



**WARHAMMER**  
40,000



A BLACK TEMPLARS SHORT STORY

**CHAMPIONS,**



**ALL**



**MARC COLLINS**



**WARHAMMER**  
40,000



A BLACK TEMPLARS SHORT STORY

**CHAMPIONS,**  
✠ **ALL** ✠

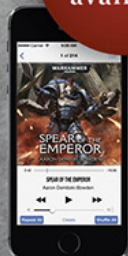
**MARC COLLINS**

# BLACK LIBRARY

To see the full Black Library range visit  
**blacklibrary.com**



Multiple formats available



MP3 AUDIOBOOKS | BOOKS | EBOOKS

# CONTENTS

Cover

Champions, All – Marc Collins

About the Author

An Extract from ‘The Talon of Horus’

A Black Library Publication

eBook license

# CHAMPIONS, ALL

*Marc Collins*

Cenric knelt, and prayed.

There was nothing else. Only the movement of his lips and the beating of his hearts. The scent of incense drifted from the burning braziers across the plains before the fortress. He had kept his vigil through the chill night, till the crimson sun rose above Daronch and bathed the plains in bloody dawn. Like the spreading of great wings...

*A crimson angel, bearing the Emperor's light in one hand, and death in the other. Her wings, burning sanguine glory, casting long dark shadows. Destiny turns about her.*

The Emperor spoke to him in visions such as these. On the eve of battle, at the moment of truth, He spoke. It had been so for the past five years of the Edioch Crusade. Cenric had fought for its forty-seven years, from neophyte to initiate... before he had been *chosen*, raised up as the Emperor's Champion. Battle-brothers who had once stood shoulder to shoulder with him now looked to him in awe. Chaplains and Marshals clamoured for his guidance.

Cenric ceased his prayer and rose to his feet. He checked the chains about his wrist, ensuring that they held tight to the shackled glory of the Black Sword, tracing his fingers along their links to the words etched onto the obsidian hilt. His name was engraved there, a binding the strongest chain could not match. He had not yet raised the blade in martial struggle, but soon. Soon it would taste blood and know battle. He would wield it as Sigismund had once wielded it, when he'd faced down the traitors before the Palace walls, when he had stood his long vigil before the gates of hell.

Theirs was the legacy of heroes, the blood of crusaders.

*This is eternal, this duty. We cannot, will not, shirk from it.* The mantra was like iron, a core of determination grounding his thoughts. He passed through the ranks of his brothers, where they knelt in obeisance before the Chaplains. Skull-faced warriors smeared ashen crosses upon the brows of the Templars, or flicked oil from sacred aspergills. Servitors stalked the ranks, their arms replaced by swaying auto-censers. This was war at its most sacred, its most perfect.

‘Brother!’ The voice rang out across the plain, like the hammer of inevitable artillery. Marshal Adelbert looked at him with muted concern. The warrior was unhelmed, his dark skin like carved wood beneath the beating sun. He was crowned with a simple circlet of bronze, the smooth metal riveted into his skull as a symbol of office. His armour was battered, lacking the true grandeur owed to him. At his side stood a neophyte, Baldwin, if Cenric was not mistaken, bearing the crusade banner. It fluttered in the wind, bathing the Marshal in its tattered shadow. ‘Does He speak, Brother Cenric? Does the God-Emperor bless this holy undertaking?’

Cenric nodded. ‘The Emperor speaks in His tongue of fire, scouring the unworthy and girding the faithful.’

‘Glorious,’ Adelbert rumbled. He did not pry; he did not have to. Faith was its own reward. ‘He has spoken, and all that remains is for you to be the edge of His blade, His Champion.’ He placed his hand upon Cenric’s shoulder and leant in. ‘I know your pain, brother. The galaxy burns, and we fight alone. Unsupported. Ailing. Some would have me send word to the Helicos Crusade, to meld our strength.’ He shook his head, and Cenric could see the weight of his centuries of service press upon him. ‘While there is yet might in my body, we shall continue to do the Emperor’s work. The sons of Dorn do not turn from sacrifice. That is how the eternal crusade has endured, these millennia. That is how we have survived our own half a century of battle.’

Cenric bowed his head and kept his counsel. *Once we were over a thousand strong; now we are a mere handful. Wounded by the Archenemy, scarred by the wiles of the xenos, wearied by the attempts to cross the Rift. How much more can we endure?*

‘As you will, brother.’ He spoke the words as though the desert grit

clogged his throat. ‘Our allies are prepared?’

Adelbert chuckled dryly and swept his arm round across the plain. ‘Come, Champion. Come survey the glorious faithful.’

They passed through the serried ranks of their brotherhood and the sacred scents of their devotion. Warriors brought their fists to their breastplates with the clatter of ceramite, or formed the sign of the holy aquila as the Marshal and the Champion passed. They seemed ramshackle, their armour dented and the paint scraped. They offered their obeisance like the ragged hedge knights of old, a shadow of their crusade’s proud beginnings.

Beyond them lay the muster fields of the Adepta Sororitas. Cenric and Adelbert passed beneath black banners, bearing the heart and cross of the Order of the Valorous Heart. The cloths rippled in the breeze, disturbed by the hymnal booming of laud hailers as though they were human adherents, stoked to zealotry.

Canoness Aurea greeted them at the edge of the muster, a stern-faced woman holding an ornately sculpted power sword. She examined the blade with casual indifference, her blue eyes drifting along graven scrollwork that she had doubtless read a thousand times. She was armoured in black, as he was, though it felt moribund next to the vital shade of Cenric’s own plate.

‘Canoness,’ Adelbert said, bowing his head respectfully.

‘Marshal,’ she returned and then bowed before Cenric. ‘And you, the instrument of His will. Praise be.’ Voices chorused behind her, the laud hailers hitched an octave into a higher key of hosanna. Cenric nodded, though the adoration of mortals grated upon him. It was to the Emperor alone that they owed thanks.

‘Our warriors stand ready, our weapons prepared.’ Her lips tightened, barely contained anger thrumming within her. ‘We shall reclaim what has been sullied. We shall drive back the alien.’ She glared past them, and Cenric followed her gaze to the source of their shared ire.

The fortress loomed.

Once it had been a cathedral, hewn from the desert rock like ancient mega-scale scrimshaw. The winds had sung through it for generations, and a million artisans had carved and shaped and fluted its structure. Multitudes of scribes had recorded the song, sifting it for the

Emperor's holy word. As Cenric understood it, they had still been recording when the ork scrap-ship had speared into them.

Now the cathedral was a ruin, its walls broken and marred with alien graffiti, patched with great plates of salvaged metal. Defiled. *Occupied*.

Cenric assessed the looming horror of the fastness, its rough angles crowded with guns, the air thick with smog and woodsmoke. The first shots were already echoing out, finding their range. A sudden detonation showered them in rock and shrapnel, but none of them moved. Aurea did not even flinch when a whipping spur of stone cut a thin line across her pale cheek. If anything, her determination appeared to grow.

Behind her Cenric could see the kneeling ranks of the penitent. The women had cast aside their battleplate, in some cases so violently that their interface ports still bled. They were silent, eyes fixed. Their robes were torn, bound by declarations of penance and contrition. Flakboard had been carved with further condemnations, and hammered against their exposed skin as makeshift armour. Some were gagged or hooded with rough hessian, others had their mouths sewn shut or sealed with wax and stamped with the fleur-de-lys. Great Eviscerator chainswords lay before them, unprofaned by their touch. Cenric drew his eyes away, as the Marshal made his judgement.

'We advance,' Adelbert stated simply, as he drew his own blade. 'We end this.'

The sky was burning as they charged beneath the greenskin artillery. It tore lines of fire across the heavens, hurling a rain of infernal spite against the pure. Prayers boomed across the plain, the divine cadence of the faithful in their rage. Cenric shared in it, gloried in it. He cast forth his voice in condemnation of the alien, the mutant, the heretic.

