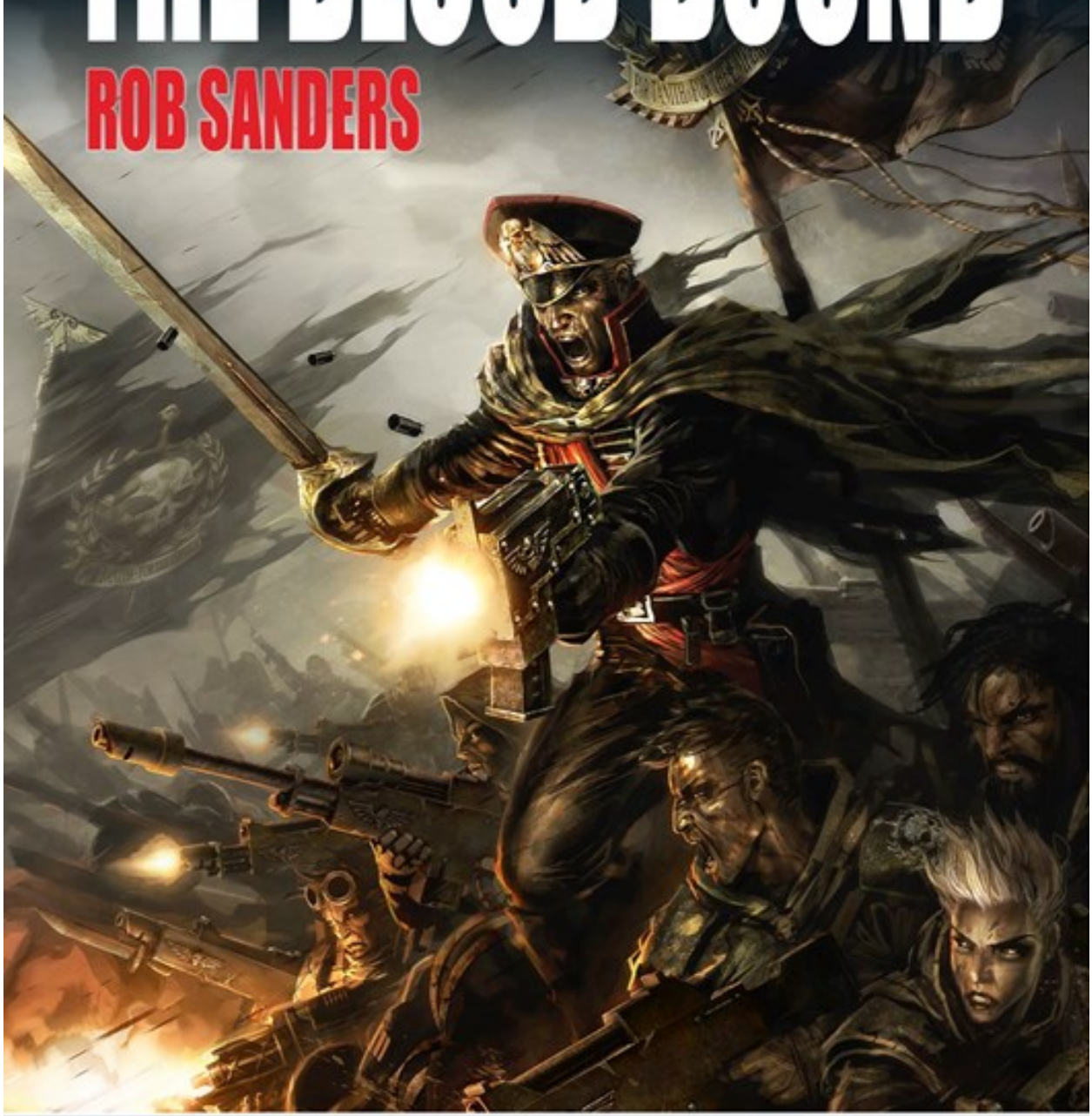


WARHAMMER
40,000

THE BLOOD BOUND

ROB SANDERS

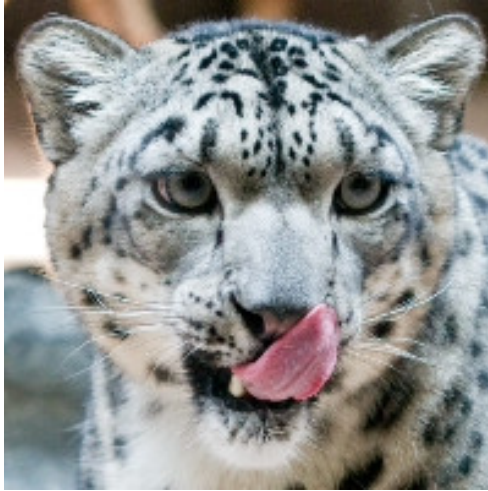


A GAUNT'S GHOSTS SHORT STORY

The Blood Bound

An Sabbath Crusade Short Story from "Sabbath Crusade"

Written by Rob Sanders
Created by



&



This is Rob Sanders's first contribution to the Sabbath mythology, and he is a very welcome addition to this volume and the 'Sabbat Worlds Writers' Club' (we have a club tie and a membership card and everything). I admire Rob's work very much (his novels are superb), and he has written a terrific and grisly piece here.

Rob came up with the premise without prompting or guidance, and I was delighted by the idea he hit upon. He also wanted to focus on the Iron Snakes, which suited both me and the context of this anthology just fine. I'm sure it will please all Iron Snakes fans out there too.

Though not a Gaunt's Ghosts story, Rob's tale (for those of you who are keen on continuity) is very much a sequel to the story 'A Simple Plan' in Ghostmaker.

Brace yourselves. A vanquished menace from the past has not gone away after all...

Dan Abnett

Valens 160, 780.M41

(the 25th year of the Sabbat Worlds Crusade)

I

The Iron Snakes frigate *Serpentra* glided smoothly into the Valens System, the mean lines of its hull dusted with the frost of immaterial translation. A crowded arrangement of super-hot gas giants and secondary satellite systems, Valens was a quiet corner of the Sabbat Worlds – all but silenced by the thunder of old war. The void seemed to echo with the emptiness of horror long past. The Valens System was a ragged wound that refused to heal.

