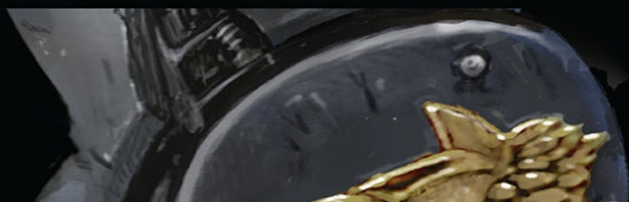


WARHAMMER 40,000



DEATHWATCH WHITEOUT

ANDY CLARK

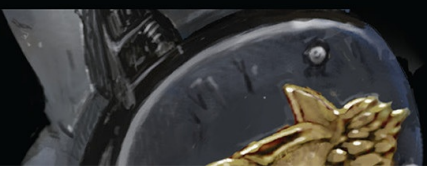




WARHAMMER
40,000

DEATHWATCH
WHITEOUT

ANDY CLARK



WHITEOUT

Andy Clark

Crimson light bathed Lothar Redfang as the drop pod plummeted through Atrophon's atmosphere. He grinned fiercely around at the rest of the Deathwatch kill team as their craft juddered and shook.

'The fires out there would roast us in a heartbeat, eh? We're in the hands of the Allfather now!'

The Ultramarine, Sergeant Cantos, didn't respond. Sor'khal, the White Scar, scowled.

'We trust our lives to a damned machine, Fenris. That's all.'

Lothar's reply was overridden by the grinding voice of the Iron Hand, Brother Gorrvan.

'I have advised on seven previous occasions, Brother Sor'khal. Statistical chance of drop pod mechanical failure is less than zero seven two. You have virtually no cause for concern.'

Sor'khal snorted.

'Virtually, he says.'

Oblivious to the irony, Gorrvan continued.

'Brother Redfang, this vehicle is a device of the Omnissiah. If you fear for your safety, pray not to your Allfather but to Him.'

'A Space Wolf fears nothing!' barked Lothar. 'Hot Fenrisian blood in these veins! Not like that sump-oil you got in you!' The Space Wolf's brash laugh faltered as he realised none of his brothers were joining in. Gorrvan stared blankly, and Sor'khal's scowl deepened. Brother Kordus, of the Raven Guard, merely tilted his head slightly and regarded Lothar askance.

'What?' muttered Lothar. 'None of you got a sense of humour?'

'Battle is no laughing matter, Brother Redfang,' declared Sergeant Cantos, 'and before us lies a fierce one. Brothers, three minutes to impact. Make ready.'

Immediately, the kill team began checking equipment while muttering benedictions to the machine-spirits. Helms were locked in place. Sor'khal's narthecium clicked and whirred as he tested its functionality. Kordus reached across to where his jump pack was mag-locked to the drop pod's central column, fingers dancing over the pack's activation runes. As they worked, Cantos ran through a final brief, reiterating the key points of his squad's strategos briefing with the typical thoroughness of a veteran Ultramarine.

'As you know, the orks of Waaagh! Dregsmasha invaded Atrophon eighteen months ago. Atrophon militia were reinforced by the Catachan Jungle Fighters. However, extreme wintry conditions on the planet have worked against them.'

'Worse,' he continued, 'the orks have deployed a string of super-weapons, to their great advantage. They carried Frostclaw Ridge with volleys of gravity bombs, deployed super-heavy war effigies in the fight for Honorium, and undermined the Ironfields with tunnelling machines.'

'Strategos link these inventions to an ork mechanic named Badklaw,' put in Gorrvan. 'Their augur-skull probes have ascertained his location amid the factorums of the Strakendorf Peninsula.'

'However,' continued Cantos, 'that information is useless to the Astra Militarum. Eighteen hours ago, the greenskins staged a push on the Strakendorf front. The Catachans and Atrophons fell back over the River Strakk, demolishing its primary bridges behind them. This has bought the defenders time to marshal their forces. However, it has cut them off from the orks.'

'Cowards,' grunted Sor'khal.

'Just men,' offered Brother Kordus quietly, 'but not us.'

Sergeant Cantos nodded. 'Correct. The Emperor has blessed us with the ability to take the fight to our foe. Judging by pattern matching of rising energy signatures within the ork's factorum stronghold, it has been estimated we have approximately six hours until Badklaw's latest device reaches completion. Then our target likely moves up to join the attack on the Strakendorf front.'

'Then we kill him first, eh?'

Sor'khal shot Lothar a humourless grin.

'First sensible thing I've heard you say, Fenris.'

Lothar grinned back, baring his canines.

The next moment, the drop pod's electroconces pulsed and an urgent chime rang from its vox-casters.

'Collision warning!' barked Cantos.

'Not buildings,' gritted Sor'khal as he gripped his restraint harness, 'we're still

in clear sky!’

‘Then what...?’

Lothar never finished his question as, with a sudden, shocking bang of metal on metal, the pod was slammed sideways. The lights went out, and Lothar felt gravity crush him back into his harness as the drop pod spun wildly. Alarm tones pinged and whooped, and Lothar let out a groan of effort as he braced against the forces clamping him like a vice.

There was a thunderous impact and everything went black.

Lothar’s vision swam as it returned, light and shadow churning in a sluggish, nauseating ballet. Pain pulsed in his skull. For several heartbeats, disorientation tried to drag him back down into unconsciousness. With a defiant growl, Lothar forced his eyes to focus. The Space Wolf’s helmet chron told him he had only been unconscious for a handful of minutes. The fact that he was still breathing told him that, whatever else had happened, he was still alive.

Lothar sat up, grimacing, and realised he’d been staring up into a thick snowstorm. Sor’khal was crouched next to him, checking readings on his narthecium.

