

WARHAMMER
40,000



— DEATHWATCH 7 —

CITY OF RUIN

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Ian St. Martin

Not a single breath has left my body but in service to the House.

The words echoed through Sai's head, offered no challenge by the howling of the wind. From the spire's terrace he beheld the metropolis of Pomarii tumbling out across the plains in a breathtaking expanse of gridlines and hab blocks.

Billions of people lived, toiled and died below him, but all he could see was his mother's face, and the glacial reserve engraved in her features.

As the lone male heir of House Trigarta, the course of Sai's existence had been decided and regimented from the day he first drew breath. Of all the opulence and luxury that life within a House of the Navis Nobilite afforded, choice had been a delicacy too rare to taste. While his sisters took to the stars, guiding the fleets of the Imperium, Sai remained cloistered, shut away from anything that might threaten the continuance of the bloodline.

He had sailed through the Sea of Souls to arrive here on Basatani, to be received by the emissaries of House Velon. Sai's future was decided, an arranged marriage with a daughter of Velon to maintain alliances that had existed before man had first set foot on Basatani, and nearly as long as the Imperium itself. Sai would never shepherd a vessel through the Immaterium. Despite the priceless value of a Navigator's curse, he was consigned to be little more than a breeder.

He would never even open his eye.

Every beat of my heart has been for the survival of the House, Lady Trigarta had said as Sai departed for Basatani. And now, so must yours. He

had excused himself from the pomp of the reception, seeking a rare opportunity to be entirely alone.

But the tension in the city below was palpable even from these heights. War had descended over the entire sector, which was in the grip of a xenos invasion, or so he had been told. Sai had only just arrived when the aliens began their assault. Safe within the system's core worlds defensive line, Basatani had avoided the bloodshed thus far.

Other than lessons in naval and military history taught to him by his tutors, he had no experience of war, or of any of the myriad xenos races that opposed the Imperium of Man. His life had been insulated from such things, the perils of the galaxy rendered inert on the pages of parchment scrolls and dataslates.

Sai looked up. The terrace and spire were draped in shadow, drawing his gaze to Basatani's star. The blazing sphere was masked in an eclipse, and a brief smile crept across the youth's face as he beheld it.

Then his wonder chilled into ice that crept up his spine. He looked closer as klaxons began to wail in the distance. He remembered his study of this world in the long months of his journey...

Basatani did not have any moons.

The eclipse grew darker, casting the spire and all of Pomarii into deeper shadow. The object continued to swell, growing larger, and Sai's eyes widened as it caught fire.

There was a noise like the sky ripping open. The intense heat of the atmospheric plunge stripped away pieces of debris from the object, which arced downwards on columns of fire. Stone fragments the size of hab towers smashed into the city in shattering explosions. Individual sounds ceased to be. Numberless impacts and the din of destruction swelled and overlapped into a monstrous cacophony like the roaring of a nightmarish ocean. Tremors rocked the spire. Sai grabbed hold of the railing of the terrace and crouched behind it. He shrank against the thunder of explosions as debris rained down, demolishing entire city blocks below.

Sai touched a hand to the elaborate headdress he wore, carved into the image of angels with platinum wings swept protectively over his mutation. His third eye throbbed and pulsed beneath the covering. He peered over the railing upon the city. A swelling cloud of dust from the impacts boiled over the metropolis like churning fog. It rose, billowing and licking at the

roots of the central spires but failing to reach their height.

His gaze lifted from the shrouded devastation below, and ice plunged into his veins.

A gargantuan meteor of blazing rock and jagged metal, far larger than anything else that had fallen, broke through the clouds, descending towards Pomarii like the fist of a livid god. Flickering streams of fire from the city's defence batteries carved ineffectual scars into it, and hasty arrows of fighter craft hurtled out from hangar bays, rising to intercept the looming colossus.

Sai's breath caught in his throat as the meteor responded. Clouds of ordnance lashed out in all directions, and the fighters blinked away in tiny sunbursts.

This was no meteor. Someone, or *something*, was controlling it.

It was a ship, and it was not slowing down.

The hulk began to tumble, rolling slowly like a great ocean leviathan as it hurtled towards the city. Fire-wreathed debris continued its hellish rain, obliterating spires and reducing entire city blocks to rubble.

Sai of House Trigarta realised that he was going to die at the top of this spire, on a world he did not know, for a reason he would never understand.

Rodricus Grytt stood in the scarlet light of the Thunderhawk as he was armoured for battle. Robed thralls and servitors surrounded him, anchoring massive plates of ceramite over the Space Marine's enhanced musculature. The war-plate was the deep black of the void, save for the silver bearing the insignia of the Deathwatch riveted onto his left arm and shoulder. The only thing to hint at his Chapter allegiance was the gold livery of the Imperial Fists on his right pauldron. The jet fist of Dorn was scarred and singed from recent battle, the deepest gouges still stained with the blood of brothers and foes alike.

Grytt rolled his shoulders as the thralls stepped away, the power pack on his back thrumming to life. The servants fell to their knees, offering trembling devotions to appease the spirit of the armour for the haste of its preparation. Grytt ignored them, scratching at the scars that branched over his face before donning his helm.

For a Space Marine, joining the ranks of the Deathwatch was among the highest of honours, worthy of remembrance in the annals of one's parent

Chapter.

For Grytt, it was exile. One that he had imposed upon himself.

Through the visor of his plough-faced helm, Grytt stared at the servo-skull that bobbed before him, the whirring clockwork of its optics pulsing in the gloom. The drone served as his spotter, expanding his view of a battlefield as his Devastator squad rained down the fury of Dorn upon the enemies of mankind.

Grytt blinked, and the skull's pict feed overlaid his right eye-lens. He breathed in the armour's stale air, and watched the recording of the battle he had fought mere days ago. He watched himself lead a squad of Imperial Fists through roughly hewn rock tunnels awash with blood and flame, heavy weapons unleashed at point-blank range upon a roaring horde of greenskins.

He watched as his brothers demonstrated the iron discipline and restraint that defined Dorn's sons as they waged war.

He watched as he himself did not, striking ahead and casting abandon behind. He witnessed his loss of control mar the cohesion of his squad, and he saw his battle-brothers die because of it.

'Never have I witnessed one so strong display such weakness,' Grytt remembered the words of Captain Kyradon, now counted amongst the fallen as the vile xenos burned the system to ashes. The words dug into the core of him, taking root with barbs of cruel truth.

Grytt possessed a furious temperament, more in common with his zealous cousins of the Black Templars than that of the Chapter that had once been Legion. In a brotherhood where control was paramount, his recklessness was a mark of shame.

