

WARHAMMER 40,000



BLACK TEMPLARS DISHONoured

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Around the outpost of Blight's Edge, a warhost of angels fell to earth.

They came to excise, to cleanse, to burn. To take back the planet of Schrödinger VII from the necrons, in the Emperor's name.

Instead, they fell, they died. The ice turned black with their blood.

Marshal Helbrecht of the Black Templars saw the enemy approaching. Forty pairs of eyes hanging in the dark, burning with soulless fire. Beyond them, Blight's Edge burned, explosions and crackling gunfire echoing out across the ice.

The vox squealed and roared in his ears. Between the ebb and flow of the static he could hear his brothers fighting at the other insertion points situated around the outpost. Where he had ordered them to be. Where he had been sure they could take their enemy by surprise.

They were already here!

Do not falter...

We are surrounded!

They were dying.

All of them.

The advancing necrons began to fire. Gauss fire whickered across the ice.

'They think us undone!' he called out. 'Push them back!'

Helbrecht led the charge, the wholesale slaughter of his brothers ringing in his ears. He met the first necron warrior with a crash of ceramite and metal.

The creature didn't get the chance to fire. Helbrecht punched his sword through the xenos' throat, severing cabling and tearing the creature's head from its body. The light in its eyes guttered out. He pulled his sword free and the necron's body crumpled.

Before it hit the ice, it disappeared with a sound like a thunderclap, but

Helbrecht was already moving to engage his next foe.

Around him, his brothers fought like war given form. The squad's standard bearer, Evrain, had one of the necron creatures pinned to the ice, impaled on the banner pole. Garel and Thibaut stood at his side, keeping the necrons back. The standard was ancient. It had seen a thousand battlefields. Every burn mark and ragged thread was a testament to Helbrecht's strength, to the strength of the Chapter.

It was a symbol. It was faith.

Evrain freed the banner pole from the necron's ruined form and raised the standard high. A roar went up across the vox from eight battle-rough throats.

Helbrecht's champion, Aergard, was by his side. He was Helbrecht's shadow, and his sharpest blade.

'They foresaw the location of our landing sites,' Aergard said.

Helbrecht couldn't deny his words, but that didn't mean he had to like them. The Marshal engaged a necron warrior, separating its legs from its upper body with a brutal strike from his sword. It toppled onto the ice, but still its top half crawled towards the Marshal, clawed hands digging into the ground.

It should have been dead.

Aergard drove his sword into the top of its head, and it spasmed and sparked at the champion's feet before vanishing completely.

'What would you have us do?' Aergard asked.

Helbrecht raised his bolter and fired over his champion's shoulder, knocking one of the necrons backwards onto the ice with a burst of flame.

'What we came here to do,' the Marshal said. 'Purge them. Every last one of them.'

Aergard turned away from the Marshal and fired his bolter. The bolts hit home, blasting holes in the chest of a necron warrior. The xenos kept coming, wounds re-knitting. It levelled its gun, and the maw of the weapon began to glow with emerald fire. Aergard rushed forward, taking the necron's head with a sweep of his sword. The body fell backwards to the ground, the gauss blast it had fired screaming skywards, and as the body hit the ice it phased out with a clap of pressure.

'That could have been the end of you.' Thibaut's voice was underpinned by echoing snaps of bolter fire.

'Yes,' Aergard said, turning and firing at another of the xenos creatures. 'But it wasn't.'

Thibaut snorted and cut the vox link.

Across the ice from Aergard, Thibaut and Lidas were battling with the necrons. The two Space Marines fought like brawlers, without grace, but with matchless ferocity. Where Aergard found clarity in the execution of his duty, Lidas and Thibaut both found joy. Lidas fought with his gladius in one hand and his chainsword in the other. He punched the gladius into the side of a necron's metal skull. The short blade snapped off at the hilt. The necron staggered, twitching. Lidas took its head with a messy swing of his chainsword.

Aergard knew that behind the mask of his faceplate, Lidas would be grinning.

The Black Templars had pushed the necrons back, claiming the ice as their own. At Aergard's side, Helbrecht tore the last of the xenos open from hip to shoulder. The life went out of it with a burst of wicked green light. It fell.

'If they had looked to test us,' the Marshal said, 'then they should have sent more.'

Aergard didn't get the chance to reply. The world lit up for a split second with a blinding flare of light. In its wake, the darkness parted as if a veil had been lifted. Seven necrons appeared. Six held bulky shields and wicked blades, but the seventh was smaller, hunchbacked, and twitching with synaptic misfires. It wore a rotten cloak around its lumpen shoulders. A single green eye looked out from under the hood.

At Aergard's side now, Thibaut slammed a fresh magazine into his bolter.

'How accommodating.'

Aergard silenced him with a look.

The Black Templars drew together, each protecting his brother beside him.

The hunchbacked creature cast its eye across each of the Space Marines. With a garbled machine-squeal, it raised its arm and pointed at Evrain.

'I, Kheprys, demand this one,' it said in halting Gothic.

The standard bearer cursed. He fired his bolter at the creature, only for the explosive shells to detonate in the air around it. For an instant, Aergard could see the reflective curve of some sort of shield, as if it were made of impossibly thin glass.

The creature, Kheprys, laughed. It sounded like air escaping from a valve. Its guardians started forward, closing ranks.

They were coming for the standard bearer.

Eight became seven.

One of the necrons had pinned Lidas to the ice, with its sword punched through his chest. Blood spread around the Space Marine on the ground like

unfolding wings. The necron stood over him, one foot on his throat.

Lidas primed a krak grenade. In the heartbeat that followed, Aergard mourned his brother.

The grenade went off and Lidas and his necron assailant were consumed by flame. It was not a beautiful death. Lidas would have wanted to die on his feet.

Aergard armoured himself in fury and charged the closest of the necrons, swinging his sword two-handed. It connected with his opponent's shield, staggering the alien. Before it recovered, he swung again, severing the creature's arm at the elbow. The shield fell onto the ice and Aergard got a heavy kick in the chest for his trouble. The impact cracked his armour and took him off his feet. He landed hard, coughing a spatter of blood onto the inside of his faceplate.

Aergard expected the creature to come for him, but it didn't. It turned away, heading for Evrain. The standard bearer was wounded, kneeling on the ice, while the hunchbacked necron stood over him. Garel and Thibaut were fighting like madmen to reach him. The Marshal was seconds away, Balinor and Vayn at his side.

A darkness moved around Evrain and the necrons like churning water. When it cleared, the xenos had gone.

They had taken Evrain and the Marshal's standard with them.

Helbrecht stood at the spot where Evrain had disappeared.

There was a black mark there on the ice. The aftertaste of the teleportation in the air made Helbrecht want to spit.

'My lord.'

Aergard was waiting for a command. They all were. Helbrecht clenched his fist. They had lost so much already.

'My lord,' Aergard said again.

Helbrecht turned to face the five Space Marines that remained of his honour guard.

'Kneel,' Helbrecht said. He didn't raise his voice.

They all complied immediately with a clash of armour plates, bowing their heads. Helbrecht could not help feeling that they were avoiding his eyes. He drove the point of his sword into the ice, marking where Evrain, and the standard he bore, had disappeared.

'This is failure,' he said. 'The Black Templars have *failed*.'

Helbrecht stalked to where Aergard knelt and pulled him to his feet.

'The enemy have my standard. They have your brother.'

For years, Helbrecht had valued Aergard's counsel. His champion was a balanced blade, not easily given to choler or spite. Yet in that moment, Helbrecht looked at his brother and saw nothing but his own failures reflected back at him.