‘Ah! Fenris lives.’ The White Scar stood, extending a gauntlet to help Lothar up. As Sor’khal hauled him to his feet, the Space Wolf took in his surroundings. The two of them stood shin deep in a snowdrift, engulfed by the shadow of a ruined hab-block. Snow fell thickly, dragged this way and that by gusting winds that Lothar’s auto-senses warned were well below freezing. Through the murk, the Space Wolf could see more skeletal ruins all around. Blasted habs loomed over the snowy streets like ghosts.

‘The crash landing knocked you senseless,’ said Sor’khal. ‘Our pod came down in this ruin and we dragged you clear. Damn machine managed to fire its retros just in time to stop us being smashed to bits. By the Emperor’s grace we all came away in one piece, more or less.’

‘Was it the Iron Hand’s impossible failure?’

Brother Sor’khal shook his head and turned away, jogging off through the snow with his bolter ready. Lothar followed, drawing his own weapons as he went.

‘No failure,’ said the White Scar over his shoulder, ‘Gorrvan was right about that. Something hit us, ork aircraft most likely. Emperor knows no Imperial pilot would be aloft in this mess.’ They crunched across a road junction, picking their way around the half-buried wreckage of a Chimera and its slain occupants.

‘Mess?’ scoffed Lothar. ‘On Fenris we’d spar in this without armour!’

Sor’khal glanced back at him. ‘In that case, on Fenris you must all be deficient.’

Lothar’s booming laugh was swallowed by the muffling shroud of snow.

‘Hah, remind me to bash your teeth in for that sometime, eh?’

‘You’re welcome to try, Fenris. If Laedas couldn’t take me, you don’t stand a chance.’

‘Laedas?’

‘Our former squad mate. The Imperial Fist who got torn apart by genestealers just so we could enjoy your sorry company. I liked that big bastard – we all did. And he was twice the warrior you are.’

Lothar’s rejoinder was drowned out by the howl of a jump pack as Brother Kordus dropped from the sky in front of them.

‘The sergeant is in the cathedrum up ahead. Problem.’

Sor’khal gestured around.

‘You mean, besides being stuck in a snowstorm on the wrong side of an uncrossable river?’

Kordus paused for a moment.

‘Yes.’

With that, he turned, fired his pack, and soared away into the falling snow.

‘All talk, that one,’ grumbled Sor’khal as they pressed on. Lothar chuckled, then pulled up short.

‘Wait. Wrong side of the river?’

‘Did I not mention that? Vox is shot to hell with all this stuff in the air – we can barely reach each other, let alone anyone useful. Come on, Fenris, the sergeant will have a plan.’

They found their battle-brothers in the blasted ruin of the cathedrum of the Emperor Resplendent. Shattered figures in stained glass stared down at them with cracked and sorrowful eyes. Snow fell through rents in the domed roof and had piled in drifts across the nave. The kill team’s briefing had indicated that, while the orks had not yet made it across the River Strakk on foot, their aircraft had been pounding the city for days. It seemed they had been thorough. Lothar frowned as he took in the tangles of fire-blackened bodies strewn around the cathedrum’s ruined interior. Many of the Atrophon citizenry would have gathered here to pray for salvation, now finding only death as the bombs fell. Lothar felt anger surge hot in his chest at the pitiful sight. These people would be

avenged.

Cantos, Gorrvan and Kordus were at the far end of the building, staring out through a hole in the cathedrum's east wall. Sor'khal and Lothar moved up to stand alongside them.

'It is good that you are unharmed, Brother Redfang,' grated Gorrvan, his voice echoing through the ruin.

'We Space Wolves are made of sterner stuff, Iron Hand,' said Redfang. 'Needn't worry about me, eh?'

'My concern was not for you,' responded Gorrvan. 'If your inability to endure the crash had left you compromised, that weakness would have negatively impacted our chances of mission success.'

Sor'khal snorted, but his amusement died as he followed Sergeant Cantos's gaze.

'Oh...'

Before them, the fire-blackened city dropped away steeply, marching down to the banks of the River Strakk. Through the tattered snowfall, they could see the river churning with breathtaking fury, great white crests of foam boiling upon its surface. The far bank was obscured, but from their briefing they knew the Strakk to be more than a kilometre wide and extremely fast-flowing. Even a Space Marine wouldn't survive an attempt at crossing it. Yet the river was not the problem.

'Is that...?' Sor'khal began.

'Indeed,' Cantos cut in.

'Didn't they...?'

'Evidently not.'

'So we should...?'

'Absolutely.'

Sor'khal blew out a breath.

'Well. Let's get going then, eh?'

Cantos nodded.

'Brothers, we move. Twenty-foot spread to maintain visibility, assume hostile contact as possible. Kordus, stay high. Gorrvan, see if you can get a vox-link to Atrophon High Command. They need to know about this.'

As the Space Marines clambered through the rent in the cathedrum's wall and set off at a jog, the snow swirled about them. Ahead, the river thundered along beneath the un-demolished span of Strakkendorf's third primary bridge.

The bridge was enormous, a plasteel and ferrocrete monument to the might of the Imperium of Man. It consisted of three roadways, each wide enough to accommodate a trio of Baneblades driving abreast, and separated by jutting, armoured barriers. At intervals, towering support columns rose from the churning waters of the Strakk to bear the bridge's weight. From what the kill team saw as they advanced from the west bank towards the bridge's mid-point, each support was a substantial building in its own right, studded with access hatches, snow-choked gantries, stairways and ladders. Thick steel cables stretched between the supports, the wind singing a cold dirge between them.

As they reached the centre of the bridge, the kill team were confronted by the most imposing structure yet. Here stood a mighty fortress, a bastion wall of armoured ferrocrete that incorporated the central support columns and stretched the entire width of the bridge. A vast marble aquila spread its wings across the fortress's imposing facade. Heavy gun emplacements and banks of darkened floodlights studded it. At its feet, the three roadways plunged into darkened tunnels, and it was here, within the blackened maw of the central tunnel, that the Deathwatch found a code-locked door leading into the fortress proper.