When the Deathwatch summoned him, requesting he join their ranks, Grytt had accepted without question. War's intoxication had eroded his discipline, and the fight to not drink deep of it was the only battle he had ever lost. In order to atone, he would drown himself in it. He would return to the Imperial Fists tempered and purged of his weakness by the crucible of shadow war, or he would not return at all.

The deck shuddered beneath Grytt's boots as the gunship landed upon the hangar deck of the Deathwatch frigate *Kisertet*. The Imperial Fist stepped down the embarkation ramp into the ordered pandemonium of the hangar bay, towards the figure that awaited him.

Like Grytt, the warrior was a Space Marine of the Deathwatch, his black armour edged in blue and etched with esoteric runes. A crystalline hood rose behind his head, crackling faintly with unnatural energies. The heraldry of the Silver Skulls displayed his origins, while his wargear marked him as a Librarian.

‘Brother Grytt,’ said the psyker, his tone soft for a Space Marine. ‘I am Adomar. You have arrived in haste, but we cannot tarry here. Kill Team Almuta gathers. We must join them.’

Grytt removed his helm again with a gasp of equalising air pressure, and carried it in the crook of his arm as he followed Adomar. The servo-skull whirred as it floated at his shoulder.

‘Tell me,’ asked Grytt, as the two Space Marines departed the bustle of rushing auxiliaries and hangar crew, walking through the darkened corridors of the *Kisertet*. ‘Have you crusaded amongst the Deathwatch long?’

‘No,’ replied Adomar, his steps silent compared to Grytt’s hulking gait. ‘I am a replacement for their fallen, as are you.’

‘This invasion has spilled much noble blood,’ said Grytt. ‘My company has been engaged with the greenskins assailing these worlds for weeks. My boarding party had only just returned from one of their wretched vessels when I was seconded here.’

‘It is an honour to serve,’ said Adomar. ‘Your experience with these orks will do us credit in the strife ahead.’

‘So long as this filth is burned from our dominions,’ Grytt replied. ‘If the Deathwatch is to be at the throat of this horde, I intend to be the blade that cuts it.’

Three warriors stood in the gloom of the strategium, fresh from the fires of battle. The Space Marines of Kill Team Almuta bore the scars of intense fighting, the damage clear to see as Grytt and Adomar entered.

A warrior of the Iron Hands crouched behind a Space Marine of the Revilers Chapter, hands and snaking mehadendrites attending to his comrade’s power pack. The Reviler leaned heavily against the polished onyx of the strategium table, bearing the full weight of his unpowered armour. With a few ministrations, the Iron Hands warrior sealed the power pack as the gooseflesh hum of power returned, and both straightened while

adepts and serfs attended to and prayed over their sacred war-plate.

The third warrior, bearing the twin-blade livery of the Executioners, stood silently, looking down upon the power axe held in his hands. The weapon's craftsmanship was exquisite, inlaid with pearl and ruby teardrops, its double blade fashioned to resemble outstretched wings. It was not an aesthetic style he would credit to the Chapter, but Grytt had seen its like before, forged in the armouries of Baal and carried into battle by the descendants of Sanguinius.

The Executioner looked up at the newcomers, his armour creaking with the stalling clicks of damaged servos. He stepped forwards, mag-locking the axe to his back.

'Brother Adomar,' he said in greeting. The Silver Skull inclined his head in reply, his face cast in the shadow of his psychic hood.

The Executioner looked to Grytt. 'I am Ralon, now leader of Almuta.' Grytt noticed the Reviler and Iron Hand look briefly to the warrior, before their eyes returned to him.

The successor, then, thought Grytt.

'Brother Imre,' said the Iron Hand in a mechanical snarl of introduction, pressing his cybernetic fist to his chest.

The Reviler inclined his head fractionally, no emotion disturbing the urbane calm of his pale features. 'Kitra.'

'We must be brief,' said Ralon. 'Brothers Grytt and Adomar have joined our ranks from amongst the forces conducting operations alongside us in the system. We were marked for withdrawal and recovery, but new orders have diverted us here.'

The hololithic projector at the centre of the table chattered. A blizzard of flickering light winked into the air, rolling and coalescing into the planet Basatani, where the *Kisertet* now perched at high orbit. The planet was sedate and verdant, with continents of rolling plains and calm oceans. A blinking dot arced down onto the surface with a flash, and from its impact spiralling clouds and storms bloomed over the world.

Kill Team Almuta studied the hololith of Basatani as it turned gently before them, the planet's former beauty smothered beneath continent-spanning veils of dust like a sphere of curdled cream.

Grytt leaned forwards, planting his fists upon the table. 'This is our target?'

Ralon cleared his throat. ‘Basatani. Ten days ago, a xenos hulk made landfall within the outskirts of Pomarii, the planetary capital. The city contains the majority of the planet’s population, and casualties are estimated to be catastrophic. The force of the impact has triggered ash storms that shroud nearly the entire globe, significantly inhibiting any scans of the surface from orbit.

‘We received scattered vox-transmissions that large numbers of orks emerged from the hulk. The Astra Militarum presence on the surface was little more than a token garrison, their regiments having been diverted to hot zones across the system. They now number among the dead.’

‘So what are *we* doing here?’ asked Grytt. ‘The entire system burns, rife with greenskin incursions of greater scale than this. What down there is so important?’

‘Not what,’ replied Adomar, ‘but *who*.’

The members of Almuta turned to the Silver Skull as the psyker continued. ‘We are here by mandate of the Navis Nobilite.’

‘We are the scourge of the xenos,’ said Imre. ‘Not thralls to task with the errands of the Navigator Houses.’

‘There were envoys of two great dynasties on Basatani when the xenos hulk made landfall,’ said Ralon. ‘Our orders are to infiltrate the surface, confirm whether there are any survivors, and extract them.’

‘We are committing a full kill team in the middle of a system-wide invasion for a rescue mission?’ asked Grytt.

‘The two Houses have served the Imperium of Man since the time your gene-sire walked among mortals, son of Dorn,’ replied Kitra. ‘Navigators are prized, and carry much influence in the Council of Terra. Should they require aid, none but the Emperor’s elite shall do.’

Grytt made to reply, but Ralon raised a forestalling hand.

‘We all have our role to play, brothers. And if any leadership of this horde is below as well, killing it here and now could shorten the invasion by months.’

‘Greenskins are an infestation,’ said Grytt, running a gloved hand through his stripe of silver hair. ‘Their microscopic spores now carpet that city as surely as the ash. It is only a matter of time before millions of them taint its surface. You all have been fighting these xenos scum as I have. I say burn it from orbit, and be done.’

‘Our esteemed watch-commander shares your sentiments,’ said the Executioner. ‘Accordingly, the *Kisertet*’s shipmaster has set a mission timeframe of ten hours before she begins an orbital bombardment of the hulk, survivors or not.’

