

# WARHAMMER 40,000



DEATHWATCH 5

# DEAD HENGE

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## I

Brother Ennox Sorrlock lay wounded in the panelled reading room of Planetary Governor Ajax Finne's personal library. His helmet rang with the dying shouts of his squad, and through the hazed eye lens of his Mark VIII 'Errant' armour he saw the darting shapes of the eldar: all blades and skin, and thin, pale, grasping fingers.

He fired three wild shots. His bolter magazine flashed empty. His secondary heart was failing and his breath came in long gulps. His arms were weakening. He tried to reach a fresh magazine, but as he did so a sickle blade stabbed down at his throat. He caught the hand, almost by instinct, dragged the eldar warrior in close, found his combat knife and drove it deep into its body, before throwing the corpse aside. The exertion left him weaker than before, but he gritted his teeth against the pain, flexed his muscles and tried again for the magazine.

'Brother Sorrlock!' a voice rang out in his vox-link.

He tried to answer, but could not make a noise.

'Sorrlock!' the voice came again. It was Brother Lenhk.

'Leave me...' Sorrlock tried to say, but all that came from his lips was a froth of blood and spittle. He looked about. The fight had moved on, and all around him were the enemy dead, lying in deep piles. Mixed in with the dead were leather-bound volumes in disorganised heaps, scraps of singed paper in the spreading pools of blood, much of it his own.

Warning runes flashed in his helmet: secondary heart collapse, liver

failure, blood loss critical, too severe even for his Larraman cells to staunch. Sorrlock found a krak grenade and tried to set the charge, but his fingers were clumsy, and he couldn't see properly anymore. He was trying to toss it towards his enemies when, from the corridor leading towards the library chamber, there was a flash of bolter fire. The screams and shouts of xenos. The vivid gout of promethium flames.

'I've found him!' he heard Lenkh call over the vox.

'Leave me,' Sorrlock tried to say again. Warning runes flashed inside his helmet. His consciousness faltered. He felt himself being dragged backwards.

'Cover me!' Lenkh was shouting to Renz, the other surviving member of the squad.

'Covering.'

'We have him,' Lenkh voxed the Stormraven pilot. 'Get us out of here!'

Flames filled the chamber again. More xenos screams and howls.

'Coming in,' the pilot voxed.

Sorrlock could hear the whirring of the console, the repetitive beep of the homing beacon through the pilot's signals as their Stormraven gunship circled, looking for a good place to land.

'I have Sorrlock,' Lenkh voxed.

The pilot's voice crackled back. 'And the rest of the squad?'

'Dead,' Lenkh shouted. 'Now, get us out of here!'

Then they were out into the open. Sorrlock saw the twin yellow lights of the Stormraven, descending steeply through the rain. It was the last thing he saw before his vision faded, but he heard a sudden roar as missiles streaked overhead. He felt the explosion, but it came to him only as a dim and distant sound.

There was the whine of the gunship, the grate of his power armour against the ramp as he was dragged into the hold. The Stormraven was already lifting.

Something was clinging to the hull. He could hear it scraping to get inside.

'The others are lost?' a new voice said.

'Affirmative,' Lenkh said.

'All of them?'

'Yes.'

Someone was kneeling at Sorrlock's side. For a moment he was able to see clearly. It was an Apothecary with black hair and a ragged scar across his neck. His blue-lit augmetic eyes looked down at Sorrlock.

'Throne,' the Apothecary hissed. 'What did this to him?'

'Xenos,' Lenkh said.

Sorrlock felt his power armour being stripped away, a hand at his neck. 'His gene-seed is compromised,' the Apothecary reported.

The words cut through his pain. Sorrlock felt intense shame. Not only had he led seven battle-brothers to their deaths, but now he could not even pass on his genetic legacy to the Chapter.

As the Stormraven began to climb through the rain clouds, the vox-link crackled. There was a whisper in his ear.

'*Brothers,*' a voice said. It felt like a dream, but the voice was so real and familiar that it roused Sorrlock for a moment. '*Brothers, don't leave me here...*' the voice came again.

The accent was Grimmack's.

Sorrlock moaned. He tried to tell them to go back, that they had left a brother behind, but he was unable to speak.

'Inserting needle,' the Apothecary's voice came.

'No!' Sorrlock tried to say, but the drugs were spreading cool within his veins. They removed all the pain, but there were things worse than pain.

Things like failure and defeat.

## II

Space was silent, and here, in the viewing chamber of the Reclusiam spire of the Deathwatch fortress Sentinel IX, the silence was palpable. It was so quiet that Chaplain Ortan Cassius could hear the footsteps from the bottom of the long black marble staircase, nearly five hundred yards below him. He waited, listening to the sound, then turned to the armourglass window where the darkness of the galaxy seemed to suck all light from his chamber.

More than a decade ago, he had donned the black power armour and taken the silver shoulder pad of the Deathwatch; his purpose was to defend humanity from the xenos. In that time he had sought out and destroyed

more aliens than he could remember. But there were always more.

It was a battle that had started long before he was born.

It would last for generations after him.

The thought did not disturb Cassius. He was a weapon of war. It was his fate to die on the battlefield and he was content with that – he would serve until that day.

He drew in a deep breath and put both hands on the vellum of the book he was reading. *The Beatitudes of Arch-Confessor Paladine*. The illumination showed the victorious Paladine himself with one foot on the greenskin, aquila banner held high.

