

WARHAMMER
40,000



CARCHARODONS
THE REAPING TIME

ROBBIE MACNIVEN

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THE REAPING TIME

Robbie MacNiven

+ Sub-file 8762-443 +

+ Jurisdiction: Ethika Subsector +

+ Timestamp: 3551670.M41 +

+ Subject header: Tithe Non-Payment Response Protocol 33/8 +

+ Clerk Attendant: 4872-Amilia +

For the attention of the Adeptus Administratum, Sub-Division Theta 16, Ethika Subsector. Contact has been lost with Tithe-Ship 531, designate *Praetorian*. Last known astropathic message relay confirmed successful warp jump into the Zartak System [file ref. 228-16a]. Contact is now two weeks overdue, Terran Standard. Recommending dispatch of Imperial Navy Mars-class Cruiser *Andromidax* [see attachment DX1-9] to investigate.

+ Sub-file 8762-443 record-logged for review +

+ Added to review queue +

+ Estimated processing time: 6 years, Terran Standard +

+ Thought of the Day: The faithful suffer in silence +

The guildmasters were terrified. Their postures were stiff, their eyes darting, sweat slicking their pale, wrinkled flesh. One old man, stooped beneath the weight of his own sagging fat, was twitching uncontrollably. The motion juddered grotesquely through his heavy jowls, growing more pronounced the more he tried to hide it. Another balding, rheumy-eyed figure's skeletal hands were clenching and unclenching on the grip of his silver pick-cane. A third was

clutching her ermine ruff so hard her scrawny, velvet-draped limbs were shaking.

The entire assembly, packed onto the walkway of an observation gantry, cringed at the presence of the giants towering over them.

They were monsters, primordial terrors clad from head to foot in battleplate the colour of ash. They reeked of weapons unguents and a cloying, alien scent that turned the humans' stomachs. None had moved since stepping onto the gantry. Their motionless state spoke of a razor-edged, predatory patience.

Eventually, one of the ashen giants spoke.

'These are all of them? All the young?'

None of the guildmasters answered. For a moment, nothing happened. There was a click. Then, abruptly, one of the giants lunged.

For something so large, it moved with terrifying speed. Its bone staff shattered the skull of the fat, twitching guilder. Those around recoiled from the splattering of brains and blood. Without hesitation, the other giants lashed out.

The screaming started. It didn't last long.

The figure at the heart of the coral chamber woke with a start. He bit back a cry, fists clenched and shaking around his force staff.

It had been no dream. His kind were incapable of something so human, so innocent. No, this was the third time he had seen the exact same scene – the exact same slaughter – play out since the ship had broken in-system. It was a warning. It could be nothing else.

The figure shifted his cross-legged stance fractionally, the incisor-charms hanging from the leather bands around his wrists rattling. Without his etched blue battleplate and psychic hood, the true horror of his ancient form was revealed. The simple black shift did little to hide the ivory whiteness of his flesh, or the ugly grey denticle-scabs that blotched his elbow joints and neck. It was an affliction, the result of his unique and degraded genetic inheritance. Even more startling were the figure's eyes. They were utterly black, without iris or sclera, as pitiless and unfathomable as the void that was his home.

The figure drew in a long, slow breath. Should he inform Company Master Akia? Not doing so would be a dereliction of duty. But telling him ran complex risks. They could not afford the dangers of a self-fulfilling prophecy. Nothing could be allowed to interfere with the Tithe.

After a while the vox bead in his ear clicked. The figure known to his brethren as Te Kahurangi – the Pale Nomad – listened for a moment, then uncrossed his

legs and stood.

The time for contemplation was over. The reaping time had arrived.

The sub-guild quota hall was in an uproar. Every guildmaster and guildmistress present was speaking at once. It took Thornvyl slamming his augmetic left fist – the result of a mining accident almost a century before – against the flank of the hall’s lexmechanic podium to bring some semblance of order.

‘Panic achieves nothing,’ he snapped. ‘There may be another explanation.’

‘Another explanation for an Adeptus Astartes ship arriving unannounced in our system?’ Elinara of the Freehold Prospector Guild demanded. ‘A more probable explanation than the Imperium finally coming to investigate the disappearance of the *Praetorian*?’