As the frigate slid in-system with inertial silkiness, the wreckage of monitors, mining vessels and entry waystations was pushed aside. Nudging its way past derelicts and smashed orbitals, the *Serpentra*'s progress sent wreckage pirouetting off into the void. The Valens star burned like a dying fire, casting the churn of gas giants and clusters of attendant moons in a rusty light. In the glowering silence, the Space Marine frigate drifted towards the hive world of Valens 160.

'Try voxmissions again,' Porphyrian commanded. The Iron Snakes Space Marine stood like a statue before the bridge lancet screen, cutting a silhouette into the growing orb of the hive world. 'Short-range capture.'

The bridge serf complied with Porphyrian's order.

'Nothing, my lord,' the Ithakan reported.

As a member of the *Adeptus Astartes*, Porphyrian's hearts knew nothing of the silent dread experienced by the lesser beings on the frigate's command deck. Even Porphyrian had to admit that what they had found – and more importantly what they had not – in the Valens System was disquieting. He feared that was exactly

what it was designed to accomplish: system and interstellar shipping hanging like abandoned ornaments in the blackness of space. Communication channels a deathly crackle. A hive world of billions, silent and still. He turned to Andromedes, the only other battle-brother present on the bridge. Only weeks before, Andromedes had been a petitioner. Now he was a battle-brother of Squad Orpheon. Andromedes gave his sergeant raised eyebrows above a mask of grim anticipation.

‘Take us in,’ Porphyrian commanded.

‘Yes, my lord,’ a helmserf acknowledged.

Under the gentle thrust of sub-light engines, the frigate ploughed its way through the abandoned vessels and wreckage. Silent expectation and the rumble of the Serpentra’s drives took them past the moons of Dralion, Vortigus Minor and Aeonara. Past great abandoned mining transports and bulk ore-freighters. Past the silent reef-stations and loose, broken belt of orbital installations that rotated slowly around the hive world of Valens 160.

‘There,’ the helmserf called out from the side of the command deck. He stepped forward, grasping the pulpit rail and pointing up at the lancet screen. ‘The Excommunicado.’

‘You’re sure?’ Porphyrian asked. He peered at the free-floating vessel to which the helmserf was pointing, but even he couldn’t make out the vessel’s name or designations.

‘Forgive me, my lord,’ the helmserf said. He had spoken before he was certain. ‘From her lines she’s a penitentiary vessel.’

The Commissariat corvette Excommunicado had left the world of Sapienca with its damned cargo – the captured heretic warlord Sholen Skara – bound for the Inquisitorial fortress on Khulan. It boasted a pair of escort vessels and a half-brigade selected from the 123rd Pontifical Strikes. It never reached its destination and neither did its escort of Falchion-class warships.

The Ordo Hereticus blamed the loss on insufficient security provisions, while the Departamento Munitorum accused the Inquisition authorities on Khulan of failing to send ships to meet them en route as arranged. Porphyrian had come to view the loss of Sholen Skara as inevitable under such circumstances. It was a long trip from Sapienca in the war-torn Sabbat Worlds to Khulan and the relative safety of Imperial space. A lot could go wrong on such a journey. Especially transporting a dangerous heretic like Sholen Skara. A ruinous mongrel. A mass-murdering butcher of worlds with the blood of millions on his hands. What were a few more Officio Prefectus officers and storm trooper turnkeys?

Now Porphyrian and his Iron Snakes had the duty to find the magister, to ensure he made it to Khulan. When Apothecary Nemertes had asked if Porphyrian agreed with the mission, the sergeant told him that the Adeptus Astartes didn't have to agree with a mission in order to prosecute it. When the Apothecary pressed him he admitted that he thought that the Militarum Tempestus forces securing Sapienca had made a mistake, that Sholen Skara was too dangerous to be left alive and should have been formally executed. The Commissariat liaison at the mission briefing had confessed to the sergeant that he did not quite know why Skara hadn't been processed in such a fashion, believing that the decision had been made by a superior – a Colonel-Commissar Ibram Gaunt. Porphyrian had never met Colonel-Commissar Gaunt, but took him for a fool nonetheless.

In truth the whole situation was a mess. In a region strangled by bureaucracy as much as scarred by war, it had taken years for Sholen Skara's disappearance to be classed as worthy of investigation and forces assigned to such a duty. Astrotelepathic silence from the Valens System and the disappearance of merchant shipping despatched to the hive world had led the Ordo Hereticus to discover the record of an echo, a brief mayday from the Excommunicado's registered astropath. A miserable call for help cut brutally short.

Porphyrian was honour-bound to answer the request of the Ordo Hereticus, but in reality had wanted little to do with such a duty. Sholen Skara was undoubtedly a monster deserving of death, or the worse fate waiting for him at Khulan, but the Iron Snakes Space Marine didn't relish the prospect of the sons of Ithaka being employed as either a glorified escort or the firing squad for a wretched heretic. As he told Nemertes, such duties should have been beyond the Adeptus Astartes, but obligations between the Ordo and the Iron Snakes stood. Porphyrian told Squad Orpheon what Brother-Captain Cules had told him – that they all took their orders from somebody.

'Confirmed,' Brother Andromedes called, moving between a serf-station and a runebank manned by a Chapter servitor. 'Designations identify vessel as Commissariat corvette Excommunicado, out of Sapienca.'

Porphyrian nodded and looked back at the tumbling vessel. 'Anything from the vessel?'

'Nothing,' Andromedes said. 'Dead.'

Porphyrian suspected that was all they would find aboard the corvette, but still the vessel needed to be searched. It was too much to hope that Sholen Skara would be among the bodies.

'Brother Andromedes,' Porphyrian said. 'Squad status?' Porphyrian knew that Brother Deucalion would have such matters in hand, but the sergeant was putting the former petitioner through his paces.

'The Apothecary has met Brother Deucalion on the flight deck,' Brother Andromedes said. 'Brother Deucalion reports the squad battle-prepped, observances made and awaiting further orders. Brother Salames has assembled a flight crew: the gunship Ithakariad standing by.'