Cassius looked up as his visitors reached the top of the stairs. The first was a red-hooded Inquisitorial serf. He stepped forward to bow and spoke in a deep, weary voice.

‘Chaplain Cassius. As requested, I have brought Battle-brother Sorrlock of the Iron Hands.’

Cassius looked past the serf into the shadows at the top of the long staircase. Three red eyes glowed in the darkness.

A metallic voice spoke in clipped tones.

‘Chaplain Cassius. I am Ennox Sorrlock – formerly of the Iron Hands, now Deathwatch. Greetings.’

‘Why “formerly”?’ Cassius asked. ‘You came from the Iron Hands and will return to the Iron Hands, when your service with the Deathwatch is done.’

‘If they will have me,’ Sorrlock replied.

‘Why would they not?’

‘My flesh was weak.’

‘Weaker than steel?’

‘Of course. But that is not what I meant. I failed my Chapter. I failed my brothers.’

As he spoke, the Iron Hand strode forwards from the shadowed archway. With each step there was a muted hiss of extensive cyber-enhancement. Sorrlock was tall, even for a Space Marine. His face was half steel – a mess of wires and tubes, with three marble-red optical augmetics where the eye had been.

Cassius put out a gauntlet. The fist that gripped him back was not human. He could hear the gentle whine of motors and metal tendons, felt the cold

grip of iron fingers.

Sorrlock did not let go. ‘You think my enhancements crude?’

The voice was as monotone as a servitor’s, but it did not lack intelligence. Sorrlock had an odd manner; it was methodical, clinical. Too much enhanced inhuman intellect, Cassius thought. Typical of the Iron Hands. They did not trust flesh. They did not trust their greater-than-human bodies, nor even entirely the gene-seed legacy of their own primarch.

They did not trust themselves.

‘Crude? Yes,’ Cassius said. ‘In my Chapter we at least attempt to make a face that is human in aspect.’

‘That is foolish,’ Sorrlock replied flatly.

‘Why?’

‘It wastes time and resources.’

Cassius did not try to argue. He turned to the window ports and looked out into the haunted space known as Deadhenge.

‘Do you know why you are here?’

‘No.’

‘Can’t you guess?’

‘I do not guess. I input data, and assess the best course of action.’

Cassius smiled. He had heard that Brother Sorrlock could be a little difficult at times.

He turned from the window. ‘What do you see when you look at the vast emptiness of Deadhenge?’

‘Enemies,’ Sorrlock said. ‘Lurking. Hiding. Pretending not to be there.’

Cassius smiled. When he looked into the darkness of space, he too felt it watching him in return. ‘Good. We have that at least in common.’

‘We have much more in common,’ Sorrlock’s monotone voice said.

Cassius turned to look at the metal face and wondered what he meant, but Sorrlock was staring out through the vast reinforced pane, one hand upon the grip of his combi-melta.

### III

Pain flooded Ennox Sorrlock as he lay in the Apothecaries’ chamber. The

drugs were wearing off. His body stiffened, his mouth a snarling rictus, consciousness and memory flooding into him like a fresh shot of agony...

*His orders had been to locate the eldar flesh-smith known as the Black Spider. He had done so, but rather than waiting for support, he had led his squad straight in. Surprise, he believed, was worth more than numbers, and all seemed well as they had trapped the Black Spider in the governor's personal library.*

*'We have him!' Sorrlock had declared in righteous triumph as the Black Spider had dashed up a grand wooden staircase. Sorrlock laughed as he aimed his bolt pistol. 'Death to the xenos!'*

*But at that moment, flesh-constructs had burst from within the vast axelwood bookshelves. All about the Iron Hands were hulking monsters with blades implanted into their flesh, simian heads snarling and hunched, ichor dripping from venom-guns. Sorrlock's squad was surrounded by darting shapes – whips, coils, and searing blasts of poisonous liquid flashed at the Iron Hands, and the Black Spider's narrow alien face changed from an expression of fear to inhuman delight.*

*'Back!' Sorrlock commanded, and his squad had fought as they retreated.*

*But the corridor was blocked with more of the foe. They had fought until the enemy dead lay three deep. And as they fell, the Black Spider raised his own weapon. Sorrlock had never seen this type of gun before. He had backhanded the barrel as he charged at the flesh-smith, but moments too late. A spray of sticky green liquid covered his side. The eldar stumbled back but did not fall. Hunched low, it edged forwards, firing over and over again.*

*Sorrlock had felt the slime splat against his armour. He was confident in his battleplate but the creeping gobs found the weak points – damaged areas, and the joints – and started to dissolve his flesh.*

*His fury had turned to alarm as the liquid filled up his armour and started eating him alive.*

As Sorrlock lay in the medicae bed, the nightmare of the assault returned to him again and again. And it always ended the same way, with the hissed voice from Grimmack.

*'Brothers... Don't leave me here...'*

Sorrlock knew only too well the pain that the wretched eldar could inflict, and he twisted and writhed at the thought of it. 'Go back!' he shouted out

in his nightmares, but he was lying wounded, and could not help Grimmack.

The thin metal arms of the medicae servitor moved quickly to hold the sutures closed. The Apothecary bent over him, the glowing blue eyes staring into his own. 'Be still, brother. We have done all that we can. There is no way back,' he said. It was a simple truth. 'No way back for any of us.'

Sorrlock didn't understand, but felt more life-supporting fluids being pumped into his body.