'I am His rage and His sword! Judgement and justice!' Everywhere he looked there was the enemy. They spilled from ramshackle gates or hurled themselves from the walls, bellowing their swine-cries. They were vermin. They would die for their transgressions, for their fundamental inhumanity.

Cenric hurled himself into the midst of the foe, cleaving through the first of the greenskin warriors without stopping. The energised blade blazed white hot, obliterating the roaring warrior in a magnesium-bright burst of superheated blood and powdered flesh. He slammed it into the armour of

another ork, splitting its plate and taking its arm off at the shoulder. The beast roared and grabbed at him with its free hand, letting an oversized cleaver fall from its fingers as it tried to strangle him. Lumpen digits scraped at his immaculate battleplate, but he cast it aside with the back of his gauntlet. Slamming the sword clean through its midriff, he wrenched it to one side and bisected it.

‘Face me, xenos dogs!’ The cry rippled from him, vox-amplified by his armour and echoing across the tumult. ‘Face the Emperor’s will made manifest!’ Lesser beasts scattered from his path, whether in fear or in the attempt to reach his brothers, Cenric did not care. They were nothing before him, not compared to the greater examples of their filth-breed. Where those things walked he could see the Emperor’s golden light, singling them out for His divine judgement. Cenric would tear apart their champions, cast down their tyrants. Only humanity would reign over this burning world.

Cenric hewed the head from another greenskin and the corpse reared back, still firing its crude gun. He moved in a storm of sword thrusts and parries, watching alien blades break on his weapon’s edge or careen off his armour. The Emperor was with him, in every movement. Every breath. Whether he swung his sword in great two-handed arcs, or brandished it in one hand while he fired his bolt pistol, every strike was sacred.

He could see others of his brotherhood slam into the ork horde. Adelbert brought his sword through an alien’s chest with an artful thrust, rending armour and flesh, showering himself in inhuman gore. Sword Brethren and Chaplains flanked him, lashing out with mace or sword and shield. They sang their war cries as they slew, chants of devotion to Him on Earth. Aurea fought her way forward, as though to prove her faith the equal of the Templars’. She need not have; all present knew the hearts of the Sororitas beat true and faithful. She fought in determined silence, lips tight when not moving to the echoing laud-hailed hymnals.

The Sisters Repentia were an undulating, febrile knot of motion near her. They were a blur, almost frantic, moving with such rapidity that they seemed out of phase with the battle around them. The great chainblades swung and cleaved into the foe, drawing great gouts of blood and viscera. They forced their entire weight behind each thrust, driving the enormous weapons down with nothing more than human zeal, and the determination

to atone. Together they were pushing forward, holding against the tide of roaring alien filth. The xenos' animal stink was like a bow wave before their fury.

He looked around. The larger orks seemed to be pulling back, rallying their forces with snarls and violent gesturing. If he moved up to support the Marshal, they could push through to the enemy's leaders. Then there would be the reckoning Cenric craved. Turning the sword in one hand, he advanced, cleaving through the dregs with disdainful ease.

Ahead of him, a clutch of orks suddenly burst up from the ground, trailing dust and garish purple paint. They glared at him with bestial malice, yet he could see the flicker of amusement in their eyes. Each of them held a clunky device, prodding and shaking it experimentally. Lights flickered on their surfaces, antennae sprouting madly in every direction. They quivered with ruinous potential.

*Detonators. By the Thro—*

Cenric had no time to finish his thought before the world erupted in fire.

When he awoke, it was without a sense of time.

The world was changed, warped like a pict twisted by heat. There was a greater darkness, beyond the smoke-streaked sky. Death, fire, the stench of burning meat.

He forced himself up, feeling at his armour. The master-crafted plate held firm, though he could feel the weakness of his own flesh. Blood ran within his armour, from largely minor cuts. As he moved, he could feel that his fused ribs had split or cracked in places. He would live. The Imperial Fists, his Chapter's gene-source, believed that suffering bound them to the heroes of the past.

But here, all Cenric felt was alone.

He had fallen. That much was clear. He was in a pit hewn into the earth by massed explosives. Ancient passageways had collapsed, spilling the broken bas-reliefs of their walls into the depths. The faces of saints and heroes stared up, impotently, their shattered visages judging him. Pipes that had once carried sacred oils had ruptured, burning with lurid multicoloured flame. The light rippled along the ragged walls, picking out details and horrors.

Bodies surrounded him, giving the place a charnel air. Masses of the

enemy lay dead, alongside multitudes of the Sisterhood and his own brothers. His grip tightened about the Black Sword. This was not the victory he had been promised. He pressed the blade tip into the cracked stone and bowed his head.

*Do not forsake us in our hour of glory or time of suffering. We venerate you, we trust in your guidance. This cannot be the end. This cannot be all that you have wrought me for.*

He nearly choked on the pride in his thoughts. His was not to question; merely to serve. To fight and to die at the Emperor's will. Then his body and blade would be carried back to the *Eternal Crusader*, to lie alongside the other vanished heroes of the Chapter. An honour that would be denied to the brothers here, unless the Apothecaries were to find them when, *if*, the battle was won.

'I will not let you moulder here, brothers,' he swore. 'When the enemy lies dead before me, you shall be honoured as you deserve. Your legacy shall return to the Chapter, that future generations might serve our cause in the Emperor's name.'

His words were drowned out by a tortured mechanical scream. The earth shook and trembled, dislodging debris from the sides of the pit. It pinged uselessly against his armour, not even scoring the pure blackness of the ceramite. He looked up. Great mechanical plates slid across the gap above, obliterating the sky with their grinding passage. Greenskin chants echoed, and he could hear their stamping and pounding upon the makeshift bridges.

Sunlight died beneath their advance, and he was left alone in the flickering shadow.

His armour's auto-senses compensated quickly. Where his eye had first been drawn skywards, now he looked to the ruined mess of shattered tunnels and ancient cracked-open vaults. Powdered masonry and old bone coated everything, spilling from violated reliquaries and shrineholds. Worlds such as Daronch were threaded with them, like capillaries through flesh. All inevitably snaked back to the great organs of the cathedrals. He looked to the north, where the perverted fastness of their enemy waited. The tunnels were unreliable, likely still teeming with greenskin stragglers, but they were all that remained to him.

*He has set a path before me, and I will follow it even if it leads to death.*

To others it might have seemed a haunting thought, but it bore a reassurance within it. This was ordained; it had to be. Did the galaxy not turn by His will?

Cenric pushed on, his pain forgotten, his kindled blade held before him.

The light of the power weapon split the darkness, resolving the intricately carved walls of the passageways. Even here they had been worked and graven, the better to channel the desert winds into sacred song. Now they echoed with the distant sound of bestial roars and grunts, of metal on metal, and the clamour of battle. It had become a debased alien hymnal of desecration.

And of struggle.

He could hear human exertion echoing amidst the fray, the muted sound of battle. Orkish cries and jeers sought to drown it with their savagery. The whirring of an engine rose and fell, the juddering of teeth against metal. Someone was fighting, struggling to survive. Cenric barged his way past piles of debris and crude barricades, crushing rocks to powder beneath his tread. He rounded another corner and emerged into a domed circular chamber. There he found his quarry.

The woman fought like a cornered animal, slashing at the air with the massive chainblade. Three of the greenskins had closed in around her, laughing with piggish amusement. They were toying with her, seemingly unconcerned by the rents in their armour and the wounds carved into their skin by her defiance. Her eyes were ablaze, piercing in their unbridled hatred. She swung recklessly, not caring if she exhausted herself, only that she struck, that she endured. She would fight, to the bitter end.

Any brother of the Chapter would be proud to fight like this – to die like this. The thought gave Cenric pause, resolving his duty like a sharply honed blade.