And he could not bear them.

'*Speak,*' Helbrecht snarled.

'We allowed the enemy to best us. *I* allowed it,' Aergard said, head bowed. 'What would you have me do?'

Helbrecht gestured at Thibaut and Garel.

'Take these two and find my standard. I will continue on to Blight's Edge. I will rally our brothers and retake the outpost.'

Aergard flinched as if he'd been struck.

'We are sworn to defend you,' he said. '*I* am sworn to defend you.'

'Then I relieve you of that responsibility,' Helbrecht said. 'Return to me with my standard, or do not return at all. Do you understand?'

Aergard inclined his head, but said nothing.

'Swear by your blade,' Helbrecht demanded.

Aergard planted his sword in the ice. He dropped to one knee before it, eye-lenses level with the crosspiece.

'I swear it, by my blood and by my blade. Lest I die dishonoured.'

'Do not disappoint me in this,' Helbrecht said. 'Restore our honour and your own will be restored with it.'

Helbrecht turned away, looking to the horizon. The outpost of Blight's Edge reared from the ice. Inside, fires were burning, lighting the sky with a false sunrise.

In Helbrecht's ear, the vox pick-up crackled and stuttered.

'... *Seven dead... regroup...*'

'... *Heavy armour sighted!*'

'... *Hundreds of them! Steel yourselves!*'

He would not filter the communications. He needed to hear it all: every drop of blood spilt, every brother lost.

Everything.

The name of the outpost was painted in massive letters on the external wall.

'Drab,' Thibaut read it aloud. 'I hope it lives up to its name.'

'Very amusing,' Aergard said, not taking his eyes off the walls.

Drab lay to the west of Blight's Edge. It was one of many smaller outposts on the planet's surface that had been built directly on top of rich deposits of

cryonite. It was a functioning mine with a population of around thirty thousand souls.

Aergard suspected that number was now grossly inaccurate.

Beyond the walls, palls of smoke rose, shrouding the frame of the mine head and the buildings that clung to it. The smoke was lit from underneath by the emerald flare of gauss fire and the blazing trails of missiles. The ice shook to the heavy tread of war.

The outpost was being brought to its knees, and it struggled as it died.

The three Space Marines were walking the perimeter, looking for a way to get inside. Drab had been locked down. Sealing it off had been an attempt to keep the workers safe. Instead, it had trapped them inside with the necrons.

Garel walked ahead of them, almost consumed by the shadow cast by the walls. The sun was coming up. Somehow, it made it feel colder.

‘Evrain’s locator signal is getting stronger,’ Thibaut said.

‘It is coming from the western quarter,’ Aergard said by way of response. The rune that signalled Evrain’s location flickered in his peripheral vision. While it could tell them where to find him, it couldn’t tell them whether or not he still lived.

‘How can you be sure that we will find the standard there?’ Garel said. ‘The locator signal only tells us where Evrain is. Or at least where his *armour* is. They may have taken it from him.’

Aergard clenched his fists. The thought of the necrons scavenging Evrain’s battleplate, ripping it from him like carrion birds worrying a corpse, was almost worse than imagining him dead. It was *sacrilege*.

‘We have to assume that Evrain and the standard are in the same place,’ Thibaut replied. ‘It is currently our best hope of finding either.’

‘Assumptions – always eminently preferable.’ Garel sounded irritated.

Thibaut laughed. ‘My assumptions over your eyes, any day, brother.’

‘That’s enough, both of you,’ Aergard said. ‘We need to focus.’

When Thibaut spoke again, he sounded concerned. ‘You are troubled,’ he said.

Aergard thought that somewhat of an understatement, but didn’t say so.

‘The battle plan that I helped devise is currently getting our brothers killed. I stood by and watched as that vile xenos disappeared with one of our own. I would say that is adequate reason to be troubled.’

Thibaut shook his head. ‘That is not your burden to bear alone,’ he said, ‘though you seem to be intent on trying.’

‘I swore on my sword. The oath is mine,’ Aergard said.

Thibaut's faceplate hid his expression, but when he spoke again he sounded faintly amused.

'You are so damned honourable,' he said. 'We are brothers. Your burdens are our burdens, until we are all too dead to bear them.'

Aergard smiled, just barely. 'That almost sounded like good counsel,' he said.

'You're welcome.'

'Forgive me for interrupting.' Garel sounded impatient even through the crackling, intermittent vox. 'I believe I have found a way in.'

'Good,' Aergard said. 'Then let us go and find the Marshal's standard.'

'And Evrain,' Thibaut added.

'Yes,' Aergard said, feeling the acid touch of guilt. 'And Evrain.'

After several attempts, Helbrecht had made contact with *Unyielding*.

The Thunderhawk gunship was now en route to pick up the Marshal and the two remaining members of his honour guard and relocate them to the heart of the battle, the outpost of Blight's Edge.

He had also tried to reach *Flight of Angels* and *Ascendancy*, but the only answer had been a damning silence.

Helbrecht, Balinor and Vayn held their position on the stretch of ice that had been bought with Templar blood. Between the Space Marines and Blight's Edge, the land was heaped with boulders of wind-carved ice. In places, the face of the planet was split. Some of the fissures were miles deep. If you were to fall, the planet would take you.

More necrons had come since Evrain was taken, and still more kept coming. They marched between the glistening blocks of ice, accompanied by a thousand watery reflections. The Space Marines kept them at bay, each protecting the other. Eventually, though, their bolters would run dry, and their swords would blunt and break.

They would use their fists if they had to.

'How long until *Unyielding* reaches us?' Balinor said. He slammed another magazine into his bolter.

'Two minutes,' Helbrecht replied. It sounded like no time at all, but it was long enough to get them killed. 'Stay focused. We cannot afford a moment of distraction.'

Vayn spoke up over the thunderclap of a necron phasing out.

'They are wasteful, spending resource without thought.'

'They are wearing us down,' Helbrecht said. 'Forcing us to spend our

ammunition and our strength. Do not underestimate them.'

Vayn ducked behind a frozen outcrop as gauss fire lit the gloom. It carved straight through the ice beside his head. Meltwater splattered his battleplate.

'Noted,' he said.

'For every life they have taken, they will repay us tenfold,' Helbrecht said.

He looked at Balinor, and Vayn beside him.

'Keep faith,' he said. 'Or we are already lost.'

Overhead, the sky trembled with the roar of thrusters. A Thunderhawk broke the low cloud, trailing smoke and flame. The sound of its straining engines echoed around the frozen landscape.

It was *Unyielding*, and it was being hunted.

Helbrecht watched as three necron fighters burst from the cloud behind the ailing gunship. They rolled in the air with a peculiar, alien grace. Where the Thunderhawk bellowed and roared, the necron craft *sang*.

The sound was unbearable.

Unyielding deployed a burst of flares. The three fighters dipped and weaved around them, ignoring them completely.

Then the lead fighter fired.

A beam of searing light lanced from the ship's underbelly, striking the Thunderhawk across the tail and shearing clean through the gunship's layers of ablative armour plating. The tail section tore off completely. Chain explosions burst along the length of the Thunderhawk's spine, and it shuddered in the air with an agonised groan.

Unyielding came apart before Helbrecht's eyes and began to fall to earth. The Marshal cursed and turned to run, Vayn and Balinor beside him.