'Be still, brother. It is time to let go.'

Sorrlock snarled in answer, but the drugs were stronger than he.

## IV

Amongst the abandoned orbital platforms over the planet of Shenden Port, deep in the region of space known as Deadhenge, a vessel waited. At the hour foretold by the reading of the Emperor's Tarot, a single Storm Eagle began its descent. Its colour was black, its only insignia the mark of the Inquisition. As it started its dive towards the planet, Kill Team Torrent prepared themselves for their mission.

Chaplain Cassius stood strapped against the steel walls. His briefing had not explained why Deadhenge had been abandoned, but there were humans living on this planet regardless. And, despite the odds, the population was swelling.

In the decades that had passed, they had bred. There were now thousands here, tens of thousands, perhaps. Weak, vulnerable and beyond the shield of the Imperium: to the sentient enemies in the galaxy, these defenceless humans were prey.

To the Ordo Xenos of the Inquisition of Mankind, they were bait that had finally drawn their target in.

Cassius looked towards the members of his team.

Stentor Pranus, Novamarine. An expert in fighting the eldar.

Skarr-Hedin, Space Wolf. A new recruit. One of the fiercest fighters he knew.

The third, Ennox Sorrlock, Iron Hand. A fearsome logic engine.

He had handpicked each warrior. They were the best at what they did. He was going to need them – Vael Donatus, his Chapter brother and favoured kill team leader, was on a posting to the Hurn Wastes. Cassius closed his eyes, and focused on his fury.

As they entered the outer atmosphere, the air within the gunship began to heat up. Cassius breathed deeply. He could feel Sorrlock's augmetic eyes watching him.

'Sorrlock?' he called across the hold.

Sorrlock made no response. The Storm Eagle rattled as it hit the lower atmosphere.

'You're thinking,' Cassius said.

Sorrlock's metallic voice came back. 'I am always thinking.'

'So, tell me what is going through your mind now.'

'I am reviewing our mission, Brother-Chaplain. Deathwatch kill team specified target: the eldar listed in Ordo Xenos archive Sentinel-Four-Four-Three as Archon 2296-46a. Commonly known as Archon Tehmaq, killer of twelve worlds, first noted in Imperial records in the Opal Sector. Responsible for the Scouring of Lijan, shrine world. Estimated losses of two billion. Ninety-eight per cent losses in the Cadian 1076th, including General Plume and all support staff, Lord Commissar Tranz von Gunten, and Inquisitor...'

Cassius let Sorrlock go through his data files. Sorrlock found facts comforting in a way that became almost painful. He knew the Iron Hand would list each atrocity that the archon had committed.

He let the details sink in, let them stoke his own righteous ire.

No one possessed a fury like he did. He could control and hone it, using it as a weapon of war in itself. It was a black fire within him, a geyser of rage at the traitor, the heretic, the xenos.

He breathed the fury out. His eyes blinked open suddenly as he sucked his anger back through flared nostrils. It filled him.

'The Black Spider will be there,' Cassius interrupted.

There was a moment's silence. It was unusual in Sorrlock.

'The Black Spider,' he said. 'Common Imperial designation for haemonculus of the Dark Coven. Haemonculus listed in Ordo Xenos Archive Sentinel-Four-Four-Nine as Haemonculus 862-CW-5. Responsible for—'

‘Responsible for the loss of seven members of Iron Hands Squad Morag, Clan Kaargul.’

There was another pause.

Cassius watched him. ‘Your own squad, Ennox Sorrlock.’

Sorrlock said nothing as the Storm Eagle’s rapid descent levelled out. They were flying low to the ground now, to avoid detection.

‘How do you know this?’ Sorrlock said at last.

‘You fought well. You brought death to the xenos. They were stacked three deep about you.’

‘I brought death to my brothers.’

‘We all die,’ Cassius said.

‘Machines do not,’ Sorrlock said.

Cassius sighed. ‘Today is your chance for vengeance, brother.’

‘Negative. Today our mission is to kill Archon Tehmaq.’

Cassius stared at him, but it was Pranus, the Novamarine, who spoke. ‘The Black Spider. He did... *all this* to you?’

Sorrlock’s metal head turned to the fair-haired warrior next to him. ‘Affirmative.’

‘If he did this to me then I would tear his arms from his body!’ Skarr-Hedin said. ‘The galaxy seldom gives you a chance for revenge like this, Sorrlock. Do you not savour it?’ The Space Wolf’s fangs appeared as he snarled. ‘I can almost taste it. I would rip out his heart.’

Sorrlock slowly faced each of them in turn. The movement had the odd air of a practised behaviour, as if he had no interest in the gesture, but had learnt it was expected. At the end he appeared unmoved.

‘Negative. We should all remember. Our mission is to kill Archon Tehmaq. The Black Spider is not our target.’

There was a long pause.

‘Query – what does vengeance taste like?’ Sorrlock asked.

The Space Wolf grinned, his yellow eyes as inhuman as Sorrlock’s. ‘Hot blood. It tastes like battle joy. It tastes like laughter. It is like a Great Company charging in fury. It is the roar of battle in the emptiness of the void, when the boarding torpedoes launch.’

Sorrlock watched without reaction, or even interest. ‘We are approaching the target,’ he said.

At the same time a red light began to flash. ‘Approaching target,’ the

servitor vox-system announced. ‘Contact in ten, nine...’

