

**WARHAMMER**  
**40,000**



DEATHWATCH 4

**REDBLADE**

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# DEATHWATCH 4: REDBLADE

**Robbie MacNiven**

The chosen arena was Arco-Refinery Alpha 1-1's primary firing range. Originally, the low, sloping tunnel had been designed to test Adeptus Mechanicus combat servitors, but with the arrival of the Space Marines on Theron it had been given over to them. If the servants of the Machine God had known what it was being used for now they would doubtless have objected, but a guard had been posted on the door to ensure they didn't interfere.

The chamber's lumen strips flickered to life, a low hum filling the echoing space. Four warriors occupied the fire-scarred range just beyond the empty weapons stalls – two in the black plate of the Deathwatch, two bearing the blue-grey livery of the Space Wolves. One of the former, his quartered red and yellow pauldron marking him out as a Howling Griffon, took the boltgun handed to him by his brother.

'You know the rules, Space Wolf,' the bolter's owner, Caius Vorens, said. 'Combat knives only. First blood.'

Drenn nodded. The young Wolf was almost shaking with battle-hunger, hand clenching and unclenching compulsively around the hilt of his blade, Fang. He could feel the anger of his pack leader, Svenbald, burning into him even as he squared up to Vorens. The Deathwatch kill-team leader was terse and stoic, his face unreadable behind his black faceplate. Drenn had left his own helmet off.

They drew their blades and paced out to the centre of the range, boots ringing off the pockmarked rockcrete. Halfway down, Vorens stopped and faced Drenn. Svenbald and the Howling Griffon, Gallio, took post at the

edge of the chamber.

‘Before the eyes of the Emperor,’ Gallio intoned. ‘Victory to the just.’

Drenn kicked hard, slamming the ork back into the refinery’s edge. The alien managed to snatch one of the Space Wolf’s gauntlets just as the railings buckled and split. Snarling an oath to Russ and the Allfather, Drenn hacked into its straining limb with his knife, sawing its sharpened edge through slabs of green muscle, tendon and bone.

The ork lost its grip, roaring furiously as it toppled over the platform’s side and down, down into the crushing embrace of Theron’s swirling gravity well. Drenn watched it go, bouncing off the flank of one of the refinery’s engine spheres. Its claws scrabbled for purchase, smearing the grav machine’s flank bloody before the beast vanished into the roiling clouds. The wind’s fury snatched its howl away.

‘Report,’ the voice of Svenbald, Drenn’s pack leader, crackled over the vox. He grimaced, turning away from the edge.

‘Southern plate secure. Six contacts, all purged.’

‘Regroup with the pack at the central hub,’ Svenbald said. ‘The fleet is reporting another wave approaching from the east.’

Drenn bent to wipe the sticky xenos blood from his combat knife, and realised abruptly that the remainder of the alien’s meaty forearm was still clamped around his left gauntlet. Frustrated, he prised apart the ork’s claws and tossed the limb over the refinery’s side. For all their size and resilience, greenskins were hardly a worthy foe. There would be no sagas sung about today.

Drenn sheathed the knife and keyed the activation rune on his jump pack.

The clouds around Platform Epsilon 9-17 looked like diseased lungs, swollen a sickly yellow and shot through with ugly veins of red lightning. The airborne refinery lumbered through the sulphurous banks, the six huge gravitic engine spheres keeping the platform rig aloft.

Thunder split the infected heavens as Drenn landed on the central plate of the refinery. The lightning snapped upwards, a crimson lash from the gas giant’s crushing depths. Normally, the Adeptus Mechanicus personnel crewing the platform would have welcomed such a sight, for Epsilon 9-17 was a mobile conductor, channelling a portion of the lightning it harvested to stay airborne. Its central hub bristled with plasteel arrays and blackened

earthing spikes, while the bowels of its grav-engines crackled with the energy of the storm. But today the sound of thunder didn't come from the lightning alone. It came from the orks.

Drenn's packmates were watching the second wave coming in. From such a distance the mass of xenos aircraft looked like a black thunderhead, spreading from the hangars of a hulking ork battle asteroid. The looted hunk of debris perched low in orbit, a burly mass of space-scarred rock, rusting battlements and leering skull glyphs.

'Svenbald wants to see you,' one of Drenn's packmates, Karlson, said.

'Where is he?'

'He went into the hub with the xenos hunter. He wants you to wait outside.'

Drenn cast a glance at the three black-armoured warriors of the Deathwatch who stood observing the approaching war planes alongside the Space Wolves, then turned towards the refinery's central hub.

Epsilon's generatorum house was like an Ecclesiarchy church, all crenelated spires and flying buttresses – except instead of the aquila above its arched doors it bore the Machina Opus symbol of the Adeptus Mechanicus, and instead of pews and a high altar, the inside was crammed with throbbing arco-banks. The vaulted ceiling vibrated with their power, and red light crackled around the coils, throwing the interior into jagged illumination.

The station's crew of six tech adepts were standing before the hub's primary generator, the air resounding with their binary cant. Magos Zarn was leading them, but turned as Drenn entered. His chief engineeer picked up where he left off.

'My lords,' the magos said. He was addressing the two figures who had walked in just before Drenn – Svenbald and the Deathwatch kill-team leader, Caius Vorens. Drenn hung back as they approached the magos. The Martian's face was still mostly flesh, but utterly immobile, as though he wore a corpse mask. The tech-priest's pale lips remained shut, his automated voice issuing from a brass vox-grille sutured into his throat. A canvas pump-lung, a requirement in the inimical upper atmosphere of Theron, pulsed grotesquely from its harness across his chest.

'Magos Zarn,' Vorens said, glancing briefly up at the cog-toothed symbol of the Omnissiah, suspended by great chains above the generatorum.

‘My data-streams report the xenos attack has been repelled,’ Zarn intoned. The mechadendrites coiling upwards from his robed back were swaying gently in time with the chanting of his adepts.

‘Repelled thanks in part to the firepower of your combat servitors,’ Vorens said, ‘and the oversight of the Imperial Navy. Has there been any word from the other refineries?’

‘Epsilon Five-One and Omega Fifteen-Zero have reported similar assaults. Beta Thirteen-Eleven hasn’t encountered any contacts, and we have received no communications, for good or ill, from Kappa Six-Eight. Of the refineries beyond my quadrant I know nothing, but my own estimates show that over eighty per cent of the platforms on Theron’s northern hemisphere are under attack.’

‘Naval fighter command is sparing what it can,’ Svenbald interjected, his stony voice a counterpoint to Zarn’s monotone speech. ‘We’ve been relying on their orbital presence to detect each incoming wave. There’s another one inbound as we speak.’

‘I trust your warriors will prove sufficient for the task at hand,’ Zarn said. Drenn felt the machine-man’s bionic eyes focusing on him over Svenbald’s shoulder.

