Oaths kept for more than my honour.'

I hate the words I must speak. Everything within me cries out to proclaim the saga of the brother who cast aside his life to save mine.

'Tell me,' Magyar's eyes leave the sword to regard me. 'Were you there when he fell?'

I remember the night I swore my oath to the Inquisition, never to speak of what I had done, what I had seen. The Inquisitor swore one in return. Swearing what measures he would take against oath breakers, his pet witch touched my mind to show me.

Worlds burning. Fortress monasteries in ruin. Entire Chapters wading their fleets into the roiling nightmare of the Eye.

I look up at Magyar, holding the gaze burning within his coal-dark mask of scar tissue.

'You know what they will do.'

He makes to reply, but his jaw sets, and he says nothing.

The Mortifactors lord rises, the bulk of Terminator plate doing nothing to restrain his predatory grace. He stands over me, torchlight playing flickering shadows over his face.

'Rise,' he says. 'Adoni, you have returned a fallen brother, and this prized weapon of our Chapter. The blade shall be restored with honour amongst our relics. Sobor will join the fallen, interred within our monastery. His spirit is at rest by returning him here.'

I stand.

'You honour me, brother.'

'Indeed. Sobor's death resides in you,' Magyar clasps my shoulder. 'Honour *him*. Your memories are all the tomb his legend shall have.'

'Chaplain,' Magyar regards Astador. 'Assemble the brotherhood. We have fallen to honour once more.'

'We are born into darkness,' Astador stands before the altar at the sepulchre's

centre, his incarnadine armour ochre in the torchlight gloom of the massive circular chamber. Bleached skulls of conquered foes cover the walls, staring down without eyes. The square ziggurat of the altar sits beneath a crystal dome ceiling. Posul hangs over us in the void beyond.

I stand with the three Mortifactors companies on the *Basilica Mortis*. There are fewer than two hundred. Leviathan took much of the Chapter, and crusades since have bled us further of warriors we can no longer replace.

‘In the endless night of Posul, there was only death. Lives began, and ended, in the bloodletting of our tribes.’ Astador’s voice is the only sound beyond the thrum of active power armour. Every brother stands armed and armoured. A Mortifactor does not draw breath without a weapon in his hand.

Sobor’s skull sits upon the altar. Every campaign, honour and triumph is etched into it in blunt Posulan script. Beside it lies his sword, polished to an ebon sheen.

‘Until the *Ultimum Bellator* came. The Emperor’s illumination offered us ascension above the savagery of our birth. For millennia we have defended His realms, for without Him none would know meaning in death.

‘The most precious gift one can give is that which they deny themselves. For all His might, He who reigns over a million worlds from Terra, has given us something He can never possess.’ He anoints Sobor’s skull in oil, placing it in an iron bowl.

‘Death. For all He has sacrificed, He can never give fully of Himself. We can, and so we must. He has given His life to us, and so we die in His place. Blasphemy is not acknowledging we surpass the Emperor in this way,’ Astador shakes his head. ‘Blasphemy is recognising a gift and wasting it.

‘Sobor was among the greatest of our brotherhood. He has accepted the Emperor’s precious gift, shedding his life in His stead. The shadows grow darker for his absence. Those who remain must burn brighter in defence of His realms.’ He holds Sobor’s sword over the skull.

‘Who among you shall do so?’

‘I shall,’ says Magyar. He runs his palm down the shattered blade, clenching his fist to rain a trickle of blood over the skull.

‘I will,’ says Althanax, bearer of the Chapter banner. He repeats the act, as does everyone, until Sobor’s skull sits submerged in oil and kindred blood.

‘With each of the fallen, our flames must burn brighter,’ Astador takes up a blazing torch. ‘We must give light, and endure burning.’ He lowers the torch, and sets the blood alight.

The blood burns away in coils of greasy smoke, filling the cavern with a scent

like battle. I watch the flames consume the blood, until only the skull remains. Astador raises it in his hand for all to see.

‘We are born in darkness. May we be the Emperor’s light until we join the dead.’

‘Until we join the dead,’ repeats the assembly. Heads bow, and fists touch chests in salute. Quiet descends, each warrior in prayer and contemplation. I look down, frowning as I see my breath feather out from the vents of my helm, and frost crawl over my plate.