‘Brothers,’ Cassius rumbled. ‘Join with me.’

Together they uttered the Litany of Hatred. They were just speaking the last lines as the servitor reported again. ‘Contact.’

The Storm Eagle landed, bracing harnesses released.

Chaplain Cassius was first out, Kill Team Torrent right behind him.

## V

Sorrlock remembered.

He remembered human pain. Human frailties. The enemies of the flesh.

He remembered having a human body again. Running, flexing, twisting, laughing. He remembered the fury of being weak and trapped. He remembered the last moments of his charge, cutting down one, two, four of the foe. He got so close to the Black Spider he could see the back of its throat as it opened its mouth in a roar of hate. There were words there, though Sorrlock did not care for them.

He bludgeoned one of its guards with his bolter’s stock, punched the other, took aim... but had fired too slowly.

‘*Brothers,*’ Grimmack’s voice haunted his dreams. It summoned the ghosts of his Iron Hands back to him. They stood in a circle about him, his dead brothers, in full battle dress, their red lenses staring accusingly at him from beyond the grave.

‘*You failed us, Sorrlock,*’ their faces said. ‘*Your flesh was weak.*’

## VI

The low clouds of Shenden Port hid the tops of the buildings in the warehouse district. Between the vast structures were dark canyons, thick with derricks and gantries and ancient, rusting chains. Water dripped in a continuous stream. Sorrlock had plans of the planet and the city stored within his memory coils. He led them towards their destination, taking care to avoid detection from the hunting xenos.

‘Canyon fifty-six,’ he said. ‘This is it.’

Cassius nodded.

‘Target structure lies north of here,’ Sorrlock voxed. ‘Five minutes at current speed.’

Something darted into the canyon a hundred yards from where they stood. Cassius saw a half-starved human, barefoot, in ragged clothes, with what looked like a hatchet in its belt. It kept low, moving furtively, looking over its shoulder, clearly frightened.

Sorrlock’s brain worked in data. ‘Male,’ he said. ‘Approximate age, thirty-four. Life expectancy, plus six years. Threat, negligible.’

A flock of sharp shadows plunged down on the man like striking eagles. There was a hum of air, a scream, and then they were gone, wild shapes veering maniacally down the street.

‘Eldar reavers. Threat: extreme.’

The human lay in a widening pool of his own blood, moaning in agony.

Skarr-Hedin let out a low growl but Cassius touched his shoulder. ‘I hear your fury, brother.’

Sorrlock ignored them both. ‘Precision wounds have left the spine untouched. Human experiencing extreme pain levels,’ he noted. ‘Revised life expectancy, plus thirty seconds. Reavers bear the kill-markings of Archon Tehmaq’s coven. Target is likely to be close. Follow me, brothers.’

Ten minutes later, Sorrlock held up a hand at the base of a vast rockcrete warehouse.

‘This is it,’ he intoned.

Cassius led Kill Team Torrent forward. The corrugated metal doors hung open on broken hinges.

Sorrlock noted the details. ‘It appears most of the warehouses in this area dealt with the shipment and processing of foodstuffs – animal carcasses and organic residues such as dried sorghum stalks, compressed fava oil, gantha root gum...’

He paused in the doorway, taking a moment to scan the room.

‘All clear.’

Kill Team Torrent moved slowly up through the empty warehouse floors. The refrigeration units had long since shut down. A vast square container had blown open and slabs of grox flank rotted inside. It was covered in thick blue algae.

The stink was acrid, but the Space Marines could still detect the scent of

fresh blood.

Sorrlock halted at the open doors of a conveyor shaft. The bottom was piled deep with rotting bodies. Skinned, headless – human.

‘Why would they do this?’ Skarr-Hedin growled.

‘It is what they are like,’ Pranus replied. ‘They take pleasure in pain. They feed on fear.’

‘Will they be waiting for us?’

‘Negative,’ said Sorrlock. ‘Guards will most likely be flesh-constructs. They will be defending the warp gate. The eldar will most likely be indulging their sadistic temperaments.’

Skarr-Hedin nodded and hefted his heavy bolter. ‘Let us continue, brothers.’

Sorrlock led them across an empty refrigeration unit to another conveyor. The iron cabling that supported the cage had rusted through but there was an inner ladder within the shaft that was still firm.

‘Sorrlock, take the lead,’ Cassius ordered.

The Iron Hand nodded and started to climb. The lift shaft rose through a series of storage floors filled with empty silos and granaries. The shaft ended twenty-five floors up, opening out into a large counting room. Wooden chairs lay overturned along a long central table. The walls were hung with peeling pictures of the colony’s founding fathers. They looked out with short beards and solemn faces, hands resting on the various implements of their trade.

Sorrlock raised his combi-weapon.

‘Flesh-construct,’ he voxed. ‘Close-combat unit, serrated blade-arms. Danger: significant. Life expectancy: zero.’

As he spoke the last words, his combi-melta’s bolter bucked.

The muffled report of the shot rang out. The construct fell. The entry hole was a neat round puncture through the metal visor, the back of its head a fleshy ruin.

‘Left eyeball,’ Skarr-Hedin murmured as they stood over the body. ‘Good shot.’

‘We have entered the sentry zone,’ Sorrlock intoned.

‘Then we must be coming close to the warp gate,’ Pranus said.

‘Affirmative.’