He hurled himself forward, bellowing his wrath. ‘For Dorn! For Sigismund! For the Emperor!’ The beasts turned, their red glare suddenly focusing upon him. The warrior took her chance and rallied. The great blade came up, teeth screaming as she raked it across the back of the nearest ork. It roared in pain and rage, spinning back towards her and catching her return sweep in the face. Its head vanished in a burst of gory slurry, its body shuddered and dropped. She was already moving past it, into the fray, initiative regained.

Cenric swung the Black Sword double-handed and the nearest ork flinched back from it, too slow. The crackling tip of the blade opened a gouge in its oversized plate armour. Rivulets of molten pig iron spilled across exposed skin with an acrid crackle, and it swung its own axe in a desperate arc. The flat of the blade caught him in the side of the helm, knocking him backwards. The visual display jolted, damage runes staining everything with winking crimson.

He gritted his teeth and pushed in, past its guard. Drawing the sword in towards his body, he spun on his heel, letting it swing forth as he moved out and away from the ork. The beast's arm followed him as it was sliced free from its body. His pistol came up as he stopped, and fired two shots into its skull. Its head snapped back in a shower of brain and bone fragments but he was already turning from it, forgotten like the vermin it was, to face the last of them.

Champion and Sister struck as one, moving at almost the same moment. He brought his blade across its throat, while the Repentia went low and her chainblade hammered wetly at its knees. The beast was ripped apart, its body torn in opposing directions, scattered across the chamber. The woman was panting with exertion, but Cenric stood perfectly still. He raised the blade, touching it lightly to his forehead, before relaxing his stance.

‘Be at peace, Sister.’

Her eyes snapped up to meet the lenses of his helm. She gritted her teeth and rose, her gaze never flinching from him. Votive parchment had stuck to her wounds, the blood obliterating whatever canticles of contrition had been written upon them. Her robes were rough-spun, threaded with barbs and thorns, smeared with blood from her injuries. He could see the remnants of wax, where her lips had been sealed shut. Her hair had been shorn crudely from her head in ragged lines, dark where it had already begun to grow back. She was the image of the humbled warrior. Yet still she fought, with a devotion that would put lesser men to shame.

‘You...’ She spoke in a rasp, her voice atrophied from lack of use. ‘He has sent you to me.’ She almost laughed, looking away lest the sight of him strike her blind. She fell to her knees, head bowed. ‘I am unworthy to stand in His light, by His Champion.’

‘I have watched you fight. Worthiness lies in the deeds done in the

Emperor's name. Rise.' There was a deep respect in his every word, and she rose with the gesture of his hand. 'I am Cenric, named Emperor's Champion of the Black Templars.' He placed a hand on her shoulder to steady her.

'Penance,' she hissed the word. 'That is the name granted to me in mercy and contrition. I am Penance, or I am nothing.'

'Penance.' Cenric bowed his head. 'A fine name.' Her face creased with sudden anger, and for a moment he wondered if her blade would come up. White-knuckled hands were locked around the grip, and the chainblade revved with sympathetic fury.

'A fine name? One born of shame? I had a name, before I was judged unworthy of holding it. I will claim that name again in death, my oaths fulfilled.' She spat to one side, the saliva blood-flecked.

'I meant no offence.' He spoke the words in a peal of sincere thunder. 'The Emperor tasks us with our finest work, in war and in peace. He expects our all, but many are found wanting. They could have executed you for your failings, as many amongst the Militarum are. Instead, you have the opportunity to erase your sin with blood. Yours or the enemy's. It makes little difference to Him on Earth.'

She looked away, as though burned. 'Perhaps you are right,' she swallowed, the admission bitter. 'We yet live, and so have our chance for redemption.' She cast her gaze skywards. 'Do you think they endure? Your brothers, and my sisters?'

'All things that serve Him persist in Him.' Cenric spoke the words almost by rote. 'If they continue to fight, then there is hope.' He raised his sword, pointing it towards the catacombs ahead of them. The blade's black metal was aglow with the caged lightning of its power field, a blazing beacon to light their way in the darkness. 'The only way out of the abyss is through.' He turned back to her, his helm impassive yet burning with the majesty of his calling.

'Will you rise with me, Sister?'

For a time, they advanced in silence.

Both of them stared at the walls of the defiled tunnels. The crude script carved over sacred inscriptions and the murals profaned with alien filth. The stonework beneath their feet was already beginning to crack as xeno-

fungal growths wormed their way up from the earth below. Fingered protrusions tasted the air, staining the close atmosphere with spores and the gentle light of bioluminescence. They could have been beneath some strange ocean, rather than trapped in the bowels of a temple to the Emperor.

The walls shook with the distant sound of battle, palsied with the echoes of siege and defence. They could not tell who was winning, who held any sort of advantage. Bestial snuffling drifted through the empty corridors, but they saw no one. Perhaps all the enemy were above, set against their allies, and all that remained in the depths were the ghosts of the xenos, the shades of their brutal past.

‘How much further?’ Cenric asked as he paused, running his fingers along the intricately carved walls of the tunnel. They teemed with etched hymnals and prayers, where the passage of orks had not erased them and altered the directed song of the wind. He traced the words IMPERATOR GLORIANA with his gauntleted hand, lingering, considering.

‘We should be nearing the base of the cathedral. These tunnels are singing lines, meant to carry the song out across the plains to shepherd the faithful.’

‘You know them well, then?’ he said. Still his fingers danced across the words. He dwelt over warnings against pride, and the laxity that such vanity carried with it.

‘I once had the honour of patrolling them. The wind was bracing, the song...’ She trailed off. ‘I cannot describe it.’ Penance shook herself from her reverie, chastened by thoughts of nobler times. ‘I served my last posting in defence of the reliquaries.’ She looked at him, at the fixedness of his gaze. ‘Why do you tarry, Cenric?’

‘I—’ He paused, his fingers hovering over the inscription. He clenched them into a fist and turned from her and the carvings. ‘I meditate. Upon my duty to the Emperor and my responsibilities to the Chapter.’ He looked back. She was following him closely, and nodded her head as he spoke. ‘In duty are all things made pure. Even the most egregious of trespasses can be mended in service.’

‘As mine may be.’

‘As yours may be,’ he affirmed, and then held up his hand suddenly.

Something rattled ahead of them, the sudden movement of steel on stone.

He could hear the low growling of beasts, hungry and slavering. There was another rattle, the snap of chains going taut, and the enemy were before them in a sudden flash of stinking flesh and teeth.

The five squig-beasts were rotund and blubbery, their hides scarred from pit fighting and idle malice. Their eyes were frenzied, jaws foaming as the collars locked tight around what passed for their throats. He could see the beast master beyond them, chortling as it cracked the chains like whips to urge them on. The first creature hurled itself at Cenric, clamping its jaws around his sword arm. He backhanded it fiercely, his gauntlet driving into the side of its snout to the sound of shattering teeth. He smashed it against the wall, using his pinned arm to batter it into the cold stone. It let go with a yelp of surprise, coughing teeth and blood. Cenric brought his boot down on it, and it burst in a shower of quivering organs. Behind its pets, the ork gave a stunted cry that might have been amusement or grief. Cenric cared not. He stalked forward.

Penance fell back, struggling to bring her Eviscerator to bear, her injuries bleeding with the effort. The teeth bit at the air and caught on the stonework, lighting the darkness with sparks and filling the tunnel with a dusty miasma. She braced herself, digging her feet into the floor as a beast hammered into her guard. The squig's jaws clamped against the blade, and she shook it to dislodge it. It opened its mouth and roared as it tumbled back, tiny arms flailing, showering her with the debris of its last meal. Saliva and blood stained her holy weapon, and she bellowed her own rage back in its face.