The Wolf Guard sensed the change of attention and turned. His craggy, red-painted face, underlit by the energy surging through the arco-banks, became even grimmer. ‘I told you to wait outside, not follow me around like a stray pup.’

‘They’re coming again,’ Drenn said, ignoring the reprimand.

‘We know. Get out.’

The greenskin invasion of Theron exuded savage, alien desperation. The strategos of the Departamento Munitorum had calculated that the xenos were attempting to capture the gas giant’s arco-refineries in a bid to refuel and rearm before pressing corewards. Kjarl Grimblood, perhaps reading good fortune in the flames of war, had dispatched eight packs from his Great Company to assist the Adeptus Mechanicus forces with Theron’s defence. Where the Deathwatch had come from, nobody knew.

Drenn stared at the new swarm of ork aircraft in the distance as they rumbled towards Epsilon 9-17. Svenbald rounded on him, gripping his arm and speaking in hushed but aggressive tones.

‘Look at me. Grimblood ordered your transferal to my pack because

you're a wild young fool, even for a Blood Claw. My Flame Hunters thrive in the hottest fires, but we don't seem to burn bright enough for your underdeveloped passions, do we?'

'If you stopped gnawing at me, maybe I would respect you more,' Drenn spat, finally looking his pack leader in the eye. Like many of the long-tooths in Kjarl Grimblood's company, he daubed his burn-scarred features with his own blood before battle, the red streaks mimicking the fire that was the symbol of the Grimbloods. Svenbald was a Wolf Guard sky leader, but since Drenn's recent promotion from Blood Claw to the war-hungry ranks of the Flame Hunters he had yet to see Svenbald do anything noteworthy.

The old wolf was all boast and no teeth.

'If you want to remain a part of this Great Company you can start by respecting the decisions of its Wolf Lord,' Svenbald said. 'A place in my pack is an honour, and it burns my pride having to count a whelp like you among my warriors.'

'You want a tame pup who follows all your orders. You'd rather I gave up on personal combat, for a start. I won't. No pistol or flamer can match my blades.'

Immediately after arriving on Theron, Drenn had refused to carry his bolt pistol as a sidearm. The weapon had jammed when he'd needed it most, cut off in the middle of a mob of rampaging orks. Since then he'd relied only on his chainsword, Graam, and his hook-tipped combat knife, Fang.

He'd also discarded his helmet, letting loose his shock of fiery red hair during combat. He had only worn his helm on the day that his bolter had failed, and only then because his power armour had been burning from crest to boot, set alight by the greenskin's crude flamer weaponry. He'd carved his way clear of the mob, like the Fire Wolf of Fenrisian legend, a Flame Hunter worthy of his Wolf Lord. Svenbald had just watched.

'You prefer the blood on your blades to the fire in your heart,' Svenbald accused, accompanying each word with a jab at the Fire Wolf head embossed on Drenn's breastplate. 'You're no Grimblood.'

'You only say that because you know your kill statistics won't match mine at the end of this campaign, long-tooth.'

Svenbald snarled and turned away. 'I don't have time for your toothless biting, Drenn.'

‘My name is Redblade,’ said Drenn.

‘No it isn’t. Get back to the pack.’

Erik, formerly the youngest of the Flame Hunters before Drenn’s hasty induction, stepped aside to make room for him at the edge of the refinery. The Wolves were taking up combat positions, flanked by the Deathwatch.

‘What did you say to him?’ Erik muttered. ‘It looks like you pissed in his *mjod*.’

‘He still won’t acknowledge me as Redblade,’ Drenn replied, deliberately catching Svenbald’s eye. The Wolf Guard held his gaze, but said nothing.

‘The greenskins are using a different trajectory,’ Vorens cut in over the vox. ‘Stand by for further orders.’

He was right. The first wave had torn into the refinery head-on. Its defenders – hardwired combat servitors, the Deathwatch kill-team and Svenbald’s Flame Hunters – had picked them off as they approached, smearing the vile-looking clouds with dirty black contrails and spinning wreckage. Only six greenskins had made it to the platform, and Drenn had dealt with them.

This time the orks’ crude machines were banking high, climbing above the platform.

‘Those look bigger,’ said Svenbald. ‘Bombers?’

‘I doubt it,’ Vorens replied. ‘They want to take the station, not destroy it.’

‘If we kill enough of them, they’ll turn the asteroid’s guns on us,’ Svenbald said, pointing at the vast ork rock-ship still disgorging its airborne flotsam.

‘They need the power stored within the arco-refineries. Without the generatorums their most powerful weaponry is useless.’ Vorens’ voice remained slow and precise, but Drenn got the impression he thought Svenbald was an idiot. His opinion of the Deathwatch leader rose fractionally.

Limping, fat flyers with stubby wings and dozens of juddering rotors had clambered over the refinery, out of bolter range. Drenn watched, fascinated, as their ramps and hatches were hauled back. Shapes began to barrel from the aircraft, leaping into the abyss with apparent fearlessness. For a moment he wondered whether the xenos were truly so blood-crazed and stupid that they thought they could avoid being dragged down into

Theron's gravity well. Then he spotted flares of light winking from the bulky packs strapped to their backs, and he realised he was in fact witnessing a haphazard aerial assault deployment.

'Now we're in for a fight,' he growled. For once, Svenbald didn't reprimand him.

There was a thud of disengaging mag-locks as the Skyclaws drew their chainswords.

'Kill-team,' Vorens snapped. 'Protect the central refinery. Hit them as they land.'

'Flame Hunters,' Svenbald roared, 'for Russ and the Allfather, into them!'

Drenn needed no further urging. He was already launching himself into the air, even as the first hard rounds from the orks' crude firearms spanked off the platform around him. The gut-wrenching sense of dislocation matched the adrenaline pounding through his charged body, and he howled with glee as he speared upwards, his jump pack vents throbbing.

He picked his first target. The greenskin's mouth was open, but its bellowed challenge was whipped away by the wind. All Drenn could hear was the keening of his pack as he forced the turbo stud to its limit, pushing his leap as high as possible. He held his chainsword out two-handed, the kraken teeth roaring to life.

Above the surface plates of Epsilon 9-17, Wolf and ork met. The impact almost tore Graam from Drenn's grip, but it cleaved the beast from groin to skull. The rocket lashed to its back detonated, immolating the bisected halves. Drenn left the blast in his wake, drenched in alien gore.

His jump pack hit its peak barely a second after the bloody collision, chiming a warning as the duel-vector thrust shorted out. That was when the second ork hit him.

This one came boots-first. One steel toecap smashed into Drenn's skull, and for a second even the Wolf's superhuman senses failed. He felt a crack. Darkness reared up to smother him. The smell of blood – his blood – reached his nose and he snapped back with a snarl.