Sorrlock led them up a rusty file of wide steps through a doorway into a

ramshackle clerk's chamber. Scraps of human flesh hung from walls, with hooks, chains, manacles and fresh dripping skins swinging gently in the breeze from the lower levels. He put another shot through the skull of a second sentry construct, then led the kill team inside.

They were moving faster now. The xenos warp gate had to be close.

Sorrlock dispatched another sentry standing at the end of the next corridor. It slid backwards down the wall, leaving a long dark stain. At the same time an alarm rang out. It was something between a scream and a siren.

'We have been detected,' Cassius cursed. 'Move quickly!'

## VII

'There is no other way.'

Ennox Sorrlock drifted in and out of consciousness. He was being devoured by the green slime. His flesh was steaming. His bones were dissolving. He burned from the inside.

He arched his back, and raised his hand to try to fire his boltgun, but he wasn't holding it anymore. He was lying on an apothecarion gurney. A face bent over him. He tried to bat it away before recognition came to him. It was not an enemy.

'Brother. There is not much time. You will need all your strength. There will be pain.'

Sorrlock braced himself.

'Insert probes,' the voice came again.

Ennox Sorrlock's teeth ground together as the barbed neural implants seared into the soft grey matter of his brain. His fingers clenched. His body heaved against the restraints. A low tortured moan escaped through his snarling teeth.

There were hot wires in the meat of his mind. The agony was unbearable.

The voice said, 'Turn it on.'

Sorrlock braced...

...but this time there was no pain. Or rather, the pain was distant as a shouting man, who falls far behind and is soon forgotten.

Pain and emotion existed on the other side of an unbreakable screen in

his mind. He could see them. Recognise them. But he no longer *felt* them. There was only a sense of expansion, of elevation, of elation.

His mind spiralled in exacting multi-functional lines of thought and logic. It revelled in the speed of his precision thinking. He calculated the chances of his survival. The rate of healing. The probability of his return to active service within the month. The chances of a bolt shell hitting a Medusan auroch at half a mile.

The voice summoned him back. 'Ennox.'

He opened his one remaining eye. His sight was blurry and indistinct.

His three augmetic eyes did not need to open. They focused on the face above him.

*Iron Father Stovek. Space Marine. Iron Hands Chapter. Age, two hundred and fifty-seven years. Seventy-four per cent augmetic. Life expectancy (organics), in excess of five hundred years, assuming no further enhancement or combat damage.*

'Brother Sorrlock,' Stovek spoke. 'You have been blessed.'

'Thank you, Iron Father,' a mechanical voice said in response, and the voice was his own.

Sorrlock sat up with a hiss of pistons. He looked down. His body was metal and wires.

'Over eighty-three per cent augmetic,' Iron Father Stovek said.

'Yes,' Sorrlock said, as he analysed his own body. There was a whine of motorised parts as he looked up. 'Eighty-three-point-seven...'

'You were a great warrior, Ennox Sorrlock,' he said. 'But your flesh was weak.'

'I led my brothers to their deaths.'

The Iron Father nodded. 'I have seen the pict-feeds. You let pride drive you. But you fought well. Better than any I have seen. We have elevated you. Machine and human, melded as one. You are a true Iron Hand now. The finest we can build. Take your shame and hone it to a fine blade. You will fight for the machine. You will fight for the Imperium. You will kill in the name of the Emperor.'

'Yes, Iron Father.'

Sorrlock stood. He took two steps. He moved his left arm, his right arm, flexed his metal fingers.

'I am truly an Iron Hand now.' His metallic monotone had no trace of

humour. As his augmetic eyes looked about him, his mechanical cortex scrolled with data and targeting relays.

The flesh was weak, it reasoned.

The machine was perfect.

## VIII

From all across the warehouse, xenos flesh-constructs came for them. They were mindless things, but they were not slow or stupid. They followed their master's commands, and their commands were to stop the intruders.

Sorrlock kept the kill team moving, his memory coils continually analysing modes of attack, possible routes to the rooftop, proposed opposition.

As Pranus killed the last constructs in the stairwell behind them, Sorrlock ran to the top and kicked the gantry door open. There was a long, half-lit rockcrete corridor behind it. He did not pause but kept moving, his combi-weapon bucking as each red target lock blinked out. Cassius was right behind him. Pranus was catching up, Skarr-Hedin firing his heavy bolter in support.

As he rounded the end of the corridor, Sorrlock punched his melta barrel into the mouth of the thing that jumped at him, and seared off its head.

Sorrlock's augmetic hand caught the creature's claw. It dripped hissing yellow venom. He snapped the hand free and slammed it into the chest of another flesh-construct. It fell back, heels drumming on the ground as the toxins boiled within it.

Skarr-Hedin filled the corridor with heavy bolter shells, throwing the xenos things back. Behind them stood their flesh-master: an eldar degenerate, human-skin cloak flapping about her.

Skarr-Hedin kept firing. More shells smashed holes in the rockcrete walls where she had been standing.

Sorrlock fired his bolter three times. Two of the rounds hit the eldar in the back and tore her slender shape to shreds.

'On your left!' Cassius hissed as they hit the top of the stairs.

Pranus' bolter was on semi-automatic. The muzzle flare cast a ruddy

light on his close-shaven face as he hosed the antechamber. The Space Wolf was right behind him, howling in hatred until the fighting was too close for his heavy bolter and he was forced to draw his combat knife and fight them hand-to-hand instead. He broke a thin eldar warrior backwards over his knee. He struck another in the face, his genhanced senses picking up the distinctive sound of shattering nose bones being driven into brain, then swung around looking for the next kill.