The dismembered gunship hit the ice behind the Space Marines and exploded, engines detonating with a thunderous exhalation of heat and pressure. Helbrecht was hurled into the air, the hot rush of flame blistering the paint from his armour. He landed hard, smoke rising from his battleplate. Dozens of necrons had been immolated by the blast, or crushed when *Unyielding* fell. One had been blown over the edge of a fissure and swallowed by the hungry darkness.

Helbrecht got up unsteadily. Fractured bone shifted in his chest. It hurt to breathe.

'Balinor?' he said, his voice hoarse. 'Vayn? Acknowledge?'

'Still here, my lord.' Balinor was lying not far from where Helbrecht stood. He got to his feet slowly. Flames were steadily consuming his tabard. He batted at them irritably.

‘Vayn?’ Helbrecht called again.

‘Aye,’ came the reply. Vayn staggered into view. His helm was a shattered mess, and his right arm terminated in a ragged stump just below his elbow. Half-clotted blood blotted the ice at his feet. Vayn pulled the remains of his helm from his head and dropped it.

‘Still here. Mostly,’ he managed, teeth chattering as his armour’s systems pumped coagulants and painkillers into his bloodstream.

‘Can you fight?’ Helbrecht said.

Vayn smiled through the blood on his face.

‘I can still hold a sword.’

Balnor was watching the wreckage of *Unyielding* burn.

‘Should I try and raise another transport, my lord?’

Helbrecht shook his head.

‘No,’ he said. ‘The skies belong to the enemy.’ He pointed with his sword in the direction of Blight’s Edge. ‘We walk.’

Garel’s ‘way in’ turned out to be a maintenance tunnel that led through the outpost’s outer wall. It looked as though it hadn’t been used for decades. The shielding that covered the entrance was rusted shut and rimed with ice. Garel kicked the metal cover over and over, bending it away from the frame. The noise echoed in the shadow of the wall that loomed above them. Aergard and Thibaut kept watch.

In the far distance, monoliths of black stone bore inexorably down upon the Black Templars like an oncoming thunderhead. They were xenos constructs, raised up and guided across the battlefield by the hand of the enemy. Coruscating energy lashed from their capstones, raking claws of light across the sky. Everything that the light touched was obliterated. The Space Marines would not last long outside the walls once the monoliths reached them.

‘Quicker would be better,’ Thibaut said.

‘You are welcome to help,’ Garel snarled, between kicks.

‘If it is going to require two of us to get that panel off, I would start to worry about our chances of success here,’ Thibaut replied.

‘Quiet, both of you,’ Aergard said. His vox pick-up stammered in his ear. Between bursts of static, there was a familiar voice.

‘*Reques... deple... into the outpost... pinn...*’

Behind the voice there were sounds of furious gunfire and shouting.

‘Can you hear that?’ Aergard said, looking to his brothers. ‘It sounds like

Leoric. Struggling.’

‘Leoric?’ Thibaut said. ‘Biting off more than he can chew? I am surprised.’

Garel snorted a laugh.

Aergard replied on the same channel, not even sure if Leoric would be able to hear it.

‘Hold your ground, brother,’ he said. ‘We will come to you.’

‘What are you doing?’ Garel asked.

Aergard looked to Garel and Thibaut. His armour’s systems had approximated the location of Leoric’s broadcast. He was inside the outpost.

‘Leoric’s position lies between us and our target. We can aid him.’

‘What about the standard?’ Garel said.

Aergard stared at his brother.

‘I will not abandon Leoric to die.’

Garel stopped kicking and stared back.

‘Leoric is not our concern. The Marshal’s standard is.’

There was no trace of cruelty in Garel’s tone, just cold dismissal. Aergard thought about Lidas pinned to the ice, dying. His own conscience would not be so easily dismissed.

‘Leoric and his squad are inside the outpost. So is the standard. We can aid him without forsaking our duty.’

‘You tell yourself that, if you wish,’ Garel said.

Aergard wasn’t about to let Garel goad him.

‘I do not need to. I am telling you.’ Aergard said, evenly. ‘Leoric is our brother. Our blood. I will not waste his life when we have lost so much already. We will offer Leoric what aid we can, then we will find the standard, free Evrain and return to cleansing this frozen hell.’

Garel looked at Aergard for several heartbeats, then shrugged.

‘As you say.’

Aergard could hear the dissent in Garel’s tone. He chose to ignore it.

Garel turned away and planted his foot hard into the maintenance panel again, and it gave way, dropping to the ground with a crash.

Aergard stepped into the tunnel. In the periphery of his vision, another locator rune blinked alongside the first. One for Leoric. One for Evrain.

Another brother. Another life.

Another oath.

‘We are not alone,’ Helbrecht growled.

The three Space Marines were on foot, moving towards Blight's Edge. Helbrecht had sent a company-wide vox broadcast calling all Black Templars forces on the surface to the outpost, with the intent that they could regroup and strike back at the necrons.

The number of Black Templars capable of responding was unsettlingly small.

Vayn and Balinor held position on either side of Helbrecht, the honour-chains that bound their weapons to their armour clicking together softly in the freezing wind.

'I see nothing, my lord,' Balinor said in a low voice.

Helbrecht narrowed his eyes.

'Neither do I,' Helbrecht said. 'But we are being watched.'

The Black Templars were moving through an area that had been abandoned when the necrons had made planetfall. Huge pieces of mining equipment stood stationary, rimed with frost and creaking in the ice planet's unceasing wind. There were bodies, too. Frozen hands reached to the sky with blackened fingers. Blood had become mirrors of red glass. Not all of the human workers had abandoned their machines quickly enough. Helbrecht scowled.

'We move,' Helbrecht said, eyes on the long shadows cast by the machines. 'But keep your eyes open.'

The three Space Marines moved as one through the graveyard of machinery. In the distance, Blight's Edge reared up from the ice, wreathed in smoke.

'I would dearly like to know where the bastards have disappeared to,' Balinor voxed. 'I grow tired of fighting shadows.'

'Perhaps they have fallen back to Blight's Edge,' Vayn said.

Helbrecht didn't look at his brothers. He kept his eyes on his surroundings.

'They armour themselves with cowardice,' he said. 'It will not protect them. Wherever they hide, we will seek them out and then we will destroy them. In His name.'

'In His na—' Balinor's reply was cut short. A burst of blood issued from his throat, and the Sword Brother fell to his knees. The vox channel was filled with the sound of Balinor choking to death.

'Sniper!' Vayn cried out. He immediately dragged Balinor into cover.

Helbrecht saw it then, in the shadow of a mining drill.

The necron sniper almost seemed a part of the shadow, save for the glow from its emerald eye. In a heartbeat, Helbrecht brought up his own bolter and fired. The darkness gathered around the creature as the bolts hit home. Helbrecht heard a machine-squeal and the necron dematerialised, leaving behind the smell of

ozone and traces of smoke from the bolter fire.

Wherever the creature had conjured itself away to, it was hurting.

Helbrecht turned to Vayn, who was kneeling beside Balinor.

‘Does he live?’ the Marshal asked through gritted teeth.

Vayn said nothing. He just shook his head.

Helbrecht exhaled slowly. Another life lost.

Without an Apothecary present, Helbrecht was the one who had to retrieve Balinor’s gene-seed. It was the least he could do for him now. The gene-seed in Balinor’s throat had been destroyed, but the secondary implant in his chest had survived. It was a small mercy.

‘Emperor keep your soul, brother,’ he said. He bowed his head, making the sign of the aquila with his bloody hands.

The maintenance tunnel led further on into the outpost than they had initially thought.