Cantos ordered Gorrvan to gain access, reasoning that such a structure would boast hardened vox-relays and military-grade augurs. The survival of a bridge across the Strakk changed the wider strategic picture enormously, and the sergeant was determined to gain access to up-to-date intelligence before his kill team made their next move. Leaving the Iron Hand to work on the code-lock, the rest of the squad spread out to scout their surroundings.

Lothar stepped from darkness into murky, snow-curdled daylight. He stared east, along the span of the bridge, scouring the swirling snow for signs of movement. The immensity of the fortress loomed above him, lights dark and guns mute and inactive.

'This is Lothar. I'm at the eastern mouth of the central tunnel. Not seeing anything.' He waited for a few moments, the hiss of the vox underpinning the moan of the wind through the tunnel.

'Kordus,' came the Raven Guard's quiet tones over the vox. 'Eastern mouth of left-hand tunnel. The auspex is showing some unusual energy spikes nearby.'

'I've got the same on the right,' came Sor'khal's gruff voice.

'Elaborate.' Cantos's clipped tones cut through the background static. 'What are you seeing, brothers?'

'One signature, approximately two hundred metres to the east,' reported

Kordus. 'Large, constant and concurrent with a shield generator or sizeable weapon system.'

'Again, same,' added Sor'khal. 'Doesn't look orkish, sergeant. Too steady.' For a few moments, the vox was quiet, then Cantos's voice came again.

'Understood. Hold your positions, brothers. We'll know more once Gorrvan gets this door open.'

Lothar gritted his teeth in frustration, snapping a quick glance at his helmet chron. Four hours and forty minutes remaining. He checked his own auspex, banging it against his armoured thigh when its readout remained annoyingly neutral. The device flickered, then a stuttering signature appeared on its screen.

'This is Lothar,' he voxed. 'I think my auspex got damaged in the crash. It's just picked up another signature. The fix can't be right, though.'

'Explain,' replied Cantos.

'Looks like I'm stood right on it, more or less,' replied Lothar, scowling at the flickering readout. Exasperated, the Space Wolf gave up on the damaged device and peered out along the bridge once more. He narrowed his eyes and increased his helm's magnification as he caught the suggestion of a large, humped shadow a little way east. Something he had missed amidst the swirling snow. Lothar raised his bolt pistol and chainsword, readying for a fight, but the shape wasn't moving.

Curious now, the Space Wolf decided to investigate. He crunched forward with a hunter's caution, wolf-tail totems whipping in the wind, until the shape resolved itself into a wrecked, snow-buried vehicle.

Still wary of potential foes lurking in the snowfall, Lothar moved up to the blackened wreck. It was a Taurox, lying stricken on its side in a snowbank like the corpse of some slain beast. The vehicle had clearly been gutted by fire, its hull torn open by what looked to have been forceful explosions against its rear armour. Lothar took in Catachan regimental markings on the wreck's scorched hull and, as he dug out the snow around it, he found several of its ill-fated passengers. Fire-blackened mummies in the tattered remains of Catachan uniforms, the dead men had been twisted by the agony of their deaths and then frozen solid by the sub-zero conditions. Once more, Lothar found his anger stirring at the sight of proud soldiers of the Emperor so diminished and defiled. He looked away from their clawing hands and screaming, black-fleshed skulls, and rose to his feet.

'Cantos,' he voxed, 'I've found something. About a hundred feet east of the tunnel. It's a wrecked Catachan Taurox and what's left of those riding in it.'

Coming this way at speed, I'd say, then took a few rockets to its arse and went up in flames.'

'Brother Redfang,' came the reply, 'you were ordered to hold position.'

'Aye, but then I saw this mess.'

'Evidently,' came the dry response. 'Well, as you're there, what's your assessment?' Lothar thought for a moment, eyes roving across the bleak and empty roadways of the bridge.

'Not part of the evacuation,' he responded eventually. 'If the orks had disrupted then there'd be wrecks everywhere, not just this one. Stragglers, maybe?'

'Or sappers?' voxed Sor'khal. 'Trying to blow the bridge? The greenskins might have caught them before they could finish the job. They tried to run and... boom.'

Lothar nodded slowly as he stared at the wreck. Perhaps. Just then, Gorrvan's monotone cut across the vox.

'Brothers, the machine-spirits have been rendered compliant. We have access.'

'Good work, brother,' responded Cantos. 'Kordus, keep watch. If the orks know this bridge is open, they may be on their way. The rest of you, regroup with Brother Gorrvan. We shall find our answers inside.'

Minutes later, the kill team, minus Kordus, stood around Gorrvan in the stronghold's cavernous command chamber. Cantos and Sor'khal had removed their helmets. The Iron Hand, meanwhile, knelt in data-communion with the fortification's cogitator bank. The kill team had found the fortress's systems powered down and its hatches locked tight, rendered inert by the garrison during their retreat. Now, Gorrvan was restoring power one system at a time, lumin globes and data-banks flickering back to life all around. Mechadendrites stretched from the Iron Hand's gauntlets into the cogitator's ports, and every few moments he twitched, or emitted a blurt of binary.

Sor'khal grimaced with distaste. Sergeant Cantos clapped a gauntlet against his comrade's shoulder guard.

'I know you mistrust machines, brother. But this is necessary. We need to know why the bridge wasn't demolished. We need to know if it's a viable route of advance.'

Lothar stopped pacing and turned.

'Advance?'

'Yes, brother. You disagree?'

The Space Wolf frowned, opened his mouth to speak and paused. Cantos's ice-blue eyes bored into him. The sergeant's paired service studs glinted in the half-light as a reminder that he was many decades Lothar's senior.

'Cantos...' Lothar began.

'Brother-sergeant to you.' Cantos' voice was not raised, but it cut like a combat knife.

'Brother-sergeant. The Atrophons and Catachans think this bridge is down. Reckon they think they're safe, eh? But they're not – there's a great big hole in their shield wall.'