The arched vault of the quota hall descended once more into wild chatter. The guildmasters, leaders of the mining colony of Zartak, had come together for an emergency session after the augur masts had detected an unidentified vessel breaking in-system. When the logisticators had identified it as a Space Marine warship, the meeting had descended into chaos.

‘They are the Emperor’s servants,’ Thornvyl, Guildmaster of Chronotech Inc., snapped. ‘As are we. And we shall greet them as such.’

‘Are you insane?’ demanded Maron of Broken Hill Industrials.

‘Unless you wish to call out the Guard, the local defence force and the mine-militia?’ Thornvyl responded. ‘Tell me, which course of action sounds more insane?’

The other guildmasters quietened, realising the truth of Thornvyl’s words. He pressed on.

‘There has been a misunderstanding. We will resolve it, quickly and quietly. Trust me, Guild Brethren, these god-warriors will be gone by tomorrow.’

It was raining hard when the Space Marines arrived. The downpour made the surrounding jungle canopy hiss, and seethed off the rockcrete surface of sink shaft 1’s primary landing plate, sited just beyond the edge of the great burrow-mine habitat.

A behemoth descended from the near-black skies, water cascading from its broad flanks, the white oceanic predator emblazoned on its grey hull glistening. The assembled guildmasters huddled closer together as the mighty gunship screamed overhead, shivering in their drenched finery. The flier’s afterburning turbofans whipped at the embroidered hems of their robes and sent one matriarch’s shawl twisting away through the rain. The engine’s painful howl

finally dropped to an idling snarl as the transport settled itself atop the plate. The dark muzzles of its many weapons systems gleamed in the rain.

For a moment, nothing stirred. The guilders looked on, fretting. Eventually there was a thump, loud enough to make them jump. The gunship's prow hatch began to lower, venting gouts of hydraulic steam. Through it, their armoured footfalls ringing rhythmically off the plasteel plates, came seven primeval giants.

Each one towered head and shoulders above the tallest guilder, and all were clad in grey battleplate of different shades. Their eye lenses were black, glittering in the harsh light of the landing zone's jury-rigged lumen strips. Around their wrists and gorgets were bands hung with vicious fangs, claws and incisors, while many parts of their armour were inscribed with flowing line-markings that formed stylised maws or darting fins. They carried weapons in their gauntlets, mighty boltguns and chainaxes, their rotors thankfully inactive.

The seven stepped out onto the landing plate two abreast, forming a line in front of the guildmasters. With a crash of ceramite they came to a halt, the rain pattering from their armour.

For a moment they remained still and silent. Then one, his armour a whiter shade and embossed with numerous brass molecular bonding studs, took one step forward. The guilders cringed.

'Who rules this world in the Void Father's name?' the white-plated giant demanded, his voice crackling up through the arched grille of his helm's vocaliser as though from some great depth. The words were delivered in High Gothic, stilted and unnaturally formal. The guilders didn't respond. The giant said nothing more. Eventually, unable to stand it any more, Fargo Tork of BorerCorp Mining summoned up the few words of High Gothic he recalled from his scholam days.

'We rule as a collective council, sire. We have no one leader, bar Him on Earth.'

For a moment the giant did not respond. The guilders detected a series of low clicking noises. Some recognised it as the sound of an internal vox conversation, held in private over the Space Marines' helmet comms. Eventually, the giant spoke again.

'Well met. I am Master Akia, of the Third Battle Company. We are the Carcharodons Astra, and we have come for you.'

The viewscreen monitor flickered and died. The sub-guild quota hall descended once more into furious recriminations, until Thornvyl snapped for quiet. After a moment's pregnant silence the viewscreen blinked back into being again, the

grainy image of Vasil Krane's body double reappearing.

'Repeat yourself,' Thornvyl ordered. 'We lost you.'

'They are demanding to see our records,' the Krane double said, pausing to glance back over his shoulder. He was muttering into a handheld vidcam, squeezed into the entrance tunnel of one of the tiny ratholes that wormed its way through the mineworks of Lower Six-Sixteen.