On the far side of the walls it had branched into a network of underground passages, mine shafts and cramped hab units. Everywhere there were signs of conflict. In places, the tunnel had partially collapsed. Aergard stepped past scorched bones clad in the blasted remains of carapace armour. The mortals had died defending this place. There was something admirable about that.

After some time, they had started to climb, heading for the last position that Leoric had been broadcasting from, which turned out to be an unremarkable building called the Chapel of the Emperor’s Benevolence.

The three Space Marines watched from the broken window of a third-floor hab unit as Leoric and his brothers defended the chapel. Outside, fifteen necron warriors kept up a relentless hail of fire, blasting holes in the building’s crumbling facade. Leoric’s squad retaliated, firing through gaps in the hastily built barricades and broken windows. The necrons were advancing slowly.

Patiently.

‘Leoric,’ Aergard said over the vox. ‘We can see your position now.’

The vox signal was much better at close range. It crackled, and then Leoric spoke.

‘It is good to hear your voice, brother. Is the Marshal with you?’

Aergard sighed.

‘No, his path takes him elsewhere,’ Aergard said. ‘There are three of us.’

Leoric made a noise that suggested he didn’t think three would be enough.

‘It is not like you to be held up by a handful, brother,’ Thibaut said with a

smile in his voice.

The tone of Leoric's reply was not as jovial.

'They have been attacking for hours. As soon as we put them down, more arrive to replace them.'

In the background of the transmission, Aergard could hear hymns being sung by human voices.

Aergard frowned. 'You have mortals under your protection.'

'The alternative did not feel very honourable,' Leoric said.

Behind Aergard, Garel was watching the necron advance with cold detachment.

'He should have abandoned the mortals to die,' Garel said, softly.

Aergard ignored him.

'We will cut the necrons down while they focus on you. Once they have turned their attention to us that should give you and your squad respite enough to join the fray. Send the mortals to shelter in the crypt, if there is one. We will not be able to protect them if the necrons manage to breach the walls.'

'*Turned their attention to us,*' Thibaut repeated. 'That almost makes it sound amicable.'

Aergard shot Thibaut a look. The other Space Marine just shrugged, managing to look amused despite the impassive mask of his faceplate.

'That sounds as good a plan as any,' Leoric said. 'My thanks, brother.'

Aergard smiled humourlessly.

'You can thank me when all the necrons are dead.'

Leoric terminated the link. Aergard nodded to Thibaut and Garel.

'Leave none alive.'

They saluted in reply.

All three Space Marines leapt from the window, falling to the roadway below.

Garel landed first, his leap taking him the farthest. He landed on top of one of the necrons with a clang of armour and metal, knocking it flat. Garel hacked at the creature messily, sparks flying.

Aergard was already on his feet, laying about himself with his sword. The powered blade sang as he killed, a melody of crackling power fields and rending metal.

Thibaut threw himself at one of the necrons, shoulder barging it and knocking out its aim. He jammed the muzzle of his bolter against the creature's torso and fired. Green light flared angrily as the necron's systems shorted out. Its ruined remains disappeared before they hit the roadway.

‘I think they have turned their attention to us now!’ Thibaut shouted over the deafening racket of bolters firing and gauss weapons discharging.

One of the remaining necrons turned and fired at Aergard. He threw himself aside, the beam glancing him just barely. It gouged a furrow in his armour that cut clean down to his bodyglove.

Straight through the ceramite.

‘Hells,’ Aergard swore, getting to his feet. He raised his bolter to fire, but the necron was engulfed in flame before he pulled the trigger.

Leoric’s squad were coming over the barricades.

‘No pity! No remorse!’ Leoric roared.

‘No fear!’ Aergard, Thibaut and Garel finished their Chapter’s battle cry as one.

Helbrecht and Vayn had found their brothers.

The outpost of Blight’s Edge was encircled on all sides by a deep ravine, like the moat of an ancient castle. Bridges of ice crossed over the ravine, linking the outpost to the mainland. Once there had been many such bridges, but now only one remained, and it was heavily defended.

There were legions of necrons inside the outpost, and yet more standing outside it like statues, frost hardening on their metal skeletons. Overhead, necron aircraft tore across the sky. Huge arachnid constructs traversed the walls of the outpost. Hundreds of soulless green eyes stared out from Blight’s Edge, waiting.

The Black Templars had rallied, just as Helbrecht had ordered, but with the bridge held by the enemy, and the necrons controlling the skies, they couldn’t get into Blight’s Edge to liberate it.

‘We will not push across the bridge this way,’ Helbrecht said. He had pulled his forces back to limit casualties and gathered a conclave of warriors to him. They needed to change their approach or none of them would make it off-world.

Helbrecht cursed himself, not for the first time, for sending Aergard away. His champion had always given him good counsel.

Now, for all the Marshal knew, Aergard was as dead as Balinor.

‘We are wearing them thin,’ Jenovar said. The Sword Brethren veteran was notoriously stubborn, and his armour bore the scars to prove it. ‘We can take the bridge.’

Beside Helbrecht, Vayn snorted disdainfully.

‘How many times have you tried to storm the bridge, Jenovar?’ Helbrecht asked.

The veteran's hands curled into fists at his side.

'Three,' he said, begrudgingly.

'You have fought valiantly.' Helbrecht kept his voice neutral. He would not win the man to his cause by hurting his pride. 'But we will not take the bridge this way.'

'Can we not call in aid from the *Eternal Crusader*?' Ideus was only an initiate, but he showed great promise. He had rallied the rest of his squad when their sergeant was killed, kept them fighting and bolstered their faith. 'We could bombard the city from orbit, and renew our offensive once the necrons are weakened.'

Helbrecht shook his head.

'It would do us no good,' he said. 'The complex runs deep into the ice. Short of cracking the planet, we could not flush them out with orbital strikes. Besides, the machinery and resources inside Blight's Edge are valuable. We must save as much of the outpost as we can.'

'For the good of the few humans who yet live, and the cryonite mines?' Jenovar said with disdain. 'It hardly seems a worthy prize for the lives we have lost already.'

Helbrecht stared at him. Jenovar wilted visibly under his gaze.

'The Imperium lives and dies in the hands of all humanity,' Helbrecht said, quietly. 'They may not have our strength, but that does not make them worthless.'

Jenovar bowed his head, contrite.

Helbrecht looked to Blight's Edge. The sky above the outpost was thick with choking black smoke.

'If we cannot take the bridge, then we must find an alternative route,' he said. 'This world is a warren of mines and passageways. We will pass under the ice and cleanse the outpost with bolters and blades. From the foundations up.'

'If we all disappear from the surface they will know we have gone to the mines,' Vayn said.

Helbrecht nodded.

'That is why I will remain here to lead a final assault on the ice bridge. I will hold their focus for as long as is necessary, until the mines are taken.'

'My lord, surely another would be better placed to do this? You said yourself that an assault on the bridge cannot hope to succeed,' Jenovar said. His meaning was clear. He wanted to stay on the surface and prove it could be done.

That was precisely why he couldn't be allowed to do so.

‘I need you to lead our brothers into the mines in my stead,’ Helbrecht said.

Jenovar bowed. ‘Aye, my lord.’

Ideus dropped to his knees, laying his sword flat across the palm of his gauntlet. ‘I offer you my blade, my lord. I would stay with you on the surface.’

Helbrecht almost smiled.

‘I suspect I will need all the blades I can get,’ he said. ‘Rally your brothers, Ideus.’ He caught sight of Balinor’s dried blood on his gauntlets.