‘Very good, Brother Andromedes,’ Porphyrian said. ‘Summon the ship’s steward, if you please.’

Leodocus, the ship’s steward, presented himself. As the senior Chapter bondsman aboard the Serpentra, and a failed initiate of the Adeptus Astartes, it was rumoured that Leodocus never slept, and that he made use of his cult indoctrination, training and conditioning to make himself available to his Ithakan overlords at all times.

‘Leodocus,’ Porphyrian said. ‘Squad Orpheon is to leave the ship. I want you to enact the usual vicarial protocols. I want the Excommunicado under the frigate’s guns at all times. If Squad Orpheon is out of contact for three sidereal rotations you will take the Serpentra to Captain Cules.’

‘Yes, brother-sergeant.’

‘Ship’s steward, the Serpentra is yours. Remain on station and stand by for further orders.’

‘Yes, my lord.’

‘Do you think this is a good idea?’ Brother Andromedes asked as he left the bridge with his sergeant.

‘No,’ Porphyrian told his battle-brother. ‘This is a very bad idea.’

II

The Excommunicado was a floating slaughterhouse. From the moment the Storm Eagle gunship’s landing gears skidded across the hangar-bay deck, it became clear to the Iron Snakes that the Commissariat vessel had been overrun. As Squad Orpheon ran from the prow door of the Ithakariad, their power-armoured footfalls crunched through the bones of the long dead. From the butchery in the hangar and the small-arms fire afflicting the deck

and walls it seemed that the corvette had suffered a boarding action. The las-riddled shells of lighters and humpshuttles sat empty on the flight deck surrounded by skeletal remains. The hangar was littered with the dead. Guard uniforms and carapace had become bags for bones. Shattered skulls separated from spines bore testament to the furious violence of the assault and atrocities committed during or after the conclusion of the boarding action.

Leaving Brother Salames with the serf flight crew in the cockpit of the Ithakariad, with engines idling, Porphyrian ordered the Iron Snakes on. Splitting Squad Orpheon into two, the sergeant sent Brother Deucalion and Apothecary Nemertes with half of the Ithakans aft to check the penitentiary section. Porphyrian and Andromedes led the other half of the squad towards the command deck.

Death was everywhere. The corvette had been the site of obscene butchery and celebratory mutilation. Despite the air being musty with murderous violence long past, the floor was sticky with the black sludge of old blood. Porphyrian suspected that during the savage boarding action, the accessways and corridors of the corvette must have been puddle-deep in the blood of innocents. Despite the fact that their auspectra showed no life signs or energy emissions, Porphyrian ordered extra vigilance. The Iron Snakes had fought many enemies across the Sabbat Worlds – creatures like warp-spawned monstrosities – that existed beyond the narrow spectrum of the scanners' parameters.

With Andromedes beside him with his boltgun and Brother Ptolomon's flamer hissing behind, Porphyrian ordered Argius and Hyperenor up front. Mag-locking their boltguns to their belts, the Iron Snakes led with combat shields and sea lances held above their armoured shoulders. The humming lances were power spears that were largely used in cult ceremonies. Each member of Squad Orpheon carried two such weapons slung between their

armour and their pack, and Porphyrian could think of little better to have between him and a horde of enemies trying to rush them down the length of the narrow corridor. The kind of horde that must have overwhelmed the Tempestus scions of the 123rd Pontifical Strikes and butchered the Commissariat officers of the Excommunicado.

The vessel echoed like a tomb. Black blood squelched and fragments of shattered bone crunched beneath armoured boots as the Iron Snakes moved through the corvette. Through the bodies slammed into the deck. The skeletons torn to pieces. The mounds of bones at bulkheads, smashed barricades and bottlenecks signifying sites where commissars and Pontificals had held their attackers for a few moments at least before paying for such foolish notions with their lives.

By the time the Iron Snakes reached the corvette's small bridge, Brother Deucalion had made his report over the vox. They had found the penitentiary section awash with bodies – both storm trooper sentinels and their attackers. The bones sat in the bloodstained clothing of hive world menials daubed with a number eight with a horizontal line through the middle of it. Porphyrian had found the same on bodies on the bridge and smeared across runescreens and walls.

'Brother Andromedes,' Porphyrian said as he moved through the carnage. Runebanks and servitor stations had been smashed – either by the blood-crazed enemy or by commissars aiming to deny the vessel to their attackers. Their bones sat tangled in leather greatcoats.

'These same symbols were recorded on Sapienca,' Andromedes said, recalling Captain Cules's mission briefing. He snorted the stench of death back at the deck from which it was rising. 'Cultist insignia,' Andromedes confirmed finally. 'Belongs to the Kith.'

‘Sholen Skara’s Kith?’ Porphyrian asked. ‘His cult troops? How can that be possible?’ The sergeant shook his head at the butchery around his boots. ‘They were annihilated at Sapienca, many by their own hand. How can we not be done with the Kith?’

Andromedes shook his head slowly. ‘Heresy is a plague,’ the former petitioner said, ‘a disease that seems to survive despite our best efforts to eradicate it.’

‘Still,’ Porphyrian said, hauling tangles of bones and shredded clothing from consoles. ‘How is this possible?’

‘It’s not possible,’ Brother Andromedes said.

‘I want to stop hearing that answer,’ Porphyrian rumbled. ‘Find an operational databank among this mess and pull some information on what happened here. The ship’s systems must know something.’

As Andromedes – aided by Brother Hyperenor – went to work on a functional bridge station, Porphyrian reported back to the Serpentra, updating Leodocus and the mission log on their findings. When Brother Deucalion and his Iron Snakes completed their sweep of the corvette’s aft section, the story was the same. Butchery, slaughter, desecration of the flesh. Blood everywhere.

‘What about Sholen Skara’s cell?’ Porphyrian put to Deucalion. The sergeant knew he was hoping beyond hope that the body of the Chaos warlord would be discovered still manacled to the floor.

‘Gone.’

‘Repeat,’ Porphyrian ordered. ‘I didn’t quite catch that. Did you say it was breached?’