'Records?'

'Imperial data. Reports on psyker levels, Guard recruitment rates, xenos and heretic activity.'

'And tithes?'

'Yes, tithes. Their leader, Akia, claims to be here specifically for the tithe.'

'It's as we feared,' Ghorst of New Western Mining hissed. 'They know about the *Praetorian*!'

'Silence,' Thornvyl barked before the room descended once more into mayhem. He turned back to the viewscreen.

'Where are they now?'

'Waiting in upper ore hall west,' Krane's double said, again glancing back, as though he expected to see one of the giants loom suddenly from the half-darkness behind him. 'Their latest request was to inspect the most junior Guard battalions.'

'The most junior?'

'The cadets, the new foundlings of the 10th Regiment.'

'Why is that their first priority—' began Elinara. Thornvyl cut her off.

'It doesn't matter why. It presents us with an opportunity.'

'They're here for the tithe, you heard it yourself,' Tork said, jowls wobbling as he sought to contain his terror. 'When they discover what happened they'll kill us all!'

'They won't,' Thornvyl said firmly. 'Not if we keep our heads. Their ship is still in orbit, yes?'

'So the augur beacon says,' Maron said. 'Holding anchor directly above sink shaft 1. Its ident-tag and keel scans are still coming up blank, but it's definitely of ancient design.'

'Their main strength will still be onboard,' Thornvyl said. 'But their leaders are down here, with us. That presents an opportunity.'

'I do hope you have a plan, Thornvyl,' Elinara said, her eyes narrowing. 'Remember that not all of us supported the last one you had. This is where it has led us. We won't all be held accountable should you fail.'

The rest of the guilders muttered their agreement.

‘But you’ll expect to reap the rewards once it’s successful,’ Thornvyl said, smiling despite the steel in his voice. ‘Trust me one more time, Guild Brethren. Tell the holding blocks to prepare to enact Order 19. And pass word for Inspector DeValin. I want the 10th paraded in full combat kit in drill cavern 11 within the hour.’

‘We should just slaughter them,’ Akia said over the inter-squad vox. Te Kahurangi didn’t deign to reply. The Company Master was speaking in jest, venting his frustration. The Pale Nomad couldn’t begrudge him that.

According to the chrono digits ticking over in the corner of the Chief Librarian’s visor display, First Squad had been standing at parade rest, waiting in what appeared to be called the drill-head chamber for upper ore hall west, for almost forty minutes. Akia had delivered the company’s demands to the gaggle of flunkies who claimed dominion over Zartak, and they’d been ushered into a quota collection analysis chamber, the cogitators and tithing boards currently abandoned. The flunkies had then fled. A wide-eyed attendant had offered them some sort of fungus-like local refreshment, the tray clattering in his shaking hands. The Carcharodons hadn’t so much as moved, and the human had left with haste. Since then they’d seen no one.

‘They dishonour us,’ said the Company Champion, Toa.

‘The concept of individual honour is a dead thing,’ Te Kahurangi replied, quoting from *Beyond the Veil of Stars*. ‘It is a lie invented by arrogant men to excuse their own foolhardiness.’

‘They dishonour the Chapter,’ Toa corrected. ‘And through it, *Rangu*.’

‘You think the Void Father cares if we wait an hour or two?’ Strike Veteran Dorthor rumbled. ‘We must follow protocol. The Edicts of Exile were not issued by the Forgotten One in vain.’

Throughout the exchange, Te Kahurangi could sense Akia brooding. The Company Master had lately reached his full maturity as leader of the Third through the august title of Reaper Prime, but with experience had come a bloodthirsty edge that left the Chief Librarian in no doubt as to his particular genetic heritage. The suggestion that they simply slaughter the Zartakian mine-leaders had not been spoken entirely in jest.

‘Movement,’ Signifier Karra said, a moment before Te Kahurangi’s auto-senses detected approaching footsteps. A moment later the same terrified attendant reappeared, this time without his tray of fungus. Te Kahurangi suspected he was

one of the few Zartakians fluent in High Gothic. The little man bowed hastily.

