

WARHAMMER 40,000



DEATHWATCH 6

FIRST TO HUNT

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Chris Dows

Jetek Suberei opened his eyes and looked up to the blazing twin suns of Ballestae, their harsh white glow unfiltered by helmet or visor. Reaching down with his ungloved left hand, he touched the barren rocky surface of the planet and, like any good son of Chogoris, tried to read its secrets.

Sheer walls of granite towered hundreds of yards above him on either side. Their shape and form funnelled a vicious wind that whipped dust and tiny fragments of rock onto his exposed face, flicking the ends of his drooping moustache and long, braided topknot. Suns and breeze were scorching in their own way, but none of this registered on the kneeling Deathwatch warrior, too focussed on learning what the floor of the yawning chasm had to tell him about what lay ahead.

Unfortunately, the tale being told was of little use.

‘Difficult to say how much further we must travel, Vengla. You will have to take flight once again and be the eyes of Suberei. The xenos scum cannot be too far away.’

Rising to his feet, the White Scar strode over to his idling bike and snatched his helmet up from the broad seat. Thrusting it back on, he reached for his gauntlet and clicked it into place, but instead of mounting the battered vehicle, he extended his left arm and took the weight of the magnificent cyber-eagle as she glided from her perch on top of the bike’s rear wheel cowling. His impulse-link with the hunting bird might be at the most feral, basic level when they were not in direct communion, but during the long and isolated scouting missions that Suberei favoured, he spoke to her as though she understood every word.

Vengla took flight and climbed swiftly, using the swirling currents and rising heat of Ballestae's unforgiving surface to twirl into the open sky. It filled Suberei's heart with joy to see her soar. It brought back his memories of being a child on Mundus Planus, when he would go hunting with his tribe on the brutal Chogorian steppes. It mattered not that Vengla carried the augmentations of the White Scars Techmarines, that she was not a pure-breed – in fact, with her enhanced vision, power and reactions she had proved a great ally and, on occasion, a formidable weapon.

Canyons. Harsh rocky outcrops. The distant horizon.

Images of her hunting perspective formed in his retinal display as he mounted his bike and gunned the accelerator. He felt the deep treads of the rear wheel bite into the chasm's rough surface and set off. If Vengla was his companion, this bike was his most beloved possession.

Every time he mounted the iron steed he felt at home. There was some truth to the saying that Chogorians were born in the saddle; he felt a feeling of absolute freedom and power every time he went out riding. However, there was something unique about this bike. It had served him so well for so long that he found it unthinkable that he would ever replace it. When he had first met his new Deathwatch brothers, he'd had to fight, and fight hard, to keep it. They couldn't understand his attachment to the dented, scarred machine when better and newer technology was available. When it became clear that Suberei's usual good humour and bluffly eccentric manner didn't extend to losing his bike, a compromise was finally reached and the old bike had been given a fearsome weapons upgrade. Such was the state of its once-white livery that the need to paint it black had been questioned.

With a sudden lean to the left, Suberei deftly avoided a massive sheet of rock thrusting up from the ground and sped onto a wide, flat ledge – one of thousands that ran along the jagged walls of Ballestae's myriad canyons and ravines. This world had been harsh enough before the eldar had invaded, and had continued to provide no comfort or tactical advantage as wave after wave of the xenos battered against the embattled Imperial presence.

But then, when one final assault would have likely engulfed the Imperial forces, the eldar had inexplicably stopped their onslaught and withdrawn deep inside their own territory.

‘That is why Suberei is here – to find out why, and to bring the storm.’

Suberei might have been addressing his eagle, but whether or not she heard he didn't care. He liked to talk to himself. On more than one occasion fellow battle-brothers had commented on it. He did not care about that either. He was the Living Hurricane, the master of the Chogorian steppes, always first to hunt, and–

A flash of red. Then another. Very fast, closing.

‘Higher. Go higher.’

Again – there. Two vehicles with xenos riders.

Eldar jetbikes. ‘Return. Now.’

Suberei went up a couple of gears, the sudden increase in speed jolting him backwards and bringing the broad front wheel inches off the upwardly angled granite. In front of him was a steep incline leading to an overhang of rock from the mesa running along the top of the sheer canyon wall. Vengla's commanding view showed that the grav vehicles were heading towards him down the same valley, and the last thing he needed was to be discovered out in the open like this.

He had been travelling constantly for nearly two days, moving as fast as he could across the wide-open spaces, then ducking and dodging through twisting passageways to avoid any long-range patrols. Curiously, there had been none. The reconnaissance pieced together from the single functioning Imperial orbital recon unit had been imprecise, but the impression was of a significant concentration of eldar forces fairly close to this position. Attracting their attention and bringing them down upon him before he'd even managed to discover what was going on was not part of his plan, nor his usual stealthy approach.

Pulling back again on the throttle, he made his mount buck with raw power, vapour streaming from the exhausts as it hurtled up the glassy slope. Suberei leaned forwards, anchoring his weight so the bike could not flip over.

Within seconds he was at the top of the incline and slamming on the brakes, juddering to a stop and cutting the engine with a stab of his thumb. Vengla plummeted past him then arced gracefully back, outer wing feathers and razor-sharp talons outstretched. She dropped onto Suberei's forearm before taking her usual perch behind his seat. Reaching into a small container to the rear of the bike, Suberei pulled out a lump of meat

and tossed it backwards without looking. Vengla snatched it with a darting nod and devoured it gratefully.

Suberei could feel his surroundings whisper through the sole of his boot. The planet, it seemed, talked to him when it chose to.