“Shield wall”, Brother Redfang?’

Lothar banged his gauntlet against a datastack in exasperation.

'You know what I mean! If we leave, what's stopping the orks rolling straight over this bridge and catching the Astra Militarum taking a squat in the snow?'

Brother Sor'khal frowned. 'They've not crossed the bridge yet, or we'd have been neck deep in greenskins already. Maybe this was just the chance? A bunch of orks catch up to the Catachans and kill them, then carry their rampage off somewhere else? These are orks, Fenris. You know they're not much for strategy.'

'I know they do whatever you least expect, and when you least expect it,' replied Lothar. 'For all we know, they left themselves a way in on purpose, and the whole Waaagh! is approaching right now!'

Sergeant Cantos nodded.

'A fair assessment, Brother Lothar. But we have a mission. Already we're out of position, and time is against us.'

'But we can't...'

'We can,' interrupted the sergeant, 'and we must. I've no more desire than you to leave a hole in the Imperial defences. But our target takes precedence.'

'Besides,' put in Sor'khal, 'how are we going to demolish a bridge? Tell me that, Fenris. Shoot it with bolters till it falls down? We'll be here a while.'

'By the Allfather! I'm not saying we demolish anything! I'm saying we hold the damn bridge like real warriors.'

'Hold it?' replied Cantos sceptically. 'With what? Five battle-brothers? Rash foolishness.'

'More like heroism,' retorted Lothar angrily. 'Think of the glory!'

Sergeant Cantos's eyes flashed with anger.

'We are not here for glory, Brother Redfang. We are here to complete our mission. If you can't grasp the difference, I'll send you back to Fenris where you

can engage in all the wasteful glory hunting you please.'

Lothar growled, the sound raw and angry. Sergeant Cantos stood, a cold stare locked with the Space Wolf's. The grate of Gorrvan's voice punctured the moment.

'Sergeant. Brother Redfang may be correct.' Cantos turned his glare from Lothar to Gorrvan.

'Explain.'

'I have interrogated the machine-spirits and data-logs. When the stronghold garrison pulled back, they did indeed leave a team of Catachan sappers to take care of the bridge itself. I believe we can safely assume that they did not succeed. However, they seem only to have been interrupted at the last moment.'

'The energy signatures!' exclaimed Lothar. 'They got their charges set, but didn't have time to blow the bridge?'

'I believe so,' nodded Gorrvan, 'I have inloaded our squad's auspex data. Cross-referencing with the Catachans' logged demolitions schematic, I believe there are two extremely large plasma bombs located a short distance east of here, and another in the support girders beneath this fortress. In addition, though meteorological conditions are becoming increasingly adverse, long-range auspex suggests dramatically increased movement on the river's east bank.'

'This may have been deliberate, then,' nodded Cantos grimly. 'The orks have left themselves an attack route, and now they gather to exploit it.'

'And in this throne-damned weather, no-one's realised,' said Sor'khal. 'But then, surely they'll be on their way?'

As though summoned by Sor'khal's words, Kordus's voice crackled over the vox.

'Enemy movement in the east. Scattered infantry and light vehicles crossing the bridge towards your position. Numbers unclear.'

Sor'khal exchanged a look with Cantos.

'Sergeant?' For a moment, Cantos stared intently into the middle distance. Lothar drew breath to speak, but Sor'khal motioned him to stay quiet.

'Very well,' said Cantos. 'Brother Gorrvan, I assume we are still cut off from Atrophon high command?' The Iron Hands legionary nodded.

'Correct. Long-range vox contact is impossible at this time.'

'Then we must deal with this matter ourselves. A random greenskin incursion into the Imperial lines was troubling, but an acceptable risk. This is not random. There will be little gain to the Imperium if we eliminate our target at the expense of the entire Atrophon war effort.'

‘So we fight?’ asked Lothar eagerly.

‘Yes, Brother Redfang. We fight. But not for glory, and not in some forlorn last stand. We still have a mission to complete. Gorrvan?’

‘Yes, sergeant?’

‘The plasma charges. How difficult would it be for us to rouse their machine-spirits?’ For a moment, Gorrvan retched binary. From Kordus came three insistent vox-pips. Situation urgent, orders required.

‘Viable,’ grated Gorrvan. ‘The data-logs indicate that the charges require only the final rituals of arming to synchronise them in a data-choir with this cogitator bank.’

‘Good. Exfiltration? We need to be on the eastern bank when this bridge comes down.’

‘There are maintenance and drainage ducts running through the bridge superstructure just below surface level,’ replied Gorrvan after a pause. ‘Large enough for us to move along at a run, all the way to the eastern bank. Some systems are still inactive, sergeant. I cannot promise that the duct-ways are fully accessible, or that the foe will not have found a way into them. However, I calculate a seventy-six per cent chance that they will provide a suitable, uncontested exfiltration route once the charges are primed.’

‘It will have to do,’ barked Cantos, donning his helm. ‘Gorrvan, remain here, provide us with strategic oversight and guide us in the arming rituals. And get the east-facing servitor guns up and running as your first priority. Sor’khal, Redfang, with me. We’ll press on and prime those charges.’

‘Sergeant, I’ll take the bomb below the stronghold,’ voxed Kordus, ‘I can reach it quicker than any of you.’

‘Agreed,’ replied Cantos. ‘Once all charges are set, we fall back here. That should lure the orks onto the stronghold’s guns and, while they are fully distracted, we slip away through the ducts before the charges blow.’

Sor’khal nodded.

‘No more bridge. No more orks. Brilliant. By the Khan, then, brothers, let us be about our duty!’

The Space Marines emerged into gloom of the central tunnel once more, the door’s code-lock rune flashing from green to red behind them. Now only Gorrvan would be able to unlock that portal from the central command chamber. Cantos led his brothers at a run to the eastern mouth of the tunnel, where they ducked down for a moment with weapons held ready.