A cry rings out, shattering the reverent silence. Brother Librarian Uxbal collapses, blood jetting from his eyes. His armour’s crystalline hood flares bright before exploding in a conflagration of warfire. Aetheric flames leap over Uxbal’s prostrate form, their windswept roar marred by his screams. He tears away fistfuls of his face as it weeps away like tallow, collapsing in a charred husk.

There are three other Librarians on the *Basilica Mortis*, and each of them falls to a phantom affliction. Olthis bellows like an animal, charging into the wall of the sepulchre and dashing his head apart against the stone in a cloud of blood and skull fragments.

A soul-curdling scream tears from Ionuth’s throat as his body ruptures in flash-mutation. His flesh bursts with spines that dissolve into rolls of glistening fat before hardening into stone. His scream is the one constant in the maelstrom of change, before his flesh shakes itself apart into pale, shivering globs. All of this occurs in the time it takes for us to draw our weapons.

Chief Librarian Zdeno alone endures. Driven to one knee, eyes screwed tight and weeping blood, armour crackling with hoarfrost as he withstands the psychic onslaught. I can hear his teeth breaking in his jaw.

A keening wail shrieks across the vox. The Space Marines recoil at the violent noise. I feel warmth pool in my ears and slide down my face.

The shriek ripples and stutters, becoming a disjointed, lyrical sound. I realise that it is laughter. As suddenly as it began, it vanishes, replaced by the dread-soaked oppression of silence.

‘*It is undeserved,*’ a voice pierces the quiet. A female’s voice, mellifluous yet edged with barely restrained fury. The one who laughed. ‘*Undeserved, but I grant you this. I shall have you know the name of the reckoning that has come for you. I am the Bahzakhain. I am exarch, the Swordwind and the Tempest of Blades. Know that in the moments remaining to you.*’

I see Zdeno standing halfway up the steps of the altar.

‘Brother?’

He turns, movements sluggish and dreamlike. He raises his hand, pointing to the crystal dome above. I look, seeing only Posul.

‘*I have come to take from you what you have stolen from us,*’ she sings as the air trembles.

‘*A future.*’

I blink, and in that instant the void swells with swarming eldar warships. I watch the *Endless Night* break apart as they stream through its wreckage. The *Basilica Mortis* quakes under fire, and again the vox fills with laughter.

It begins as a spark, a single mote of light splitting in two and multiplying until a cloud of sparks spin and twist about like fireflies. They coalesce into a corona of multicoloured light beneath the sepulchre’s dome. The corona yawns open, becoming a gateway.

She emerges from the light like the spirit of vengeance made manifest. Her armour is powder white, coiled tight around her lithe musculature. Ivy iconography slides and twists over the plates like living smoke. From her shoulders trail banners of flowing vermilion silk like blood-drenched wings, matching the crested mane of her screaming war helm. She bears a crackling power glaive, its crystalline blade singing as it carves the air. She soars towards Magyar, at the altar’s apex.

Togin is a Mortifactor without peer, having served for a century in Magyar’s elite guard. In Posul’s last nights, Togin slaughtered over a thousand of the Leviathan swarm, allowing the surviving companies to withdraw.

Althanax bears the Chapter banner. He has carried it through every crusade of the Mortifactors’ First Company for the last two centuries. The skulls of every race and wicked bastion of Mankind’s enemies clatter from his plate on dense black chains.

These are the warriors at Magyar’s side as the war maiden descends. These are the warriors she kills before touching the ground. Their bifurcated remains crash to the flagstones like tolling bells. The Chapter banner falls, its fabric drinking the blood of champions that empties onto the stone.

The eldar exarch tilts her head, regarding Magyar, before whipping blood from her glaive. The Chapter Master stoops, gathering the fallen banner and lashing it to his armour like a cloak. He activates his massive war scythe with a hiss of coruscating lightning, and the two clash.

The air shimmers, and hundreds of blinding flares fill the sepulchre. Eldar

warriors stream into the chamber, charging and firing weapons. Mortifactors die, eviscerated by shuriken and blasted apart by brightlance fire. The flagstones become slick with blood.

I bury my chainaxe in the head of a charging eldar. I gun the engine, ripping the xenos' head apart in a blur of screaming teeth. Sergeants and captains fight to rally their commands into order amidst the chaos of the ambush. Sporadic fusillades of bolter fire pluck leaping eldar from the air. Dead and dying are ground to mulch underfoot in a churning melee.