Dismounting with an easy grace, he slipped onto his chest and inched towards the outcrop's edge. Luckily, the valley below curved steeply on his left then straightened out for a couple of miles. Far to the right was the huge rock he had dodged to ride this slope. The approaching eldar would likely have to gain altitude when they spotted it, and hopefully they'd be too preoccupied to look up any higher. For a few seconds his blood boiled and his hearts pumped in anticipation of combat, but he suppressed the reaction.

Now was not the time to attack. Now was the time to gather intelligence.

Fine dust began to fall from the huge, sheer rock face dozens of yards opposite, and the cyber-eagle clacked its beak behind him.

‘Still, Vengla. They will pass any time now.’

The dust turned to a mist of stones shaking loose from the walls on both sides, raining down onto Suberei's armour. He heard the high-pitched whine of the eldar engines, amplified and distorted by the canyon. And suddenly there they were – two, riding at a frantic pace side by side. The closest, slightly smaller in frame than the other, had the better line and nosed ahead on the turn. Despite the angle, Suberei could see the white emblem of the Saim-Hann craftworld painted on the long, sloping fairing, and the flapping pennants fixed to their backs. The markings were not identical – both had subtle variations, signifying that they were from different kin-bands. That in itself was not unusual.

The fact they were both hacking at each other with swords most certainly was.

They passed by Suberei's position in a flash, the outer rider catching up despite its rear left aileron nearly hitting the rock face. The other took another swipe back at its rival's gleaming white helmet, but in doing so unbalanced itself momentarily and drifted to the right. This was all the space the larger rider needed to accelerate into, leaving the other with the option of pulling up and away over the rapidly approaching sheet of fallen granite, conceding first place, or colliding headlong into it.

Suberei was incredulous. ‘Are they trying to kill each other?’

As the leader crouched down and flipped the jetbike on its side, it was clear that no thought was being given to the one behind. The larger rider disappeared through the narrow gap, leaving the outmanoeuvred smaller rider banging his fist on the top of his cowling before pulling up sharply. But despite the eldar's fast reactions, the bottom of one of its stabilising fins snapped off and spun away. Then he, too, disappeared out of sight.

Vengla squawked loudly and flapped her wings as larger rocks and debris fell from the walls above and opposite her master's position. Realising the danger of the situation, Suberei remounted his bike and headed back down the slope, ducking and dodging the rock falls. Judging the maximum height he could safely jump to the canyon floor, Suberei wheel-spun the bike sharply to the left and launched it into space, ahead of the obstacle the eldar had just passed. The landing was harsh, jolting Suberei from his seat and throwing Vengla violently to one side, but the bike's suspension absorbed the worst of it. Quickly checking that his shield and weapons were still attached, he flicked the bike one hundred and eighty degrees and gunned the engine.

'Yes, Vengla – Suberei will follow the route they have taken here.'

Directly behind him, the eagle screeched and wiped its hooked beak across the seat's ridge.

'You are correct. They may return this way again. The actions of the xenos scum are... unusual.'

Vengla ruffled her feathers and tightened her grip around the small bar upon which she perched. Protected in the slipstream of Suberei's power armour, she almost casually took to preening as her master used the deep shadows created by the high canyon walls to hide his progress. While the morsels he provided had kept starvation at bay, her hunger for fresh meat would be growing. Very soon, she would hope to feast.

Suberei looked down at the auspex built into the controls of his bike and frowned. It still provided less detail than normal vision, and was nowhere near as good as the view Vengla could give him through her superior eyes. He didn't need the scanner anyway, as Ballestae was beginning to talk to him directly. As the miles and hours passed, hints and suggestions of unseen terrain whispered from the wind's directional change and the arrangement of rocky layers. As he took a long, broad slope to avoid yet

more fallen rock, his thoughts turned back to what he had witnessed.

Replaying the events through his mind, he focussed on different details – the variations in the eldar symbols, the riding techniques they had adopted and, in particular, their ferocity against each other. He knew that it had been more than a race.

‘The xenos were fighting each other, Vengla. But for what?’

In the far distance, Suberei could see evidence of heavy weapons fire on the opposite canyon wall where a rough entrance to the valley had been fashioned. Recognising it from the fractured images the orbital unit had transmitted days ago, Suberei came to a crunching halt and turned off the bike’s engine, surveying the base of the sloping cliff before him. It was a dead end, the barrier wall rising up and backwards out of sight into the darkening sky. He knew that on the other side, nestled in a well-protected valley, were the eldar forces. It wasn’t impregnable by any stretch of the imagination, but the towering granite created a perfect defensive base. Ballestae clearly favoured the xenos’ way of war, but if the Imperium had been lucky enough to land there first, the course of this long and bloody battle might have been quite different.

Suberei saw the shadow a fraction before he heard the howl of a Vyper’s engines.

Heaving his bike into the quickening gloom of the chasm’s floor, he watched the skimmer slow near the base of the incline, its rear gunner turning slowly from left to right before the blood-red machine gathered speed and roared away.

‘Nothing more than a routine patrol,’ Suberei murmured. ‘Suberei will await darkness, then go hunting.’

Finding some excellent cover underneath a pile of fallen boulders, he cleaned his weapons as Vengla attended to her feathers. Once night began to close in, Suberei looked towards the purple darkness of the slope.

‘Blades or bolts, Vengla?’

The cyber-eagle clicked her beak and cocked her head quizzically at the question.

‘Suberei agrees. Blades it is.’