Lothar stared hard along the bridge, noting that the weather was worsening fast. Already the crashed Taurox and its slain cargo were lost to sight amid the wind-whipped snow. He could hear engines snorting and snarling out there, but couldn't yet see the foe.

'With me,' voxed Cantos, 'Lothar left flank, Sor'khal right.'

The three Space Marines loped out along the bridge, steadying themselves against shrieking gusts of icy wind. As they jogged along the bridge, their boots crunched in the snow and the sound of motors and crude bellowing voices got steadily louder.

'You are now less than one hundred metres from the charges,' voxed Gorrvan. 'There appear to be two, one to either side of the bridge.'

Just at that moment, the first of the foe loomed from the swirling snow. The orks were huge beasts, as tall as the Space Marines themselves and easily as broad. Despite the icy cold they were clad in ragged cloth and scrappy armour that left much of their green flesh exposed. As the hulking silhouettes emerged from the storm, Lothar grinned in recognition.

'Contact left,' he snarled and, raising his bolt pistol, shot the first beast through the face. The ork's head exploded in a wet spray. Behind it, its comrades roared in anger, but Lothar was already charging. A few crude slugs whined off his armour in showers of sparks, then he was in amongst the greenskins, his chainsword howling. His first stroke lopped a greenskin's head from its shoulders. His second hacked through the haft of a scrap-iron axe and severed the arm holding it. An ork hatchet clanged against Lothar's shoulder guard, hacking a chunk from the ceramite and driving the Space Wolf to one knee. In return, he drove his chainsword into the ork's guts and snarled his satisfaction as the alien's innards sprayed red across the snow.

More orks closed in, a metal club crunching into Lothar's chest with enough force to crack the black carapace beneath. The Space Wolf growled as he tasted blood in his mouth.

Bolters thundered as Lothar's brothers joined him. Cantos and Sor'khal gunned down the greenskins with practised skill, the muzzle flare from their weapons lighting the snowbanks with its strobing glare. Within moments only butchered meat remained, pools of xenos blood steaming as it swiftly cooled and froze.

'...sily recognisable. Vox me whe... cated the charges.' Cantos paused, one hand pressed to the side of his helm.

'Brother Gorrvan, repeat. You're breaking up.' Static whistled through the vox.

‘We need to move,’ muttered Sor’khal, scanning the whirling snow. ‘That was just the first handful. The sound of fighting brings the bastards running.’

Lothar revved his chainsword.

‘Let them come. *Stormtooth* hungers for their blood!’

‘Atmospheri... terference is increasi... sergeant,’ voxed Gorrvan. ‘Reiterati... each charge is located at the ba... a support column, and will be easily recogni... Vox me when... located the charges.’

‘Acknowledged,’ replied Cantos. ‘Sor’khal, take the left-hand side of the bridge. Brother Redfang, right. I will remain central and retain their attention while you complete the rituals. Go.’

The two Deathwatch brothers nodded, turned, and forged off into the snow. Cantos remained where he was, stood alone amid the orks’ contorted corpses. Engines roared, louder now and getting swiftly closer. Cantos raised his combi-melta and waited.

Brother Kordus triggered his jump pack, launching himself from the gantry. Snow whipped around him as he flew through the air, auto-senses overlaying his vision with trajectories and the wireframe mapping of the bridge’s structure. For a long moment he sailed through white nothingness, the thuggish wind trying to bludgeon him off course, before his boots clanged down on another strut. He stood on a censer-spar that jutted precipitously from the bridge’s underside. Far below, the river churned and roared. The Raven Guard calmly calculated his next leap, ignoring the wind screaming around him, then fired his jump pack’s thrusters again. As he flew, he listened to his brothers’ vox chatter. Sor’khal and Redfang had almost reached their charges now, and Cantos was engaging another wave of greenskins. Kordus had no doubt they would complete their duties, even the newcomer. Meanwhile, he would see to his task.

Kordus’s leap carried him down, under the ferrocrete mass of the bridge and into its shadow. Down here, a vast cradle of gantries, girders and cables helped support the stronghold, lest its weight pull it down into the fury of the Strakk. He landed on a long, wide girder and paused, getting a fix on the energy signature of the plasma charge. With whipping snow and shadow all around, the Raven Guard’s visibility was now down to a few metres at best; his helm’s auto-senses would have to be his eyes.

Kordus’s contemplation was broken as a bullet whined off the girder to his left. Another clanged from his helm, then more were raining around him. Obeying ingrained training, Kordus triggered his jump pack and executed a

twisting, evasive leap to carry him out of danger. He crossed the vaulted space between two spars then cut his engines suddenly to drop like a stone. Kordus fell several metres and grabbed the edge of a lower platform as it flashed up at him out of the murk. Swinging into shadow, he waited, twin hearts thudding steadily, aware of the constant, hungry roar of the river far below. More gunfire rattled, then petered out. His assailants had lost him. Hopefully.

Scouring the gloom, Kordus saw the foe as flickering heat-signatures. The creatures swarming along the cables and girders weren't orks. They were smaller, gangling things that clung on for dear life as they climbed. Gretchin, a whole mob of them heading right for the plasma charge. He could see its power readings from here, and gauged that the device was nestled close to a support column directly below the stronghold's main mass. It wasn't far away. Kordus pulled himself up with one fluid motion. The Raven Guard crouched, palmed a frag grenade, and drew his bolt pistol. He would need to be quick.

Lothar was almost at the plasma charge, and could see it pulsing green through the snow when the orks struck. Only the sudden howl of his instincts saved him. Lothar threw himself sideways, a smoke-belching rocket whipping over his head. The projectile corkscrewed into the bridge and exploded. He hit the ground, rolled, and came up with his pistol raised. The snow around him erupted as a mob of orks burst from hiding. They were clad in a jarring grey and red pattern that Lothar realised was meant to be camouflage, and many had a crossed-axe glyph smeared crudely on their skin or wargear.