‘It’s gone, brother-sergeant,’ Deucalion informed him. ‘Mesh, bars, bunk, chains – even the sentinel station and pict terminals. All gone.’

‘Gone?’

‘Torn to pieces, brother-sergeant.’

‘We’ve got it,’ Andromedes announced. Having restored the bridge station to partial operation, Brother Hyperenor stepped back and recovered his shield and spear.

‘Stand by,’ Porphyrian told Deucalion. He heard Brother Andromedes grunt as he read the runescreen.

‘Well?’ Porphyrian demanded. ‘What happened here?’

‘Ship’s log confirms that the Excommunicado dropped out of the warp and put in at the Valens System as a result of a medical emergency,’ Andromedes told the bridge.

‘You’re getting this?’ Porphyrian asked, opening a vox-channel to Brother Deucalion and the other Iron Snakes.

‘Receiving, brother-sergeant.’

‘Sholen Skara suffered some kind of episode or affliction,’ Andromedes went on, reading from multiple logs and records. ‘Convulsions. Ruptures. An embolism. He started bleeding from mouth, ears and eyes – internal bleeding that could not be corrected with surgery. The corvette’s chief medicae officer believed that Skara had found a way to harm himself. This contradicted Colonel-Commissar Gaunt’s orders that he should reach Khulan unharmed and certainly not realise his cult ambitions and take his own life. When the officer reported that Skara’s afflictions were life-threatening and beyond his skill, the commanding commissar ordered the Excommunicado put in at Valens 160 in search of assistance.’

‘But instead of receiving medical assistance...’

‘The corvette was boarded by lighters and humpshuttles from the planet surface and overwhelmed,’ Brother Andromedes told him.

‘Why didn’t they request assistance from system ships of the defence forces?’ Porphyrian asked.

‘I presume because they were either dead already or the ones attacking them,’ he answered, as though completing a test for his sergeant. ‘This is not the first time Sholen Skara graced Valens 160 with his presence. Captain Cules’s briefing indicated that for the longest time, Lord General Bulledin had Skara and his Kith on the run. Skara’s forces beat a fighting retreat through this region. The magister held Bulledin’s forces here before regrouping on Balhaut.’

‘Leaving his taint here,’ Porphyrian said.

‘And no doubt a few lieutenants to see to the cult’s continuation,’ Andromedes said. ‘He timed his symptoms to coincide with this leg of the journey. The Valens System is the obvious choice for assistance – Valens 160 the only choice for Officio Medicae facilities and personnel. By then, the Kith would already have their hooks into the hive world. The Excommunicado would have simply been another victim.’ Brother Andromedes found himself lost in the horror of such a possibility. ‘Imagine the celebratory slaughter to follow,’ the former petitioner said, ‘upon discovering their ruinous magister on board. If Valens 160 wasn’t doomed before then, its fate was sealed that day.’

Porphyrian bit at his lip. There was nothing else to be done. His assigned mission was to find the heretic Sholen Skara. The monster had left a trail of blood and butchered bodies in his wake.

‘We don’t need to imagine,’ the Iron Snake told Andromedes. ‘Brother Deucalion, your work is done. Fall back to the Ithakariad. We shall meet you there.’

‘On our way, brother-sergeant.’

‘Does the log contain the course signatures of the departing lighters and shuttles?’ Porphyrian asked.

'You intend to-' Andromedes began, turning away from the runescreen.

'I intend to follow the carnage wherever it leads,' Porphyrian told them. 'Since it will, Emperor willing, eventually bring us to the heretic Sholen Skara.' The sergeant changed vox-channel. 'Brother Salames?'

'Standing by, brother-sergeant.'

'Prepare for an orbital insertion,' Porphyrian told the Space Marine pilot. 'Our search continues on the planet surface.'

'Aye, brother-sergeant.'

'Course signatures?' Porphyrian pressed.

'The capital hive,' Andromedes said. 'Plethorapolis.'

Porphyrian made to leave the bridge. The Iron Snakes did likewise. 'It waits for us,' the sergeant said, 'and no doubt Sholen Skara with it.'

'Yes, brother-sergeant,' Andromedes said.

'Leave the bridge as we found it,' Porphyrian said, striding across the command deck. 'And Brother Andromedes...'

'Yes, brother-sergeant?'

'Good work.'

III

In a free fall, the Ithakariad descended through the hull-staining cloud cover of the hive world. With storm-racked nebulosity churning around the Storm Eagle and a poisonous upper atmosphere of caustic chemicals eating away at the armour plating, the Iron Snakes gunship dropped out of the sky.

Crafting a shaft of sunlight through the rusty layers of smog, bilious yellow vapours and oily smoke, the Ithakariad punched down through the underbelly of the permanent cloud cover,

allowing the light of the Valens star to reach the industrialscape beneath. Below the thick cloud was a murky twilight, dungeon-like in quality. Only the sheet lightning that seemed to pulse perpetually from the tumultuous clouds provided anything approaching illumination.

Brother Salames engaged the gunship's wing thrusters to slow their descent before firing the main engines. They picked up speed over one of the satellite hives before slipping down into the colossal forest of tower factoria, manufactorum mills and smokescrapers. Banking left and right at high speed through the gargantuan architecture, the Ithakariad made short, blazing work of the conurbatia between the satellite cities and the capital hive. Plethorapolis reached up through the ramshackle dereliction of its own foundations, a wonder of unchecked accretion, mindless engineering and trembling hive quakes. Like a single, yellowing tusk it punctured the toxic heavens.

Slowing and bringing the gunship up through the insanity of rising architecture – the factoria vent nests, hab-stacks and tottering cathedra – Brother Salames fired the prow door. Behind it stood Brother-Sergeant Porphyrian. The Iron Snakes Space Marine took the hive world in. A world devoted to death, pledged to one of the dark powers of the galaxy – the abyssal appetite for slaughter and suffering that was known from planet to planet simply as the Blood God. Here on Valens 160, the Kith and their magister, Sholen Skara, had found a world ripe for sin and sacrifice.