The others were already running towards another flight of wide rockcrete stairs.

‘Do not be distracted,’ Sorrlock said flatly over the vox. ‘Our time is running short.’

More and more siren alarms sounded, calling the eldar from across the city back to the safety of their warp portal.

Now Sorrlock took the stairs four at a time. The stairwell wound up, doubling back over itself at plain rockcrete landings fifty steps apart. As he approached the third landing he tossed a frag grenade up onto the stairwell, timing the explosion to the millisecond, and reached the landing as the last fragments of shrapnel flew by.

His augmetic eyes were running at combat speed. It had the effect of expanding time – the pulling of a trigger seemed almost a minute long. The cyber-optic connections within his brain moved at a speed that not even the eldar could counter. He targeted and fired, the combi-weapon kicking slowly in his hand as each bolter shell exited the barrel. He watched as the rocket accelerant fired in a fierce explosion of yellow flame, his mind calculating the trajectory of each round, the movement vectors of each target, the percentage hit probability, how many more shots it would take to achieve the ninety-nine per cent death/maimed/inoperative threshold he had learned to trust. At this speed, his arm seemed lazily ponderous. He had seven bolt shells in the air at one time. Each one was aimed at a different target. He watched each one strike home, confirming the hit.

As they smashed into a four-doored chamber, more flesh-constructs fell on them, wrapping serpent arms about them, serrated knives searching for weak spots.

There were hundreds of them, snapping and clawing. Within moments Cassius was pinned against the wall, and Skarr-Hedin was wounded and

slowing rapidly. Pranus filled the room with bolter fire, but even as the attackers fell away more dropped in to replace them.

Sorrlock killed eight in mere seconds, reloaded and started to fire again, but as he reached the end of the corridor a tail caught him about his throat and dragged him back. Its skin shifted in texture as the muscles within it tightened. Sorrlock's metal throat creaked with the strain, which would have snapped any other Space Marine's neck. The tail kept wrapping about him, constricting about his chest and arm as a fanged mouth snapped at his face.

Normal augmetics would have buckled against such pressure, but Sorrlock's were the work of an Iron Father. Even so, the finely calibrated ball sockets creaked and a hydraulic pipe on the bicep bulged and began to leak. Alarms flashed within Sorrlock's retinal display even as he reached across with his bionic hand. From the fingers slid thin knife blades. He grasped the thing's body and his hand snapped shut, shearing straight through muscle, bone and nerves.

The serpent creature whipped round. It was fast, even by Sorrlock's standards. It wrapped around his wrist three times, and a flailing appendage drove a poisoned blade into his plackart, squirting hissing venoms into a gut of wires and pistons and nutri-cabling. It stabbed again, higher this time, seeking flesh, veins – the agony that would paralyse its foe, venoms that would down even a Space Marine within moments.

Sorrlock twisted, braced his feet and slammed his enemy against the wall, but his foe's grip grew tighter. Chances of success began to decline rapidly. Consequential probabilities began to fall as well. Life expectancies of his fellow kill team members. Success of the mission. Probabilities of kill team extraction. All falling.

The machine within him snarled as it processed alternative solutions.

The probability of success was too small.

*Too small. Too small.*

Options were limited. The consequences were dire, perhaps critical. All probabilities were against them. Sorrlock's logic circuits froze as the variables spiralled beyond his ability to compute.

Sometimes, when Sorrlock slept or powered down, his human mind would remember life when his body was still merely flesh and blood. The tingle of skin. The imperfections of a human body. Sometimes, when he dreamt, the armourglass barrier within his mind dissolved and emotions filled him as they had once done.

Anger. Hurt. Pride.

Pain.

When he woke, the separation from sleep and emotion was always a shock.

The machine gave him so much more. It was precise and logical.

It was not weak.

Not even the Emperor could live without it.

It kept Ennox Sorrlock alive. It gave him power. It made him more than he had been.

Iron was strong. It did not fail.

*Now you are strong. You are man and machine. You are more than an Iron Hand. You are iron limbs, iron spirit, iron will. You will not fail.*

*Do not fail yourself. Your Clan. Your Chapter. The Golden Throne.*

*You have been given a great honour, Sorrlock. You will not forget. You cannot forget.*

*The machine does not forget.*

The machine is perfect.

*I am a machine.*

*I am perfection.*

But sometimes, when the data failed him, all that was left was Sorrlock's fierce, *human* will to survive. That refused to die, even when the data was stacked against it.

He dragged the serpent to his head. Butted it. Trapped it. Bit it. His metal teeth tore through the flesh.

The blood of the creature tasted foul. He spat out chunks and bit again.

Mouthful by mouthful, he gnawed it down to the spine and cracked the bones between his teeth. The creature went slack. He spat again as he threw it to the floor, lifted his combi-weapon and pumped six shots through its body.

The predictive scroll of statistics began to slow, and then moved into a rapid reverse as he fired about the room, putting bolt rounds into the

snarling faces that ringed him.

The room was a blur. These xenos moved faster than even he could see at times.

‘Sorrlock!’ Cassius hissed through gritted teeth. ‘Pranus is injured!’

‘I will try to aid him,’ Sorrlock said, but statistics from Pranus’ power armour showed that his systems were collapsing under a wash of toxins. The chances of the team’s survival were already low. He ran the cogitations in milliseconds. He had to aid Cassius first.