'You do not end me!' Penance screamed as she hurled herself forward. The Eviscerator fell, and reduced the swollen beast to red ruin. She trod through the remains of it, swinging again and battering the next squig against the wall as she passed it. She drew level with Cenric and then turned.

They fought, back to back. Penance lashed out against the two remaining beasts, guarding Cenric as he advanced upon their keeper. The ork grunted, and then lashed out with a thick club of knobbed metal. It cracked against his helm, and he reeled back before bringing his sword up. The crackling energy field split the darkness, and the ork stumbled, hurling insults in its guttural tongue. It fumbled for the pistol at its belt, getting off a single shot. The round scored across the side of Cenric's pauldron, as he spun in

and round. He thrust the Black Sword through its ragged breastplate, impaling the creature as it sputtered and snapped.

The club came round again in great swinging strikes, cracking against his helm and chest-plate, before the ork began to slam it against the sparking power field of the sword. Its eyes were wide with pain and anger, and it battered the club against the sword until it broke and wept molten metal. It snarled, its toothed maw wide and glistening with spittle, mirroring its charges. Despite its wounds, it lunged forward and stabbed the ruined weapon at him. He bit back pain as the spur of metal lodged in the joint of his arm. His grip did not falter. He grabbed his bolt pistol, thrusting it into the beast's hateful face.

'Die,' he spat. 'Die, and blight His creation no more!' Cenric fired, again and again, till the pistol rattled empty. The ork's skull detonated, and Cenric took hold of the sword with both hands once more. He dragged it up and through the corpse, bisecting it completely. He turned in time to watch Penance hammer the last of the squigs into the ground. The gore seemed to halo her, for one moment rendering her as a—

*Crimson angel.*

Cenric shook off the vertigo of recognition, the near-gravitational pull of prophecy. Penance was panting, exhausted, bleeding. She turned her gaze to him again, and nodded simply.

'We live, Champion.'

'For the moment.' He looked around. 'Their numbers may grow from this point on.' He shook his head. 'You said we were near the cathedral's base?'

'More so now.' Her lips opened in a hiss of pain as she forced herself to stand. Her legs trembled, but she steadied herself with the Eviscerator. 'We go up. We fight, perhaps we die. But it is the will of the Emperor that we do so. It is the stoniest paths that lead surely to absolution.'

'And the path set before us is rough indeed.' He bowed his head in contrition. 'I wonder how I found myself upon this road. Have I erred? Should I have cleaved closer to the Marshal? I was a mere initiate before He raised me up as His Champion. I have striven to be an exemplar of our creed — always forward, never showing cowardice in the face of the enemy.' He looked to his sword, to the chains that bound it to him. As unyielding as honour. 'Could I have done more?'

‘We can only do what the Emperor has set as our task. His is the ordered universe, His the tempered blade. We are all instruments in that design, implements under that aegis. I held rank, before. I was a Sister Superior, watching over the outer shrineholds.’ She paused, lost in memory. Tears streaked her ashen, bloody features. ‘I erred. I fought, and I lived, where my Sisters died. I could not save the relics. Thousands of years of history, ground to dust beneath their boots. While they laughed. They *laughed*. Had I the option then, I would have demanded I be nailed to a Penitent Engine, and cast into the fire of battle. This, though, is my reward.’ She swallowed hard before she continued. ‘But it is His plan that guides us. It is the God-Emperor’s will that has brought us to this moment. What is pride, next to that? What are our lives?’

‘From the mouths of the faithful.’ His voice was sombre, and she turned to him as he spoke, silently watching. He looked up, helm inclining as he considered their options. ‘Up then, as you say.’

They climbed the steep ascent of a winding stairway, a narrow chamber that seemed more oubliette than thoroughfare. ‘The passages,’ Penance whispered. Once they had been used by the clergy; some brought them to the vaults with ease, others were for escape. There were fist-sized gouges in the walls, where munitions had detonated or great hands had torn in frenzy at the masonry. When the end had come, these passages had failed just as surely as the rest of the defences.

They had climbed almost halfway up the stairs, Cenric moving gingerly as he eased his bulk around the turns while Penance hobbled behind him, when the first of the enemy became aware of them.

Debris began to rain down, thrown with an almost childlike indolence, the whimsy of giants. A huge chunk of hewn stone split against the edge of the stairway. The bricks trembled. The mortar cracked. Both quickened their pace, forging on to the next landing. More debris impacted around them. The head of a saint shattered against Cenric’s chest, staggering him slightly. His vision clouded with dusted marble, and he barely had time to react before the offending ork had hurled itself down onto their level.

An axe blade scraped across his battleplate, defacing the black paint of the Armour of Faith with a long gouge. He stepped back, almost knocking Penance off the platform. Without igniting the power field, he brought his

sword down upon the ork's head, denting its spiked iron helmet. It gurgled, bemused, and lashed out again. Cenric reached up, catching its wrist, before slamming his helmeted face into its gurning features. The ork stumbled backwards, filling the air with the mulchy stench of its blood. Cenric raised the blade two-handed above his head, as best as he could in such cramped conditions. As soon as he brought the flat of it straight down onto the ork's skull, the field triggered with an ozone snap. The beast's head burst with a thunderclap of force. He kicked the still-twitching corpse into the depths.

'Dregs and stragglers remain. Outcasts, left to roam the deeps. If we can find the war-leader, and he has not committed his strength, then we can end this.' He spoke the words with new certainty, cleansed in the baptism of blood and battle.

They came to the top of the stairs and Penance took the lead. He was content to follow her. She had walked these halls, lived amongst them. The ruined grandeur of the great cathedral had been her home, and was now her hunting ground. They passed beneath broken arches, hung with scorched banners. Mosaics had been shattered to their component tiles, obliterating the faces of saints and heroes. The gilding of the floors was tarnished, thick with muck and condensation. Cenric trudged through it, even as the cacophony hit them.

It was the primal howl of war, of massed cannons and artillery. The pounding of fists against chests, of bare flesh against stone, and the animal ululation of countless orks. And behind it all, woven through it, singing through the shattered airways of the temple itself, was a word. A war cry, a celebration.

*Grashbakh! Grashbakh! Grashbakh! GRASHBAKH!*

It took him a moment to realise it was a name. An entire army chanting one name, in one voice. A tribe honouring their chief. This was the malignant heart of their enemy's forces. He could feel the air grow close and tight, electric with the anticipation of combat. He closed his eyes, and when he opened them he saw again with the eyes of the divine. The Emperor Himself, reaching down, to take a hold of his senses.

'Praise be.' Cenric whispered the words in awe.

All he could see was perfect golden light, its burning core beyond the next wall. It clawed at his sight – like fire, like fever, like the caress of

stellar radiation.

He strode forward, placed both hands upon the great oaken doors before him, and pushed his way into the sanctum.

The chamber was dimly lit by crude low-burning firepits and by the wan sunlight that drifted through the broken windows; the remains of the stained glass cast it into strange, ethereal combinations, lending the great hall an unearthly feel. As though they had stumbled beyond the bounds of reality and into the hateful empyrean.

At the centre there was an awkward assemblage of refuse, beaten and forged into the shape of a throne. Before it there seemed only more junk, in strange configurations. It took Cenric a moment to recognise it as the battlefield outside, rendered by barbaric hands in mockery of a strategium.

Above it, the warboss towered.

Grashbakh was enormous, a bloated example of its filth-breed. Plates had been hammered into its skin, the rivets lodged in burnt flesh. Its head had been bent, broken, reshaped and largely replaced by crude cybernetics. Iron teeth glistened wetly in a misshapen jaw, and the eyes that turned to meet them were mismatched: one bloodshot and glaring, the other a throbbing red bionic. A great iron claw flexed and crackled, large enough to encompass Cenric whole, while the other arm was gone, lost in a mismatched jumble of barrelled weapons. Cenric's mouth twitched into a snarl at its living blasphemy, the hideous violation it represented. The arm twitched, drifting this way and that as it sought targets. The ork exuded threat, swathed in a miasma of murder.