Suberei reached to the rear of his bike and retrieved his power sword and shorter duelling *kindjal* from its ceremonial animal-skin sheath. Examining both curved blades in the fading light, he nodded to himself

with satisfaction. Vengla opened up her wings and stretched, waiting for Suberei to extend his arm, but he shook his head.

‘No, I think not. You must stay here and guard the steed.’

Ignoring her indignant wing flapping, Suberei flicked the kindjal around in a couple of rapid circles, delighting in its perfect balance.

Now he was ready.

By day, Ballestae’s twin suns beat down onto its desolate surface, scorching what passed for flora and burning any living creature exposed to their harsh rays. The night offered no better comfort, the thin atmosphere and lack of cloud plunging the temperatures well below freezing. As far as finding cover on this inhospitable world went, crawling up an ebony cliff face in black armour was about as good as it got.

Occasional Vypers soared overhead, and while it was difficult to find foot and hand holds on the near-vertical slope, when he stopped moving he blended in with his surroundings perfectly. The only real problem was maintaining grip. The night brought with it frost and ice, making progress slow and precarious. An occasional slip and loss of a few yards was a trade-off he was willing to make, as long as he didn’t start a rockslide that might give away his position. That had been the main reason he’d not brought the eagle with him – if she had to take flight to save herself, she might attract attention.

As the sky brightened with an artificial glow in front of him, he was even more convinced that he’d done the right thing. All he could do was hope the ridge he was crawling towards was nothing more than a silhouette to the enemy.

The view that finally met him was extraordinary. A few hundred yards below, virtually every part of the rough valley was covered with elaborate temporary structures, grav-machine tethers and floodlit open workshops nestled in between. Clusters of ornate scarlet dwellings and lines of jetbikes stretched at least two miles into the distance, penned in by near-vertical cliffs on every side. Any gaps between the enormous walls were heavily guarded, but as Suberei scrutinised the mass of red bodies moving around, he realised that this was not, in fact, a single eldar encampment.

They were all Saim-Hann, of that he was certain, but the differing pennants and banners flapping from half a dozen satellite camps suggested

this was an assembly of disparate kin-bands.

He found it curious that there was very little movement *between* the sectors. The xenos seemed to be keeping to their own boundaries, and even the sentries standing at the jagged entrances to the valley were subtly different in appearance and deployment. His eyes fell upon a large, steeply raked rectangular arena directly below his position. Even though it was in near-darkness and deserted save for a few eldar attending its outer structure, the position and enormous size was significant. He considered that it might be there to serve as neutral ground. However, its exact purpose eluded him.

There was no unity here. They had surely all arrived on Ballestae together but, unlike the Deathwatch he proudly served, these aliens did not move as one.

The way the outer camps had clear avenues between them suggested a deliberate attempt to remain separated, and his Chogorian sensibilities picked up a deep unease. As if to confirm this, his attention was drawn to the assembling of several dozen eldar from facing camps in the middle distance. It was difficult to make out details this far away, but he didn't need to – the body language of the opposing factions was becoming increasingly belligerent, and when blades appeared from nowhere, they were brandished with clear intent. Within seconds, the straggled front lines were joined by dozens on either side, the ensuing jostling and pushing narrowing the gap between their camps. Just as it looked as if they might come to blows, several elaborately dressed eldar moved swiftly into the middle of the pack, wielding their ceremonial spears in a flurry of robes and outstretched warning hands.

At first it appeared that the two groups would back down, but the pushing continued until the stand-off erupted.

The brawl would likely have continued long into the night had the sky not been lit with a brilliant display of power by the tallest of the eldar warlocks. Suberei watched as the factions shuffled back hesitantly from one another, leaving several armoured bodies lying prone on the ground to be tended by their kin. The leader, resplendent in black robes and red glowing jewels, pointed towards the dimly lit arena.

An audible roar went up not only from the two conflicting kin-bands but the entire valley, as the other camps had gathered to watch the outcome.

Lights burst into brilliance around the arena, and Suberei ducked out of sight as thousands of eldar stampeded towards the amphitheatre.

He took in a very deep breath and exhaled slowly. It was likely that this was something never before witnessed by an outsider.

A flash of red registered in his peripheral vision, and he flattened himself immediately onto the freezing rock, clutching the edge for anchorage. He didn't move for long minutes after the patrolling Vyper had turned away, and by the time he looked back down into the valley the arena's steeply raked platforms had filled to overflowing.

Standing on a central dais facing Suberei's position, the tallest warlock rose from its seat and pointed slowly to the warriors arrayed on its left, then those opposing them on the right, eliciting more cheers and, Suberei fancied, furious insults from every side of the arena. Banners were waved to show clan affiliation and blades were readied under the harsh lights. Every xenos rose as two single eldar strode into the empty floor from opposite entrances. Both were armed with long swords, and both wore no helmet. Having fought several of their number over the last few months, he also recognised the style of their garb.

'Clan chiefs. Now *that* is interesting.'

There was no announcement needed, no further ceremony required. The two Saim-Hann ran at each other, swords held high and behind as was their way. With the first clash of blades came a tremendous roar, the audience forgetting their own petty squabbles and focusing instead on the melee unfolding before them. The slightly larger of the two chieftains spun on the ball of his foot and rotated his body to the left, avoiding a slicing downward blow from his opponent. In a split second he countered with an upward arcing slash, but the smaller eldar flipped backwards, the blade glancing off his right shoulder.

The speed was frenetic, the intention clear – to draw blood and to win.