'Die, filth,' snarled the Space Wolf, blasting the ork with the smoking rocket launcher off its feet. The next greenskin roared and shot Lothar point-blank, cracking his armour and sending him staggering back. The Space Wolf howled with rage and charged, sawing his chainsword into the ork's face. Blood and broken teeth sprayed, even as Lothar's next two shots blew chunks of flesh from another assailant. The ork came on, despite the craters blasted in its torso, and Lothar took a resounding blow to his helm, amber warning runes flickering in the corners of his vision. Spinning, the Space Wolf brought his blade whirring around in an arc and hacked the head from his tenacious foe. As this latest ork fell, neck-stump jetting gore, the last of Lothar's attackers lost their nerve and fled. His instincts bayed at him to give chase, but he had a mission to complete. Instead, he dropped to one knee next to the humming bulk of the plasma charge and stared in incomprehension at the wires and cables that spilled from its innards.

‘Gorrvan, I’m at the bomb. What in the Allfather’s name do I do now?’

For a few moments there was silence, followed by the sound of Cantos engaging the orks somewhere behind him. Muffled bolter fire thudded through the air, interwoven with bestial greenskin warcries. Lothar grinned fiercely at the sound of something exploding with a hoarse boom. For an Ultramarine, he thought, it sounded like Cantos could really fight. Suddenly, Gorrvan’s voice broke through the choppy static.

‘...rother Redfang... see a panel with a ...echanicus cog. It... about ha... way up the dev...’

For a moment, Lothar was at a loss. Then his eyes found the panel. ‘Got it.’

‘Ver... ood. Intoning the thir... cantica... of the Omniss... pre... the red rune ne... the pane...’

Lothar scowled. The wind howled around him, gathering pace by the second. A particularly fierce gust snatched a clutch of icicles from a gantry high above, flinging them down to shatter upon his armoured shoulders.

‘...n the circumstance... think we can dispense with the chanting. Just hit the red rune Brother Redfa...’

Lothar grunted and thumped his fist against the blinking red rune. With a puff of incense, the panel slid aside, revealing a nest of wires and switches. Squatting amongst them was a device that Lothar recognised. A melta bomb. A secondary charge, presumably placed to violently dissuade tampering. As the panel opened, a runic display on the small charge’s front began to count downward.

‘Fenrir’s arse,’ cursed Lothar. ‘There’s a bomb here, Gorrvan. Another one, and its machine-spirit doesn’t like me! Now what?’

‘Ah,’ came Gorrvan’s response.

‘Ah? What do I do?’ snarled Lothar. For long, agonising seconds, the only response was static, hissing and whistling through the vox. Lothar’s twin hearts thudded, and every nerve screamed at him to get clear, but he had a duty to discharge.

‘Gorrvan? Gorrvan! By the Allfather, you metal bastard, if you don’t tell me what to do right now this thing’s going to blow my head off!’

Finally, Gorrvan’s voice returned, still infuriatingly unruffled.

‘Remain cal... Brother, I will hel... you. Thr... wires shoul... from the top of the melta charge, yes?’

Lothar searched frantically, sweat rolling down the back of his neck as the runes counted down towards zero.

‘No... yes! I see them. Now what?’

‘...ood. Rip out the ... ed and blue. Lea... the green.’

Sliding his thick, armoured fingers into the bomb’s workings, Lothar gingerly grasped the wires and, with a muttered prayer, yanked them out. For a second more the rune counter spiralled downwards, and then it blinked and went dark.

A breath that Lothar hadn’t realised he was holding escaped his lips in a rush.

‘Brother Lo... ar, do you sti... live?’

Lothar barked a humourless laugh. ‘I do, Gorrvan. I do. I owe you a debt, brother.’

‘You are ver... elcome, Brother Redfa... but no debt has... en incurred. Your immolation, along with... plasma charge, would ha... been sub-optimal for our chances of missio... uccess. Now... the panel, do you se... switches?’

‘Aye.’

‘...ount along fro... the left... ick the third switch...’

Lothar swore as the signal finally deteriorated into a roar of static. With a wary glance at the huge, pulsing bomb, Lothar counted the switches from the left and placed his finger on the third one.

‘Hope this is right, brother,’ he muttered. ‘Don’t want another mechanical failure eh?’ Wincing, Lothar flicked the switch.

At the same moment, Kordus, having monitored Gorrvan’s instructions to Lothar, flicked his own switch and gunned down another two gretchin. Already, heaps of the vile creatures lay scattered around the platform, blown apart by bolts and frag grenades. The rest had hunkered down behind struts and spars, preferring to pelt Kordus with fire from a safe distance. He was bleeding from several superficial wounds, his armour a mess of bullet-scars, but as the charge’s rune flashed from red to green he knew he’d completed his task.

‘Charge primed, Gorrvan,’ he voxed. ‘Returning.’ The wind screamed, its ferocity increasing with each moment. As he watched, several gretchin were plucked from the nearest gantry and sent spinning away into the storm with reedy shrieks of terror.

Steeling himself, Kordus took a running leap into the maelstrom, jump pack roaring as it propelled him past a knot of greenskins and into the darkness. He landed with a clang, steadied himself, leapt again, and again. His auto-senses warned him the wind speed and temperature were becoming untenable for flight. A storm of ice chipped and scratched at his armour. Yet just a couple more jumps would carry him up onto the bridge’s surface.

At that moment, his vox coughed static in his ear, along with Cantos’s ragged,

distorted voice.

‘...rothers, if any of you... hear this... plete the mission... can’t... hold...’