Cenric raised the Black Sword, tip pointed at the creature's heart. 'I name you Beast, and I condemn you.'

Grashbakh snarled, a bellow of rage that hit him in a solid wall of sound. They were all moving; Cenric and Penance went left and right as the ork barrelled towards them. Weapons fire slashed across the length of the chamber, great solid shots that cratered the marble floors and lurid energy blasts that reduced columns to molten slag. The warriors ducked and weaved through the storm of fire, till they were beneath the arc of the guns, and their blades came round in their own arcs of destruction.

Cenric went high, and the Black Sword carved great gouges from the warboss' armour. Sheets of it fell away, smoking and warped. Penance

swept in low, until the teeth of the Eviscerator were whirring and smoking against the stout plate of a bionic leg. She pulled the blade back, and spun away, swinging her weapon across its armoured back in a spray of sparks and shards. Cenric took advantage of the beast's distraction, stabbing for its throat, but Grashbakh reached up and closed the blade in its own sparking fist as the claw's power field engaged with a snap. Lightning danced between the competing weapons with a tortured whine. Cenric saw the sword, haloed in terrible light, trembling madly as the pressure between them built. He pushed, trying to drive it through the furious maelstrom, but it would not move. The ork's eyes narrowed, and its maw twisted into a sneer of triumph. Even so, within its closed fist; the force of the caged energy was building to a crescendo. Cenric could still hear the thunderous roar of the chainsword as Penance moved about it, hacking and slashing. He could not even shout to warn her.

The explosion hurled them apart. Cenric and Penance were thrown back, skidding along the floor. Grashbakh cursed in its gutter-invective, flailing the smoking ruin of the claw as it sought to regain control. Cenric sprawled on his back, having borne the brunt of the detonation. His armour smoked, and the chain around his wrist had broken. He reached out, fingertips trying to touch the pommel of the Black Sword, but falling short.

*Not like this. Not in failure and shame.*

He saw movement to his right as he tried to rise. Penance knelt, checking him for wounds, aware all the while of the roaring beast behind them, heaving itself to its feet. She reached for the krak grenade at his belt, detaching it with a click.

‘Sacrifice, Champion. Sacrifice is the soul of duty.’

She threw herself forward, though her wounds slowed her progress. She revved her sword, hefting it awkwardly as she lurched towards Grashbakh. It could have fired, but did not. Cenric looked up, seeing the faintly bemused creasing of its mouth. It was toying with her. Playing. Letting her get close. She ducked as it swung with the barrels of its gun-arm, burying them in the befouled marble. Penance swung herself to one side, brought the sword up and round. The whirring, snarling teeth bit into flesh with a spurt of foul blood, and a grunt of muted pain.

She looked up.

Grashbakh reached down and grabbed her, the smoking claw enfolding her. She let go of the sword, still lodged deep in its guts, but did not struggle. Her hands came up, as though in prayer. Cenric could see the grenade cradled in her hands, like a benediction. A promise. A sacrifice.

There was a flash, a pulse of light and heat. For a moment it was near-blinding, but Cenric could see her. Caught in the heart of the explosion, she was haloed by blood and fire. For one glorious moment, she was a crimson angel, bearing the Emperor's light, and death.

Her body tumbled away, through the rising smoke and dusted marble. Cenric pushed himself to his feet, looking up as he heard the grinding rumble of movement. As Grashbakh jerked suddenly through the smog.

Half its face was gone, a ruin of wet flesh, glistening bone and sundered metal. It bellowed, striking its ruined weapons against the ground. It recklessly knocked over braziers and shattered columns in its fury. The fabric of the cathedral trembled as it lumbered forward, caught in some unnatural disaster. Cenric closed his eyes.

He could still see the golden light. The Emperor's judgement. It burned, like the purifying heat of the world's sunrise. Like amber wings.

He reached out, across the broken links of still-smouldering chain.

He took up his sword.

Its tip scraped across the ruined marble floor and he moved in a blur, up and away, with a sudden burst of speed that caught Grashbakh by surprise. A throaty roar followed him, but he ignored it. He drove in at its side, slashing and hacking. The wounded beast lashed out, scraping at his armour with its ruined claw. He felt it buckle, but hold. Cenric snarled, his eyes ablaze with hate. He struck, again and again, and then reached out with his free hand. He grasped the hilt of the Eviscerator lodged in its side, and *pushed*.

The ork howled in pain and rage, flailing at him. Cenric took the blows, let them wash over him in a tide. He forced the chainblade into the warboss with every iota of his transhuman might. He watched Grashbakh collapse to its rusted knees, glaring up at him with pure animal hatred.

Cenric stepped back, panting. He raised the Black Sword, aimed it for the beast's throat, and pronounced his judgement.

'*Imperator Vult*,' he hissed, and the blade fell. The ork's roaring head came away from its neck in a welter of unclean gore, and fell silent.

Cenric stood for a moment in the sudden silence, trembling as the grace of His guidance fell quiet. The divine light was gone, but the chamber felt brighter, the sunlight picking out an untouched altar sitting beneath the sight of a golden aquila. He made his way to Penance, knelt and checked at her throat, but she was gone. Her body was untouched by fire, miraculous in the circumstances.

‘Praise be unto Him, for His mercy as for His wrath.’ Cenric bowed his head, in reverent awe.

He reached up with his gauntleted fingers and gently closed her eyes. He lifted her, her body so very frail and mortal, and placed it upon the altar.

He strode back to the warboss’ corpse, picked up the head and made his way to the main doors. He braced himself for a second, the Black Sword alive in his hand, and threw open the doors, hefting the ork’s head high as he bellowed his challenge to the world.

And below, in loyalty and in impurity, that challenge was answered.

When they eventually found him, he was alone.

He knelt in prayer before the altar, surrounded by the bodies of the xenos. He had removed his helm, and it sat to one side of him as though forgotten. He waited for a long moment, as the first of them entered the chamber.

They had the decency to be surprised by his presence.

‘Champion,’ a quavering voice asked. ‘Brother Cenric?’ It was Baldwin who spoke, the young neophyte who had accompanied Adelbert. He was without his master now, and the banner hung ragged and limp. The words of it were almost obscured by fire and ash, EDIO the only letters that remained.

‘The Marshal?’ Cenric asked, and there were tears upon Baldwin’s cheeks. So young. So weak. Had he ever been so himself?

‘Dead.’ It was Aurea who spoke. ‘He died in the charge, holding the breach so that your brothers could forge their beachhead. A hero, to the end.’ The old canoness was limping, bloodied but unbowed. ‘We owe him a great debt.’ She inclined her head to the warboss. ‘And you a greater debt still, it would seem.’

‘You owe me nothing. We are servants of the same design.’ He bowed his head, remembering. He gestured to the altar. ‘This Sister died in service of

our mission, bravely in the face of abomination. In her shame, she was named Penance.'

'I know her.'

'I would have her true name. The name she wore in fealty.'

'She...' Aurea hesitated, and then straightened as she regained her composure. 'She was Sister Superior Osyth.'

'My thanks,' Cenric replied. He looked to Baldwin. 'Much has transpired that we would wish otherwise, but now is not the time to fear, or doubt, my equerry.' Baldwin barely had time to register his surprise. Cenric looked at the gathered throng: battle-brothers and Sisters, champions all.

'We shall fortify this world in His name, and drive back the alien. Once that is done I intend to send word to the Helicos Crusade. We have suffered, and we have sacrificed.' He paused. 'But we shall rise glorious and triumphant by His will. Ave Imperator!'

Each voice echoed his words, till they filled the hall and the tunnels that wound beneath it. Till the world sang anew, with the hymn of faith and the promise of a new dawn.

## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

**Marc Collins** is a speculative fiction author living and working in Glasgow, Scotland. 'Ghosts of Iron' is his first published work for Black Library. When not dreaming of the far future he works in Pathology with the NHS.

An extract from *The Talon of Horus*.



In the long years before the Battle of Canticle City, I knew no fear because I had nothing to lose. Everything I'd treasured was dust at the mercy of history's winds. Every truth I'd fought for was now nothing more than idle philosophy – spoken by exiles, whispered to ghosts.

None of this angered me, nor was I victim to any special melancholy. I'd learned over the centuries that only a fool tried to fight fate.

All that remained were the nightmares. My somnolent mind took a dark joy in casting back to Judgement Day, when wolves howled and ran through the burning city streets. I dreamed the same dream each time I allowed myself to sleep. Wolves, always the wolves.

Adrenaline pulled me from slumber on a lactic leash, leaving my hands trembling and my skin dusted in cold crystals of sweat. Dream-howls followed me back to the waking world, fading into the metal walls of my meditation cell. Some nights, I felt those howls in my blood, riding through my veins, imprinted in my genetic coding. The wolves, even though they were nothing more than memory, hunted with an eagerness fiercer than fury.

I waited for them to melt away into the thrumming sounds of the ship all around. Only then did I rise. The chronometer cited that I'd slept for almost three hours. After remaining awake for thirteen days, even a clutch of stolen hours' rest was a welcome respite.

On the deck floor of my modest bedchamber, a wolf that wasn't a wolf lay in watchful repose. Her white eyes, as featureless as perfect pearls, tracked me as I stood. When the beast rose a moment later, her movements were unnaturally fluid, not bound to the motions of natural muscle. She didn't move the way real wolves moved, nor even as the wolves that

haunted my dreams. She moved like a ghost wearing a wolf's skin.

The nearer one came to the creature, the less she resembled a natural beast at all. Her claws and teeth were glassy and black. Her mouth was dry of any saliva, and she never blinked. She smelt not of flesh and fur but of the smoke that follows fire – the undeniable scent of a murdered home world.

*Master*, came the wolf's thought. It wasn't really a word; it was a concept, an acknowledgement of submission and affection. However, a human – and post-human – mind instinctively processes such things as language.

*Gyre*, I sent back in telepathic greeting.

*You dream too loud*, she told me. *I fed well that day. The last breaths of the Fenris-born. The crack of white bones for the tangy marrow within. The salty tongue-sting of the proudest blood.*

Her amusement inspired my own. Her confidence was always infectious.

'Khayon,' came a dull, inhuman voice from all around the chamber. A voice wholly starved of both emotion and gender. 'We know you are awake.'

'I am,' I assured the empty air. *Gyre's* dark fur was soft beneath my fingertips. It felt almost real. The beast paid no heed as I scratched behind its ears, showing neither pleasure nor irritation.

'Come to us, Khayon.'

I wasn't sure I could deal with such a meeting, just then.

'I cannot. Ashur-Kai needs me.'

'We are recording tonal signifiers suggesting deception in your reply, Khayon.'

'That is because I am lying to you.'

No reply. I took that as a good thing. 'Has there been any word regarding power through the antechambers connected to the spinal thoroughfares?'

'No recorded changes,' the voice assured me.

A shame, but not a surprise, given the ship's power conservation. I rose from the slab that served as my pallet, thumbing my sore eyes in the wake of unsatisfying slumber. The chamber's illumination was dull with the *Tlaloc's* depleted power, mirroring the years I'd spent as a Tizcan child reading parchments by hand-held illum-globe.

Tizca, once called the City of Light. The last time I had seen the city of

my birth was when I'd fled from it, watching Prospero burn as the planet receded on the oculus viewscreen.

Tizca still lived after a fashion, on the Legion's new home world of Sortiarius. I had visited it a handful of times, deep in the Eye, yet never felt any compunction to remain there. Many of my brothers felt the same – at least, those few with their minds still intact. In those inglorious days, the Thousand Sons were a divided brotherhood at best. At worst, they'd forgotten what it meant to be brothers at all.

As for Magnus, the Crimson King who once held court above his sons? Our father was lost in the ebb and flow of the Great Game, fighting the War of the Four Gods. His concerns were etheric and ethereal, while his sons' ambitions were still mortal and mundane. All we wanted to do was survive. Many of my brothers sold their lore and war-sorcery to the highest bidders amongst the warring Legions. Our talents were always in demand.

Sortiarius was a hostile home, even among the myriad worlds bathed in the energies of the Eye. All who dwelled there lived beneath a burning sky that stole all notion of night and day, with the heavens drowned in a swirling, tormented chorus of the restless dead. I had seen Saturn, in the same planetary system as Terra; and the planet Kelmasr, orbiting the white sun Clovo. Both planets are haloed with rings of rock and ice, marking them out from their celestial brethren. Sortiarius had a similar ring, spectrally white against the tumultuous violet of Eyespace. It was formed not from ice or rock, but from shrieking souls. The Thousand Sons' exile-world was quite literally crowned by the howling spirits of those who had died by deceit.

It was beautiful, in its own way.

'Come to us,' said the mechanical voice from the wall-mounted vox-speakers.

Was I imagining the faint edge of a plea in the dead tone? It unnerved me, though I couldn't say why.

'I would rather not.'

I moved to the door, and didn't need to tell Gyre to follow. The black wolf padded after me, white eyes watching, obsidian claws clicking and scratching along the deck. Sometimes – if you glanced at the right moment – Gyre's shadow against the wall was something tall and horned

and winged. Other times, my she-wolf cast no shadow at all.

Two guardians stood vigil outside my door. Both were clad in bronze-edged cobalt ceramite, with their helms marked by high Kheltaran head crests, reminiscent of Prosperine history and the ancient Ahztik-Gypton empires of Old Earth. Both of them turned their heads towards me, just as expected. One of them even nodded in slow greeting, solemn as any temple gargoyle. Once, this display of life would have teased me with the threat of false hope, but I was beyond such delusions now. My kindred were long gone, slain by Ahriman's hubris. These Rubricae, these husks of ashen undeath, stood in their place.

'Mekhari. Djedhor.' I greeted them by name, futile as it was.

*Khayon*, Mekhari managed to project the name, but it was a thing of cold and simple obedience, not true recognition.

*Dust*, sent Djedhor. He'd been the one to nod. *All is dust*.

*My brothers*, I sent back to the Rubricae.

Looking upon them with the penetrative stare of second sight was maddening, for I saw both life and death in the ceramite husks they had become. I reached for them, not physically but with a hesitant pressure of psychic awareness. It was the same subtle straining one might do to listen for a distant voice on a silent night.

I felt the nearness of their souls, no different from when they'd walked among the living. But within their armour was nothing but ash. Within their minds was mist instead of memory.

From Djedhor, I sensed the scarcest ember of recollection: a flash of white flame eclipsing all else, lasting no more than a moment. That was how Djedhor had died. How the whole Legion had died. In rapturous fire.

Although Mekhari's mind sometimes offered the same insignificant pulse of remembrance, I sensed nothing from him then. The latter Rubricae regarded me with an emotionless, motionless stare of its helm's T-visor, clutching its bolter in stately guardianship.

On more than one occasion, I had tried to explain the living-dead contradiction to Nefertari, but the right words always failed me. The last time we'd spoken of it, it had ended particularly poorly.

'They are there and not there,' I'd said to her. 'Husks. Shadows. I cannot explain it to someone without the second sight. It is like trying to describe music to someone born deaf.'

At the time, Nefertari had run her clawed gauntlet down Mekhari's helm, her crystal nails scraping over one staring red eye lens. Her skin was whiter than milk, paler than marble, translucent enough to show faint cobwebs beneath the skin of her angular cheeks. She looked half-dead herself.