He was falling. His pack was ringing out a warning, but he couldn't reach the turbo stud because the greenskin that had struck him was now clamping both arms around his waist, locking its hands beneath his jump pack. Drenn got an impression of porcine red eyes glaring from behind

grimy goggle lenses, great yellow tusks and breath like a butcher's yard.

Then the alien headbutted him.

There was another crunch. Drenn's vision swam. The world was turning over and under, yet still the ork clung on with savage, stinking intensity. It tried to hit him a second time, but he managed to twist his head back and away and the greenskin's slavering jaw cracked off his gorget.

One of Drenn's hands scrabbled for a hold on the nose of the ork's rocket pack. With a fanged grimace he managed to force the battered nose of the rocket backwards, straining the straps binding it to the ork's broad torso. He thrust Graam into the gap, and revved the weapon furiously. There was an audible snap of leather and the rocket fell away, launching off on a crazed, looping trajectory.

The ork sensed its sudden weightlessness and tried to gouge Drenn's face with its tusks, but the Wolf just grinned and hit the turbo stud with his free hand. The jump pack's vector-thrust roared into life and the ork answered with a howl of agony as the downwash of the twin jets charred its forearms, still clenched around Drenn's waist.

The Space Wolf kicked away, turning and powering his fall into a sideways roll. With a crunch, the xenos brute impaled itself on one of the central hub's earthing spikes.

Drenn slammed into the hub's deck plates an instant later. The pack hadn't enough time to build a proper thrust, so the impact was hard and clumsy. He rolled, the servos in his power armour grating as they absorbed the fall. He felt a knee plate crack, but then he was back on his feet, Graam in hand, the weapon growling.

Svenbald's Flame Hunters had intercepted a dozen orks on the way up, and a dozen more on the way down, but just as many had made it to Epsilon's plates. A few had come too fast, or their rocket packs had failed them, and their crumpled remains were smeared across the deck. Plenty more, however, had ploughed into the Deathwatch.

The nearest ork had its back to Drenn, too busy pounding at the mangled, sparking form of a combat servitor to notice the Wolf's arrival. Drenn smashed Graam through the alien's thick skull, his own howl joining that of his chainsword. The battle frenzy was on him – the bloody fury the *skjalds* spoke of, the urge to kill so strong that it could fire up even the greyest long-tooth.

It didn't matter anymore that the greenskins weren't worthy foes. It didn't matter that Svenbald was an old fool who probably wanted him dead. It didn't matter that even his packmates, themselves headstrong young Wolves, thought Drenn an impetuous firebrand. It didn't matter that every day since leaving his tribe and his home on Fenris, he'd felt like a wolf without a pack, a lone hunter.

What mattered was that his limbs were swift, his armour strong, and that there was alien blood on his blade. What mattered was the way the next ork overextended its lunge, the way Graam's initial strike cleaved off its arm, and the backstroke opened its throat. What mattered was how the next greenskin tried to gun him down, realised its pistol was jammed, and died with his combat knife through its chest.

By the time Drenn Redblade came to his senses, he was standing on the very edge of the refinery, slick with stinking alien gore and staring out into the heavens.

There was a storm coming. The clouds had turned even uglier and more nebulous. The gravity well below was becoming a yawning, black maw. The wind was picking up, and was clawing at him. He spread his arms wide, twin hearts still hammering out the addictive rhythm of combat, a howl building in his—

A gauntlet smacked into his pauldron, shattering the moment. He turned, snarling, expecting to face Svenbald.

The snarl died when he instead found himself confronting the black battleplate of the Deathwatch leader.

'You fought well, Wolf,' Vorens said. His own armour was almost as bloody as the Flame Hunter's. 'What is your name?'

'Drenn,' he replied. 'They call me the Redblade.'

'Listen to the pup,' scoffed Utred, one of the older Flame Hunters, as he slapped a fresh clip into his bolt pistol. 'Not even a single moon with us and he's already given himself a deed-name. He's no true Skyclaw, just an upstart Blood Claw out of his depth. Tell me, who calls you the Redblade? Bar yourself, of course.'

'If I don't deserve the name, then come take this from me,' Drenn snarled, pointing Fang at Utred. Its blade was slick with dark xenos blood.

Vorens pushed between Drenn and the older Wolf, breaking their eye contact. 'The xenos have been purged, but our long-range communications

have been disabled. We need to regroup. Come, Drenn.'

Vorens held out a hand, as though to pull the Space Wolf away from the oblivion which beckoned just beyond the refinery's rim. Drenn stepped back from the edge, but didn't take the proffered gauntlet. Utred had already gone.

Epsilon's plates looked like a scene from a skjald's epic. The eviscerated remains of orks carpeted the plascrete. Zarn's red-robed adepts were scurrying between the combat servitors, attempting to effect repairs, their pump-lungs swollen and straining in the thin atmosphere. Sparks flew and saws hummed as pale, dead flesh was stitched back up and rent metal welded shut.

The refinery's servitors weren't the only casualties. Drenn saw the Deathwatch kill-team's Apothecary kneeling over the body of one of his brothers, retrieving his gene-seed with a bloodied narthecium. The Flame Hunters were assembling on the eastern side of the platform, and he noted that two of them were also missing: Ivarr and Karlson.

'Lost over the edge,' Svenbald said. 'Ivarr took a hard round through the visor, Karlson was dragged down by two greenskins. May the Allfather guide their souls to the Great Hall.'

'We will feast with them again one day,' Drenn said. The other Flame Hunters growled their agreement, and even Svenbald allowed himself a curt nod.

The sound of armoured boots interrupted the obituary.

'The greenskins that engage in jump-pack assaults are not like the rest of their kind,' Vorens said, parting the circle of Wolves. 'Discipline and determination are their hallmarks. We cannot assume that was the end of their assault, or that any future attacks will be so direct.'

'You think there'll be another wave?' Drenn asked.

'Atmospherics are hampering our attempts to re-establish communication with the scrying Navy vessels in orbit,' Vorens replied, 'but fresh xenos formations are already on their way.'

'We can hold them.'

'That's if they attack us hand-to-hand again.'

'You said they didn't want to damage the refinery,' Svenbald said.

'They don't want to *destroy* it. Damage is another matter.'

'A bombing run this time, then?'

‘Possibly. We should prepare Epsilon’s shuttles for evacuation. We’ll rig the central hub with melta charges before we leave.’

‘A true warrior doesn’t retreat,’ said Drenn, facing Vorens.

Svenbald cut in before the Deathwatch leader could respond. ‘A true warrior doesn’t speak out of turn, especially before his superiors. Show some respect.’

Drenn fixed the Wolf Guard with a glare.

‘I see no superiors here. Only equals at best. If anyone considers themselves my better, let them challenge me, blade to blade.’

Svenbald took a pace forward, fangs bared, and Drenn’s hand went back to his chainsword’s hilt. Distantly, the storm’s thunder rumbled, heavy with threat.