‘There are many unresolved variables,’ said Imre flatly. ‘Too much is undefined. How are we certain any we seek remain alive?’

‘Brother Adomar?’ Ralon looked to the psyker.

‘I have seen it,’ said the Silver Skull. ‘There is one with the sight to guide through the Sea of Souls who yet lives upon the surface. A child without a crown, taken by storms of great rage. Fate showed me five who swam beneath the cowl to seek him out, but the storms are bladed, and much blood will be shed.’

Grytt regarded Adomar. *A Prognosticator?* He had heard tell of entire crusades being abandoned by the Silver Skulls based upon such vague divinations...

‘Our losses?’ asked Ralon.

‘They are... acceptable,’ Adomar replied, his gaze never leaving the planet’s flickering image.

‘Squad leader, I object,’ said Kitra. ‘If this is to be a covert infiltration and extraction of the asset, the Imperial Fist poses an unacceptable risk. I have reviewed his combat record. He is reckless, and will expose us to an ork warhost of which we know neither size nor capability. We are the razor’s edge, not a cudgel. His antics will see us dead.’

‘My apologies, cousin,’ Grytt’s eyes narrowed. ‘I like my enemies to fall down when I hit them.’

‘Oh, yes, very good. Why not enact Exterminatus upon every world our enemies touch? Destroy everything around us so that we might be the lords and kings of cinders.’

‘Enough,’ said Ralon. ‘I will not suffer this. We are elite, and your bickering like neophytes shames your Chapters. Prepare for drop pod deployment. Operations commence in two hours. Anything else?’

‘Yes,’ said Grytt. ‘I need a weapon.’

‘Come, my child,’ his mother cooed, extending her hand. ‘Follow me.’

Sai recoiled, uncertain. Her voice was fluid, unusual. It was not threaded with the iron calm it had always possessed. He was suddenly afraid.

‘Come with me now,’ she said, her voice deepening. ‘DO NOT DISOBEY.’

The light in Lady Trigarta’s eyes blackened, shrinking and turning the shade of old blood. Veins of dark ivy bloomed over her skin like ink through water. Her skull groaned and stretched, reforming into a squat plug sheathed in ochre-green flesh. Tusks of yellowed bone burst from her lipless maw, broken and etched with crude iconography.

Sai turned to run, but brutish hands seized him. They grabbed hold, spinning him roughly. The thing was massive, growing larger and larger, crushing him in its grip.

It roared, its language an incomprehensible dirge of alien rage. Sai’s hands slapped to his ears as the creature shook him. His headdress tumbled away, and though his mundane eyes were screwed shut, wreathed in tears, his other eye snapped open, blinding everything in a searing corona of light—

Sai awoke with a start, drenched in cold sweat.

He saw only darkness, briefly illuminated by flickering sparks that did nothing to tell him where he was. He heard water dripping, and the disjointed thrum of engines in desperate need of repair.

His third eye throbbed in rhythm with his heart. He lifted his head and felt a heavy weight upon it. A cage of rough iron was bolted around his skull. Panic seized hold of him. His face was crusted with dried blood.

Sai reached out. Searing pain shot through his arms as he tried to move, every shift bringing fresh agony. His arms were locked out to his sides. He turned his head, and saw lengths of iron rebar driven through his wrists, pinning him like an insect for study.

A knot of haphazard machinery erupted in a cascade of sparks, throwing brief light into the chamber. Sai saw a cavern of rock, threaded with piping and junkyard steel. Crude pictographs and graffiti covered the walls. Ramshackle devices rumbled and ticked, operating in defiance of any mechanical logic. It resembled some cruel lunatic’s nightmarish laboratory.

It was then that Sai heard breathing. Deep, laboured and pained, like that of a wounded beast. Plodding footsteps closed on the Navigator, and a blinding light stole his sight.

When his eyes adjusted, Sai screamed as he beheld a creature standing inches away from him. It was the thing from his nightmare, massive and green, with beady crimson eyes glaring from a sloping brow. A crown of crackling electrodes, which sparked and linked with crimson lightning, was screwed into its skull. Totems and metal tools clinked from hooks on the apron of crude sackcloth it wore, and it leaned heavily upon a staff of rusted iron topped with a cluster of smouldering human skulls.

Sai's memories returned, riding a wave of throbbing pressure boiling within his skull. *The dust. The crash. Crawling through the wreckage, hearing the bestial howl of the things rampaging through the city. Struggling against green hands, opening his eye—*

His blood froze.

What his eye had done to them. They knew what he was.

Sai looked up, and the ork returned his gaze with an uncouth, bestial grin.

The drop pod hurtled through the tortured skies of Basatani like a drop of oil through smoke. The pod jinked and rolled, buffeted by ash tempests that spanned continents. Within, the kill team made their final preparations for planetfall.

'Brother Grytt,' said Imre, 'your Chapter engaged the xenos in this system.' It was a statement, not a question.

'Yes,' Grytt replied. 'It was my last action before being seconded here. My company is entrenched against the greenskins at the system's core, where we believed the flagship of the orks was located. We boarded their ships to cripple them and destroy their leadership. Without a clear ruler, it was surmised that the horde would fall to infighting and scatter.'

He glanced around the confines of the pod for a moment, then back to the deck.

'We destroyed much of their armada, but they were too many. At great cost we destroyed the flagship, but the rest scattered across the system before we could intercept them all. This hulk was among them, and may carry the one who has taken up the mantle to lead the xenos.'

'You were among the warriors who assaulted the flagship?' asked Imre. 'An achievement.'

'It would have been if any of the brothers you commanded got out alive,' Kitra muttered.

Grytt ignored the Reviler, his gaze meeting that of the servo-skull stowed before him. His scars itched beneath his helm.

‘Irrelevant,’ said Imre. ‘Sacrifice will be necessary to contain this outbreak. These xenos are cunning for their race.’

Grytt remembered the fighting in the tunnels. Extracting the gene-seed of the fallen. Regrouping with the fleet as the flagship burned, hearing the rumours of him being considered to lead the company in the wake of Kyradon’s death. He shook his head, and focussed.

‘These orks are ferocious fighters,’ replied Grytt. ‘Only superior strength will crush them. We will be engaged below, and the wrath of Dorn will be waiting for them.’

‘We require speed and stealth here, brothers,’ said Ralon. ‘We hit, pick up any traces from the Navigator Houses, and avoid detection by the xenos. If there are no survivors to extract for the Navis Nobilite, we leave before the greenskins know we were ever there. Let the ship purify the site from orbit.’

‘What of the civilian population?’ asked Adomar.

‘Not our concern,’ replied the Executioner. ‘This is a fast operation, Almuta, quiet and by the numbers.’ His helm turned to Grytt, nodding to the Devastator’s stowed weapon. ‘You fire that thing without my sanction, and we will have a problem.’