‘It is time to turn the tide of this war.’

The last of the necrons phased out with an otherworldly whine that made Aergard’s teeth ache.

‘More will come,’ Garel said quietly. ‘We should leave before we get caught up in another fire fight that we can ill afford.’

Aergard knew he was right.

It was time for Leoric to make a decision. He could not hold the chapel indefinitely and they could no longer stay to aid him. They had another task to complete.

‘I will speak with him,’ Aergard said. He picked his way through the makeshift barricades and entered the chapel. Inside, a group of humans sat around a fire. The smoke was making them cough. The sound echoed in the vaulted space. One of Leoric’s squad, a neophyte named Anguis, was sitting beside the men and women. He was leading them in prayer.

‘He cares too much.’ Leoric’s voice was hoarse from shouting in battle. ‘It will get him killed.’

Aergard chuckled humourlessly.

‘Garel said much the same about you.’

Leoric scowled.

‘I cannot say I am worried about having more heart than that bastard.’

Aergard couldn’t find it in him to disagree. Garel was pragmatic to the point of callousness. He embodied what mortals so often thought of the Adeptus Astartes, that they lost their capacity for emotion when they accepted their mantle of demigod. That wasn’t strictly true. It merely became easier and more vital for them to keep their emotions distant.

Most of the time.

‘These mortals spoke of an ancient structure, buried beneath this settlement,’ Leoric said.

‘Necron?’ Aergard asked.

Leoric nodded absently.

‘They did not say so, but it makes sense. I think they triggered some sort of beacon when it was uncovered.’

Aergard frowned. If what Leoric was saying was true, then the necrons would not abandon the planet easily. Nothing about this crusade was turning out to be as it first appeared.

‘Did you send news of this to the Marshal?’ Aergard asked.

Leoric shrugged.

‘We tried. With the vox system ailing as it is we can only pray that he heard it.’

Aergard exhaled slowly, frustrated. The light coming through the windows was dwindling. The day cycle on Schrödinger VII was short. Darkness would fall soon.

‘We need to move on,’ Aergard said, still watching Anguis with the humans. ‘I swore an oath to the Marshal, and we have tarried here too long. As have you. You cannot protect them, Leo. Winning back their world is the only way to help them now.’

Leoric nodded.

‘I know what you are going to say,’ he said.

‘Then I will not say it,’ Aergard said.

Across the chapel, Anguis finished his prayers. One of the women put her hand on his arm as he got up to leave. She took a golden chain from the folds of her cloak, and pressed it into his hand. Even at a distance, Aergard recognised the pendant. It was an aquila. Anguis thanked her with a patient smile.

‘They keep true to the faith,’ Leoric said. He looked at Aergard. ‘They call us angels.’

Aergard watched the woman. She wore a scarf covering her nose and mouth, protecting her from the cold. Only her eyes were visible.

He saw fear there... and hope.

Aergard sighed. ‘Get them back into the crypts. Leave them a light and a blade. Then get back into the fight.’

A knife would certainly not protect them should the necrons return, but the comfort of having the weapon would perhaps be worth something. It was all that could be done for them.

It would have to be enough.

Leoric nodded. ‘As you say,’ he said.

Aergard bade farewell to Leoric and turned away, crunching slivers of stained

glass under his boots. The rune denoting Evrain's location flickered. They were not far now. It originated in the network of mines beneath their feet.

Aergard watched the pallid disc of the sun slip below the buildings as he left the chapel. The sky was tainted by smoke and the intermittent flare of weapons fire. His two brothers waited at the bottom of the steps.

'Are we done here?' Garel said.

'Yes,' Aergard replied. 'It is time to finish this.'

The necrons had taken the bait.

As Helbrecht reached the ice bridge, five of the xenos landed hard on the ice in front of them. They wore arcane jump packs that seemed to achieve propulsion without thrust. Where they landed, they caused tiny disruptions in gravity. At Helbrecht's feet, crystals of ice began to float upwards.

As one, the necrons activated the power fields on their staves.

'I think they are trying to stop us from reaching the bridge,' Vayn said, drily.

The necrons began to advance.

'Go through them,' Helbrecht said.

The Black Templars started to move.

One of the creatures lowered its staff and braced its feet. A searing beam of energy arced from the staff's jewelled head, hitting one of Ideus' squad, Deytrik, in the chest. With a boom of pressure, Deytrik was unmade, reduced to a grey flurry of ashes.

Gone.

With a snarl of rage, Helbrecht charged the closest of the necron creatures. It blocked his attack with its staff, the power fields of their weapons colliding with a shriek. The creature knocked Helbrecht's blade aside, pushing the Marshal back two paces. It swung the staff with silent malice, aiming to punch it through Helbrecht's chest. Helbrecht deflected it with a swipe of his sword, chasing up with a deft strike at the creature's throat.

His blow never connected.

His sword cut empty air as Helbrecht felt the point of the necron's staff scrape along his fused ribcage. He cursed, spitting blood. It was fast, faster than he'd expected. The creature knocked him back with the haft of the staff, sending the Marshal sprawling on the ice. It swung at him. Helbrecht rolled aside and the staff crashed into the ground where he'd been moments before.

And stuck there.

Gaining his feet, Helbrecht fired his bolter, stitching the creature with

firebursts as the rounds detonated. It fell, damaged and twitching, but not dead. The creature's body started to reknit. It lurched to its knees, reaching for the Marshal with hands like claws.

Helbrecht fired his bolter again, and kept firing until the creature lay still, shattered and smoking. The Marshal was breathing hard, blood dripping onto the ice from where the creature had cut him.

He was surprised how much it hurt.

'That was the last of them.' Vayn limped towards him. His chest-plate was cracked, the black lacquer flaking away. He spat on the ice.

'What I would not give for an enemy that stayed dead when I killed it.'

Helbrecht looked up. A curdled swirl of cloud was gathering above them. Lightning flashed in the sky.

'If we survive this, then I will try and find some for you,' he said.

The wind was picking up. It tugged at the purity seals attached to Helbrecht's armour. Thunder boomed unceasingly.

'That is no natural storm,' Vayn shouted over the noise of the wind.

Suddenly, the clamour stopped.

Emerald light lit the sky. Helbrecht caught the scent of ozone.

The light flared away and a silver figure was revealed, standing in the centre of the ice-bridge. A long, segmented cape hung heavy from its shoulders. It bore a brassy crown on its brow, stained with verdigris.

An immortal king crafted from silver and steel.

With an air of ceremony, the figure extended its hand.

'Mortal ones,' the figure said in richly accented, halting Gothic. 'You look upon Imotekh the Stormlord, Ruler of Mandragora, Liberator of Somonor and Overlord of the Sautekh dynasty.'

'That is rather a lot of titles,' Vayn muttered.

'Helbrecht!' the Stormlord said, impossibly loud.

Helbrecht, for a moment, felt physically stunned.

His name. It had used his name.

'You are the one who leads,' the Stormlord said. 'That must make you an honourable creature. Of sorts.'

The necron's face was a frozen rictus mask of metal, but Helbrecht couldn't help but hear a smile in the Stormlord's voice.

'If that is the case, then face me in single combat. Prove that you are not the failure you have so far shown yourself to be.'

The knuckles of Helbrecht's gauntlets creaked as he curled his hands into fists.

‘Sire,’ Vayn started, placing a warning hand on Helbrecht’s shoulder.

Helbrecht stared at him. ‘Let go,’ he said, softly.

Vayn did as he was asked, though he looked none too happy about it.