The first whirled his body in a spiral and leaped into the air, but instead of using the height advantage to strike down onto the exposed head of his foe, he instead sliced through the pole carrying the opposing kin-band's pennant. It fluttered to the floor and, on landing next to it, the triumphant warrior ground it into the dirt with his boot heel.

One side of the arena erupted in fury and, within seconds, a much larger battle was taking place. Eldar fell and jumped from the terraces onto the

bare ground below, engulfing the two clan chiefs in a sea of red.

This was not the dignified race that Suberei knew. The scene was one of utter chaos, with non-aligned groups who had come to watch throwing themselves into the fight for good measure. Things were little better outside the arena, where bystanders were enjoying their own contests. In less than a minute, every xenos in the valley was at another's throat. It was an astonishing sight, breathtaking and exciting in its ferocity.

Suberei wished he could call in a Naval bombardment right now and finish the whole gathering off in one deadly salvo, but he knew that was impossible. They'd lost their support ships when the eldar had last reinforced their own numbers, and while Imperial forces were doubtless making their way towards Ballestae and would certainly drive back the xenos invaders upon arrival, the Astra Militarum were currently without support. It occurred to Suberei that any action he might personally take at this point would not only be suicidal, but likely go unnoticed in the pandemonium.

While he didn't yet know the motives behind this hostility, his scouting experience was taking over and telling him to get away. He now knew the lie of the enemy land, even if he couldn't explain why the eldar had halted their attacks, and with this information, the Imperial forces could bring the fight back to the xenos.

At precisely the same moment as he came to this conclusion, the ledge onto which he was clinging broke apart.

Given the ice-rimed surface and the steep angle of the rock face, Suberei didn't have a chance of preventing his fall. Despite spreading his arms and legs out as wide as possible, his speed increased rapidly and within seconds he was hurtling down the cliff face, his breastplate and the forward rims of his pauldrons taking most of the grinding impacts. He tried to keep vertical but his foot connected with an outcrop, spinning him wildly. Instead he threw his left shoulder forwards, quickly flipping himself onto his back. His armour was, of course, capable of withstanding such a battering but he could not afford to strike a rock headfirst at such speed. Opening his arms, he scrabbled around for a hold, the stars flashing by in a blur. When he finally got one, the shock nearly tore his arm out of its socket but it had the desired effect, arcing him around so he was now sliding down the ledge feet-first and on his back.

If he felt that his situation had improved, spotting the two eldar jetbikes tearing towards him from left and right quickly dispelled the illusion.

The rock erupted with shuriken fire on either side as the red machines hurtled towards him, but their angle of attack and the speed with which Suberei was travelling meant that their lethal hail sliced wide of the mark. Suberei credited the enemy with the sense to turn quickly and come in for another pass, and with no stomach for dying in such a fashion he urgently looked past his feet to the rapidly approaching ground below.

As one jetbike banked sharply to the side, Suberei lifted his knees up towards his chest, sliding on his armour's backpack down the unforgiving rock, his vision immediately blurred by the vibration. Tensing his stomach muscles, he thrust both hands down and threw his body forwards so that he was perpendicular with the cliff face. He knew the contact between his feet and the rock would be brief at the speed he was travelling, and if he did not time his manoeuvre precisely he would topple forwards onto his chest again. As soon as the flat of his boots met the speeding rock below, he kicked away as best he could.

Now he was in freefall, the vast dark mesa stretching out from the base of the mountainside below him, but his sudden leap from the rock face caught the closing eldar riders by surprise. The one on his right tightened its turn and began firing, but stopped as the closer one on the left hurtled into the line of fire. Suberei could sense the ground rushing up to greet him and tensed himself for the impact, but the eldar wasn't going to be cheated of his prey. Pointing his jetbike straight at the falling Space Marine, the pilot opened fire at near point-blank range, but overshot, grazing the armour on his shoulder.

Suberei seized his chance. Activating his power sword, which mercifully had remained mag-locked at his hip during his crazed descent, he connected with the underside of the jetbike's tapered nose, slicing through its slaved weaponry and severing vital control systems. The machine immediately flipped onto its back, hurling its rider out of its seat and towards the canyon behind. Suberei roared with delight, but his victory cry was thumped out of him as he slammed hard into the surface of Ballestae.

The few warning runes that were not already red immediately changed colour in his visor, and Suberei lay on his back for dangerous seconds, waiting for the rush of adrenaline from his hearts to clear his head.

Then an image intruded upon his vision, one of wheeling dots of light and shadows.

Vengla had taken flight, and was on her way to help.

Through her eyes, he saw the second Saim-Hann jetbike speeding towards his prone position, likely believing him too stunned from the impact to realise that his attacker was nearly upon him. Suberei fought the urge to stand, instead remaining still and counting on the nature of his enemy to engage at close quarters rather than shred him from a distance. Sure enough the jetbike levelled out only yards before his position, its rider leaping into the air, blades drawn, before the sleek machine had come to a whining halt.

Suberei sprung to his feet, the weight of his armour providing vital purchase on the icy rock. The eldar might have the advantage of speed but the blades it wielded, while dangerous, were nothing compared to the power sword that now hummed in Suberei's right hand. In his left, he held the kindjal in a dagger fashion, and used it to block the xenos' first thrust. Its second blade moved in fast to Suberei's right, but the blow was parried with his power sword, the sheer brute force of his move knocking the warrior to the freezing floor. Rolling into a kneeling position, the Saim-Hann brought its blades up once again and pushed itself forwards with extraordinary speed. Unfortunately, the surface underfoot did not give the creature the momentum it had expected, and Suberei leaned in to capitalise on the split second of poor coordination. His power sword entered the eldar precisely in the middle of its abdomen and didn't stop until the hilt was blocked by what remained of its armour.