'You explain it,' she had replied with a dry, alien smile, 'by saying that music is the sound of emotion, expressed through art, from musician to audience.'

I had nodded at her elegant rebuttal, but said nothing more. The details of my brothers' curse weren't something I enjoyed sharing even with her, not least because I shared the blame for their fate. I was the one who had tried to stop Ahriman's last throw of the dice. I was the one who had failed.

The familiar throb of guilt-stained irritation pulled me back to the present. Gyre growled by my side.

*Follow*, I bade the two Rubricae. The command cracked down the psychic filament linking the three of us, and the bond thrummed with their acknowledgement. Mekhari and Djedhor's boot-steps thudded on the decking as they trailed behind.

In the long thoroughfare leading to the bridge, another vox-speaker crackled to life.

'Come to us,' it said. Another toneless entreaty to venture deeper into the ship's cold hallways.

I looked directly at one of the bronze aural receptors dotting the arched walls of the main spinal corridor. This one was forged in the shape of a smiling, androgynous burial mask.

'Why?' I asked it.

The confession was whispered from speakers all over the ship, just another voice among the songs of ghosts.

'Because we are lonely.'

Life aboard the *Tlaloc* was a thing of contrast and contradiction, as with all Imperial vessels cast onto the shores of Hell. Realms of stability and tormented currents existed throughout the Great Eye, and the ships that sailed inside Eyespace eventually settled into similar states of infrequent flux.

It's a realm where thought becomes reality, if one has the willpower

necessary to bring forth something from the warp's nothingness. If a mortal yearns for something, the warp will often provide it, though rarely without unexpected cost.

Once the weakest souls killed themselves with an inability to control their wayward imaginations, structure among the crew began to rise from the disordered rubble. Within the *Tlaloc*'s arched halls, society soon reformed around an oppressive meritocracy. Those who were most useful to me rose above those who were not. It was that simple.

Many of our crew were human, taken as slaves in raids during the Legion Wars. Beneath them were the servitors, and above them were the bestial mutants harvested from the genetic stock of Sortiarius. The braying of their ritual battles echoed down the halls night after night, as they did battle on lower decks that stank of beasts' fur and animal sweat.

It took almost two hours to reach the Anamnesis. Two hours of bulkheads slowly grinding open on low power; two hours of juddering ascent/descent platforms; two hours of dark corridors and the sound of warp song torturing the ship's metal bones. Through the unmelody of straining creaks, infrequent shivers coursed through *Tlaloc*'s predatory form as the ship split the Eye's densest tides.

Outside, a storm raged. Rare were the times we needed to reactivate the Geller field within the Eye, but this region was more warp than reality, and an ocean of daemons burned in our wake.

I paid no heed to the warp's tune. Others among our warband claimed to hear voices in the harshest storms – the voices of allies and enemies, of betrayers and the betrayed. I heard no such thing. No voices, at least.

Gyre trailed us, occasionally vanishing into the shadows on the whim of whatever hunts tempted her. My wolf would enter a spread of darkness, and emerge elsewhere from another shadow. Each time she melted into nothingness, I'd feel a resonant shiver through the unseen bond that bound us together.

In contrast, Mekhari and Djedhor stalked behind in mute compliance. I took a solemn solace in their company. They were a stalwart presence, if not gifted conversationalists.

Sometimes I found myself speaking to them as though they were still alive, discussing my plans with them and replying to their stoic silence as if they'd actually answered. I wondered what my still-breathing kindred

would make of my behaviour back on Sortiarius, and whether any of the other Thousand Sons survivors were guilty of the same indulgence.

The deeper we walked through the ship, the less it resembled a melancholy fortress, and the closer it came to a slum. Machinery became more ramshackle, and attending humans ever more wretched. They bowed as I passed. Some wept. Some scattered like vermin before the light. They all knew better than to speak to me. I bore them no special hatred, but the hive-swarm of their thoughts made them unpleasant to be near. They lived meaningless lives in the dark, born and living and dying as slaves to masters they could not comprehend, in a war they didn't understand.

Disease ravaged the lower decks in cycles of plague. Most of our slave raids were for simple mass-replenishment of unskilled labour, but once every few decades we would need to strike against another Legion to restock the crew decks in the wake of another Eyeborn contagion. The Eye of Terror was unkind to the powerless and the weak of will.

When I reached the great linked chambers of the Outer Core, the Anamnesis's eroding sense of order began to take over. The vast halls were populated by servitors and robed cultists of the Machine-God, all dealing with the clanking machinery that lined the walls and ceilings, and nestled in pits cut into the floors. Here was the *Tlaloc*'s brain laid bare: its veins formed of composite cables and twined wires, its meat made of decaying black steel engines and rusting iron generators.

The mono-tasked work crews largely ignored their master's passage, though their cultist overseers bowed and scraped much as the human herd did on the decks above. I sensed their reluctance to bow before any authority that didn't share their worship of the Ommissiah, but I was not unkind to them. By remaining here, they were allowed to serve the needs of the Anamnesis itself, and that was an honour coveted by many in the Machine Cult.

A few managed to offer genuinely respectful gestures of submission in acknowledgement when they registered me as the ship's commander. Their respect was meaningless, nor was I concerned with those who lacked it. Unlike the unskilled human menials who also lived their sunless lives in the ship's bowels, these priests had more pressing duties than prostrating themselves before a lord who paid them little heed in kind. I let them work in peace, and they accorded me the same polite ignorance.

Rising above the hunched priests and shambling servitors were several robotic sentinels: humanoid Thallaxi- and Baharat-class cybernetic warriors in each chamber. All of them stood motionless, with their heads lowered and weapons slung. As with the servitors, the inactive robots made no note of our passing from the Outer Core to the Inner.

The Inner Core was a lone vault shielded behind a series of sealed bulkheads, accessible only by the highest-ranking souls on the ship. Automated laser turrets cycled into reluctant life, sliding from wall housings on crunching mechanisms and tracking our approach across the gantry deck. I doubted more than half of them still had the power to fire, but it was reassuring to see the machine-spirit controlling the *Tlaloc* still upheld certain standards.

The doorway to the Inner Core was almost palatial in ostentation. The doors themselves were great slabs of dark metal engraved with the sinuous, coiling forms of Prosperine serpents, their crested heads held high, their jaws wide to devour twin suns.

The only guardian here was another Baharat automaton: four metres of mechanical muscle and metallic might, armed with rotor cannons on its shoulders. Unlike those of the Outer Core, this one remained active. Its joints still exhaled piston breath; its weapon mounts hummed with live charge.

The cyborg's featureless faceplate regarded me in emotionless judgement, before stalking aside on heavy iron foot-claws. It didn't speak. Almost nothing spoke down here. Everything communicated in blurts of scrambled machine code when vocalisation was required at all.

I pressed a hand to one of the immense sculptures – my palm covered only a single scale on the left serpent's hide – and projected a momentary pulse of thought beyond the sealed gateway.

*I am here.*

With a discordant orchestra of slamming lock-bars and rattling machinery, the first of the seven bulkheads began the arduous process of opening.