The Imperial Fist nodded, his gaze returning to the skull. ‘As you wish, brother.’

The kill team stepped from the drop pod and into the devastation of the city. Ash covered everything like filthy snow, swirling about in drifts at the whims of the howling storms. The sky was black, lanced through with lightning as thunderheads clashed and cast everything in eerie twilight. The dense ashfall marred the armour of the Space Marines, until they resembled living statues advancing through the streets.

Visibility was limited to just a few yards, the auspex crowded with ghosts and false returns. Hab blocks collapsed into heaps of rubble. Any walls that remained standing were vandalised with crude greenskin graffiti. Statues of Imperial saints, and even the Emperor Himself, were torn down and defaced, their faces daubed green. In the distance, pillars of smoke and heat haze curled up from the base of the hulk with the distant din of

fledgling greenskin industry.

Uneven mounds of ash littered the streets. Wind swept over a cluster of them, revealing bodies, and pieces of bodies. The level of mutilation cast objective doubt on whether or not the remains had ever been human.

The Space Marines formed a chevron, Kitra stalking ahead on point, Grytt and Imre anchoring the flanks. Grytt's servo-skull rose above them, the spotter bobbing and swaying in the crosswind. The Imperial Fist unlimbered his new weapon, chambering a round with a deep *clunk*.

The Valedictio pattern frag cannon was a massive automatic grenade launcher larger than a heavy bolter. Twin ammunition belts fed from a hopper on Grytt's backpack into the cannon, along with power cabling feeds to his armour. With modifications performed in the armoury, he mixed the belt feeds with solid rounds for soft targets and fragmentation shells designed to obliterate harder defences.

'Remember what I said,' warned Ralon. 'Fast and quiet.'

'Tell that to the orks,' replied Grytt, his voice a metallic growl through his visor.

The servo-skull chirped, the pict feed translating over the Devastator's right eye-lens.

'I've got something,' he said. The team split, taking cover on both sides of the avenue.

'Show me,' Ralon replied.

Grytt twinned the feed to the commander. 'North of us. Ork infantry, two light vehicles.'

'There's something else...'

'Those are civilians,' answered Grytt, watching the procession of grey figures stumbling through the ash. 'They are rounding up survivors. Forced labour, or sport killing.'

'We should shadow them,' said Kitra. 'They could lead us right into the hulk.'

'Seconded,' said Imre.

'Agreed,' replied Ralon. 'Keep your distance, follow them in. No one fires unless I give the order.'

Grytt guided the servo-skull closer, magnifying the image. The forced march had stalled, as a man scrambled away after somehow breaking free from the group.

The poor human cried out as a blast took his leg off at the knee. He crashed into the ash, blood pulsing from the stump and rendering the ground into a sticky loam. The ork stomped down on his remaining leg, snapping bone and tearing a scream from the man's throat that Grytt heard through the spotter's pickups.

The ork reached down, its clawed fist closing over the man's head. It wrenched its hand back and threw something into the street. The feed flickered with static. It refocussed, and Grytt watched the ork stomp back to the column, the man's corpse left mangled in the dust.

Another greenskin approached, grunting a challenge to the first. Punches were thrown, and the two brawled in the dust, with the first beating the other severely before casting it back to the column to vent its frustration on the other prisoners. Grytt narrowed his eyes, linking targeting runes to the orks and blinking away the spotter feed as three shots rang out.

The ork threw its pistol aside as it clicked empty, and was raising a rusted cleaver when Grytt opened fire. Standing braced in the centre of the street, he unleashed a blistering salvo from his frag cannon. High-explosive shells slashed out into the two ork vehicles in deafening thunder, rupturing their dilapidated construction and littering the ground with chunks of greenskin flesh.

'Grytt, you fool,' barked Kitra. 'You'll expose us!'

The surviving orks turned to respond before solid shot rounds burst their bodies apart, leaving nothing but twitching lumps of meat. Silence descended as smoke mingled with the ash.

The Imperial Fist approached the trembling column of humans, and snapped the length of chain binding them together. The moaning wretches blundered about, unable to focus upon anything or anyone. They scrambled away in every direction. Grytt reached down to lift one up who was sprawled in the dust. The woman recoiled back, howling and clawing at his arm. Nothing human remained in her wide, unfocussed eyes, just the frenzied instinct of an animal to survive. He released her and she fled into the ruins.

'Brother Rodricus Grytt,' Ralon called out and he strode forwards, rapping an accusing fist against the Devastator's chest. 'You are hereby marked for disciplinary flagellation. Your actions have endangered—'

'You would rather watch these people be butchered?' Grytt demanded.

‘We are the protectors of Humanity. I will not sit idle while they are slaughtered by these xenos filth.’

‘If you seek more greenskins to combat,’ said Imre, looking up into the sky. ‘You have guaranteed it.’

Flares corkscrewed into the air between the kill team and the ork hulk, exploding in greasy bursts of red and yellow smoke. Roars sounded in the distance, a bestial overlapping din with no unity or rhythm.

Artillery burst behind the kill team.

‘They have our position,’ said Adomar, racking the slide of his boltgun.

Hundreds of orks poured in towards the avenue, whooping and firing weapons into the air. Their charge grew louder, shaking loose rubble and drowning out all sound in its terrible tumult.

‘Displace!’ barked Imre, pointing to an alleyway beside them. ‘Through the buildings. I will draw their fire.’

A rocket jinked past their position, exploding in the second floor of a hab block and spraying them with debris.

‘Go now!’ The Iron Hand stood, snapping off precision shots from his plasma gun. The kill team crossed the open street and began moving through the building.

Imre sighted down his rifle, each shot taking the head from a screaming ork. He staggered as a solid round smashed into his shoulder. He leaned forwards and vaporised the greenskin’s torso.

Kitra took up a firing position in a doorway.

‘Imre, I have you covered!’

The Iron Hand rose, firing his plasma gun into the swelling lines of orks and moving to a mound of shattered masonry in the middle of the street. He made to advance as another pair of rockets corkscrewed into the mound, exploding in a hail of smoke and shrapnel.

‘Brother!’ Kitra shouted, unable to see the Iron Hand through the smoke. A barrage of artillery howled through the air, and Ralon pulled the Reviler back as the front of the building collapsed, cutting them off from the street.

Imre staggered against the road, his war-plate sundered and covered in ash-clotted blood. He made to rise, but reeled as the orks bracketed him with weapons fire. A grenade exploded, throwing him back to the ground. He rolled to his knees but toppled, his right leg nothing but a shredded

stump of fused flesh and plasteel.

The orks surged forwards. Imre's armour shattered under the fusillade of their guns.