Then the Lightning struck.

It came from the north, using the rising storm as cover. Two ork bombers were plummeting into the gas giant’s black embrace before the Imperial forces even realised they were under attack, scrap-covered fuselages lanced through by heavy lasbolts. Autocannon rounds riddled a third heavy flyer before the formation began to scatter.

They were too slow. The Lightning was followed by five lithe air superiority fighters bearing the matt-grey colours and red talon crest of the local Imperial Navy battlegroup.

The orks had no fighter topcover. Obeying their primitive instincts, most of their war planes attempted to turn and fight, defence turrets swivelling. The Imperial aircraft, however, had been built for this particular type of slaughter. They danced, rolled and darted, whilst the blind rage of the greenskins resulted in their own aircraft colliding or mowing one another down in a confused tangle of fire arcs.

Epsilon 9-17’s defenders watched in silence as the Imperial Navy tore the clouds asunder with the weight of the wreckage they sent tumbling into the yawning, swirling gravitational well at Theron’s heart. As the final ramshackle bomber was ripped to pieces by strafing fire, Epsilon’s cross-command vox-net lit up.

‘This is Flight Lieutenant Dall to task force designate Epsilon Nine-Seventeen. Come in, over.’

It was Vorens who answered, tapping into the command frequency. ‘Flight Lieutenant Dall, this is Kill-Team Leader Vorens of the

Deathwatch. We congratulate you on your timing. You do the Imperial Navy great credit.'

'You honour us, lord,' Dall replied, 'but my wing can't remain on-station. Another xenos asteroid is attacking platform Sigma Thirteen-Eight, four miles south-west of here. My warbirds need to rearm before we can go to their aid.'

'The xenos will send another bombing run,' Vorens said. 'We can't protect the platform from that, and the refinery's shuttles are likely too slow for effective escape. Is there any way you can assist with aerial extraction?'

'Central Command at Alpha One-One can scramble Valkyries,' Dall said. 'Their ETA would be around twenty minutes. We should be able to make another pass by that time, to see them safely through.'

'The lives of everyone aboard this station may depend on it,' Vorens said. 'Our thanks again for your assistance, flight lieutenant.'

'Good hunting, my lords.'

And then the Lightnings were gone, slamming south-west through the cloud cover, the roar of their jets drowned by the wind's howl.

Drenn looked at Svenbald, but the Wolf Guard was pointedly ignoring him. He felt his anger spike, driven on by the battle lust he'd yet to slake.

'Look at me!' he barked, stung to fury by the older Wolf's disdain.

And that was when the first explosion tore through the heart of Epsilon 9-17.

Vorens was right. These were no ordinary orks.

Epsilon lurched again, yawing towards its southernmost plate. The movement wasn't vast, but it was enough to force Drenn to thought-activate his auto-stabilisers, clamping himself to the deck.

'Hel's teeth,' snapped another Flame Hunter, Hrolfgar. 'What was that?'

Warning klaxons began to wail from the central hub's spire. Adepts, mechadendrites writhing in alarm, were hurrying to the outlying nodes. The platform groaned, tilting a fraction further.

'One of the grav-sphere engines,' Drenn heard Erik growl down the vox. 'It's gone.'

'They're below us,' Vorens added. He was crouching at the platform's side. 'They're on the engines.'

And suddenly it all made sense. The main assault was a diversion. While one mob dropped from above, a smaller contingent had flown their rickety aircraft in below Epsilon and leapt up using their rocket packs. Now they were clambering over the curving plasteel framework of Epsilon's underbelly, rigging the platform with bundles of piped explosives.

'Don't fire,' Vorens ordered. 'We can't risk damaging the gravitic spheres.'

'We've got to get them off,' Drenn said, stepping to the refinery's edge. 'If they take out any more, we won't be able to stay airborne.'

'They're not trying to bring it down,' Vorens said. 'They want to capture the platform intact, and if they want to do that they'll have t—'

But Drenn wasn't listening. He was jumping.

Vorens shouted after him, but it was too late. The young Flame Hunter fell, combat knife unsheathed, fangs bared, his red hair whipping out behind him.

Now was not the time for thoughts. Now was the time for great deeds.

Now was the time for Redblade to make his mark.

The first ork he hit didn't even know it. Drenn's boots burst its skull open and snapped its neck, smashing it off the engine's flank. He activated his jump pack the moment he struck, and the powerful turbos thrust him viciously upwards and to the left. He collided with another greenskin clinging onto a strut binding one of the crackling grav spheres, the beast's blunt features contorted by a grimace as it tried to bring its crude firearm to bear. The impact of the Wolf, pauldron-first, tore the ork from its grapnel and sent it roaring out into the ether.

Drenn tried to jump again, but his pack chimed. The turbo hadn't recharged yet, and suddenly he was in freefall. There was nothing below, nothing but an endless sea of swirling, sickly clouds and the grinding pressure of Theron's gravity well many miles below.

He lashed out, trying to get a hold on the flank of the sphere sliding past, but his gauntlet could only scrape against the smooth outer plates. With a yell, he lunged with his other fist, plunging Fang into the engine's frame.

His arm jerked and he slowed, but didn't stop. The lightning bolts feeding the gravitic engine's inner core cracked and lashed at the gash he'd torn in the light metal frame, the blade carving its way through the sphere's outer shell. Drenn spat a curse as he gripped onto the weapon's hilt two-handed,

but to no avail.

And then, abruptly, he stopped.

The knife struck one of the plasteel stanchions ribbing the platform's swollen belly, the final one before the drop away into nothingness. The metal bent but held, and Drenn found himself dangling helplessly.

Thunder crashed. Beneath his dangling feet, Theron's swirling maw gaped, seemingly desperate to turn the young Wolf to pulp.

He managed to grip the stanchion with his other hand. His jump pack chimed again, finally recharged, but he had nothing to kick up off. Gritting his fangs, he began to pull. The servos in his power armour whined as they added to his strength, heaving him up onto the narrow strip of metal. It groaned and bent further. Finally he snatched hold of the rent his knife had torn in the engine sphere's shell, and found his feet.

Lightning crashed again, lashing up past him. The arcs caged within the grav-sphere twisted and crackled in sympathy. Drenn heard a ticking in his ears and realised it was his vox, barely audible over the storm.

'Above you!'

Drenn looked up and saw two shapes – Vorens and Svenbald – traversing the side of the engine. Svenbald had discarded his jump pack. Both were strapped into harness coils usually plugged into the servitors responsible for maintaining the engine flanks.

There was a crack, and Drenn felt something strike his leg. He turned to see the nearest orks firing at him, their wild aim sending rounds rattling off the stanchions. He mag-locked Fang and bellowed at them, unable to do anything but hold on.

'Jump!' It was Svenbald this time. Both figures had paused halfway down the engine's side, just above where Drenn had first stabbed Fang in.