Even from the gunship, with the doomed hive streaming by, Porphyrian could see the simple horror of the choice the heretic warlord had presented to the rancid billions. His monstrous god demanded blood. Every man, woman and child – from the lowliest underskavs to the clean-breathing Spireborn – owed Sholen Skara an end, a death-pledge that could be settled in the savage taking of one's own life or the limitless taking of others.

Porphyrian saw a cityscape decorated in chemically mummified cadavers. Like the fruits of damnation hanging from warped trees, thousands of bodies swung from cords, chains and improvised ropes, hanging from every available ramshackle structure, balcony and walkway. Steeples, chimneys and scaffolding leaned with the weight of the dead hanging from them. Forests of cadavers swayed with the roaring passage of the Iron Snakes gunship. Aerials, wire walkways and hab-stack-spanning power cables were draped with the dead.

Some had launched themselves from great heights, making a broken descent through the busy architecture of the hive. Those not cut into pieces by high-tension suspension cables or scarecrowed on spires and vox antennae, who reached the rockcrete, became one with it, turning the avenues, elevated freightways and labyrinthine thoroughfares leading out of the hive into rivers of blood.

The copper tang of slaughter was so thick that, like the hull of the Ithakariad, Porphyrian's armour began to mist red.

Beyond those who had taken their own lives and the lives of their dependants in the Blood God's name, and those who had willingly pledged themselves to his service in the cult ranks of Sholen Skara's Kith, there had been many unready for such an impossible choice. They had become the sacrificial millions offered up by swelling numbers of the Blood God's newest and most ardent servants.

There were bodies everywhere, and everywhere the dazed, idle monstrosity of those who had shed their blood. Murderous mobs and hordes of emaciated savages waited on the magister's word – gathered in quads, on roofs, along the ooze of blood-slick freightways and in the devastation of hab-stacks. Around the bloodbound Kith, on every surface, wall and floor was the sigil of Sholen Skara smeared in gore.

As the Storm Eagle howled by, the Kith howled back their murderous intent. They watched the Ithakariad weaving in and out, up and around the web of cables, walkways and towering dereliction, but all they really saw was a delivery of victims, unfortunates who would honour the Blood God with their deaths or join the blessed ranks of his butchers.

‘Let’s get their attention,’ Brother-Sergeant Porphyrian voxed to the cockpit.

‘Affirmative,’ Brother Salames voxed back.

Porphyrian felt the gunship buck as a hellstrike missile blasted free of its wing-mounting and streaked away. Watching the missile sear ahead of them, Porphyrian followed its progress until it slammed into a colossal sub-spire. Reaching for the polychromatic underbelly of the polluted heavens was a shaft of sweat mills, rickety hab-stacks, smokescrapers and tower-top villas that formed a prong on the crown of sub-spires that encircled the Plethorapolitan capital spire. Porphyrian could not help admiring Brother Salames’s aim. It wasn’t just hitting the tower; the Ithakariad’s machine-spirit could help a pilot achieve that. It was knowing where to hit the sub-spire. As the missile thudded into the towering monstrosity, and ripples of infernal destruction blasted through the floors and superstructure at the spire base, the architecture couldn’t decide whether it wanted to topple over or collapse in on itself. Attempting both, the excruciating sound of shearing girders and pulverised masonry drowned out the screams of thousands of cult warriors. The Kith savages flailed to their deaths, their broken bodies destined to be buried beneath thousands of tonnes of falling rockcrete.

As a plume of dust rocketed up in place of the sub-spire, the Iron Snakes gunship punctured straight through it, swooping through the labyrinthine reach of hab-stacks and tower factoria. Banging a gauntlet on the troop-bay ceiling, Porphyrian heard Brother Salames respond by unleashing the nose-mounted heavy

bolters on the hive. As the gunship expertly weaved through the tottering architecture, the heavy bolters above the prow door chugged away with a monstrous, rhythmic insistence that was felt throughout the length of the craft. From shredding away the sides of habs and mulching the cult warriors within to chewing up hordes of Kith and the elevated avenues upon which they were idling, the Ithakariad visited a maelstrom of destruction upon all who fell under its guns.

Punching the last of the gunship's hellstrike missiles into a forest of slum-stacks, and watching the tapering tower blocks tangle and topple one another over in a net of contorted suspension wires, the gunship emerged from the mess with little room to manoeuvre. As the Ithakariad slowed and its progress became increasingly frustrated by crowded architecture, snapping cables and the shattering structures of rusted walkways, Porphyrian ordered Brother Salames to land.

Turning a furious mob of Kith roaring at the gunship from atop a sweat mill into a red smear of bolt-punctured plasteel on the rust-stained roof, Brother Salames drifted the Ithakariad down. Gently landing the gunship on the creaking roof, Salames cut the engines and idled the wing thrusters in preparation for – if required – an immediate take off.

'Squad Orpheon,' Brother-Sergeant Porphyrian said over the helmet vox, turning to address his Iron Snakes, who were gathered for departure behind him. 'We are here to hunt a monster. A dangerous foe who, like the water wyrms of our distant Ithaka, churns up the world around him into storm and violence. We are the Iron Snakes. We shall ride out the storm, cut through the chaos and bring this monster down. Just like Ithaka. Just like home. Is that understood?'

'Yes, brother-sergeant!' Squad Orpheon returned.

'That's what we are here to do,' Porphyrian said. 'The heretic warlord Sholen Skara is your target. We take him alive if

circumstances permit. Brother Andromedes, the honour is yours. Begin the Rite of Giving Water. Bless this undertaking with Ithakan water from your flask. Prepare this world for the blood to be spilled. The blood of the Emperor's enemies.' As Andromedes came forward with his copper flask and anointed the rust-stained roof – the closest they could expect to get to the hive world surface – Squad Orpheon remained silent. When Brother Andromedes rose back to full height, Porphyrian voxed, 'Brother Salames, await our return. Stand by for further orders.'

'Affirmative.'

'Squad Orpheon,' the Iron Snakes sergeant said. 'For Ithaka.'

'For Ithaka!'

'And for the Emperor.'

'The Emperor!'