He put a bolt round through the back of the creature that embraced Cassius in its serpent coils, and two more into the five-armed thing that lunged at Skarr-Hedin. Both rounds hit. Skarr-Hedin threw the clawed hands off, and the creature’s sting-tipped tail made a few last efforts to stab through his armour before it fell dead. Sorrlock kept up a storm of fire, keeping Cassius and Skarr-Hedin free to fight.

‘I will cover you!’ Pranus choked as he reloaded his bolter. ‘Move, brothers!’

## X

Sorrlock burst out onto the open roof. The warp portal flared in the air above him. It was oval, like an egg, bulging on all sides. As he slowed, three eldar jetbikes powered through the air towards the shimmering alien vista beyond it.

Sorrlock identified them as the same ones who had killed the human in the street. He threw himself back as they swept just over his head, razored blades thrumming in the air as they passed. The portal crackled blue and purple as they approached, strands reaching out to swallow them whole.

He let them go and spun about, looking for the mission target. He spotted an open-topped raider skimmer that was careering up the canyon from the south. It swung under gantries and archways, around rusting chains. His augmetic eyes zoomed in.

There on the deck stood their target: Archon Tehmaq.

Behind him was a face he had seen a thousand times in his nightmares.

*The Black Spider.*

About them were the archon’s retinue, all dressed in black armour, their

faces hidden behind horned masks.

He pointed. 'Ident positive. Target acquired.'

'Skarr-Hedin, engage!' Cassius shouted.

The Space Wolf was bleeding from a wound in his side, but he did not slow as he strode to the lip of the building, heavy bolter primed to fire. But Sorrlock did not have time to offer a warning before a hulking figure burst through the floor at Skarr-Hedin's feet and threw him backwards. It was monstrously large – huge slabs of muscle, with a slavering head ending in a knot of tubes that hung about its head like hair. It had six arms. Each one ended with a terrible blade or drill or long, venom-dripping needle.

Skarr-Hedin swung about. It was difficult to hit something coming at him with such speed. He fired as he fell, rounds going wildly astray. Some hit. Others trailed up into the sky. The six arms wrapped him in a dreadful embrace, a fanged mouth gnashing at his throat. Behind the creature the raider's guns opened fire, blazes hurtling up towards them.

Cassius ducked. His crozius was sizzling as he ran to help the Space Wolf. 'We must slow them,' he hissed. 'Sorrlock!'

The thing tore at Skarr-Hedin in berserk fury. Its snout snapped at his throat. The arms stabbed and tore and crushed. Sorrlock calculated that he had six seconds to engage this threat before the archon came within range.

'Affirmative,' he voxed, aiming at the hulking flesh-construct's head first, but his rounds failed to penetrate the armoured skull. Sorrlock's sensors scanned the creature again, searching for vulnerabilities.

The movement slowed in his enhanced vision.

He took in every twitch of muscle beneath the skin, saw the pump of blood through its veins.

The pattern was clear. This thing possessed two hearts.

He targeted each one. As the metal coils in his brain spiralled away, assessing alternative weak spots in the internal bone mass, his human instincts saw only *twin heart, fused ribcage*.

It took a long moment for Sorrlock to believe what his data showed him. Despite all the changes, the thing felt familiar. It looked like a son of Medusa, the same dark planet that had raised him. The same clan, in fact...

The evidence was clear: this hulking thing had once been a Space Marine. A brother of the Iron Hands Chapter.

The realisation chilled him. Not only was this a Space Marine, he also

recognised it. He knew its name. They had been scouts together, had been through gene-implantation and training together. And here they were now, on an abandoned planet, years of warp travel away from their home, each changed in their own way. And now the creature was tearing Skarr-Hedin apart.

The strength of the emotional response startled him.

‘Grimmack!’ he cried, as if he could call the spirit of his brother back to him. ‘Stop!’

But the thing did not stop. It snarled and savaged and punched a blade-fist through the front of Skarr-Hedin’s armour, kept driving the blade up towards his vital organs.

‘Grimmack!’ he shouted again.

Warning symbols flashed in his helm.

Sorrlock had run out of time.

## XI

The eldar raider came on at seemingly impossible speed. Its bladed sail swung as the craft flew, strange runes in black on a purple background. Heads hung by their knotted hair from the craft’s railings, their slack mouths open in wild terror. The archon’s black-armoured retinue drew sickle blades from their belts, lifted their pistols to fire.

The archon himself was piloting. His mouth was open in a fey smile. His white face was flecked with blood, lit by the searing flashes of lance fire.

Skarr-Hedin battered at the thing that had once been Grimmack. The two of them raged at one another, berserk fury on both sides.

‘I have this one, brother,’ Skarr-Hedin hissed as he drove his combat knife into the second heart. He was gasping for breath. ‘Kill the archon!’

‘Archon approaching,’ Sorrlock voxed. He engaged his combi-melta, focusing his augmetic eyes on the foe. ‘I have him.’

As the raider swung up towards the warp portal, Sorrlock aimed and fired. The air shimmered with the sudden heat, and the shot hit the craft in the bows. It should have cut through and hit the archon as well, but the raider veered wildly, caught a hanging gantry, swung about like a ball on a chain and did almost a full rotation before slamming down in a ruin, fifty

yards from the gate.