‘Lords, the cadets of the 10th Regiment of the Zartakian Astra Militarum have been assembled, as per your request. The guildmasters await you on the primary observation point of drill cavern 11.’

‘They do not understand, do they?’ Akia asked privately over the vox.

‘Perhaps it is best that they do not,’ Te Kahurangi replied. He switched to his external vocaliser, speaking in Low Gothic.

‘Lead on.’

The attendant took the Carcharodons along a series of long, low earthen tunnels, propped up with plasteel beams. He was forced to scurry at an unnatural pace in an effort to match the stride of the towering transhumans. They took a grav-lift deeper into the mine workings, the mechanism rattling as it descended into Zartak’s depths. Dorthor spoke to First Squad as the lift slowed to a halt, its mesh doorway juddering open.

‘We’ve lost contact with *White Maw*.’

Te Kahurangi realised the brutally scarred Strike Veteran was right – the sigil representing the strike cruiser’s vox uplink was gone. Even the powerful communications of the ancient capital ship could not reach the company’s Command Squad now.

They stepped from the grav-lift and out into another tunnel. This one was more sturdily constructed, its flanks plated with hazard-striped flakboard, the lumen strips wired overhead bright and unblinking. At its end the attendant scraped into a low bow and, wordlessly, ushered the Carcharodons through the auto-doors.

Te Kahurangi was the last to duck through. He found himself on an observation deck, a mesh gantry built into the flank of a great, dark cavern whose walls bore the bit-mark scars of megaborer drilling. A sheet of plexglas separated the gantry from the rest of the artificially carved chamber. Most of the space was occupied by the same terrified guildmasters that had greeted them on the landing plate. Beyond, in the cavern below, were hundreds of ranked figures. They were clad in flakplate and black fatigues, and carried Munitorum-stamped lascarbines, but even a glance told the Chief Librarian that the pallid, thin-faced figures were mere youths. They were the boys who would become men in the ranks of the Astra Militarum. There were not, however, enough of them, their ranks were shoddy, and their uniforms ill-fitting. They reeked of fear.

His attention was only on the badly paraded cadets for a split second. His focus turned almost immediately back to the guilders standing between the Carcharodons and the plexglas. He had seen this before. He had seen it all, in

every last, exacting detail.

‘These are all of them?’ Akia asked. ‘All the young?’

For a second, there was only silence. Te Kahurangi knew exactly what came next.

‘It’s a trap,’ he said over the internal vox. ‘Kill them.’

He lunged with his force staff, crushing the skull of the nearest guilder. As the fat man crumpled, Akia and the rest of First Squad responded without hesitation. The helpless humans wailed as the Carcharodons slaughtered them.

Te Kahurangi kicked another guilder out of his way and slammed himself into the plexglas separating the gantry from the cavern below. The sheet gave way with a crash, and the Pale Nomad found himself in freefall. Armour streaked red, the rest of the Carcharodons followed him out, beating aside the guilders blocking their path. They were still falling when the mining charges taped to the underside of the gantry detonated.

The shockwave flung Te Kahurangi across the chamber. His servos absorbed the impact, but the landing still kicked up a hail of grit and left the bare rock floor scarred. He found his feet swiftly, auto-senses piercing the haze left by the blast, his genhanced body unfazed by the sudden and violent dislocation.

He’d landed less than two dozen paces from the front ranks of the Guard cadets, who themselves had been pitched from their feet by the blast. His void brothers were around him, rising. The markers representing each member of the Command Squad still blinked green and unharmed on the visor display.

The cadets opened fire. The first las-bolt – well-aimed or fortunate – struck Te Kahurangi’s helm, cracking off and snapping his head to one side. Another shot scored off his right pauldron, while a third and fourth slashed past to his left and right, their snap-crack reports joining the echo of the mining charge blast still bouncing back from the cavern’s scarred ceiling. He snarled. More shots darted wide. Some of the so-called cadets simply scattered.

Toa raised his bolt pistol, steadied against the rim of the Coral Shield.

‘Hold, brother,’ Te Kahurangi snapped, a sliver of his psychic potency stilling Toa’s finger on the trigger. ‘Remember why we are here.’ Toa grunted unhappily and lowered the weapon as more bolts cracked off the Carcharodons.