He fired a blast into the mob as it encircled him, bringing cleavers and hatchet blades down and kicking the weapon from his grasp. His multi-lung was filling with blood, and his secondary heart had ceased to beat.

Imre faced the glaring maw of a massive ork chieftain. The brute drew a serrated axe, and drove it down into the Space Marine's side as the mob roared. The Iron Hand reached out with his cybernetic hand, fighting through the storm of blades and punches to reach for his fallen plasma gun. The weapon's barrel glowed from rapid firing, and its plasma coils writhed with the unstable energy building within.

The Iron Hand grabbed hold of the weapon as a cudgel smashed into his head. Blind, he cradled the weapon to his chest, overcharging it. The plasma coils shivered and sparked, groaning with inevitable overload.

'The flesh...' Imre choked, his voice wet with blood and oil, '...is weak.'

Reaching for the plasma coil, Imre crushed it in his fist, and the street vanished in a starburst of azure light.

Grytt watched the explosion from the overloaded plasma weapon in the static-laden pict feed of his servo-skull, as Imre's ident-rune blinked out on his display.

Kitra's fist pistoned into Grytt's jaw, knocking him back. Grytt swung back but the Reviler dodged, ducking to swing around behind him. The Imperial Fist managed to seize hold of Kitra and throw him against the crumbling wall of a hab stack with a thunderous crash.

Grytt heard the click of a bolt pistol as he took a step forwards, and felt the weapon press against the back of his head.

'That. Is. Enough,' growled Ralon.

'Dead,' Kitra coughed, pulling his helmet free and spitting a mouthful of blood onto the ash. 'Imre is dead because of you.'

'I don't see much else but death here,' said Grytt. 'Though it seems I am the only one doing anything to avenge it.'

'Blood and fire is all you want,' the Reviler hissed. 'You're no different from the orks.'

'I am here to kill the xenos!' Grytt roared. 'Blood and fire is all they

understand. I will finish what my Chapter started and break the back of this horde, and keep the rest of this system from burning. Our focus should be on ending an invasion that threatens billions now, not blundering about this wasteland chasing ghosts.'

Ralon seized Grytt by the collar and hauled his face only inches from his own, the bolt pistol now resting beneath the Devastator's jaw.

'Go against my orders again, Fist, and by the Throne I will kill you myself.' He released him with a shove. 'We need to displace now, before the hell you have unleashed encircles us.'

'Brothers,' Adomar called from the avenue outside the tenement. Ralon pulled Kitra to his feet, and the kill team converged on the Prognosticator, kneeling in the ash.

'What have you found?' asked Ralon, taking the object that Adomar held out to him.

It was an elaborate helm, small even for a mortal, resembling a pair of angels with broken wings. It bore the heraldry of House Trigarta.

'This was worn by the one we seek,' said Adomar, rising to his feet. 'He lives, and his soul-echoes will lead us to the hulk. We will find him within.' He turned to Grytt. 'It seems that all shall have what they desire.'

Sai cried out, struggling against his bonds to recoil from the leering ork. He hissed as once again it twisted the jagged metal pinning him in place, and he felt warm blood trickle across his wrists as the wounds reopened.

The ork gave a gurgling, choking laugh at the Navigator's suffering as it leaned closer. The beady red eyes of the creature widened and glazed over, as if filling with cataracts.

Sai screamed. He had felt others step within his mind in his training, but never like this. Where his mentors had slipped beneath his consciousness like warm oil behind his eyes, the ork's intrusion was tantamount to dashing his head open against a rock and prying his skull apart. Images stabbed into Sai's mind, jagged and edged in barbs of black malice and ochre rage.

He saw himself, screaming silently from within an iron casket, his third eye pried open by savage hooks and staring out into the void.

Vertigo and nausea soaked into Sai as the vision became rippled and unfocussed. With a stab of heat to his mind it resolved again. *The casket*

was bolted onto the prow of the xenos hulk ship like a barbaric figurehead. The hulk ploughed through the void, tearing free of Basatani's gravity. Lightning coursed through Sai within the casket, and blood streamed from his warp-eye even as reality itself began to bleed in response. A rift opened like claws tearing through the curtain of stars, and billions of hands reached out, hauling the hulk into the roiling insanity of the warp...

They meant to use him to take the ship back into the Sea of Souls. The ork's savage grin grew wider.

A roar thundered up from deeper within the hulk, issuing from a single throat but of unbelievable depth and volume. Bolts of sickly colour shot through the meat of Sai's mind, flashes of bright fear and panic. The ork psyker tore its mind from his like a rusted blade. The Navigator collapsed against his bonds in horror and exhaustion.

The greenskin scrambled back from Sai's hanging form, barking at the gaggle of minions toiling within the chamber. It issued growling, threatening noises to its underlings, who recoiled from it and their captive, fearing him despite the cage of iron fastened about his head.

Sai looked down, watching in horror as the alien brutes continued their crude construction below him, locking rebar and metal framework around his legs and torso.

They were building the iron casket from his visions.

'Stand by,' said Ralon through the static of the vox. 'Now!'

Grytt blink-clicked a rune on his retinal display, relaying the signal to his spotter. A booming detonation engulfed the side of the hulk, sending smoke and debris soaring into the sky.

The kill team crouched some distance away, near a narrow trench carved into the rocky hull of the ork war craft. Kitra had set the breaching charges near one of the main points of entry before rejoining Almuta.

Flares burst over the site of the explosion, and the Space Marines watched as hordes of greenskins converged on the area.

'That won't buy us much time,' said Grytt. He received no response from the rest of the team.

'Kitra, take point,' said Ralon. 'Adomar, behind him. I need you to track any trace of the asset. Let's move.'

The kill team advanced into the tunnel. Grytt blinked rapidly, and his

visor cycled to thermal vision. His servo-skull fluttered above his shoulder, its sensors pulsing scarlet in the darkness.

The tunnel wound into the hulk, threaded with sporadic steel grating and coils of exhaust piping. The machinery was decrepit and volatile, remaining functional seemingly out of spite alone. The air grew hotter as they went, and Grytt tasted smoke and scorched iron through the filters of his helm.

As the temperature increased, so did the noise. Greenskin industry was a frightful cacophony of tearing metal, smashing hammers and the howls of thousands of orks as they laboured, along with the enslaved population of the hive, to restore the colossal ship.

‘Adomar, do you sense anything?’ asked Ralon as the team stalked past a massive factory cavern, reaching a junction in the tunnel.

The Silver Skull paused, and frost crept over his armour, carving runnels down the ash-caked plate as it melted again in the heat.

‘He is close,’ said the psyker distractedly. ‘There is something else with him. A presence. The warp channels through it, but it is unrestrained, like a wildfire. It wields great power, but the power is killing it.’

‘I have encountered ork psykers before,’ said Kitra. ‘We must be on our guard. Their power swells from combat. I have seen them tear entire armies apart.’