Suberei wrenched his crackling blade back and the xenos collapsed to the ground, a gentle cloud of steam wafting upwards from the gaping wound.

Vengla cried from high above, and Suberei focussed his thoughts on her vision. Shapes were flying into the inky sky, myriad shadowy forms backlit by the glowing lamps of the encampment. The eldar had mobilised in force, alerted to his presence by those just slain.

'To your perch, Vengla! Hurry!'

Suberei powered down his sword blade and sheathed his kindjal, then strode towards the shelter under which his beloved bike was waiting.

He was on it in moments. Jabbing at the ignition, he slammed one foot onto the ground, pulled back on the accelerator and spun the howling

machine around just as Vengla shrieked into place behind him. High above, the sound of multiple xenos grav-turbines added to the cacophony as they echoed from the stone. Suberei roared into the gloom, riding as fast as he dare given the limited range of his vision. At times he stopped dead, using the darkest parts of the valley for shelter, and at others he drove with scant seconds' warning of deadly barriers looming in his path. He called on every trick he'd learned in the White Scars vanguard to avoid capture as Vypers and jetbikes flashed overhead and, when he took to the ledges of the cliff walls, below his position.

Given a couple more hours of darkness, the broad slope on which Suberei sped could have led him out of danger. This section of canyon was arrow-straight and the ledge relatively free of obstructions. Unfortunately, the first rising sun of Ballestae was already picking up the rough-hewn sides of the path, the angle of the rays chasing away the shadow cover masking his progress. Suberei edged closer and closer to the canyon wall until his handlebar grip was scraping along the rock, but with the second sun also climbing he knew discovery was only a matter of time.

A blur of movement passed overhead, and a shower of rock exploded all around him in a maelstrom of Vyper fire. Vengla squawked loudly, as much in protest as concern, and Suberei ducked low to avoid a boulder as it bounced overhead. More debris fell, clanging off the forward plate arch and wheel guards.

Glancing to his left, Suberei saw the Vyper had descended for a clearer shot. He laughed at their impertinence.

Grabbing his bolt pistol, he fired off-handed at the xenos gunner, putting a bolt through the head of the creature and cracking the pilot's cockpit screen into the bargain. The machine spun upwards and away, disappearing out of view onto the flat plain above. A second Vyper took its place, gliding in and strafing the wall ahead. Granite shards spun and flipped in all directions, and while Suberei's intention was to accelerate through the lethal spray, a slice of rock flipped through the front wheel fork and jammed itself underneath the bike's fairing.

The entire machine flipped forwards with the instant deceleration. Suberei spun over the ledge, barely managing to remain in the saddle, and smashed into an overhang before dropping the bike onto the canyon floor below.

Head reeling, he fired upwards into the belly of the Vyper machine. But instead of turning in to finish him off, it unleashed a point-blank salvo onto the ledge overhanging his bike, cracking the rock above and bringing down several tonnes of shattered stone on top of it. Suberei scrambled out of the way of the descending avalanche, chunks clanging off his armour.

By the time the huge cloud of rock dust had cleared, the eldar machine had disappeared from sight.

Suberei didn't stop to question why they had not pressed their advantage. Instead he leapt up to where his bike's rear wheel could just be seen protruding from the rock fall, drawing his power sword in readiness for attack.

When seconds turned to minutes, he shifted his weight slightly and lowered his pistol.

'Suberei will not fall for xenos trickery,' he murmured. Stepping cautiously forwards, he peered up and scanned the brightening sky to his left and right.

The enemy were nowhere to be seen.

More debris cascaded down onto his helmet and shoulders. Throwing himself back, Suberei waited for the growing landslide to pass in front of him. With a sinking heart, he realised that he could no longer see any part of his bike. It would take an age to dig it out, and even then there was no guarantee it would be salvageable. At that single point in time, if a thousand eldar had appeared before him then he would have torn them all apart in revenge for his loss.

But something equally pressing occurred to him.

'Vengla. Do you live?'

The answer came almost immediately in a beating of wings and high-pitched shrieks. The cyber-eagle landed heavily on Suberei's right pauldron, traces of blood on her beak and around the augmetic implant encompassing her eye. The son of Chogoris extended his right arm and she hopped down onto it, seeming to favour her left leg over her right. Dropping his bolt pistol and throwing off his left gauntlet, Suberei ran an expert hand over her, checking for any obvious wound or injury. She in turn pecked at his fingers, stretched her wings and opened her talons.

'It seems we both live to hunt another day.'

He was relieved, and felt no shame in admitting it.

An hour or so after the landslide, the skies still remained silent. The filters in his helmet reduced the glare from both suns, which now peeped over the ledge.

‘Something is not right here, Vengla. Why would they call off the attack when Suberei was in such a vulnerable position?’

The eagle shuffled along Suberei’s vambrace and tapped her beak on the deactivated power sword’s blade. Suddenly she darted her head up and around, her mouth opened slightly and tongue tasting the air.

‘What is it? What do you sense?’

The bird took flight without bidding. Suberei replaced his gauntlet, grabbed his pistol and followed her for a few hundred yards down the chasm’s littered floor, making a mental note of where his bike lay buried.

With the rock so weak and unstable, it no longer provided reliable cover.

And he knew – both from the eagle’s unease and from the planet itself – that the enemy would be coming.