Helbrecht strode towards the Stormlord. He forced himself to walk as if unwounded. He would not show weakness to this creature, this xenos that knew his name.

The signal from Evrain’s locator had led them into the cryonite mines.

Hanging lume-globes lit the darkness. Wind howled up from the heart of the world, swinging the lanterns and casting long, twisted shadows on the walls. This far down, the ice was depthless and black. It spoke in constant tectonic creaks. A river of molten cryonite lay alongside the path they followed. The grey substance was slow flowing, the surface cracking and bubbling. The air was rank with the stench of it, like spoiled meat.

‘I can safely say that there is nothing about this planet that I find pleasant,’ Thibaut said dourly.

Garel stopped and picked something up from the floor. He turned it in his armoured hand. It was a rebreather mask. The inside of the faceplate was crusted with old blood.

‘There are no bodies,’ Garel said.

Disturbed by his handling of the mask, tiny metallic insects scuttled from inside it. Garel made a disgusted noise and threw the rebreather mask into the cryonite. The molten substance swallowed it with a lick of flame. One of the insects had managed to crawl onto his armour. He grabbed it and crushed it in his fist.

‘I am picking up traces of multiple contacts,’ Thibaut said, tapping at the auspex he carried.

‘It’s picking up more of those damned insects,’ Garel said.

Thibaut shook his head. ‘No, it is something bigger,’ he said. He tapped at the auspex again. ‘I cannot get a clear reading. There is too much interference down here.’

Aergard scowled behind his faceplate.

‘We should keep moving. If something is following us, we cannot very well stop it if we cannot see it.’

Thibaut nodded. He moved off, following the curve of the tunnel.

Aergard watched the walls. The metallic insects were everywhere, crawling in and out of holes and cracks in the ice. Their multi-jointed limbs clicked

incessantly. Garel stalked beside him in silence, his helm's red eye lenses glowing in the gloom. After a few more minutes, Thibaut stopped.

'There it is again,' he said.

Aergard never had the chance to reply.

The stone floor of the tunnel beneath Thibaut's feet rippled, and a metallic creature emerged, all hooked blades and segmented metal spine.

It punched its bladed forelimbs through Thibaut's chest.

'Thibaut!' Aergard yelled.

Thibaut cried out and dropped the auspex on the tunnel floor. The creature reared up, lifting the Space Marine's body off the ground. Thibaut struggled. He managed to jam his sword into the creature's single eye. It gave a stuttering, static cry and lashed out, striking Aergard with its tail and sending him crashing against the wall.

Thibaut had stopped struggling, his hands twitching nervelessly. His body slid from the creature's bladed arms, and landed in a crumpled heap on the tunnel floor.

The necron creature turned wildly, blinded. Garel started to fire his bolter at it, forcing it backwards with each explosive round. He was pushing it towards the cryonite. Aergard added his own gunfire to the onslaught. The creature squealed and writhed, juddering in and out of reality like a damaged pict recording. When it hit the cryonite, it was solid enough to burn. The creature screeched, and disappeared with a burst of flame and smoke.

Aergard turned and ran to where Thibaut lay. A pool of blood was spreading beneath him on the tunnel floor.

'Brother?' Aergard said, kneeling beside him.

Thibaut's breathing was ragged. Aergard's helm display showed his life signs as an erratic, jumping line.

'D-done something to my nerves,' Thibaut said with some amount of effort. 'My legs are useless.'

Aergard shook his head.

'Come now,' he said, quietly. 'Do not make me carry you.'

Thibaut tried to laugh, but it turned into a choking gargle. He gripped Aergard's arm with his gauntleted hand.

'Like I said,' he managed, his voice a wet rasp, 'until we are too dead to bear them.' His body was wracked with a massive seizure.

Thibaut's life signs flattened out on Aergard's helm display.

Aergard remained still, kneeling beside his brother.

‘He was a good warrior,’ Garel said.

Aergard sighed. His hands were covered with his brother’s blood. ‘Yes, he was.’

For one of the first times in recent memory, Helbrecht was losing a fight.

He felt weak. The keen edge of the Stormlord’s powered blade had cut him, carving a deep gouge in his shoulder. It had been agonising to begin with, but the pain was fading, leaving behind it a cloying numbness. The loss of sensation was much worse. Agony at least brought with it clarity. Helbrecht could barely feel his fingers, his grip on the hilt of his sword slipping.

Helbrecht would have suffered any amount of pain gladly. He was blessed with the blood of Dorn. He was a Marshal of the Black Templars, the holiest of the Emperor’s sons. He had won a thousand duels or more, bested champions and hordes alike.

And now he was losing to this *creature*. This ancient, dead *thing*, that had out-thought, out-strategised and now out-fought him. This faithless, hateful *alien*.

His vision tunnelled, and he coughed up blood. It splattered onto his tabard, staining the black cross of his Chapter.

His Chapter, his blood. They were all his blood. And he had led them here to die.

‘*No!*’ Helbrecht flung the word at the Stormlord as if it too were a weapon. He struck out at the necron with a heavy blow from his sword that made the blade ring in his hand and his wounded shoulder ache. It snapped cabling and rent the metal of the Stormlord’s body.

He had wounded it.

He *could* wound it.

Helbrecht followed up with another strike at the Stormlord’s weakened armour. The necron creature stepped aside deftly and Helbrecht stumbled. Blood drops scattered onto the ice from the wound in his shoulder. The Marshal turned to face his foe.

The damage he’d done to the Stormlord’s body was repairing itself.

Tiny metallic insects were crawling over the surface of the Stormlord’s metal exoskeleton, knitting it back together.

For the second time, Helbrecht had the peculiar feeling that the Stormlord would have been smiling if it were capable.

‘You grow weak,’ the Stormlord said. ‘Weak and tired. You and your kin will fail here, as humanity’s empire will fail. Because I will it.’

Helbrecht snarled. ‘You are arrogant,’ he said, through blood-flecked teeth. ‘A relic of a dead empire that has no right to exist.’

The Stormlord cocked its head. ‘That is quite amusing, coming from one such as you.’

Helbrecht darted forward, looking to plant his sword in the Stormlord’s throat.

Not even attempting to parry, the Stormlord pointed its staff at Helbrecht with a swing of its arm. Conjured bolts of lightning struck Helbrecht in the chest, stiffening his limbs and making him blind, deaf and mute all in an instant. The power field surrounding Helbrecht’s sword shorted out with a burst of light.

He stayed on his feet by virtue of stubbornness alone.

Helbrecht’s sword connected. The force of the blow split the blade from point to hilt. The Stormlord cried out. Helbrecht tried to laugh, but found he couldn’t even breathe. The lightning blast had sent his primary heart into arrest.

Aergard and Garel had found the origin of Evrain’s locator signal.

The tunnel terminated in an expansive cave. It was a perfect dome, carved out of the heart of the world. The walls shone like polished glass. Discarded mining equipment littered the ground. A huge bladed drill stood inanimate, covered with ice.

Rising from floor at the centre of the cave was the source of the signal.

The structure was undoubtedly necron in origin. There was no technology that the Imperium possessed which could create something so *other*. It towered above the Space Marines, a pyramid of eerily perfect obsidian.

This was the structure that the mortals had spoken of. The beacon that had called the necrons to Schrödinger VII.

‘The standard is inside this thing?’

Disdain wasn’t a strong enough term to describe Garel’s tone.

Aergard looked at the structure. The longer he looked at it, the less fixed the dimensions seemed to be. ‘At least the workers left us a way in,’ he replied, flatly.