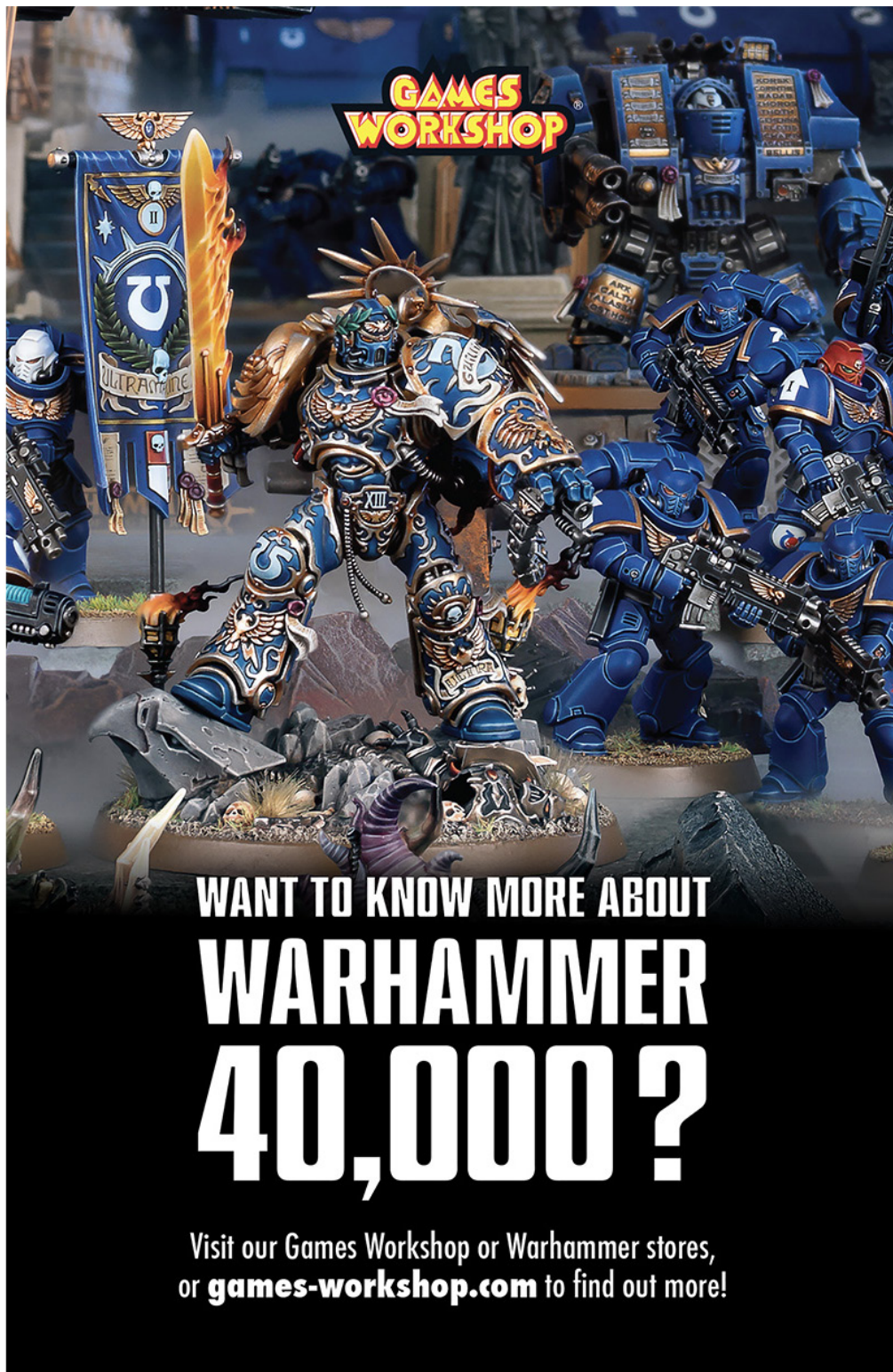
**Click here to buy [The Talon of Horus](#).**

# THE BLACK LIBRARY NEWSLETTER



**Sign up today for regular updates on the  
latest Black Library news and releases**

**SIGN UP NOW**



WANT TO KNOW MORE ABOUT  
**WARHAMMER**  
**40,000?**

Visit our Games Workshop or Warhammer stores,  
or [games-workshop.com](http://games-workshop.com) to find out more!

## **A BLACK LIBRARY PUBLICATION**

This eBook edition published in 2019 by Black Library, Games Workshop Ltd, Willow Road, Nottingham, NG7 2WS, UK.

Produced by Games Workshop in Nottingham.

Cover illustration by Alex Boyd.

Champions, All © Copyright Games Workshop Limited 2019.  
Champions, All, GW, Games Workshop, Black Library, The Horus Heresy, The Horus Heresy Eye logo, Space Marine, 40K, Warhammer, Warhammer 40,000, the 'Aquila' Double-headed Eagle logo, and all associated logos, illustrations, images, names, creatures, races, vehicles, locations, weapons, characters, and the distinctive likenesses thereof, are either ® or TM, and/or © Games Workshop Limited, variably registered around the world.

All Rights Reserved.

A CIP record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN: 978-1-78999-239-7

This is a work of fiction. All the characters and events portrayed in this book are fictional, and any resemblance to real people or incidents is purely coincidental.

See Black Library on the internet at

[blacklibrary.com](http://blacklibrary.com)

Find out more about Games Workshop's world of Warhammer and the Warhammer 40,000 universe at

[games-workshop.com](http://games-workshop.com)

## **eBook license**

This license is made between:

Games Workshop Limited t/a Black Library, Willow Road, Lenton, Nottingham, NG7 2WS, United Kingdom (“Black Library”); and

(2) the purchaser of an e-book product from Black Library website (“You/you/Your/your”)

(jointly, “the parties”)

These are the terms and conditions that apply when you purchase an e-book (“e-book”) from Black Library. The parties agree that in consideration of the fee paid by you, Black Library grants you a license to use the e-book on the following terms:

\* 1. Black Library grants to you a personal, non-exclusive, non-transferable, royalty-free license to use the e-book in the following ways:

o 1.1 to store the e-book on any number of electronic devices and/or storage media (including, by way of example only, personal computers, e-book readers, mobile phones, portable hard drives, USB flash drives, CDs or DVDs) which are personally owned by you;

o 1.2 to access the e-book using an appropriate electronic device and/or through any appropriate storage media; and

\* 2. For the avoidance of doubt, you are ONLY licensed to use the e-book as described in paragraph 1 above. You may NOT use or store the e-book in any other way. If you do, Black Library shall be entitled to terminate this license.

\* 3. Further to the general restriction at paragraph 2, Black Library shall be entitled to terminate this license in the event that you use or store the e-book (or any part of it) in any way not expressly licensed. This includes (but is no means limited to) the following circumstances:

o 3.1 you provide the e-book to any company, individual or other legal

person who does not possess a license to use or store it;

o 3.2 you make the e-book available on bit-torrent sites, or are otherwise complicit in ‘seeding’ or sharing the e-book with any company, individual or other legal person who does not possess a license to use or store it;

o 3.3 you print and distribute hard copies of the e-book to any company, individual or other legal person who does not possess a license to use or store it;

o 3.4 you attempt to reverse engineer, bypass, alter, amend, remove or otherwise make any change to any copy protection technology which may be applied to the e-book.

\* 4. By purchasing an e-book, you agree for the purposes of the Consumer Protection (Distance Selling) Regulations 2000 that Black Library may commence the service (of provision of the e-book to you) prior to your ordinary cancellation period coming to an end, and that by purchasing an e-book, your cancellation rights shall end immediately upon receipt of the e-book.

\* 5. You acknowledge that all copyright, trademark and other intellectual property rights in the e-book are, shall remain, the sole property of Black Library.

\* 6. On termination of this license, howsoever effected, you shall immediately and permanently delete all copies of the e-book from your computers and storage media, and shall destroy all hard copies of the e-book which you have derived from the e-book.

\* 7. Black Library shall be entitled to amend these terms and conditions from time to time by written notice to you.

\* 8. These terms and conditions shall be governed by English law, and shall be subject only to the jurisdiction of the Courts in England and Wales.

\* 9. If any part of this license is illegal, or becomes illegal as a result of any change in the law, then that part shall be deleted, and replaced with wording that is as close to the original meaning as possible without

being illegal.

\* 10. Any failure by Black Library to exercise its rights under this license for whatever reason shall not be in any way deemed to be a waiver of its rights, and in particular, Black Library reserves the right at all times to terminate this license in the event that you breach clause 2 or clause 3.