With that, Porphyrian led the Iron Snakes out of the troop bay and onto the roof. Their power-armoured footfalls boomed across the rust-eaten roof and onto a byzantine staircase working its way down the side of the sweat mill. Kicking the rickety railing from out of their path, Squad Orpheon dispensed with the zigs, zags and spirals of the staircase, instead dropping the distance from one mesh landing to another, shaking the structure with the rhythmic impact of each descent.

One of the landings was level with an elevated avenue stretching between hab-stacks and tower-factoria that lined the progress of the stilt thoroughfare. Thick, corroded cables running between the rockcrete path and the buildings held it steady on its stilt structure. Still, like the staircase, Porphyrian swore he felt movement in the metal and stone beneath his boots.

The elevated avenue was slick with old blood oozing downhill at a glacial pace, carrying a mesh of bones and mummified remains with it. Crunching and slushing through the muck, splashing their boots and greaves with the Blood God's sacrifice,

the Iron Snakes' progress did not go unnoticed. If explosive detonations and the demolishing of skyscrapers and sub-spines hadn't announced their arrival, the sight of armoured figures on the elevated thoroughfare, working their way spireward, drew hatred from the surrounding architecture like an applied salve drawing infection from a wound. The Kith were everywhere. They roared from factoria balconies, smashed the plasteel from habs and gathered in rooftop throngs to screech their demented blood lust. There were lives unpledged in the city. Deaths that belonged to Sholen Skara. Ends to honour the magister's Blood God. Like savage primates in the treetops, the alarm spread through the hab-stacks, along the thoroughfare and up through the insanity of the hive. This was not the identification of a threat or a warning to the group. The monstrous cacophony of voices roared hoarse – hundreds, thousands, hundreds of thousands, millions even, for all Porphyrian knew – unified to announce a hunt.

The hive seemed to come alive around the Iron Snakes. Cult warriors, who moments before had been wandering in a blood-hazed malaise, now gathered in crazed mobs, their broken minds filled with purpose and the roaring hatred of their fellow Kith. The savages climbed up through the stiltwork, leapt from balconies and catwalks, and shattered through the avenue-adjacent habs. They gathered in growing hordes, splashing up through the gore, intent on being the first to honour their magister and offer sacrifice to their dark god.

As the crazed masses flooded the thoroughfare, their number washing up behind the Iron Snakes as well as running down to meet them, Porphyrian could hear the sound of the Ithakariad's thrusters taking the gunship off the mill roof. No doubt the hordes had swamped the landing site, intent on overwhelming the Storm Eagle with sheer numbers.

'Remain on station,' Porphyrian voxed to Brother Salames, instructing him to circle as best he could.

‘Affirmative,’ the pilot voxed back. ‘Brother-Sergeant, the Ithakariad registers many thousands of enemy targets closing on your position.’

‘Aye,’ Porphyrian said grimly. ‘We are going to make them regret such a fantasy.’

‘Enemy in range,’ Brother Deucalion reported, prompting Brothers Phrenius and Urymachus to bring up their boltguns to meet the oncoming Kith.

‘Negative,’ Porphyrian decided. ‘Conserve your ammunition. Spears and shields, brothers. Formation High-Tide. Brother Ptolomon, be the storm at our backs.’

As the roaring masses came at them, the Iron Snakes coolly mag-locked their boltguns to their belts. Sliding combat shields down onto their forearm plate and drawing a sea lance each from between their backs and packs, the Ithakans brought the blades to crackling blue life. Clutching the power spears by their grips and balancing the shafts of the weapons between their tapering tails and the sizzling blades, the Iron Snakes assumed formation.

Like a stormy sea of human detritus crashing up against ceramite cliffs, the frontline cult warriors of the Kith broke themselves against the Iron Snakes combat shields and immovable armoured forms. Batting back the shattered bodies, Squad Orpheon thrust their power spears through the roaring madness of the degenerate Kith, skewering heretics three or four deep on the shafts of their lances, before withdrawing the weapons and clearing the spears of screaming bodies with the rims of their combat shields. Stamping forth through the demolished lines of bodies, the Iron Snakes turned their power spears around above them in unison, bringing the crackling blades sweeping down on the next line of frenzied savages. As the heads of heretics rolled and bodies collapsed with theatrical choreography, Squad Orpheon brought their combat shields up to begin the meat-grinding manoeuvre again.

For the longest time, the Iron Snakes' world became the roaring of blood-crazed cultists, red-rimmed eyes and faces contorted in hatred, in frustration and in agonising death. Working their way up the crowded thoroughfare, the progress of the Iron Snakes would not be denied. Shields shattered bone. Lances seared, swept and thudded through blood-daubed bodies. Armoured boots granted the Emperor's peace to cult warriors whose expertly butchered forms still screeched their magister's fell name from the rockcrete.

Squad Orpheon left a mulched carpet of the fallen in its wake. As Kith warriors surged up behind the Iron Snakes, Brother Ptolomon bathed them in a sweeping stream of flame, forcing advancing cultists to fight up through an inferno of thrashing, fiery forms. As cult warriors hauled themselves up onto the elevated avenue from the stiltworks below, and leapt to the rockcrete from surrounding balconies and habs, the Iron Snakes cut them down with the sharp crack of single bolt-rounds delivered with cool vengeance from their weapons. Blasting Kith off the thoroughfare and into the abyssal underhive below, the Space Marines kept the squad's flanks clear of hostiles.

It started with the crack of a single beam. Then the bark of a single stub gunshot. A shotgun plucked at the rockcrete of the thoroughfare before being drowned in the chatter of an autogun. Hives were towering armouries of low-grade weaponry: stubbers crafted by underhive weaponsmiths; cheap, mass-produced autocarabines; lasguns liberated from militia storage depots. The balconies, roofs and thoroughfare-facing habs were suddenly flashing with furious fire as Sholen Skara's Kith soldiers flooded the surrounding stacks and towers to create a gauntlet along the path of the elevated avenue. With rockcrete plucked around them, the air searing with wild beams and rounds sparking off their plate, Squad Orpheon were pinned down.

‘Iron Snakes,’ Porphyrian commanded, ‘strike!’

Bringing their power spears above their heads and shields, the Space Marines launched their lances at the oncoming cultists. Spearing their way through heretic ranks, Porphyrian watched as the mobs ahead were skewered into the rockcrete.