The face of the structure had been broken open. Chunks of the strange rock were scattered around the fissure.

Garel approached the structure. He glanced up at it a final time, then shook his head. ‘Let’s get this over with, then.’

The two Space Marines stepped over the threshold. The human miners had broken through into a vast chamber built of the same strange black stone as the outside of the structure. Even more so than outside, the structure’s dimensions

didn't make sense, the scale of it seeming impossible. The walls, floor and ceiling were inlaid with curious repeating patterns. As Aergard and Garel passed by them, light coursed through the strange glyphs, as if they were reacting to the movement of the Space Marines.

Dominating the centre of the chamber was a smaller mimic of the structure in which they now stood. Even the replica was five times Aergard's height, or more.

Aergard crossed the room to stand before it.

On the surface in front of him was a door. Aergard walked around the structure once. There were identical doors on the other sides.

He stopped again in front of the first door. Near the apex of the replica pyramid, below the capstone, there was a crack in the outer surface. For the briefest of moments, Aergard felt as if he was watching himself scrutinise the pyramid. The feeling was incredibly unpleasant.

'We should not tarry here,' Aergard said to Garel.

The other Space Marine was standing before another of the doors. He was absolutely still, as if he too were carved from stone.

'These doors do not make sense,' he said, by way of reply.

'There is no other way. We must go on, and that means choosing one of these doors.'

Garel didn't look at him. He kept watching the gaping maw of the doorway as if he expected it to do something.

'They do not make *sense*,' he said again. Aergard had never heard Garel sound uneasy before. It unsettled him.

'Garel,' Aergard said.

The other Space Marine finally looked at him.

'Enough,' Aergard said.

There was a silence that stretched for several heartbeats before Garel nodded.

'Which door?' Garel asked.

Aergard's visor display was trying and failing to show him the distance to his marked target. The number kept changing and recalculating. He dismissed the data. It would do him no good.

His gut was telling him to choose the first door.

He decided to go with his gut.

Aergard drew his combat knife and carved a cross into the stone beside the first door.

'That was a guess, wasn't it?' Garel said.

Aergard looked at him. 'Only if I am wrong.'

'You are a stubborn creature.'

The Stormlord's voice was a distant rumble, like the roll of a thunderhead. Helbrecht struggled to focus. He could hear a wan, wet thumping sound. It was drowning everything else out. He realised with unpleasant clarity that the noise was his secondary heart.

'You have tried to claim this galaxy as your own for ten thousand years,' the Stormlord continued. 'Yet you have little of account to show for your efforts. Such failure must be as depressing to bear as it is pathetic to behold.'

'You dismiss us,' Helbrecht managed, 'but for every drop of Imperial blood you spill, for every inch of our ground that you spoil with your presence, we will hunt you.' He smiled through bloody teeth. 'Until the stars themselves go dark, we will hunt you.'

The Stormlord cocked his head to one side in an oddly human gesture.

'I expect you will,' he said. 'But here, today, you kneel before me defeated.' The Stormlord's eyes flashed. 'And I will ensure you never forget it.'

The Stormlord took hold of Helbrecht's right arm and severed his hand with a single stroke of his blade.

Helbrecht bellowed in pain and anger. Blood jetted from the ruined stump of his arm, drawing patterns on the ice.

'May this remind you,' the Stormlord said, watching Helbrecht with cold curiosity, 'of your dishonour and defeat.'

Helbrecht glared up at his enemy.

Not like this. He would not die like this.

'I will make you pay,' Helbrecht managed, blood frothing between his clenched teeth. He tried to get to his feet but his limbs were sluggish and weak.

He couldn't get up from his knees.

The Stormlord laughed and closed his hand around Helbrecht's throat. The Marshal felt his feet leave the ice, the Stormlord suspending him in the air.

'Learn from this,' the Stormlord said. 'So that we may duel again.'

Then he threw Helbrecht from the ice bridge and the Marshal fell, cursing, into the fathomless dark.

'We have passed by here before.'

Aergard stood at the edge of an unknowable abyss, a bridge of light curving downwards into the darkness. On the wall beside him was the cross he had

carved into the stone as they had journeyed deeper into the structure. There had been thirteen crosses so far. It was the fifth time they had found themselves passing through locations that they had previously marked.

To say that he was becoming frustrated would be an understatement.

‘How can this be?’ Garel gestured to the cross on the wall with his sword. ‘We have not climbed once. We have done nothing but follow the path downward.’

Aergard shrugged, at a loss.

‘I do not think that we can apply “up and down” to this place.’

Garel growled.

‘What in the hells is that supposed to mean?’

Aergard shot him a look.

‘I do not know. I do not have the answers you seek. All we can do is push on. We follow Evrain’s signal until we find him. Thibaut died for this. There is no going back.’

‘Of course we go on,’ Garel snapped. ‘but it galls me that our brothers fight on the surface while we spend hours wandering these accursed halls.’

Aergard frowned.

‘Calm yourself,’ he said. ‘It has only been sixty-eight minutes.’

Garel froze. ‘Not according to my chronometer,’ he replied.

It was Aergard’s turn to curse. For a brief moment, he imagined the two of them condemned to tread the obsidian halls for eternity, while outside, time spun on without them. Wars would be lost and won, and the Chapter would continue. Worst of all, they would remain dishonoured, forced to bear their shame until time showed them unwanted mercy and allowed them to die. For the first time since his elevation above the rest of humanity, Aergard experienced true despair. It would consume him, if he allowed it to.

He chose to deny it.

Aergard focused on his sword. The sword with which he delivered justice and fury. The sword he had sworn his oath upon. ‘Emperor protect us,’ he said, softly.

‘So that we might banish the darkness,’ Garel spoke the words of the prayer without hesitation, his fist held over his hearts.

‘And have the strength to bear His light.’

‘Wherever our duty may take us.’ Aergard and Garel spoke the final words together, before following the light bridge down into the abyss.

Some time after Aergard marked his twenty-third waypoint, the two Black

Templars reached the heart of the structure. It was a chamber of rust and ruin, a hoard of broken things.

Aergard and Garel moved between pieces of disused machinery that had their innards exposed, like slaughtered animals. Cables trailed and snaked between them, connecting things that were never meant to be connected. What light there was bled from cracks in the ceiling. Tiny metallic insects scuttled everywhere.

A noise echoed in the chamber. Aergard motioned to Garel and they circled around the husk of a mining drill.

‘Throne of Terra,’ Garel whispered.

Beyond the machine graveyard, the chamber stopped being a workshop and started being a surgery.

At the far end of the chamber, the two Space Marines could see the hunchbacked necron creature, the one that called itself Kheprys, bent over a stone slab. As it worked it mumbled in its xenos tongue. On the slab, beneath its clicking, blood-flecked claws, lay Evrain. Most of his armour had been removed, not to mention a good deal of the skin and muscle beneath. If he was not already dead, he was dying.

On the floor beside him lay the Marshal’s standard.

Garel snarled.

Aergard put a hand on his shoulder. ‘We need to stop it from teleporting again,’ he said. ‘At any cost.’

Garel nodded. ‘At any cost,’ he repeated.

The two Space Marines burst from behind their cover, startling Kheprys.

It retreated from its workbench, clutching butchered scraps of Evrain’s holy armour. Cables trailed, still attached to the Space Marine’s body. They pulled tight as the necron backed away, keeping it tethered.