I slash through an eldar's torso and watch him collapse, fighting to restrain the steaming coils of his insides as they unspool from the wound. An explosion flings me through the air, smashing me against a mound of rubble. I feel flashes of paralysis, my consciousness flickering in and out. A ringing smothers my hearing. Scarlet warning icons wail in a wash of frenzied static.

I pull my ruined helm off. I turn my head to see Magyar duel the exarch above the melee. He attacks in blurring combinations, martial prowess alloyed with volcanic fury. The exarch flows around his attacks like quicksilver.

Magyar slashes low, a disembowelling strike the exarch evades with a flourishing backflip. Landing in a crouch, she counters with an upward slash, severing Magyar's scythe in two, barely missing the Chapter Master's head with a horizontal reverse strike.

Magyar drops the smoking halves of his scythe, reaching for the gladius at his hip. But his grip falters, and the weapon falls away. My eyes widen as bright blood sheets down from his gorget.

She had not missed. With a sound like a Titan falling, Magyar drops to his knees. His head trembles, and rolls off his shoulders. His body pitches forward, and his blood joins that of his champions in pulsing sprays.

'No!' I scream.

The exarch strides to the altar's edge and raises her arm. Clutched in her fist is Magyar's head, shedding the last of its lifeblood from severed arteries. She holds it aloft for all to see, and releases it. It tumbles down, bouncing against the timeworn steps before disappearing from sight.

An eldar dives onto me, fighting to drive a dagger into my throat. I strain against her, my strength depleted by the crash. Weakness fills my mouth with a taste of bloody ash. I could not save the world that gave me life. I could not save Sobor in the freezing night of the void. Now I have brought about the reckoning that has killed my Chapter Master, while my brothers die around me.

Can I even save myself?

In that moment, I gather the shame, the loss and the failure, and crush them into a supernova of rage. I bite down and leap into wrath's molten embrace. My muscles shiver and twitch as fury lends them new strength.

I clamp hold of the eldar's wrist, snarling as armour splinters and bones crush. My free hand searches for a weapon. It closes around a handle and roaring I swing it up, burying a blade in the eldar's temple. She twitches like a marionette as blood sluices down her armour.

Sobor's sword is in my hand. The weapon my brother had entrusted me to bring home rather than allowing it to vanish into darkness. I wrench it from the corpse and stand, taking a boltgun from the ground.

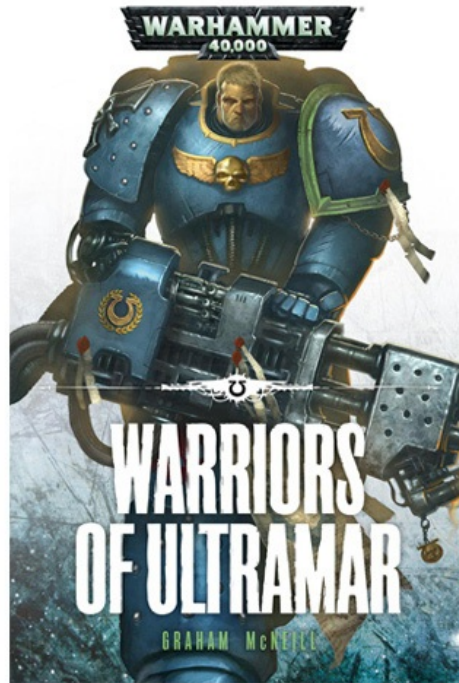
I throw myself forward, slashing and firing, fighting my way to the altar. I will not watch my Chapter die. I will not vanish into the darkness. I will take my brother's blade, and by the sunless world, I will bury it in the exarch's heart.

As Mortifactors clash against eldar amid the slaughter of the sepulchre, I reach the steps of the altar, and begin to climb.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ian St. Martin has written the short stories 'City of Ruin' and 'In Wolves' Clothing' for Black Library. He lives and works in Washington DC, the US, caring for his cat and reading anything within reach.

The tyrannids have come to Tarsis Ultra, and all that stands between them and utter devastation is a small force of brave warriors headed by Uriel Ventriss and the Ultramarines.



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