'We can't rappel past the damaged section,' Vorens voxed. 'It's too volatile. You have to jump. Now.'

The plasteel rib underfoot was buckling. More ork slugs hit him, smacking off his breastplate and his right vambrace. He grimaced, growled a heathen prayer, and hit the activation rune just as the stanchion beneath him snapped.

The jump pack flared to life and he powered upwards, arms outstretched, searing along the vicious rent he'd torn in the engine. Vorens and Svenbald reached out and snatched hold of him, their gauntlets meeting just as the

jump hit its apex.

Drenn planted both feet on the engine's side, fangs gritted as he held onto the two tethered Space Marines.

'Bring us up!' Vorens shouted. The harnesses began to whirr in reverse, the taut cables straining as they dragged the three of them back towards the platform.

They reached it just as more thunder split the heavens. The storm was breaking, the winds screaming and hammering at the refinery from all sides. The ork asteroid was moving closer, now barely visible amidst the livid clouds, its armoured bulkheads and bristling guns occasionally outlined by flashes of red brilliance.

The pack hauled Drenn, Vorens and Svenbald up over the edge. Drenn tried to stand, but a sudden stab of pain told him that an ork round had found the weak point behind his knee plate. He'd been so focused on reaching Vorens and Svenbald that he hadn't noticed he'd been hit. He scowled and pulled himself upright, blocking out the pain.

Svenbald was facing him, grizzled face contorted with anger. Before Drenn could speak, the Wolf Guard slammed a fist into his jaw. The blow sent him staggering. Svenbald snatched him before he hit the railings at the refinery's edge, and the young Wolf went down on one knee.

'You're a stupid, arrogant little piece of gristle,' Svenbald spat. 'If you disobey orders, *anyone's orders*, ever again, I will kill you myself.'

Drenn didn't reply. He could hear roaring and the hammering of bolters, and realised that the orks were attacking up over the platform's edge. Svenbald gripped his vambrace and dragged him forcefully back onto his feet, reopening the wound behind his knee.

'You owe me a life-debt, pup,' the Wolf Guard snarled. 'So in the name of Russ, *fight!*'

The greenskins died.

The Deathwatch and the Space Wolves cut them down on the open plates, bolters and hand flamers blazing. A crackling stab of lighting struck the station as they fought, slamming like the spear of the Allfather into the great rods and spikes projecting from Epsilon's hub. The impact sent fat sparks scattering across the decking and threw the combat into dark shades of crimson. The generatorum thrummed with power, the arco-banks within

alive with energy. The whine of the grav engines, barely audible over the storm, rose to a pained shriek.

‘We’re losing altitude,’ Vorens voxed. ‘Magos Zarn is trying to stabilise the rig. All brethren, report to the central hub.’

Epsilon tilted still further. Drenn activated his jump pack, bounding up the plate towards the hub and its halo of energy-wreathed spikes.

Inside, amidst the vaulted, red-shot darkness, the Adeptus Astartes and Epsilon’s crew gathered. Magos Zarn stood before the great coils of the generatorum, flanked on either side by his engineer and adepts. The tech-priest’s face was as pallid and lifeless as ever, but he pitched his synthetic voice in a manner that conveyed the seriousness of their situation.

‘The xenos have destroyed one of the gravity engines,’ he said. ‘And the damage to the second is irreparable. It is losing its charge as we speak.’

The cowled heads of the adepts turned to scan Drenn, but he simply glowered. Zarn pressed on.

‘I have calculated that the strain on the remaining four engines is too great. One has already crossed the stress tolerance threshold, despite our blessings, and I compute that another will follow within the next eight minutes. We are losing altitude. I estimate that we will reach critical descent within the next half hour. After that we will cross the horizon line into Theron’s gravitational well. Nothing can escape after that.’

‘Naval fighter support will be here soon,’ Vorens said. ‘We will evacuate the station.’

‘And we will have failed in our mission,’ Svenbald added, looking pointedly at Drenn.

‘At least the xenos won’t capture the generatorum banks,’ Vorens replied.

‘We’ll just have to hope the other refineries are more successfully defended,’ Svenbald went on.

‘Would you consider it a success,’ said Drenn, his voice hard and low, ‘if we destroy the ork’s battle asteroid?’

Lightning pounded the hub, and for a second the power failed, the only illumination coming from the red energy crackling behind the murky panes of the generatorum’s banks. The lumen strips overhead blinked back on, but dimmer than before.

‘And how would we do that?’ Svenbald asked, his tone slick with scorn.

‘We won’t,’ Drenn said. ‘But Epsilon Nine-Seventeen might.’

Again, no one spoke. Vorens turned to look directly at the young Space Wolf, the light giving his black armour a fresh, bloody sheen.

‘Elaborate,’ he said.

‘We’re a lightning harvester,’ Drenn said, and as though to underscore his words the lightning struck again. The whole platform shuddered. ‘We can’t save Epsilon, but we can still use it. Ram the asteroid.’

‘The orks will board us long before we reach them,’ Svenbald said. ‘That’s even assuming that there’ll be sufficient lightning charge left to damage the rock.’

‘I doubt any physical impact could cause sufficient damage,’ Zarn interjected. ‘But the generatorum has absorbed vast amounts of power in the past few minutes. It may be possible for my adepts to overload the coils, and compress the magnetic flux using combat servitor munitions. We could create a minor electromagnetic pulse that would likely shut down the majority of the xenos’ technological systems and cause them to drop into the gravitational well. As for directing the refinery’s course, we shall remain on board. I have served this station since I was an adept, still mired in the ways of the flesh. Regardless of your intentions, I will not leave now.’

‘With all due respect, magos, I doubt you can hold off another wave of greenskins,’ said Vorens.

‘The defence servitors will remain in place,’ Zarn replied, ‘and we will bar the hub’s blast doors. We need only hold until we have rerouted and overloaded the power couplings. And if all else fails, we can fight. Do not underestimate the servants of the Omnissiah, Space Marine. The fury of Mars is ours to command.’

Vorens nodded. ‘If you believe it can work, Magos Zarn, then I see no reason not to try.’

‘I compute the probability of causing critical levels of damage on the xenos craft at forty-eight-point-eight per cent. The odds are not in our favour, but now that Epsilon’s loss is guaranteed, it is the most logical course of action.’

‘It’s settled then,’ Vorens said. ‘I will inform your superiors on Alpha One-One of your valour, Magos.’

‘Pray you make it there to do so,’ Zarn responded.

The proximity alarms had begun to shriek. The orks were coming again.

This time they attacked from all sides – blunt-nosed fighters, flyers with thudding rotor blades, lumbering bombers that looked like great conglomerations of jagged scrap.