‘Whatever the damned reason is, we can’t stay,’ Strike Veteran Dorthor growled. The weight of fire was intensifying as more cadets recovered their weapons and took snap-shots through the dust. Whether it was deliberate treachery, or just a panicked reaction to the blast, Te Kahurangi didn’t know. But Dorthor was right.

‘The grav-lift,’ Akia said, motioning to the mesh doors that stood below the sagging remains of the gantry behind them.

‘Whoever has done this may well be able to override the controls,’ Te Kahurangi said.

‘We’ll take it anyway,’ Akia responded. ‘Unless you wish me to butcher every boy in this chamber on my way to the stairs on the other side.’

Another las-bolt hit Te Kahurangi, earthing against his breastplate and leaving the blue ceramite scarred. There was no more time for dispute. With Akia at his side, he led First Squad towards the waiting lift, punching the doors open. Las-bolts pursued them, snapping at their heels or sizzling overhead.

‘Take us to the surface,’ Akia ordered as they forced their way into the lift plate. ‘We must re-establish contact with *White Maw*. Then we’ll discover the extent of this treachery.’

‘Company Master, I cannot,’ complained Signifier Karra as he tried to enter commands into the lift’s rune panel. ‘The mechanism isn’t responding.’

Before Akia could reply, the lift lurched beneath them. Akia and Te Kahurangi’s helmet lenses met.

‘Mag-locks,’ Te Kahurangi voxed. A split second after the thudding sounds of mag-boots engaging, the floor fell away.

Te Kahurangi had been right – whoever had wired the gantry for destruction also possessed the master key for the grav-lifts. The one they stood upon had been sent into plummeting freefall, plunging at an ever-increasing speed towards what could only be total annihilation at the bottom of the shaft.

The Pale Nomad reached out with his mind as they fell, bending the lift’s mechanisms to his will. He slammed vices of psychic force around the rotors and grav-shafts, triggering the disabled emergency breaks. Feet locked to the lift’s floor, he slammed his force staff down, its rune-carved, psy-reactive bone channelling his powers and making the green shard at its tip glow.

Almost imperceptibly, they began to slow. The tortured shriek of the lift mechanism eased. The plummeting sense of dislocation passed. Te Kahurangi said nothing, his stance firm and braced, the servos in his armour locked and his sharp teeth clenched as he focused every ounce of mental strength into arresting the plunging descent. Blue witchlights snapped and crackled around the carved ceramite of his psychic hood, and burned behind his helm’s black lenses.

Finally, the grav-lift clattered to a complete stop. Te Kahurangi managed to utter a single word.

‘Out.’

With a series of thuds the Carcharodons unlocked their mag-boots. Akia tore back the mesh door, revealing a red-lit corridor beyond. The entrance was misaligned with the door to the lift, so that the Space Marines had to duck down into the tunnel, scraping their power-armoured bodies through the gap.

Te Kahurangi was the last to go. After a moment more of shuddering concentration he threw himself at the gap, rolling through. The instant his psychic will was gone the lift fell again, like a drop pod plunging through a planet's atmosphere. Its descent was lit by a hail of sparks and heralded by the shriek of burning brakes, until both were lost in the utter darkness of the shaft's depths. Eventually, a distant crash boomed up from the deeps.

'You have our thanks,' said Akia, offering Te Kahurangi his gauntlet. The Librarian took it, struggling to find his breath. Every enhanced muscle in his transhuman body ached, and his temples throbbed with pressure-pain. He could feel blood running from his nose, swiftly clotting.

He took a moment to gather himself, assessing their location. The tunnel they were in was more of a natural fissure, the only evidence of human engineering a narrow metal walkway that ran above the slow-moving lava flow constituting the tunnel's floor. It was largely scabbed over with a dark, cooling crust, but the Carcharodons' auto-senses still read the temperature in the corridor of blackened rock as infernally hot.

'We have no schematic traces,' Akia said. 'No idea where we are. And no connection to *White Maw*.'

'If we do not make contact soon, Strike Leader Oruka will enact protocol and begin an assault on our last known location,' Te Kahurangi said.