Kordus was little given to displays of emotion, but he had fought with Cantos on a dozen battlefields, and he swore as he heard the pain and defiance in his sergeant’s voice. Desperate urgency gripped the Raven Guard, and he took a running leap before firing his jump pack once more. Heavy with accumulating ice, the engines burned hard for a moment, sputtered, then cut out. Kordus stretched desperately for the nearest strut, just grasping the frozen metal. Behind his faceplate, Kordus’s black eyes widened with horror as his fingers slithered off the rime of ice, then he fell wordlessly towards the roaring river below.

Sor’khal pounded through the snow. Behind him, hidden amid the snowstorm, his plasma charge was primed. Ahead, even over the wind, he could hear roars and gunfire. The snow parted, and the White Scar cursed. Cantos was on his knees in the snow, blood running freely from his rent armour. The wreck of a ramshackle ork transport burned nearby, as did several blasted bikes. Orks were piled high around the heroic Ultramarine, yet more still surrounded him. Sor’khal ran faster, drawing his power sword from its sheathe. A massive, armoured ork with a roaring chain-cleaver loomed over the sergeant, its face split in a hideous leer. Then it raised its weapon to deliver the killing blow.

‘Cantos!’

The cleaver swept down, only to slam against a chainsword inches above Cantos’s head. Sparks flew, and the huge ork roared its outrage. Lothar Redfang surged forward, driving the greenskin back with a series of lightning-fast cuts. The ork punched the Space Wolf in the face, denting his face-plate and shattering one eyepiece. Rallying, Lothar feinted high then swung low and hacked off his foe’s leg. The ork leader crashed down, only to sink its tusks into Redfang’s thigh. Blood jetted as ceramite parted under the immense pressure of the ork’s jaws. With a roar of pain the Space Wolf rammed his whirring blade through the ork’s eye socket, causing its head to come apart with gratifying violence. By this time, Sor’khal had reached his brothers, impaling another ork, then pounding bolt shells into several more.

‘Get the sergeant up,’ voxed Lothar, parrying a whirltoothed axe. Sor’khal nodded, only to be sent staggering as another huge, armoured ork shouldered-charged him. The White Scar and the greenskin exchanged a vicious flurry of blows, and Sor’khal roared in pain as his opponent managed to ram its rusted blade through the armoured cables protecting his midriff. Blood welled through

the wound and the ork roared its victory, pushing the blade deeper. Its eyes widened as Sor'khal bellowed a curse of his own. The Apothecary slammed his armoured fist repeatedly into his attacker's face until bone broke and blood spurted. As his foe leaned desperately away from the punches, Sor'khal jammed his narthecium up, under its jaw. Drills whined, armour separators cracked out through bone and sinew, and the White Scar messily tore off the ork's jaw.

Showered in greenskin blood, Sor'khal kicked his gagging, dying attacker into the snow. He wrenched the beast's blade from his stomach and hurled it contemptuously away.

'Are you alive, brother?' Sor'khal answered Lothar's question with a pained nod, before sliding one shoulder under Cantos's arm and hauling the sergeant to his feet. Already, Sor'khal's gene-enhanced metabolism was at work, clotting the flow of blood from his wound and beginning to heal the catastrophic damage that would have killed a lesser man thrice over. Cantos, however, was more sorely wounded. Blood dribbled in ropes through the cracked vox-grill of his helm, and welled slowly from a dozen savage rents in his armour. He grunted in pain, but managed to get his feet under him all the same.

'Lothar,' growled Sor'khal. 'We need to fall back, now!'

The Space Wolf rammed his chainsword through an ork's throat, before backing towards his brothers.

'Agreed. They're thick as hook-tics on a kraken, eh?'

The Deathwatch retreated along the bridge, firing as they went. The enemy were all around, but the howling, snowy gale hampered the orks worse than the Space Marines. Though their ferocious resilience made them all but immune to the cold, the xenos still had to labour for every step. Meanwhile, the Deathwatch had servo-motors to help power their limbs, and gyroscopic stabilisers to keep them upright. Still, all three were hard-pressed and cursing the orks' incredible tenacity by the time the silhouette of the stronghold rose through the snow.

'Gorrvan,' voxed Sor'khal. 'Cover would be good!'

'...oing what I can, Brother Sor'khal. The storm has compromised the servit... guns' targeting augurs. I cannot risk triggering them at this time. They may hit you.'

'Perfect,' spat Sor'khal, blasting another ork as it loomed from the snowstorm. It took the round to its shoulder, staggering as blood and meat exploded from the wound before roaring its defiance and charging again. Sor'khal cursed and shot it square in the face, sending its headless body flopping back into the snow. Sergeant Cantos activated his vox.

‘Brother Kordus?’ he gasped, ‘Where are you? We need to go...’ Silence answered him, and Sor’khal swore again as his bolter clicked uselessly. An ork slammed into him and Cantos, spilling them all into the snow. Sor’khal’s helm hit ferrocrete as the greenskin landed atop him. The alien cracked one big green fist into his face-plate, breaking the ceramite and drawing blood.

Meanwhile, Lothar fought ever-increasing odds. He tried to reach his fallen brothers, but several huge orks hurled themselves at him all at once. He crushed in his first assailant’s skull and shot the next, but the third managed to hack its blade into his shoulder. Howling with pain, Lothar headbutted the greenskin, only to be knocked off his feet as an ork shell exploded nearby.

‘Sor’khal,’ he groaned, trying to crawl towards the Apothecary. He saw the White Scar’s assailant deliver another clubbing blow. Then a black shape hit the ork like a thunderbolt. Engines roaring, Kordus tackled the greenskin off his brother, snapping its neck as they tumbled to a stop. Standing, the Raven Guard rattled off a volley of shells, gunning down a pair of masked greenskins before they could fire their bulky flame-throwers.

‘My thanks, brother,’ voxed Sor’khal. ‘Thought I was dead.’

‘What happened?’ asked Lothar, as he staggered to join them. Kordus calmly shot another ork through the throat as it burst into view.

‘This storm,’ replied the Raven Guard. ‘Fell. Climbed. Not really the time for long explanations.’