‘Formation Tempest!’ the brother-sergeant ordered, prompting the squad members to snatch up their boltguns from where they were magnetically dangling from their belts. Assuming positions on opposite sides of the thoroughfare and allowing the patchwork balustrade of crumbling rockcrete, corrugated sheeting and suspension cables to soak up the worst of the wild assault, Porphyrian called, ‘May the Emperor grant us speed and accuracy. Make every bolt count. Open fire!’

From crouches and from cover, the Iron Snakes brought up their boltguns and took aim. Lining their helmet optics up along the sights of their hallowed weaponry, the Space Marines blasted single bolt-rounds at targets hammering the thoroughfare from above. Amid the fury and waste of hive weaponry chewing up the avenue around them, the Iron Snakes took cold and certain aim, blasting apart the Kith gunmen firing down on them from catwalks, balconies and shattered hab-stack vistaports. Round after round erupted from the muzzles of the Iron Snakes boltguns, dropping cult gunmen, blasting them back through habs or from their positions among the busy architecture of tottering towers.

As the Space Marines advanced up the thoroughfare at a cover-hugging crouch, Apothecary Nemertes and Brother Ptolomon drew bolt pistols and cut down cultists still intent on suicidally rushing them from the front and the rear. This allowed the rest of Squad Orpheon to concentrate the unrelenting accuracy of their bolt blasts on the Kith gauntlet.

The switch to such a tactic – the suggestion of formations and a plan of attack – led Porphyrian to the belief that they were getting closer to their objective. Without guidance, the Kith moved between the languid torpor of exhaustion and the idle practice of torture, mutilation and murder. In agitated numbers they could form savage hordes of wild warriors, drawn to the stench of sacrifice. In the presence of heretic lieutenants, however, a cult command structure and perhaps even a magister, the Kith managed to achieve singularity of purpose and a spiritual discipline that gave the appearance of rank and file organisation, when in truth they simply felt the predacious presence of the Blood God in their hearts, filling them with a sacrificial urge so powerful that they might end their own lives in unison to appease the whims of the monstrous power’s mortal prophets. Prophets like Sholen Skara.

As progress up the avenue was made, boltgun magazines were exchanged and ammunition ran low, Porphyrian needed the heretic warlord to show his hand. The sergeant assumed that he must be near – drawn to the destruction sweeping through his city and reports from his savages that the Emperor’s Angels were in the hives. Porphyrian was counting on the assumption that the Iron Snakes were too tempting an offering to pass up.

The brother-sergeant was not to be disappointed.

Suddenly, the din of assorted gunfire died away to a ghostly echo that bounced around the perversity of the hive architecture.

‘Hold your fire,’ Porphyrian ordered.

‘What’s happening?’ Brother Andromedes called. The silence of the guns was unsettling after the fury of the previous onslaught. ‘What does it mean?’

‘It means that he’s here,’ Porphyrian told the battle-brother.

‘Here you are...’

They were sickly sweet words on the air, pouring from every caster, every channel and every vox-system in the quarter. The voice proceeded from everywhere. It echoed over itself and filled the open space between the hab-stacks and towers with mellifluous, static-laced poison. ‘The Emperor’s snakes, slithering into my nest. I know not whether to be honoured or insulted.’

‘I want optics on Sholen Skara,’ Porphyrian said over the vox. ‘Now. He’s here. I’m sure of it. He would want to see this. Full scan.’

The Iron Snakes looked around endless floors of the hab-stacks and the busy architecture of tower-factoria, rotating through optical filters and engaging their auto-senses in a silhouette-scanning search of the gathered thousands of Kith forming the gauntlet.

‘There were serpents,’ Sholen Skara continued, the poetic poison of his words cursing the air. ‘In the fields, where I lived as a boy. Cowardly creatures. Low things of the decrepit earth. Death without meaning. They would hide, they would strike and they would kill the workers in the fields. Men trying to earn an existence for themselves and their families out of an unforgiving land. At my father’s insistence, I went out early, every morn and walked the rocky furrows, searching for serpents, that my father might not suffer them in his back-breaking work. I was terrified at first. When I found my first serpent I pelted it with stones and crushed it beneath a heavy rock. Its venom and the scales of its slithering body afforded little protection against gravity. The others came easy after that. Of course, they hid, they hissed and they struck when they could, but I came to enjoy their lowly, petty resistance. I gave their deaths meaning. I saved the man I loved as my father – the harsh and perhaps cruel man – for a significant end. A meaningful death at the hands of his miserable specimen of

a son. My mother could not accept what had happened. I helped her to understand. I didn't lay a finger on my mother. I loved my mother. My words simply took her to a place from which she wanted to escape. A place where taking one's own life is a blessed release. A death with meaning. A sacrifice of spilled blood and significance. But it all started with the snakes.'

'Target acquired,' Brother Hyperenor reported, peering up the length of his boltgun. 'Hab-stack south by south-west. Four hundred and thirty second floor.'

Porphyrian stared along the boltgun's line of sight. His helmet optics magnified the dark figure – one standing among many Kith cultists in the open space of a hab-stack under further tottering construction. Standing in the skeletal guts of the accretion, with plastek sheeting whipping about in the breeze, Porphyrian could make out the silhouette of a muscular figure with a shaved head. Like the sheeting, his hive robes tangled around him in the wind. He held a vox-thief in one hand, while behind him a humpshuttle sat precariously on the half-constructed roof of the hab-stack. Porphyrian swore that even at this distance he could see the murderous glint in the magister's eyes.

'I have a shot,' Hyperenor informed his sergeant. Porphyrian's lip began to curl. He could have Hyperenor end this madness with one pull of the trigger. The Kith were nothing without their magister.

'He's got to go back,' Brother Andromedes said. 'It's the mission.'

'The mission,' Porphyrian agreed bleakly.

And then something hit the thoroughfare, something that had fallen from the sky. Something drawn to the rockcrete by the irresistible force of gravity. Something fleshy and unrelenting. It died as it struck. Three more bombs of flesh, blood and bone hammered around them.

Bodies were raining from the sky.