'Which is an expenditure of resources I would rather avoid,' Akia replied. 'Our objective is to re-establish contact and end this foolishness with all expediency.'

Te Kahurangi knew that 'expediency' likely involved Akia's two-handed chainaxe, Reaper, and the leaders of the treacherous Zartakians. He gestured up the bending tunnel.

'At least our course is clear enough. There is no other way.'

'That much is true,' Akia said. 'Brother Dorthor, take point.'

The Space Marines advanced along the walkway, feet clanging sonorously against the metal. Unprotected humans would not have been able to survive the tunnel's infernal heat, but the scavenged, mismatching power armour worn by the Carcharodons was capable of withstanding far more inimical conditions. Provided the walkway held, Zartak's depths were no danger to them.

'How did you sense what would happen in the cavern?' Akia asked Te

Kahurangi. 'Was it a vision?'

'It was,' the Chief Librarian admitted.

'But you didn't deign to warn us beforehand? You knew we were walking into a trap, yet you said nothing?'

'The future is not a straight path, Company Master,' Te Kahurangi responded. 'It is a murky, bottomless depth. I could not be certain that by speaking of my vision, I would not guarantee that it came to pass.'

'Yet it did, all the same.'

'This time, yes. How a vision will play out is never certain.'

'Contact,' Dorthor interrupted. Te Kahurangi looked past the Strike Veteran to see that they'd turned a corner. Ahead was a heavy-looking door, and a man in a bulky grey thermoweave suit. As he caught sight of the Space Marines he went for the door's wheel lock, trying to slam it shut.

'Terminate,' Akia ordered. A second later the boom of Dorthor's bolter thundered through the tunnel. The man's head burst apart and he slumped against the half-open door.

The Carcharodons moved up to the end of the tunnel and passed through, bolters raised. Te Kahurangi let the tendrils of his consciousness reach out, seeking what lay ahead. He found thoughts, lonely and desperate, edged with fear.

They were in a holding block. The bare rock walls had been bolted with prison cages, the mesh wires electrified. Figures huddled on rocky ledges within, clad like their captors in heavy thermoweave. There were dozens of cages ranking down the long, dark chamber. Their occupants stared at the Space Marines as they entered.

There were guards too. They went for their heat-wrapped autoguns. One tripped an alarm, its wail filling the subterranean space. The Carcharodons put them down quickly, a rapid staccato of bolter shells bursting the gaolers apart, their remains steaming in the hot air.

'There is a stairwell at the far end of the chamber,' Dorthor voxed as his auto-senses probed the half-dark.

'Make for it,' Akia ordered.

'Wait,' shouted a voice over the wail of the alarms. One of the prisoners had risen, a stooped, elderly figure. Wordlessly, the Carcharodons turned towards her.

'We're not common criminals,' she said, words muffled by her thermoweave suit. 'We're loyal to the God-Emperor and the true Guild Houses. We can help

you.'

'What does she want?' Akia demanded of Te Kahurangi over the vox, anger colouring his voice. 'She wishes to be freed?'

'These prisoners are not just criminals,' Te Kahurangi said. 'I have touched upon their thoughts. They are victims of the rebellion here. Loyalists.'

'Then they will be released once we have purged the traitors responsible for this,' Akia responded.

'They likely possess local knowledge. Our chances of reaching the rebellion's leaders would be improved with their guidance.'

'They will slow us down. We do not have time to shepherd them all.'

'Not all,' Te Kahurangi said. He slammed his staff into the rune lock of the elderly prisoner's cell. The electricity shorted and died, and he tore the door mesh aside with one fist. The woman and the cell's other occupant, a boy, cowered back, eyes wide behind the grimy vision strips of their thermos.

'Who do you serve?' Te Kahurangi demanded in Low Gothic. The woman responded first.

'Groundworks Corporation Guild, and the God-Emperor.'

'What are your names?'

'I am Eustice Maudlin, former guildmistress,' the woman said, putting a hand on the boy's shoulder. 'And this is my grandson, Caderik.' The boy stared up at Te Kahurangi.

'Do you know the route to the surface from here?'