‘I have altered our course,’ Magos Zarn’s voice rang out over the platform’s vox-masts, ‘and I have done my best to stabilise the plates. Accounting for meteorological conditions, engine damage and possible evasive manoeuvres by the asteroid, I estimate a collision in just over thirteen minutes. We will have an optimal electromagnetic pulse primed within five, but we will hold off until your transports are beyond range.’

Drenn suspected they’d all be dead long before then. The fourth ork wave was vast. The asteroid had emptied its guts, the xenos apparently enraged by the refinery’s defiance.

‘Make ready,’ Svenbald said, chambering a fresh bolt round. Drenn unlocked Graam, his eyes on the storm-wracked skies.

‘I’m getting a signal,’ Vorens said. ‘Stand by.’

The platform’s long-range vox-array was down, scrambled to incoherence by the storm, but the powerful uplinks of the Adeptus Astartes had locked onto an incoming Imperial signal.

Through the clouds came two black Valkyrie assault carriers and two Vendetta gunships, their noses down and throttles open.

‘Flame Hunters, assemble on the southern plate,’ Svenbald voxed. ‘Prepare for aerial extraction.’

The servitor guns opened up, pounding the skies with bolts of plasma and streaking interceptor missiles. The greenskins to the south were unable to get at the two Valkyries as they touched down on the refinery’s edge.

The rear ramps dropped, the engines still turning over. Drenn and half the Flame Hunters fought through the brutal downdraft of the left flyer’s twin engines, the remainder joining the Deathwatch in the other. The troop hold was immediately full, the space for its usual compliment of a dozen men barely sufficient for six armoured Space Marines.

‘Hold on,’ came the voice of the pilot over the internal vox. There was a lurch as the Valkyrie lifted, overburdened by its new cargo. The rear ramp was still closing. Before it clamped shut, Drenn caught a final glimpse of Epsilon, its plates streaked with blazing firepower.

‘We have incoming contacts. With all due respect lords, we need those heavy bolters working. Keep them off us.’

Normally the Valkyrie's twin side-mounted guns would have been manned by Naval crewmen, but they'd been left behind to make more room. As Hrolfgar hauled back the left-hand hatch, Drenn swung the heavy weapon out from its housing, checked the belt feed and chambered the first round.

A swarm of junk flyers was closing in on the fleeing Valkyries. The two Vendetta gunships covering their escape were sending rounds thumping back into their pursuers, but the sheer amount of aircraft meant that some were getting past the fusillade. Even as Drenn watched, a corkscrewing rocket clipped the wing of one of the Vendettas, shearing straight through. The gunship began to spin out of control, plummeting towards annihilation in Theron's grim embrace.

Drenn howled into the wind and opened fire, the heavy bolter slamming back on its pintle. He guided the bright stream of shells onto the fuselage of an ork fighter that was barrelling straight at the Valkyrie. The heavy rounds chewed through its rusty plating and sent it tumbling nose-over-tail, flames licking from its front grille.

More greenskins were coming at them from behind. Another rocket, daubed with black and white jags, twisted wildly past before lurching randomly upwards and detonating. Tracer rounds skipped overhead, laddering back and forth as they tried to get a lock. The Valkyrie's pilot was dumping clouds of chaff and blazing phosphorous flares in a desperate effort to throw the greenskins' crude targeters.

A rotor flyer began to drag itself alongside the Valkyrie, little more than a long platform mounted on an open fuselage and bearing two massive fore and aft blades. Clinging to its rear were more orks.

They roared and scrambled off the transport as the two flyers levelled up, smacking their rocket packs. Drenn turned the heavy bolter on them, but it was too late – four of the greenskins were reduced to a gory mist and whipped away by the wind, but the rest slammed into the Valkyrie.

The aircraft lurched, its bare metal interior bathed with warning lights. An altitude alarm began to wail. Drenn heard metal-shod boots pounding against the fuselage.

'No room for chainswords!' Svenbald barked. 'Knives only.'

The ork flyer, its cargo unleashed, wanted more. Its pilot was swinging inwards, a manic grin on its bucket-jawed face. Drenn sent a burst of bolts

into the greasy mechanism of the rearmost set of rotors, seconds before it could ram the Valkyrie. The thudding blades came to an abrupt stop, and the greenskin pilot's expression turned to one of panic as the machine lurched away. It began to spin on a crazed downward spiral as its remaining rotor tried to keep it airborne.

Then the first ork was flinging itself in through the hatch.

It came from the Valkyrie's top, swinging down on one thick, green arm. Drenn's fist met its face, crunching tusks and sending the beast hurtling back out through the gap. He managed to get his hand on the heavy bolter's trigger just as the ork hit its rocket jets, launching itself back up with a roar. The heavy rounds shredded it a split-second before impact, and the detonation of its fuel tank slammed Drenn into the armoured shoulder of Erik behind him.

Grunting and the thump of blades told him that more greenskins were trying to clamber in through the other hatch. The voice of the Valkyrie's pilot came in over the vox as an almost incoherent shriek. 'They're on the cockpit! They're on the cockpit!'

The carrier began to drag to the left.

'Hrolfgar, take the bolter,' Drenn snapped. Without waiting for a response, he unlocked Fang and swung out through the hatch, hitting his pack's boosters as he did so. The wind nearly whipped him away, but his jump pack fought against it, thrusting him up onto the Valkyrie's sloping wing. He activated his stabilisers as he scrambled for purchase.

There were two orks clinging to the flyer's scarred hull. The nearest was trying to prime a primitive stick grenade and thrust it onto a whirling turbo-jet intake, whilst the other was repeatedly slamming a chainaxe at the pilot's cockpit, each furious strike fracturing the reinforced glass.

The closest spotted Drenn as he landed. In a rage, it threw its grenade at him unprimed, the shaft bouncing off Drenn's breastplate and spinning away. Drenn lunged, the ork unable to dodge without losing its grip. Fang found the beast's neck and Drenn backhanded it with his other gauntlet. The greenskin let go, and was gone.

The one perched on the cockpit turned. Beyond it Drenn could see the second Vendetta gunship going down, mauled by a trio of greenskin fighters. Rounds from the fighters tore past, punching through the Valkyrie's wing plating. Neither Drenn nor the ork on the cockpit could

move without losing purchase, but the greenskin didn't seem to care. Chainaxe revving, it jumped and slammed its rocket jets.

Drenn ducked. The ork scythed overhead, the downwards swing of its chainaxe scoring jagged grooves across the back of his armoured jump pack. Then it was gone, carried off into the storm. Drenn turned to see it furiously trying to angle itself back for another run, but then the shrieking bulk of a blazing ork bomber tore past, swatting the greenskin into oblivion. The doomed aircraft rolled onto its back as it fell, armour plates shearing off, one wing a bullet-riddled wreck.

The bomber's killer blasted overhead, banking left in search of fresh prey. It was a Thunderbolt heavy fighter, and it wasn't alone. Drenn crouched and watched as two more Imperial fighters barrelled past, chasing down a red ork jet that was bleeding dirty black smoke from its engines.