It blurted an irritated noise. In response, a massive mechanical creature unfolded itself from the dark spaces above them and dropped to the ground between the two Space Marines and their quarry, bladed limbs striking sparks from the stone floor. It reared on segmented legs and hissed.

‘Take it down,’ Aergard said.

‘My pleasure,’ Garel replied. He started to run, scaling the discarded machines to his right.

The creature was surprisingly fast for something of such great size. It thundered through the scrap. Aergard saw one of its bladed limbs punch straight through a sheet of reinforced plasteel. He threw himself forwards as the creature charged towards him, rolling underneath its bulk.

It screamed and stamped down, trying to pin him with its pointed limbs. The noise was deafening. Aergard brought his sword up and raked it across the creature's underbelly. Sparks flew.

The creature reared back, bleating. It kicked out with one of its forelimbs, catching Aergard in the chest and sending him flying across the chamber. He landed on the shell of a machine, crumpling the metal framework.

Aergard dragged himself free, rolling onto the floor. His bolter was gone, the honour chains binding it to his armour snapped.

He looked up, winded.

The arachnid creature was lying in a crumpled heap, legs splayed out, still twitching. Garel stood on top of it.

'Go!' Garel managed, before plunging his sword into the back of the creature's metal skull. It screamed and reared up, falling backwards and taking Garel with it.

Aergard had no time to check if his brother lived. He had to stop Kheprys before it escaped.

The hunchbacked necron had ripped the cables binding Evrain's armour to his body from their housings. It clutched the plates to its chest, stepping back with jerking limbs, and

laughed, a popping and hissing sound.

'I bested you. You fail!' it said, raising its staff.

The orb at the crown of the staff began to glow. The darkness began to draw close. It was going to teleport.

Aergard threw himself across the chamber. He had to reach it before it teleported. It could not be allowed to escape. He roared in frustration.

The air charged with ozone.

A hail of bolt shells struck Kheprys in the chest, stitching across its body and hitting the staff. The staff exploded with a bellow of discharging power, taking half of the necron's face and torso with it. The displacement of air knocked Aergard backwards. He looked around, dazed.

On the slab, Evrain was propping himself upright on one arm. Smoke curled from the muzzle of his bolter. His hand shook and his face was slackened with nerve damage.

'You took your time,' he managed, before he collapsed.

Aergard entered the *Eternal Crusader's* observation deck.

Helbrecht was kneeling before the viewport. The stars looked on, dim and

distant. At his side, an artificer was attending the new augmetic graft that replaced the hand Helbrecht had lost. Aergard could smell the caustic tang of worked metal and blood.

He approached, waiting to be acknowledged. It had been weeks since he'd seen Helbrecht. The Marshal had secluded himself in prayer and penitence since the slaughter on Schrödinger VII. That was what some were calling it, now. *The Slaughter*.

Such a grand title, for their greatest shame.

'It is done, my lord,' the artificer said, stepping back. The man bore the hint of a proud smile.

Helbrecht stood. He curled the fingers of his new hand closed.

'My thanks, Darion,' he said.

The artificer bowed low and retreated from the observation deck.

Aergard dropped to one knee as Helbrecht finally turned to face him.

'My lord,' Aergard said, 'you summoned me?'

Helbrecht's face gave nothing away.

'Stand,' he said.

Aergard did as he was bade. He was relieved to see the Marshal. Helbrecht had barely survived the duel with the Stormlord. Aergard suspected that only the will of the God-Emperor had kept him going long enough for the Apothecaries to get to him.

That, and hate. It came off the Marshal in waves.

'You recovered my standard,' Helbrecht said.

'Yes, sire.'

Helbrecht nodded. 'Good,' he said, after a long moment of silence.

Aergard bowed his head. 'Evrain did not survive,' he said. 'He never awoke from the healing sleep.'

Aergard had mourned his brother. He had prayed. It still stung no less to admit that he was dead.

Helbrecht said nothing, his expression unchanged. His augmetic fingers clicked quietly as he clenched his fist. 'What of Schrödinger VII?'

Aergard met the Marshal's eyes. 'The planet belongs to the necrons. It is lost to us,' he said.

Aergard remembered the human worker in the chapel. The pendant that she had pressed into Anguis' hands. A symbol of faith.

'We failed,' he said.

Helbrecht nodded. 'Yes, we did,' he said. 'I did.'

Aergard said nothing, surprised by the Marshal's candour.

'The sword I carried was ruined in the duel with the Stormlord. The blade shattered from point to quillion,' Helbrecht said, looking out into the void. 'It could not be salvaged.' His face was drawn. Tired.

'I had Darion craft this augmetic incorporating what was left of the blade,' Helbrecht raised his fist. 'We must all bear the weight of our failures. We will learn from this, and repent for it, but we must never forget it.'

'Yes, lord.' Aergard nodded, thinking of Thibaut's blood on his hands.

There would be no forgetting any of it.

'I would serve at your side, still, if you would have it,' Aergard said.

Helbrecht nodded. 'I would,' he said.

Aergard bowed his head, feeling relief despite himself.

'I need my honour guard at full strength,' Helbrecht said. 'Garel lives?'

Aergard nodded. They had both made it out of the necron structure, bringing Evrain with them, but not before rigging up what melta charges they carried. It would not have come close to destroying it, but even petty vengeance was better than no vengeance at all.

'Good,' Helbrecht said. 'Think on who you would have replace those that we have lost. I would have your counsel in this.'

'Yes, my lord.'

'That will be all for now, brother,' Helbrecht said.

Aergard could not walk from the chamber without asking the question that plagued him most.

'What of the Stormlord?' he said.

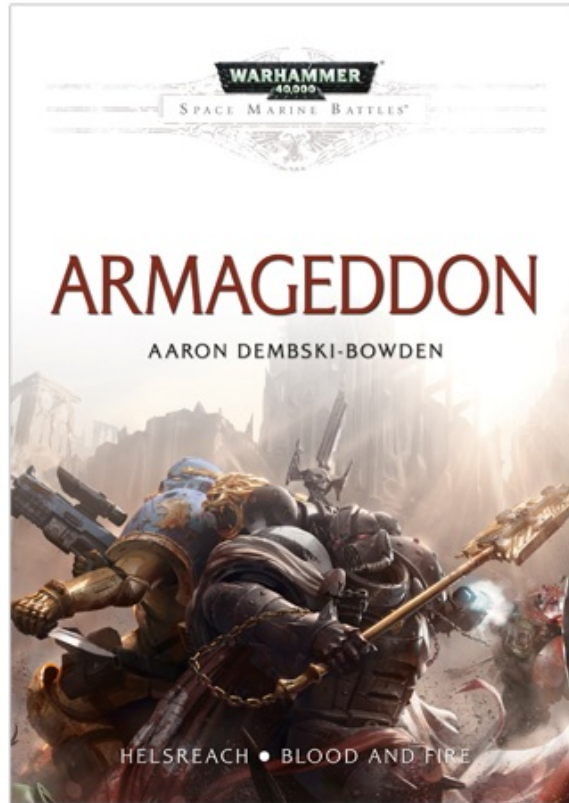
Helbrecht's face was impassive. 'When we are whole again, we will hunt it down.' He put his closed fist to his chest. The augmetic caught the starlight, glinting.

'And we will kill it.'

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ray Harrison is the author of the Warhammer 40,000 short stories 'Binding', 'The Third War', 'The Blooding' and 'Dishonoured'. She lives and works in Nottingham, UK.

[Grimaldus and the Black Templars lead the defence of Helsreach hive on the war-torn planet of Armageddon.](#)



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