'I do,' the boy, Caderik, said before Maudlin could reply.

'What about the location of the ringleaders of this rebellion?'

'The sub-guild quota hall,' Caderik said. 'That is where all their announcements are routed from.'

'Show us,' Te Kahurangi replied, taking the boy by the scruff of his suit and dragging him from the cell.

'Not without grandma,' the boy shrieked, reaching back. After a moment, Te Kahurangi relented.

'We will not slow for you,' he told Maudlin as the matriarch stepped out on uncertain legs.

'You're going to kill those treacherous bastards?' she demanded.

'We are.'

'Then I'll be right beside you,' she said. Te Kahurangi fancied she was smiling behind her suit's respirator. He ushered them out.

'Caderik,' Maudlin said. 'Lead on,'

‘What about all the others?’ the boy asked. The dozens of prisoners held in the adjacent cells had begun to shout and clamour, getting as close to their electrified bonds as they dared.

‘They’re loyal, like us,’ Maudlin said to Te Kahurangi. ‘Anyone who didn’t agree with Thornvyl and his plot was thrown in here.’

‘There’s no time—’ Te Kahurangi began. Before he could go on there was a series of cracking sounds, and the alarm suddenly shut off.

The silence lasted only a second. With a crash of collapsing bedrock, part of the chamber wall caved in. Lava burst through the fissure, a blazing, molten jet that hit the bare floor and quickly began to spread.

‘The escape failsafe,’ Maudlin said. ‘Someone’s triggered it.’

‘We go, now,’ Akia said over the squad vox. There was no more time for persuasion. Te Kahurangi threw the protesting guilder woman over one arm and snatched the boy in the other. The rest of the Command Squad were already making for the stairwell. The other prisoners began to wail and scream as they realised they were being abandoned. The Carcharodons paid them no heed.

The lava was spreading rapidly, more of the rock walls either side collapsing to admit a blazing rush of heat and magma. The screaming of the prisoners reached new heights as the lava reached them, and even the resistant thermosuits began to burst into flames.

Te Kahurangi saw none of it. He reached the stairs, and began to climb.

The sub-guild quota hall was once again in an uproar. Thornvyl drew his gilt-edged laspistol and raised it in the air. The ornate weapon wasn’t loaded, but the sight of it was finally enough to bring silence.

‘Your petty arguing is achieving nothing,’ he snarled at his fellow guilders. ‘We need to work together, now more than ever.’

‘Where has working with you got us?’ Xeron of Carbonwing Ventures snapped. ‘You assured us you had this entire situation under control!’ The other guilders shouted their agreement, until Thornvyl waved his sidearm again.

‘It is under control,’ he snapped, gesturing at the viewscreen banks. The split images showed vid feeds from across sink shaft 1. The assembled guilders had watched as the Space Marines had evaded the explosives set for them in drill cavern 11 and, through some sort of damned witchcraft, escaped the trap of the plummeting grav-lift. Now they had not only survived Thornvyl’s initiation of Order 19 – the directive to execute the loyalist prisoners seized when the rebel guilders had taken control – they had even absconded with two, the old

matriarch of Groundworks Corp and her grandson.

‘The Sub-Western mineworks,’ Ghorst said. ‘My assets. The tunnel workings there are incomplete. We’ll lose track of them.’

‘But they have to reappear somewhere within the main works of the sink shaft if they want to reach the surface,’ Thornvyl said.

‘Or if they want to reach us,’ Krane added darkly.

‘We should evacuate,’ said Maron shrilly.

‘No,’ Thornvyl replied. ‘If we flee we guarantee that they’ll make for the surface, and once they have re-established contact with their ship more will come. If they can be convinced to come to us directly, we’ll have them. And once they’re dead we can seal the mines. The rest in orbit will have to pay in blood for every tunnel and rathole they take. It would take them years.’

‘Have you seen what we’re dealing with?’ Maron demanded. ‘Have you seen *what* they are?’

‘Did you see what they did to my man?’ Tork added, still in shock after having witnessed one of the ashen giants smash the skull of his body double on the drill cavern’s viewing gantry.