Drenn mag-locked his knife. Flight Lieutenant Dall's Naval reinforcements had arrived.

An enhanced pict-caster from one of the Thunderbolts caught Epsilon 9-17's dying moments. The Space Wolves watched it on the Valkyrie's uplink monitor bank.

Epsilon was limping through the storm. Most of the ork attackers had peeled off in pursuit of the escaping Valkyries, and the remainder weren't enough to silence the weapon servitors. The asteroid was trying to turn away, its plasma drives blazing white where they burned through black clouds, but it was too slow. Its weaponry roared too, hammering the refinery, tearing its armoured hull to pieces. Still it struggled on, one deck structure shearing off and tumbling away, another blazing with blue, oxygen-starved flames where an ork fighter had rammed it.

Just when it looked as though the remains of the refinery would finally come apart, Magos Zarn unleashed his final attack.

The electromagnetic pulse, coupled with the overloading of the refinery's hub, caused the platform to finally split apart with a spectacular flash. The pict feed blazed a fuzzy white as the central hub detonated, mushrooming into a blinding corona of raw energy. As Epsilon 9-17's remains spun away into oblivion, the asteroid started losing altitude.

The orkish machinery powering the looted rock was already dangerously unstable. Whipped by successive lightning strikes, those systems which

hadn't fused out following the pulse swiftly overloaded. Something within the asteroid's bowels detonated. A section collapsed inwards, red energy dancing and sparking from its armoured bulkheads.

As more explosions ripped through the asteroid's guts it began to fall faster, its descent now unstoppable. It was trapped in the embrace of Theron's gravitational well, caught in an irresistible vortex that pulped those still onboard and smashed the rock into ever-smaller chunks of blazing wreckage. The bulkheads and weapons batteries crumbled and collapsed, as though stuck by the armoured fist of an angry god. The overburdened plasma drives were the last things to go, the fury of their detonation momentarily shorting out the feed.

When it came back online, both the asteroid and Epsilon 9-17 were gone, swallowed by the gas giant's fathomless depths.

The Space Wolves said nothing.

Alpha 1-1 was Theron's foremost refinery, and it dwarfed Epsilon 9-17. It was a mountain cast up into the heavens, its hub riddled with secondary blocks housing administrative centres, data banks, hab cells and weapons defence systems. A complex converter array, a whirring mass of spheres and orbs to rival anything from the Dark Age of Technology, crackled with power from the hub's top. A dozen conjoining plates, each alone larger than Epsilon had been, provided auxiliary earthing spires against which the surrounding clouds constantly lashed bolts of energy.

The remains of the Valkyrie's fighter escort peeled off as they neared Alpha 1-1. Drenn could hear Vorens thanking Dall over the vox. Of the Lightning wing's original six fighters, only Dall and one other remained.

The Valkyries touched down on a landing spur jutting from Alpha 1-1's flank. As soon as he stepped out onto the platform, Svenbald grabbed Drenn.

'Those tech-priests are dead because of you, young pup.'

Drenn swiped the Wolf Guard's hand away. 'Maybe if you showed more leadership, long-tooth, then I wouldn't have to do everything myself.'

Svenbald tried to strike him, but this time Drenn caught the blow. For a moment they both strained, muscles taut, their blood-streaked features inches apart. Abruptly, the younger Wolf jerked back, his eyes filled with fury.

‘This has gone on long enough,’ he spat. ‘I will prove what I know you to be, Svenbald – a weak old worm undeserving of the rank you hold. I challenge you.’

‘I accept,’ the Wolf Guard snapped. He pulled himself up to his full height, holding Drenn’s glare. ‘I have tried to be patient with you. That ends now. If you won’t learn respect, you’ll no longer be a part of this Great Company, let alone my pack. The Allfather will decide your fate.’

Vorens visited Drenn as nightfall turned Theron’s endless skies an impenetrable black.

He was seated in a tech adept’s commandeered sleeping cell. He’d stripped off the poleyn and greaves from his left leg and was seated on the cold metal slab the adept would usually have recharged on, probing the wound behind his knee. The limb was numb, flooded with painkiller stimms and counterseptic. He grunted as he dug through his flesh with Fang’s hooked point, trying to tease the battered ork slug out.

The cell’s hatch hissed open and Vorens ducked inside. Drenn had never seen him without his helmet on. His face was like tanned leather, beaten by a hundred different suns and carved by a dozen alien blades. The three service studs at his brow gleamed in the flickering light of the cell’s only lumen strip. He looked even older and more battle-hardened than Svenbald.

‘I know what you’re about to do,’ the Deathwatch leader said as the hatch hissed shut.

‘I’m about to get this damned thing out,’ Drenn growled. He dug a little deeper into his leg and the slug finally slipped free, a pulse of fresh blood slowing as the wound clotted. ‘Why are you here, xenos hunter?’

‘You won’t fight Svenbald.’

‘I will. I’ll kill him.’

Vorens shook his head.

‘You know they’ll exile you forever if you do. Send you out into the Fenrisian wastes to die or lose your mind to the curse of your gene-seed. That’s what will happen if you win – if you lose, Svenbald will banish you from the Flame Hunters. You’ll have to petition your Wolf Lord to join another pack, and the shame will haunt you forever. No one will ever respect your warrior prowess again, not when the blood on your blade

would be that of a fellow Space Wolf. Is that what you want?’

Drenn said nothing.

‘You won’t fight Svenbald,’ Vorens repeated. ‘Because you’ll fight me instead.’

Drenn looked up, scowling. ‘This isn’t your quarrel.’

‘Maybe not, but I lost a battle-brother today. His name was Kamron of the Storm Wardens. He was a fine warrior, a slaughterer of xenos, and I’d like to have him replaced before we go back into action. The fighting on this world will go on.’

‘I don’t understand.’

‘Fight your duel with me, Drenn. If I win, you will join me in the Deathwatch. You will match your blades against the most dangerous and terrible creatures the galaxy can spit at you. Fang will remain forever red, and when you eventually return to your packmates the skjalds will sing of your glories for an age to come.’

Drenn laughed. It was a short, humourless bark. ‘Svenbald won’t allow it,’ he said.

‘I’ve already spoken to Svenbald, and he is in agreement. Best me, and he will overlook all of your past transgressions and afford you the respect you deserve. Lose, and he will release you to the Deathwatch. He has sworn me an oath.’

‘I always knew he was a coward...’

‘He saved your life, and it will be many decades before you have won as much honour in your Chapter’s service. You are still young, Drenn, and that fact can cover a multitude of sins. But it will not always be so. Your pack will learn discipline in time, and be promoted. You will continue to strain against all authority, and for that you will remain a Blood Claw until the day you die.’