‘I concur,’ cut in Gorrvan, ‘you need to exfiltrate. Augur shows ork tanks moving up the bridge in great force.’

‘Well let us in then, brother!’

‘Negative, Brother Redfang. There is a duct hatch beneath the snow about five metres to your left. Enter there, it will be quicker. I will finish setting the timer then catch you up.’

‘Understood,’ grated Cantos. ‘Get those guns firing the moment we’re clear.’

A rune flashed on their auto-senses, as Gorrvan showed his brothers their exit route. While Kordus laid down covering fire and Sor’khal busied himself with Cantos’s wounds, Lothar swiftly dug down and hauled open the heavy hatch. A dark tunnel lay below, and the Fenrisian winced.

‘Like crawling down a troll’s gullet,’ he muttered. Then he loudly announced, ‘Who’s first?’

‘Go,’ ordered Cantos, ‘Sor’khal and I will follow. Kordus, rearguard.’ Lothar nodded, then dropped into the hole. As he did so he saw Kordus blazing away while Sor’khal helped Cantos to his feet. This was his pack, he thought with a

surprised surge of pride, these and Gorrvan. He heard his brothers drop down behind, heard the hatch clang down, then the sudden roar of the servitor guns opening fire at last. The tunnel shook and dust trickled with each heavy concussion.

‘Twenty minutes,’ voxed Gorrvan. ‘Move, brothers.’

Some minutes later, Lothar emerged from the tunnel’s exit amid a ruin that flanked the bridge on the eastern bank. The place had been gutted by fire, but it was cover, and there were no orks inside. He could hear them without, voices raised in warcries. The storm was lessening, and the servitor guns of the stronghold thundered in the distance as the orks poured across the bridge and into their fire.

Sor’khal emerged behind him, still aiding Cantos, and Kordus jogged from the shadowed tunnel a moment later.

‘Gorrvan?’ asked Cantos. Lothar shook his head.

‘Brother Gorrvan,’ voxed Cantos. ‘Location?’

‘Stronghold command chamber, sergeant,’ came the reply. Sor’khal swore. Cantos closed his eyes. Lothar, meanwhile, lunged back towards the tunnel exit, only to be physically restrained by Kordus.

‘By the Allfather, Gorrvan, what’re you thinking?’ yelled Lothar.

‘It was the storm, brothers. Remote detonation was impossible while it persisted.’

‘So you stayed to do it manually.’ Sergeant Cantos’s tone was weary.

‘Confirmed. Meteorological augury indicated when the storm would abate. I simply fed that data to your helm chrons.’

‘So get out now!’ urged Sor’khal.

‘Negative, brother. Five servitor guns are dry.’ Gorrvan’s words were punctuated for a moment by the choppy roar of his bolter. ‘The greenskins have breached the east wing, and several have already reached this chamber. If I leave, detonation is uncertain. Logic dictates that I stay.’ For a moment, silence fell, then Cantos opened his vox again.

‘Your sacrifice will be remembered, Brother Gorrvan. Your Chapter will be notified.’

‘Thank you, sergeant. I calculate that you still possess an eighty-two per cent chance of mission success. Please prove me correct.’

‘We’ll kill him for you, brother,’ growled Lothar. ‘I swear it on the Fang.’

‘Again, Brother Lothar, my tha—’

And then, like a new sun dawning among the Atrophon snows, the plasma charges went up. A monstrous flash of light came first, followed by a thunderous roar that grew louder and louder. The blast wave rolled out, causing the ruin to shake violently and rubble to crash down around them. As one, the Space Marines were thrown from their feet, the earth shaking furiously beneath them. A vast fireball rose skyward, wreckage raining down around it. The brothers of the kill team clung to the juddering ground as their shelter came apart and toppled down upon them like an avalanche. For a while detonations continued, accompanied by the monolithic roar of the bridge collapsing into the Strakk.

Then it was finally over.

A short while later, rubble shifted on the east bank of the Strakk. With groans of exertion, the surviving brothers of the Deathwatch heaved fallen masonry off of themselves, clambering bloody and bruised into the smoky daylight. Blackened ork corpses lay everywhere, many crushed under chunks of ferrocrete or scrap metal. Here and there, flaming wreckage still blazed, and ash swirled thick in the midst of the snow. Lothar stared at the destruction they'd wrought.

'Impressive...' he breathed.

The span of the bridge still rose from the east bank, but it terminated a little way out across the river. Most of it had been vaporised, or devoured by the hungry Strakk. Now, two stubs of bridge jutted from opposite banks, severed cables swinging and creaking in the wind.

'Not an ork left alive,' noted Sor'khal. Cantos, his wounds patched for now, stepped painfully up next to him.

Lothar lowered his gaze for a moment. 'Our brother shall have a seat in the Allfather's feasting hall, eh?'

Cantos nodded grimly.

'Indeed. There'll be scattered survivors, but the Imperial lines are safe. Gorrvan would be pleased, may the Omnissiah keep him.'

Kordus tested his jump pack's engines, nodding with satisfaction as they burned steady again.

'More likely, Gorrvan would lecture us on the inefficiency of standing around talking.'

Lothar chuckled.

'You're right. Come on, brothers, we've an ork to kill, and only four hours left to do it in.'

'And some glory to win?' offered Cantos with a wry smile.

‘No, sergeant,’ replied Lothar, showing his fangs, ‘not glory. Revenge.’

Cantos nodded. ‘Revenge then. Brothers, for Gorrvan.’

Filled with new resolve, the brothers of the Deathwatch struck out into the snow, making for the outskirts of the factorum district. Somewhere ahead lay their quarry. At their backs, the falling flakes erased their footprints as they vanished into the white.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

‘Whiteout’ is **Andy Clark**’s first story for Black Library. Andy works as a background writer for Games Workshop, crafting the worlds of Warhammer and Warhammer 40,000. He lives in Nottingham, UK.

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