Looking up, Porphyrian witnessed the impossible. At some secret signal from Sholen Skara – a trigger word or hand signal that formed some kind of sacrificial, suicidal insistence – the Kith had launched themselves from balconies, roofs and murderous heights on both sides of the thoroughfare. They were falling with impunity, rocketing towards the Iron Snakes with lethal force.

‘Take the sho–’ Porphyrian managed, but it was too late.

Bodies were hammering down all around them, smashing into the rockcrete, but many were hitting the Iron Snakes. Hyperenor’s weapon had been smashed from his grip by a thunderbolting Kith, who broke over the edge of the balustrade. The raining bodies were an enemy against which a boltgun or spear were useless, and Squad Orpheon were forced to hold their combat shields over themselves. Even beneath a shield, the servos, hydraulics and fibre bundles of the Iron Snakes’ power armour struggled with the relentless impacts of flailing bodies from above. Flesh forms broke over shields and splattered across plate. The Space Marines struggled to keep their footing, being smashed from one side to another by the suicidal descent of cultists.

‘Formation Phalanx,’ Brother-Sergeant Porphyrian ordered, but the Iron Snakes could not make it to one another. They were knee-deep in shattered bodies and bloody remains, while some of the Kith leaping from the lower floor were, horribly, still breathing. Screaming. Roaring. Clawing at the Space Marines’ plate. Drawing their warblades, the Iron Snakes slashed at grasping limbs and cut their way free of the growing cadaver mounds.

The suicidal onslaught had become a torrential downpour of flesh and bone. A deluge of sacrificial offerings, rocketing down from the heavens. Porphyrian could barely see his squad. He had been knocked to the ground several times, and although he had

heaved himself back up against the cascade of bodies, he had lost his boltgun and shield. Slashing about him with the warblade while being bounced left and right by sickening impacts, Porphyrian tried to wade through the limbs and smashed cadavers.

‘Climb!’ he ordered, hauling himself up the blood-slick mountain of dead flesh. He saw Brother Urymachus buried in bodies, his gauntlets clawing out for assistance. He saw Nemertes, the Apothecary, crawl free only to be slammed aside by a tumbling Kith that knocked him off the elevated thoroughfare and into the abyssal depths of the underhive. ‘Deucalion. Andromedes. Report in!’ Porphyrian called, but all he could hear over the vox were the exertions of Iron Snakes Space Marines buried alive.

Smashed this way and that by bodies that hit like mortar shells, Porphyrian hauled himself desperately up the side of the cadaver cliff-face. Using his warblade like a pick, he stabbed purchase into the mound and climbed, working his way clear. Leaping from the thoroughfare, across to the crumbling wall of the opposite hab-stack, Porphyrian climbed for his life and those of his trapped Iron Snakes. Stabbing the warblade into decrepit masonry and clawing at ramshackle balconies and smashed vistaposts with his gauntlet, Porphyrian made an indomitable, powered ascent. Kith had started to hurl themselves down the face of the building, bouncing off architecture and tumbling onto the Space Marine. Holding on tight, Porphyrian’s strength and will were tested by the constant stream of suicidal cultists smashing off his pauldrons. Kith warriors attacked him from catwalks and balconies, and the Iron Snakes sergeant was forced to tear them from their purchase and launch them out into open space.

With his squad drowning in death below, Porphyrian finally hauled himself onto the roof of the towering hab-stack. Exhausted, he dropped his warblade and pushed himself to his feet. When he turned around he found that Sholen Skara was watching him from

the opposite hab-stack with great amusement. His Kith acolytes were spitting and roaring at the Iron Snakes Space Marine, while the magister simply brought the vox-thief to his lips.

‘This snake can climb,’ Sholen Skara’s silky syllables boomed across the open space above the thoroughfare. ‘Where do you think you’re going, serpent?’

Porphyrian unclasped his helm and dropped it to one side. Skara smiled as though he were supposed to be impressed. Brother Hyperenor had had the magister in his sights, but he had not fired, and now Porphyrian had no boltgun with which to deliver justice. Surrounded by death and destruction, there was one thing of which Porphyrian was certain. Sholen Skara was too dangerous to be allowed to live. He was a monster, and on Ithaka there was only one thing to be done with monsters.

Slipping his second sea lance from his back, Porphyrian brought the power spear to life and balanced it in his grip. It was an incredible distance, but with several heavy steps and a power-armoured launch from the roof of the hab-stack, Brother-Sergeant Porphyrian hurled the crackling spear across the impossible distance between the two towers. The Iron Snake watched the magister’s smile contort into an ugly, horrified snarl as the lance sailed home, slamming through the heretic’s muscular chest and impaling him against the side of the humpshuttle.

As Sholen Skara stared down in disbelief at the spear shaft protruding from his chest, his Kith acolytes fought frantically to remove the sea lance from the shuttle, or their magister from the lance. The impact of the power spear had been just enough, however, to knock the craft from its precarious perch on the hab-stack roof. With Sholen Skara staring on in disbelief and the Kith screaming around him, the humpshuttle tipped and slid from the roof’s edge. Porphyrian watched with satisfaction as the tumbling shuttle crashed down the side of the building, tearing Sholen Skara with it until finally both shuttle and Skara erupted in a ball

of furious flame as the wreckage hit the elevated thoroughfare below.

Porphyrian heard the roar of engines. Behind the hab-stack, Brother Salames had managed to work through the spider's web of cables and walkways to bring the Ithakariad level with the roof. Jabbing a ceramite finger down at the thoroughfare below and Squad Orpheon buried alive in dead bodies, Porphyrian directed Brother Salames and the Storm Eagle down to offer assistance. The Space Marine recovered his helmet and cycled through the vox channels.

'Patch me through to the ship's steward,' the sergeant ordered.

'My lord?'

'Leodocus,' Porphyrian said. 'I need you to send an astrotelepathic message to the Inquisitorial fortress on Khulan.'

'Yes, my lord.'

'Inform them not to expect the heretic Sholen Skara.'

'Yes, my lord.'

'Send another to the Warmaster,' Brother-Sergeant Porphyrian said grimly. 'Tell him... Tell him that he's lost another world.'