Drenn frowned. ‘If that’s true, why do you want me for the Deathwatch?’

Vorens nodded, admitting that the question was a valid one.

‘I have spoken to my brethren, and they are united in their belief that you are a hot-headed young fool. But I’ve seen you fight, Drenn. Your talent is raw, your vigour unflagging. I won’t deny that the loss of Epsilon Nine-Seventeen means our mission on this world has been far from successful, but few would have had the initiative to do what you did. Your determination helped to destroy that asteroid. Sometimes rashness

produces results. That is why I'm here.'

'And yet you came here for nothing,' Drenn said, 'because I will defeat you, Caius Vorens. Just as I would have defeated Svenbald.'

'Come then, Space Wolf. Let us see if you're right.'

Drenn hadn't been expecting Vorens to strike first. Everything about the Imperial Fist spoke of stoicism and bastion-like defensiveness, yet no sooner had the initiating rites left Gallio's lips than the Deathwatch leader was lunging at him, his own knife a silver blur.

Drenn parried, swiping the first strikes aside, and backed up two hasty steps. Pride surged up in him. He bared his fangs and met the next handful of thrusts blade-for-blade. The instant Vorens left his guard open, the Wolf lunged, scoring a deep groove across his silver Deathwatch pauldron. Vorens leaned in, trying to use his weight to regain the initiative, but still Drenn came at him, hammering his left fist into Vorens' breastplate and stabbing again with Fang.

Vorens took the hits against his armour and countered, jabbing hard towards Drenn's unprotected eyes and face. The young Wolf was forced to scramble back again, and his anger rose even further. He turned one of Vorens' blows, and this time the other warrior was a moment too slow in recovering. Drenn lunged, his face contorted in a rictus of anger, aiming towards the joint where breastplate met plackart, just below the abdomen.

But Vorens hadn't let his guard down at all. At the last moment he bent forward a fraction, taking Fang squarely on his breastplate. There was a crack as the blade's hooked tip was deflected towards the Imperial Fist's left. He locked Drenn's overstretched arm, twisted it so that the Space Wolf dropped his weapon and, in the same instant, slammed a boot into his injured left leg.

The Space Wolf howled as his limb buckled, the pain of his wound flaring through him. Vorens kept the pressure up, forcing the Flame Hunter down onto his knees, the arm still locked. He clamped his other hand over Drenn's head, resisting every effort he made to regain his feet.

'The duel is over,' Gallio said. 'First blood to Vorens.'

Drenn could feel blood from the reopened wound running down his leg. He made one last, furious effort to rise, cursing floridly, but Svenbald and Gallio took him by his pauldrons and restrained him. Vorens let go.

‘That was dishonourable,’ Drenn snarled as the Deathwatch leader stepped back.

‘Have you never used an enemy’s wound to your advantage?’ Vorens said. ‘The galaxy is full of countless alien races, Drenn, and all of them are united by a single characteristic – they have no honour. Go searching for it, and you will die disappointed.’

Drenn stopped struggling, allowing Svenbald and Gallio to release him. He stayed on his knees and felt the anger flush from his system, his heartbeats slowing.

‘You’re fast,’ he allowed. ‘And you trusted in your armour to turn Fang. If I’d been using Graam you would be dead.’

‘But I would have fought differently. Only fools refuse to alter their style of combat. You weren’t expecting me to be so arrogant with my opening attack, and that stung you. You reacted in kind. Then I used your weaknesses against you – your lack of helmet, and your wound. You responded with speed, savagery and skill, but there was no thought behind it. You are all raw instinct, Space Wolf.’

‘And you are only the leader of a kill-team, yet you speak with more authority than anyone I have fought before.’

‘Within the Deathwatch I am Kill-Team Leader Vorens. When I return to my brethren in the Imperial Fists, I will be Captain Caius Vorens of the Sixth Company once more.’

Drenn looked up, uncharacteristically lost for words. The Imperial Fist was the equivalent in experience and rank to Kjarl Grimblood himself...

‘Your blade is a good one,’ Vorens said, retrieving Fang and handing it back to the Space Wolf. ‘But it should not be the only weapon you trust in. If you join the Deathwatch, you’ll leave your old life behind, at least for a while. The duties and habits you have now – none of them will matter. The path to your new life starts here. As a warrior of the Adeptus Astartes you have been blessed with numerous ways to deal death to the Emperor’s enemies. You should make use of them all. Take this.’

Vorens gestured to Gallio, who held forward the Imperial Fist’s bolter. It was a beautiful weapon, its oiled barrel gleaming, the black stock etched with prayers of wrath and smiting. A tattered purity seal affixed behind the ejection port proclaimed centuries of service. The Space Wolf stared at it.

‘Its name is Xenobane,’ Vorens said. ‘And it will teach you to rely on

every tool in your arsenal. Take it.'

Drenn clasped the boltgun, still staring. The grip was fashioned around the lower half of a polished femur, its smooth, yellowing surface scrimshawed with dozens of interlocking names.

'That bone is all that remains of its first owner, Brother Weiss,' Vorens said. 'And the names belong to all those who have wielded it since. It is a custom in my Chapter to venerate the dead in such a manner.'

'You honour me,' Drenn murmured. The wound behind his knee throbbed, but he ignored it, meeting the eyes of the captain.

'You knew the terms of this duel. What do you say to them now?'

Rather than reply, Drenn limped across to Svenbald. For the first time the young Flame Hunter lowered his gaze respectfully, acknowledging the Wolf Guard's rank.

'I owe you a life debt,' he said. 'I swear upon my honour that I will repay it, whether you release me to the Deathwatch or not.'

'It is already done,' Svenbald said, curtly. 'I hope Vorens can teach you something of respect, for I cannot.'

Drenn felt a rare stab of shame, and looked up. The Wolf Guard sighed.

'You have more than Russ' lineage within you, Drenn. You have his untameable spirit as well. Go with the primarch's blessings, and may we meet again.'

Vorens put a hand on Drenn's shoulder.

'The kill-team will assemble to observe your oaths tomorrow,' he said, 'and I will send word to the Watch Fortress regarding your appointment.'

He held out his hand, and the Space Wolf took it, vambrace to vambrace, the warrior's grip.

'Welcome to the Deathwatch, Drenn Redblade.'

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Robbie MacNiven** is a highland-born History graduate from the University of Edinburgh. His hobbies include reenacting, football and obsessing over Warhammer 40,000. '*Redblade*' is his first story for Black Library.

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\* 9. If any part of this license is illegal, or becomes illegal as a result of any change in the law, then that part shall be deleted, and replaced with wording that is as close to the original meaning as possible without

being illegal.

\* 10. Any failure by Black Library to exercise its rights under this license for whatever reason shall not be in any way deemed to be a waiver of its rights, and in particular, Black Library reserves the right at all times to terminate this license in the event that you breach clause 2 or clause 3.