Spotting a thick ledge high on the vertical striated wall to his left, Suberei took three mighty leaps onto a line of crumbling outcrops and landed heavily, sword now fizzing with energy and bolt pistol ready to unleash a hail of destruction. Closing his eyes, the impulse-link with Vengla crystallised in his auto-senses and razor-sharp images of sky and land filled his mind’s eye.

The canyon in which he crouched was little more than a jagged line across the vast black plain over which the bird flew. There were relatively few other valleys in the vicinity, so any search was bound to concentrate on this chasm sooner rather than later. The eagle climbed higher, the twin suns an occasional flash of brilliant light as she scanned the wide, open sky of Ballestae and the forbidding ground below it.

Shadow. Low to ground. Moving slowly.

Closer. Investigate.

Vengla dropped like a stone, arrowing towards the planet’s surface, her gaze fixed on a closing Vyper. From its raised platform, the rear-mounted gunner warily rotated the long barrel of his shuriken cannon in a methodical search pattern, oblivious to the approaching eagle. When the cyber-eagle’s augmented vision picked out the kin-band symbol on its prow, Suberei grunted in surprise.

Movement. Fast. To the right.

Turn and descend. Careful.

The second Vyper appeared from behind a distant peak, following a criss-cross pattern over a tributary valley. Both machines were conducting quite separate searches from one another, which at first puzzled Suberei.

But then he nodded to himself.

Furthest target. Identify.

Vengla banked sharply to the right and sped towards the Vyper. Suberei focussed his concentration on the front of the twin-pronged cowling. As soon as he saw the white pattern and black chevrons, he recalled his cyber-eagle. Opening his eyes again, he took in a deep breath.

The puzzle fell into place.

The kin-band symbols on the Saim-Hann Vypers were the same as the duelling jetbikes that had nearly crashed into the rock on the valley floor yesterday. They were the clan chiefs who had fought so viciously in the arena last night. Suberei didn't know a great deal about the specific xenos craftworld traditions, but he did know a thing or two about the feuding tribes from his own world of Chogoris.

He knew the importance of being the strongest, the fastest. The first to hunt.

Now it all made sense. The reason that the eldar campaign on Ballestae had faltered was so the rival factions could vie for the honour of delivering the killing blow to the Imperial forces.

The clan chiefs had taken up his pursuit personally.

‘Such hubris! Such arrogance!’

The words were spat rather than spoken. Anger rose once again in Suberei's chest with the realisation that these two rival leaders had clearly decided that he, the Living Hurricane, master of the Chogorian steppes, would be the final prize in their competition. *They* had called off the attack that might have finished him on the valley floor, so that he could be their sport.

Well, that was not going to happen.

Spotting the eagle as a dot on the horizon, Suberei extended his sword arm. In the seconds it took for her to swoop down into the gaping canyon and come to perch on his vambrace, his decision had been made.

If the disunity he had seen in the eldar camp was bad now, how would they react to the elimination of their two strongest champions? The other

lesser factions would throw themselves into the power vacuum, giving Suberei enough time to return with his intelligence and orchestrate a full-scale pre-emptive attack. He wouldn't even have to reach the Imperial front lines – he could break communications silence as soon as he was in range, and they could meet him halfway. Suberei raised his arm and looked into Vengla's piercing eyes.

'Yes, proud friend. You are right. It is time for Suberei to bring the storm.'

Vengla shrieked once then hopped up onto his pauldron, gripping tightly with her talons. Looking out into the brilliantly lit valley, Suberei scanned the opposing rock face for a vantage point but couldn't quite find what he was looking for. Striding back down to the canyon's floor, he jumped and hopped over the rubble, scanning the cloudless sky for any enemy movement. In the upper face of the cliffs, he spotted a large, ragged hole just beneath the plain's edge. To get to it, he would have to climb up and traverse part of the mesa above, but that did not bother him at all.

In fact, it just might work to his advantage.

Ballestae stretched out into the distance all around him and, around half a dozen miles away, he saw the small red speck moving slowly from right to left. With a smile, Suberei strolled boldly out into the open, keeping watch on the Vyper as he did so. It only took a few seconds for it to spot him and, as it turned and sped closer, Suberei mag-locked his power sword, dropped off the ledge into the chasm below and swung himself into the cave mouth with his now free hand.

From above, Suberei heard the howl of the Vyper's engines echo into the valley. Just above his head, the red pincer prow of the grav-machine crept into view, the pilot clearly deciding that caution was the better part of valour. The further it edged forwards, the more Suberei retreated into the body of the cliff, the planet itself hiding him from the sophisticated eldar scanners. If they could not see him, they could not attack – so that meant they would have to fly over and into the chasm to find him.

Crouching at the side of the cave wall, Suberei watched the Vyper descend.

The starboard rear fin floated past his eye line, then the base of the gunner's platform and, finally, the gunner himself, white helmet gleaming

under the rising suns. Eldar reactions were lightning fast, but even they could be surprised, and the sight of a Deathwatch Space Marine leaping through the air from seemingly nowhere was more than enough to give Suberei the advantage.

The eldar tried to bring his weapon to bear, but was too late. Suberei cleaved the cannon in two with a stroke of his sword and grabbed hold of the now useless stump of a barrel, smashing his right boot into the eldar's chest. The warrior struggled to draw his side-arm, but another impaling thrust from Suberei's sword pinned the xenos to the seat. Suberei wedged himself between the platform and the cockpit and was reaching for his bolt pistol when the Vyper suddenly accelerated upwards, throwing the Space Marine violently forwards onto the twitching body of the gunner. As the speed increased, Vengla dived in to help her master but the brutal gravitic slipstream hurled her onto the vehicle's floor, behind the cockpit.