‘This way,’ whispered Adomar.

The kill team proceeded down a branch of the tunnel, leading to a cavern filled with bizarre machinery. A pillar of iron scaffolding dominated the centre of the cave, with a crowd of orks gathered around, toiling at its construction. A slumped human form could barely be seen within the pillar, pinned in place in a cruciform position.

The chamber filled with booming boltgun fire as the kill team opened up on the orks within and slaughtered them. Unarmed, the brutes had little chance and were quickly reduced to broken, twitching corpses.

‘The ork psyker,’ asked Kitra, panning his stalker boltgun from corner to corner. ‘Where is it?’

‘That device in the centre imprisons the Navigator,’ said Adomar, pointing with his power sword. The Librarian stared up at the maniacal contraption. ‘What *is* this? By the Throne, what were they building?’

‘Do not seek to understand the xenos,’ said Grytt. ‘They are filth to be

eradicated, not studied.’

‘We need to cut him loose and withdraw,’ said Ralon. ‘We are running out of time.’

‘No,’ said Kitra, as once more they heard the howling of alien throats. ‘We are already out of time.’

Kill Team Almuta formed into a firing line as fresh mobs of ork warriors approached.

Kitra braced his boltgun to his shoulder, poised as still as a statue as he sighted through the weapon’s scope. Ralon’s power axe shone blue in the hellish light as he loaded a full magazine into his bolt pistol. Adomar channelled his energy into the psychic core of his force sword, and mauve energy shivered up its blade.

They watched the flickering light of the tunnel fill with monstrous silhouettes. Gunfire thundered, and howling, wailing roars split the air. Grytt chambered a round into his frag cannon, and squared up alongside Ralon as the orks emerged.

Bolter rounds zipped through the flickering dark, a stuttering report as each one fired before detonating within greenskin flesh. Orks burst apart in welters of foul blood. Limbs swung orphaned through the air, still clutching rusted blades and decrepit firearms. Fyceline smoke filled the cavern, rolling about the ceiling like drifting spirits as filthy xenos innards covered the walls.

Grytt’s retinal display swelled with locked targeting icons. Thumbing the safety from his frag cannon and bracing in a wide stance, he fired a burst of solid shot rounds with a booming *chunk! chunk! chunk!*

The screaming anti-personnel shells tore through ranks of orks, coring torsos in clouds of pink mist. The fusillade killed dozens of the brutish xenos, and twice that number fell mewling and wounded on the ground, left to the mercy of their fellows who trampled them to death in their eagerness to close with the enemy.

Kitra fired the last round in his magazine and stowed his boltgun. Lightning claws slid out from the Reviler’s gauntlets, writhing with energy. He wove through the onslaught, striking in and out of range, slashing orks to ribbons with each strike of the energised talons. Ralon’s axe flared with each killing strike, the glowing blade fizzing and popping as alien blood boiled from its power field.

Adomar carved into the orks, his power sword wreathed in warfire. Seeing the xenos' attacks with his mind's eye heartbeats before they occurred, he drove through their ranks, his strikes scorching swathes of the creatures with unnatural energies until the flesh ran from their bones like tallow.

Grytt smashed a greenskin aside with the barrel of his cannon, firing point blank into the horde. He stopped picking shots and fired on full automatic, blasting away the roiling host of screaming xenos as if he were tearing chunks from a mountain.

The orks faltered against the weight of fire, until a roar tore down the length of the tunnel, so loud that many of the aliens stumbled from their feet in alarm. The rest brayed, whooping and barking challenges at the Space Marines.

Their leader revealed itself.

The ork chieftain was massive, stomping head and shoulders above the rest of its kind. Veins the size of a man's arm branched over iron-hard muscle, and dense plates of armour covered the creature's body, riveted directly into its flesh. Steel horns had been drilled into its skull and curled out in all directions, their jagged tips sharpened into killing points. Scarlet eyes burned below its sloping brow, furnace-hot with alien rage. Both of its hands had been crudely removed, replaced by enormous pneumatic claws that gushed oil and crackled with caged lightning.

'Adomar,' said Ralon, his voice an anchor of calm. 'Extract the asset from the xenos device, and take care you don't kill him doing it. Kitra, find me an exit, and kill anything in front of you. Grytt, you and I will attend to this beast.'

Grytt set his stance wide and low, and levelled his frag cannon at the greenskin warlord. 'This time, xenos filth, you won't go crawling away into the dark to hide.'

The warboss stopped and roared as the warhost of ork warriors gathered behind it.

The Space Marines braced. Kitra and Adomar leapt to their tasks, while Grytt and Ralon stood before the warboss.

'Grytt, we strike together,' said Ralon, his eyes locked on the hulking monstrosity. 'I'll circle to the right, draw its—'

'Just kill it!' bellowed Grytt, firing a burst from his frag cannon. 'Die

now, filth. Face the judgment of Dorn, and the Emperor!’

The solid rounds clanged and ricocheted from the warboss’ armour, smacking into the walls and slaying the orks behind it. Those rounds that found flesh burst through in ragged wounds, enraging the alien chieftain further.

In three massive strides, the warboss covered the distance to the Devastator and smashed him into the air with a single sweep of its claws.

Grytt landed hard against the far wall and crashed to the floor. His retinal display blacked out and reset, clouded with static. He blinked blood from his eyes, searching for his spotter. The servo-skull was lost in the smoke, its feed to his display cut.

The Imperial Fist pushed himself to his knees as Ralon leapt through the air to land on the ork’s shoulders. Each slash of the commander’s axe cleaved iron horns from the warboss’ crown as he blasted down at its face with his bolt pistol.

The warboss bucked, twisting to shake the Executioner off. Ralon reared back and buried his axe in the alien’s forehead in a spray of dark blood. The xenos swung with the blow, catching the Space Marine off balance. Then it grabbed Ralon in its claws and, without apparent effort, tore him bodily in half.

A cry of rage tore from Grytt’s throat as he stood on shaking legs. The warboss turned, throwing the Executioner’s remains aside, and stomped towards him. Grytt fired at the charging ork, targeting the breaches in its armour. With a howl of rage, the xenos reared back as an explosive round detonated, blowing one of its claws apart in a burst of flame and bloody shrapnel.

Swinging the ragged stump like a club, the warboss smashed Grytt to the deck once again and seized him with its remaining claw. Raising the Imperial Fist to its frothing, roaring maw, it squeezed. Pistons and crude hydraulics in the claw’s talons crushed Grytt’s armour, and he felt the overlapping plates of ceramite grind and snap under the titanic strain.

Unable to free his frag cannon from the ork’s monstrous grip, Grytt pulled his combat blade, slashing at the bundles of wires and hydraulic feeds weaving over the claw. The hoses snapped, spraying oil and brackish fluid like crazed serpents, but still the claw closed tighter.