Sorrlock leapt towards it as eldar warriors were thrown onto the ground in crumpled heaps. He focused on one figure – the archon – who bounded unscathed from the wreckage, pirouetting through the air. Behind him, the Black Spider swung on its many limbs.

Cassius was shouting, but all Sorrlock saw was Archon Tehmaq moments from the safety of the portal. He lifted his bolter and his augmetic targeting systems worked so fast that time seemed to slow. The archon went from a blur to a slowly cartwheeling humanoid in sharp-edged black armour. The three members of his surviving retinue sprinted after him – to shield their master or to escape with him, Sorrlock could not tell.

And there, again, was the Black Spider.

Sorrlock's data stream locked on the thought of what the haemonculus had done to Grimmack. What it had done to *him*. He wished that he could feel hatred for it. Wished he could fire on the Black Spider...

But he was a battle-brother of the Deathwatch, an Iron Hand, perfected through augmentation into a weapon of war. The hatred was there, but it was distant and faint.

He fired.

The two bolts moved with a beautiful slowness. The rocket cores were like flowers of fire with blue centres and shivering petals of yellow and red. The first bolt, a hellfire round, spun as it flew. Light glinted off the microscopic scratches like starlight on the hull of a turning spaceship, almost black against the darkness of wilderness space.

It struck the archon low in the gut, where the lobster panels of his black armour bucked and crumpled as the shock waves rippled. But it exploded without penetrating. It gave off a shower of shrapnel and droplets of bio-acid, shifting and reforming as they flew through the air. It scored spreading lines in the archon's shining arcane armour, like the impact of an asteroid on the dust of a moon.

The second bolt hit the same spot, now acid-weakened by the first. It was a dragonfire round that smashed through the armour, into the archon's gut, where it exploded with a sudden glare of green flame.

Tendrils of fire spread from the wound. They wrapped about the archon in a tortuous embrace. He stumbled and fell. The other xenos, the screeching Black Spider amongst them, were already leaping for the warp gate.

Then they were gone, and the gate shuddered out of existence like an air bladder bursting in reverse. An aching purple afterlight hung in the air, flickering and casting strange un-shadows across the rooftop as it faded.

The archon crawled towards the place where the portal had been. He clawed feebly for purchase on the rockcrete, his scorched belly flat against the floor, his face a rictus of astonishment and pain.

Sorrlock stood over him and put a third bolt shell into his head.

‘Mission complete,’ he reported.

They dragged the remains of Grimmack from Skarr-Hedin and the Space Wolf propped himself up. There was blood in his beard. The toxins were making his movements laboured and weak. When his voice came, it was rasping and pained. ‘I killed it for you, Iron Hand. We fought each other to the death. Your shame is cleansed.’

Cassius knelt, and pulled back the ruined power armour to inspect Skarr-Hedin’s wounds.

Even for a Space Marine, they were mortal.

Skarr-Hedin knew this and was not afraid. He laughed messily. ‘I shall go and feast with my brothers. I shall tell them that I died bravely!’

‘Hold, brother,’ Cassius said. ‘The gunship is on its way.’

Skarr-Hedin snarled against his pain. As they waited, the purple light in the air above them continued to boil away into nothingness, colours and patterns forming and dissolving.

Sorrlock could see faces in the patterns. They came forward, as if to peer at him, and then faded back. Cassius powered up his crozius, but Sorrlock shook his head. ‘They will not fight.’

‘Then why do they linger?’

‘They have come for their master’s body,’ Sorrlock said.

‘Not to take vengeance?’

‘No. The xenos are cowards.’ Sorrlock stopped inches from the fading mist. He reached out to touch it, but Cassius stayed his hand.

‘Don’t,’ he said. ‘You do not want to know what lies beyond there.’

Sorrlock lowered his hand. ‘I know already,’ he said. ‘Pain. A place of many screams. Many nightmares. A place without hope.’

## XII

The Storm Eagle's engines roared as it returned the survivors of Kill Team Torrent to their waiting ship. Skarr-Hedin's body lay beneath a shroud. Pranus was being tended by two medicae adepts, the Novamarine having mercifully lost consciousness. Sorrlock sat bolt upright, his metal hands braced on his knees, and Cassius watched him. The Iron Hand still appeared to feel nothing. He had the same silence as the darkness of Deadhenge.

Sorrlock knew he was being watched – Cassius could see that from the dull glint of his augmetic eyes.

At last the Chaplain spoke. 'You could have killed the Spider, brother.'

Sorrlock turned his augmetic eye and regarded him. 'Affirmative.'

'Then why didn't you?'

'He was not our designated target.'

'But I would have caught the archon before he escaped.'

'Yes. My calculations say you would.'

'So, why? Look what he did to you. Your squad. Your brother, whom he captured. I brought you not only for your insight and your logic, but also to stoke the fire in your cold heart once more. You could have taken revenge.'

The half-metal face made no response.

'Part of me wanted to,' Sorrlock's monotone voice came at last.

There was a pause, a long pause, and when he spoke again it was almost as footnote.

'But that part is weak.'

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Justin D. Hill** bought his first White Dwarf in August, 1982, and has been painting, playing and writing ever since. He is the author of the Warhammer 40,000 stories '*Last Step Backwards*' and '*Truth Is My Weapon*', and the Warhammer tales '*Golgfag's Revenge*' and '*The Battle of Whitestone*' for Black Library. He has won multiple awards for his work, including the Sunday Times Book of the Year. He lives and works in York.

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