Suberei was completely exposed to the battering wind and realised that if he were thrown from the machine at this height, he would likely not survive the fall.

He sliced into the base of the gunner's chair, the frame and its occupant coming away and tumbling backwards into the valley some thirty feet below. Realising what had happened, the enraged clan chief pilot threw the Vyper into a near-vertical climb, forcing the stunned Vengla to scabble for extra grip with her talons and hurling Suberei over the mangled rear of the vehicle. Grabbing hold of the gunnery platform's stump, Suberei stabbed down with his power sword and thrust it into the exposed xenos workings, giving himself two handholds instead of one.

The machine tipped and pitched, throwing Suberei from left to right and up and down, but he only grinned. His people were born riders, and he would prove more than a match for this bucking beast. Rolling to the left, the Space Marine kicked out violently with his foot and connected with the rear of the port fin's tip. A good chunk came away, exposing sparking circuitry and naked framework. The Vyper lurched violently with a sudden loss of control, and Suberei hoped this would convince the pilot to descend.

Sure enough, it did – straight down, in a power dive.

Suberei felt himself become weightless as the arc put him into freefall. The sky tipped upside down, and he lost his grip on the platform stump.

Luckily his power sword kept its place buried in the deck, but his wrist popped as it took the sudden weight of his entire body and he crashed into the rear of the cockpit, making the Vyper judder even more as it fell from the sky. Again the pilot flicked the machine from right to left; Suberei was tossed over the broken fin and then the other, the movements too violent for him to grab his pistol and bring it to bear. Instead he concentrated on keeping his grip on the sword, his view flashing from sky to ground to the red of the Vyper itself.

A brief glimpse through the rear window revealed the clan chief struggling with his controls. This pleased Suberei hugely.

The fact he could no longer see Vengla did not.

A hail of shuriken sliced into the deck below Suberei's gauntlet. Squirming around for a better view, he spotted the Vyper of the opposing kin-band closing rapidly, its own gunner trying to get a shot at Suberei's arm. It was clear that this eldar wanted its prize alive.

Reacting to the sudden appearance of the competition, the stricken chief piloting Suberei's reluctant ride tried climbing again but the machine was not up to the challenge. Seeing their advantage, the other crew flew in even closer, the gunner pushing away her console and rotating the frame towards Suberei's position. Dragging himself back onto the deck, Suberei punched a hole through the cockpit screen in an attempt to strike at the un-helmeted pilot, but the clan chief leaned forwards, infuriatingly out of reach.

As the machine flipped to the right, Suberei fell back once again but this time let go of his sword, using the newer, better handhold of the broken cockpit frame while he made a grab for his pistol. He was just bringing it to bear when the other Vyper's gunner landed right in front of him.

The eldar's blade buried itself into Suberei's vambrace, slicing through the armour and into his arm. Suberei roared a Chogorian curse and smashed his fist into the eldar's helmet. The gunner fell backwards, only her grip on the sword planted in Suberei's arm saving her from plunging to her doom. Searing pain flamed up from the twisting blade, but Suberei ignored it and let go his grip on the cockpit, grabbing onto the haft of his still-buried sword instead. Staggering sideways, the eldar came with him. At first her feet scrabbled and her free arm flailed, but then she found her balance and reached down to her belt for the dagger sheathed there.

Gritting his teeth, Suberei yanked his skewered arm back, pulling the

eldar off-balance again. Bellowing with rage, he spun his body forwards, throwing his arm out at great speed and dislodging the xenos' blade. The sudden momentum threw the gunner off the platform into free space. She made a brave attempt to grab hold of her own Vyper, which was flying alongside the rival machine, but instead collided with the underside of the rear section. The eldar's neck snapped backwards at an unnatural angle, her lifeless body sailing out to the rapidly approaching surface.

Steadying himself, Suberei could see the two clan chiefs gesticulating at each other through their canopies, his own pilot nodding something in agreement. Suberei grabbed his bolt pistol and aimed at his pilot's head, but the Vyper lurched down and his shots went wide, hitting the other machine and striking the armoured canopy. Pulling away and out of danger, the opposing chief kept his distance and a wary eye on Suberei as the Space Marine grabbed for the stump of the gunner's platform to avoid falling. The craft ducked and weaved.

He roared in defiance, hoping the xenos could hear his words.

'In the name of the Emperor and the spirit of Jaghatai Khan, Suberei will end your—'

An image flashed into Suberei's mind, dim at first but then clearer. He closed his eyes.

He could see the sky and the ground, but not from his perspective. In the middle distance was the range of mountains surrounding the eldar encampment, then the two Saim-Hann Vypers drifted into view. One was manoeuvring furiously with a bulky figure – Suberei himself – clinging to its rear, the other keeping pace, one side of its canopy smashed, its pilot's hair flying wildly in the wind.

The angle steepened, and the hole in the cockpit grew larger as it came closer. Suddenly there was confusion, a burst of movement and a dark shape in the blinding light, then a furious shrieking and screams in an alien tongue. Blood clouded the vision, but then was blinked away, leaving a scarlet wash over the action.

Vengla struck over and over at the clan chief's eyes. His hands frantically clawed at her, but to no avail. The shrieks became a long scream and the world seemed to tip in on itself.