Grytt felt his vision narrow as the force overwhelmed him, when his

retinal display blinked, reconnecting him with the feed from his servo-skull. Grytt saw the arch of stone the warboss lumbered beneath, dust and debris falling from it with each thunderous step.

Grytt chambered a burst of high explosive rounds, and strained to aim his frag cannon's barrel at the ork's legs. He fired, snarling as the blast also sent shards of metal and stone through his own armoured greaves, but felt the ork's claw relax a fraction as it howled in pain.

He kicked away, freeing himself and landing with a crash on his back. He raised the cannon to the cracked stone of the archway over them.

'To the abyss with you, filth!' Grytt fired, obliterating the arch and burying both him and the ork warlord beneath an avalanche of ruined masonry.

He wheezed, blinking away the procession of urgent runes spilling over his visor display. He squinted, looking through the intermittent feed of the servo-skull. A heap of broken stone covered him and the ork, wreathed in clinging ghosts of smoke and dust.

Grunting with effort, he pushed forwards through the pile, dragging himself towards the flickering light. Razor-edged fragments gouged his plate and scraped the enamel from his armour. The fibre-bundle musculature of his left leg was shredded, and the armour hung as a dead weight.

Grytt punched through, and dragged himself free from the rubble.

The mound of rock shuddered, rolling away as the head of the warboss also pushed free, howling as it thrashed to right itself. It clamped its sparking claw around Grytt's leg, dragging the Space Marine back towards it.

Grytt rolled in its grip, levelling his frag cannon at the beast, and fired.

But the weapon only clunked with an uneven cough.

He wrenched furiously at the firing mechanism, fighting to clear the jam as the ork pulled him closer. With a bark, Grytt expelled a dented shell from the weapon's breech, and fired again. The shell screamed from the cannon in a blast of fire and smoke, striking the warboss in the gape of its maw. The high explosive round ruptured the ork's skull, detonating in a shower of blood and rancid meat.

The Devastator lowered the smoking barrel of the cannon, dragging deep breaths through his helm as the rusted claw went slack.

‘So must the fate of all xenos be.’

Kitra ducked beneath an ork swinging a club of jagged metal and cleaved upwards, splitting the creature from hip to neck with his lightning claws. He leapt onto a gantry, scanning the chamber for a viable exit.

Adomar stood before the half-constructed tomb for the trapped Navigator. The air froze, and ice formed over the metal as the Silver Skull began to tear it apart with his mind. He stripped away plates of iron, taking care not to harm the youth within. Clearing the framework away from the boy’s unconscious form, Adomar slid the lengths of rebar spike from the Navigator’s arms, and caught him as he fell.

‘Brothers,’ said Adomar. ‘I have him. He yet lives.’

‘And I have located a pathway that should lead out of the hulk,’ said Kitra. ‘Awaiting team leader’s confirmation.’

‘*Ralon has fallen,*’ Grytt responded over the vox, firing a high explosive round to collapse the tunnel behind him. ‘*We need to withdraw now. The Kisertet will begin its bombardment in minutes.*’

Kitra growled. ‘Have you no respect for the dead, Fist?’ He loomed before the Devastator as they met with Adomar at the centre of the chamber. ‘Another brother lost for your recklessness. Is there no end to—’

The Reviler’s words were drowned by a choking cry as he was enveloped in scarlet lightning. Kitra thrashed as he rose into the air and hurtled into a control panel in a shower of sparks.

The ork psyker emerged from the smoke of the burning chamber, uncouth rage ticking tremors across its face.

Grytt bellowed wordlessly, firing a burst from his frag cannon.

The ork did not move. The shells froze, tumbling slowly around the greenskin, before shooting off in different directions to frame the xenos in bursts of fire and shrapnel.

‘See to him!’ cried Adomar, passing the Navigator to Grytt and charging the ork, his sword burning with psychic flame.

The two psykers clashed in a thunderclap of warring energies. Adomar parried a blow from the ork’s staff, rolling his wrists and slashing across the alien’s chest. Blood boiled from the wound, and the creature howled in anger, its scream a sonic blast that threw Adomar from his feet.

The ork leapt towards the prone psyker, deflecting a shell fired from

Grytt's cannon with a thought and sending it spiralling back towards him. The round exploded at the Devastator's feet, throwing him through the air to crash hard against the ground.

Landing before Adomar, the xenos plucked a crooked dagger from its belt, the rusted blade writhing with poisonous energy. The greenskin slashed the dagger into Adomar's chest, again and again. He made to drive the blade down into the Space Marine's throat, but stopped as the temperature in the chamber plummeted.

Standing silently beside the xenos psyker was Sai of House Trigarta.

The ork growled as it glared down upon him, enraged by his escape. Adomar rolled free, turning his back to the boy.

Slowly, the lid of Sai's third eye quivered free of its crust of dried blood and drew back, locking the alien's gaze with the forbidden sight of his mutation.

The greenskin's eyes widened, their blazing red hue drowned in blackness so complete that light could not escape their surface. The flesh shivered and bulged. With a moist pop, they melted down its face, revealing undulating rifts into the warp within the sunken pits.

Billions of tiny writhing claws tore into the dumbstruck beast, pulling it into the gashes in reality. Flesh ripped like oiled sackcloth and bones gave way with a sickening crack as it was pulled into the impossibly small rifts. A howl of incomprehensible agony tore from the greenskin's throat as the warp devoured it, the steaming coils of its entrails streaming up and into oblivion in shrieks of flash-frying blood.

The ork's screams died as its throat tore away, pulled into the abyss. The creature's skull broke in half as it was sucked into the portals, leaving two glowing tears in reality floating in the chamber.

Flickering with lightning, the rifts coalesced into a gateway to the Immaterium. Ribbons of nightmarish colour pressed against the thinning veil between the real and unreal, clawed things made from anguish and fury desperate to breach the material realm. Liquid madness began to stretch the portal wider, eager to feast.

'Grytt,' said Adomar weakly, reaching towards the Navigator. The Imperial Fist stood, ignoring the stabbing pains shooting through his body, and limped to the boy.

Sai stared up at the undulating doorway, looking at things that only he

could see shimmering before him. Mandalas of pulsing light collapsed and reformed again, flickering in and out of focus.

‘Come, my child...’ a million unholy voices sang to him. *‘There is so much for you to see...’*

Sai took a step forwards, blood flowing from his mundane eyes, and reached for the rift.

Grytt seized hold of the boy, and clamped his hand over the Navigator’s eye. A billion cries lashed out from the rift as it seized and withered. Lightning the colour of shame and ecstasy burst from the rapidly diminishing ball of unreality, before coalescing into a sphere of black glass. The sphere hovered in the air for a moment, before dropping and shattering against the ground. The shards twitched with a clink before boiling away into a muffled thunderclap of sparking mist.