The image disappeared, and Suberei opened his eyes to see the opposing clan chief's Vyper bank sharply to the right, its occupant thrashing around

in agony. Suberei's pilot had to stop his destabilising movements to avoid a mid-air collision, before the other machine dived past and ploughed into the ground far below, breaking and rolling in the dirt. As his craft levelled out, Suberei holstered his bolt pistol, hurled himself forwards over the damaged stern, retrieved his power sword with a mighty pull and thrust it into the back of the pilot's neck.

The grav-machine dropped sharply and spiralled towards a deep ravine between two sloping cliff faces. Suberei pulled his sword from the pilot as he slumped onto his controls. The forward-mounted weapon beneath the prow began firing continuously, spraying the rapidly approaching ground with a hail of shuriken fire. Suberei waited until the whirling machine was only a dozen yards from impact. Then, with a howl of triumph, he leapt clear and crashed awkwardly down the rocky ravine wall.

The Vyper came down harder. Something exploded inside the fuselage before the conflicting energies of its damaged gravitic drives detonated the machine in a shower of fractured crimson pieces.

Suberei did not wait to see if the other xenos from the camp would come to investigate; he needed to get his information back to the Imperial forces. As he limped away as quickly as he could, a shadow flashed overhead then circled around him once.

‘Vengla! Come to Suberei!’

Nothing.

As he slowed his pace, Suberei's delight was slowly clouded by concern. Why was the cyber-eagle not calling to signal her return? Had she perhaps seen a massed enemy group pouring out of the ravine between the mountains to find them? No. She would have shared that vision with him. Was she injured? Again, he would have sensed that.

Then, as she suddenly appeared, he laughed heartily at the reason for her silence.

‘Suberei extends his thanks to you, proud friend. Now, enjoy your feast.’

In her beak were two glistening orbs dangling from red, dripping stalks.

The eyes of the other Vyper pilot.

The two had travelled over sixty miles before the first eldar patrol went overhead. This did not surprise him. He had no doubt the deaths of the clan chiefs would have thrown the Saim-Hann forces into disarray, and it was

likely that they had wasted precious time trying to coordinate themselves. As he hid and observed from cover, he saw a single Vyper attack and cripple two jetbikes from opposing clans in a surprise attack, and it became obvious that the conflict between them had escalated significantly. Suberei and Vengla were able to skulk and slide their way further and further from the eldar encampment, unnoticed.

Why had the xenos become so fractious? Was it something he had missed? Something to do with this world in particular?

Suberei realised that it did not matter.

Finding a suitably high location, he sent a message by coded data-burst back to the forward Imperial lines. Once acknowledged, he made his way down to the great black plains once more, but instead of continuing his journey he took a seat on a large granite outcropping and considered his situation.

‘The Militarum forces are mobilising as we speak, Vengla. Our work is done. But Suberei has one last mission to fulfil before we leave this accursed planet.’

The sounds of battle thundered in the distance as Suberei surveyed the scene from the bottom of the canyon. Flurries of rock and stone fell around him, but he took no notice. Perched above and to the left of the buried bike, Vengla shifted her weight from foot to foot then launched herself into the air, swooping low over what remained of the ledge partially buried under glistening black rubble.

Suberei closed his eyes and surveyed the scene through her vision. Spotting an exposed lip large enough to support him, he calculated the best way up to it without bringing yet more rocks down and followed the route as carefully as his power armour would allow. Vengla remained airborne all the while to keep watch, though it seemed that the Imperial forces had the eldar contained.

Suberei studied the way in which the rocks had fallen. Most of them had settled towards the top of the sloping rubble, and a few swift kicks had them crashing down into the valley below. He was rewarded with a small patch of dull grey metal he immediately identified as the exhausts. Good. At least the bike hadn't been flattened beyond recognition.

One large boulder held the rest of the landslide in place, so Suberei put

his right shoulder to its massive rough side and pushed as hard as he could. Straining with the effort, he felt his arm throb, but kept on going until the rock began to move. Slowly, it ground its way towards the ledge until gravity finally took hold and it toppled over. Waiting for the loose shale to clear, Suberei moved through the choking black dust to inspect the damage to his now exposed bike. The front guard was badly dented and the barrel of one bolter fouled with grit, but miraculously, it appeared intact.

There was, of course, only one way to be sure.

Dragging it free from the smaller rocks, Suberei brushed the dust from the saddle and mounted it. He jabbed the starter and the engine spluttered and complained. He grunted, and stepped back to inspect the grimy systems.

He cleaned and adjusted the fuel injectors as best he could, then climbed back on and tried again. His reward was a throaty roar and clouds of dirty smoke spewing from the rear.

With a cry of delight, Suberei rolled the bike slowly forwards, allowing pieces of rock to work their way from under the front and rear wheel housings. Gradually increasing speed, he followed the still fragile ledge upwards. A more cautious rider might have decided to take a longer, safer route to ensure that their machine had no hidden damage that could prove fatal to the rider at high speeds, but not Jetek Suberei. Pulling back fully on the throttle, the bike leaped forwards, eating up the space to the sheer drop. Faster and faster he went, and wider and wider his grin became until he finally launched himself skywards.

The landing on the plains wasn't the most elegantly executed, but it served to shake the last few bits of stubborn debris from the frame. Slamming on the brakes and skidding sideways to a halt, Suberei revelled in the raw power of the bike as it idled beneath him.

There was now only one thing missing. With a squawk of welcome, his cyber-eagle dropped onto her perch behind her master. Suberei revved the engine as she settled.

‘Come, Vengla. Let us away.’

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