Grytt staggered as Sai collapsed, barely managing to get an arm under him. Adomar pushed himself to his feet and, with Kitra supporting him, the Space Marines took flight.

The kill team sprinted through the tunnels of the ork hulk as the chrono chimed down. Grytt stopped at junctions and intersections, blasting the hordes of pursuing greenskins and collapsing tunnel walls to bury the howling xenos beneath tons of rock. He fired the frag cannon one-handed, cradling Sai’s unconscious form in the other.

The Space Marines charged through the hulk and into the crash site beyond, ash streaming from their armour as they ran.

Adomar collapsed. At his side, Kitra hauled him to his knees again, though this time his hands came away slick with blood.

‘Brother,’ whispered Kitra.

The Silver Skull removed his helm with a hiss of venting air pressure, the tattooed face beneath a scarlet mask of blood.

‘You cannot tarry. Go, now. Leave me.’

‘Tell me,’ said Kitra, breathless, ‘are these acceptable losses?’

Adomar laughed, a wet choke of blood between his teeth.

‘We are dead from the moment we ascend to the ranks of the Adeptus Astartes, Reviler. Even more so when we take the oaths of the Deathwatch. Death is our only destiny, and no loss is too high to eclipse the scale of duty.’

The chrono in Grytt's helm beeped. Four minutes remained. The ground began to shake with the tread of raging orks.

'Go, damn you!' Adomar hissed, driving his sword into the ground and leaning his weight against it. 'See our mission done, and ensure that the blood drunk by the soil of this world was not shed for nothing.'

'By Dorn, your sacrifice shall never be forgotten, brother.' Grytt hammered a fist to his breastplate.

'Die well, son of Varsavia,' said Kitra as he turned away.

Adomar laughed again.

'I shall, brother. And not alone.'

Grytt and Kitra set off to the extraction point at a run. Adomar set his helm in the dust beside him, and watched the street fill with howling greenskins. A growl built in his throat, and a crackling nimbus of light blinked into existence around him.

His growl became a cry, as stones and rubble lifted from the ground, floating and chaining with lightning around the psyker. His eyes narrowed as the orks drew within a few paces, a sea of berserker fury.

The midnight lacquer on the Space Marine's armour boiled away, exposing the bare silver ceramite of the war-plate. Adomar roared, and a blinding light slashed out from his eyes, curling around him as the nimbus of lightning spasmed and swelled. The horde of fury raced towards the boiling wall of energy.

The first ork brushed against the veil, and the avenue vanished in a searing flash. Lightning exploded in strobes of crackling death, the greenskins vaporising and bursting like sacks of jellied meat.

Adomar of the Silver Skulls felt his body boil away, and plunged into the waiting darkness.

Grytt felt the shockwave as it burst through the air, throwing him and Kitra forwards. The Imperial Fist turned, sheltering Sai's body as he fell. He crashed into the wreckage of a ground carriage, his retinal display awash with static and frenzied warning icons. His helm crumpled, the left eyepiece torn away by the impact. He wrenched the helmet free and locked it to his belt.

Hands gripped his shoulder and lifted him to his knees.

'No time for rest, brother,' said Kitra, extending his hand.

Grytt gripped the Reviler by the wrist and stood, lifting Sai from the ground. He punched the release stud of his harness, shrugging the depleted ammunition hopper from his back and dropping it to the dust. Locking the frag cannon to his back, Grytt caught a bolt pistol tossed to him by Kitra, and the two warriors charged down the avenue to the extraction site as the remaining minutes burned away.

Grytt ducked reflexively as an ebon Thunderhawk screamed low over their heads, its retros shrieking as it cut a tight blistering arc to slow at a city courtyard. The gunship hovered over the rubble as the Space Marines sprinted to it, pintle-mounted heavy bolters blasting away at the hordes of pursuing orks.

The embarkation ramp of the gunship lowered as they approached. Kitra leapt up, turning to take hold of the Navigator as Grytt gripped the edge.

A rocket spiralled towards the Thunderhawk, and the gunship swayed aside as the missile flashed over it. Grytt snarled as he clung to the ramp, hearing the chrono in his collar chime.

‘Get airborne now!’ shouted Grytt, hauling himself up as the Thunderhawk hurtled into the sky. He swung his legs onto the ramp, and Kitra dragged him up as the craft rocketed, rolling and blasting up into orbit.

‘Grab hold of something,’ the pilot called over the vox. *‘They’ve initiated the bombardment already!’*

Grytt and Kitra locked themselves into restraint thrones in the forward hold and secured the Navigator. The gunship wrenched to the side as the first streaking lines of the orbital strike lit up the sky, pushing its engines beyond their tolerances to put distance from the surface.

Fulgorant streaks of light burned through the ash storms, lancing down like the defied fury of the Emperor Himself. The hulk caught fire as the orbital bombardment struck its surface, burning as lance strikes sliced into it. Mass drivers smashed down, blasting the xenos ship to atoms in thunderous detonations that filled the sky with flame. The orks within were boiled alive as bolts of plasma liquefied the craft, and devastating ordnance shattered the ruins of Pomarii. Explosions burst over the surface as the Imperium of Man avenged the death of its subjects with fire and blood.

Waves of fire and plasma swept the continent, burning the surface to glass. Anything living on the surface, human or greenskin, was obliterated in the searing conflagration. The ash storms amplified, swelling larger and surging across the planet as they drank in the ruin.

Grytt glanced down at Sai, the young Navigator twitching in the throes of some unknown nightmare. It would not be his last, Grytt thought as he tightened the medical dressing obscuring the boy's mutation.

Then he looked from the viewport down at the devastation as they climbed through the upper reaches of Basatani's atmosphere. The ork hulk was gone, the site of its impact nothing more than an irradiated crater of scorched rock. The city was shattered further as another bombardment began. Soon nothing would remain but glass and slag scattered over a scorched open graveyard. His gaze shifted to the Navigator, then his ever-watchful servo-skull, caked in ash and scorched from battle.

Grytt knew at that moment that his decision to join the Deathwatch had been right. The bloodshed below had not freed him of his rage, but would he have succeeded without its fire? He felt clarity descend as the ship rose into orbit, a tempering of his choler that he had never felt before.

It was not gone, but assuaged. If only briefly.

The clarity crystallised within him, a sense of understanding. He was not one to lead, never the implacable glacier of calm that Captain Kyradon of the Eighth Company had been. He was the hammer of Dorn, a weapon for sowing destruction and purging the enemies of Man into oblivion.

If his first mission with the Deathwatch were any impression, there would be many foes to be destroyed in the time to come.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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

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