‘Enough,’ Elinara said, rising. ‘You’ve led us from bad to worse these last six years, Thornvyl. We’ve trusted you for too long. I am going to secure my own assets, personally.’

The mistress of the Freehold Prospector Guild drew her ceremonial shawl about her shoulders and made for the quota hall’s doors. The click and hum of a charged power pack stopped her.

‘Nobody is leaving this room,’ Thornvyl said, raising his now-loaded laspistol. ‘Not until this situation is resolved.’

‘You can’t stop all of us,’ Elinara said defiantly.

‘No,’ Thornvyl said, smiling coldly. ‘But the drill walkers outside can.’

‘You’ve requisitioned my walkers?’ Maron demanded.

‘Only as a precaution. A last line of defence, should our unwelcome guests make it this far.’

‘You wouldn’t dare turn them against us,’ Ghorst said. Thornvyl’s smile didn’t waver.

‘I’m surprised you haven’t realised how far men will go for wealth and position. After all, that’s why we’re here, is it not? Now sit down, all of you, and relax. Everything will be fine.’

Caderik led the Carcharodons into the darkness. Te Kahurangi worked a sliver of

calm into the boy's mind, taking the edge off the terror he felt in the presence of the gigantic warriors. He spoke to the Pale Nomad, his words halting as he took them up narrow stair shafts and along increasingly low, tight work tunnels and loco-rail haulage lines.

Caderik and his family had been imprisoned for almost six years. That was when a faction of the guildmasters that ruled Zartak's disparate mining companies had first launched their coup. Apparently driven by the belief that the Imperium's adamantium tithes were extortionate, a ringleader named Thornvyl had ordered the destruction of an Administratum tribute ship, the *Praetorian*, in high orbit above Zartak. The rebel guilders had used their influence to gain complete control over the colony. The Imperium hadn't responded, until now.

Te Kahurangi let the boy talk. The Librarian needed him – his grandmother less so. The Space Marine didn't waste any of his psychic power in easing her own fear or mistrust. She wheezed along behind Te Kahurangi, seemingly forgotten.

Caderik spoke of how his parents had died in the holding block, years earlier. The boy claimed he barely remembered it, but when he described their passing Te Kahurangi sensed his anger spike. The Librarian stoked the emotion, using it to give fresh vigour to the flagging boy. They were rising steadily, the dimly lit mineworks they passed through seemingly abandoned.

Until the blast charges in the tunnel they were passing through detonated, pulverising Caderik and Maudlin and pounding the Carcharodons with tonnes of earth.

Te Kahurangi had a split second to respond to the sudden vision. He snatched Caderik and Maudlin and turned to his left, shielding them both. In the same moment the charges, concealed in a rathole on the far side of the right-hand tunnel wall, detonated. A concussive wave of dirt and rock slammed into the seven Carcharodons, hammering them into the opposite wall, smashing plate and spraining muscle. Only Te Kahurangi, his servos locked, withstood the blast.

He didn't have time to check whether Caderik and Maudlin had survived. He didn't have time to do anything but rise. From the wall of smoke and debris, men in respirators and bagged grey work overalls charged them.

The first of them shot Te Kahurangi at point-blank range. The las-bolt, set to its highest megathule range, seared deep into the Chief Librarian's breastplate, nicking at his black carapace. The second and third speared the cracked rock ceiling above, for the Librarian's force staff shot out to intercept his attacker, cracking the weapon from his hands. Before the man could respond an uppercut from the staff snapped his head back, tearing his respirator seal. He crumpled.

Around him his fellow ambushers waded in. Clad in their masks and mining overalls, they came at the Space Marines with manic desperation, eyes wide behind the filmy lenses of their respirators, wielding lascutters, lasguns and simple half-picks.

Any normal enemy would have been left maimed and dying by the blasting charges. But the Space Marines, though battered, were not even remotely stunned. The veterans of First Squad responded with immediate, brute force. The shrill war cries of the miners were drowned by a bestial, throbbing howl as half a dozen chainaxes roared to life, their volume a deafening counterpoint to the chill silence observed by the Carcharodons. Without a word Dorthor and Karra, Tama, Raggen and Toa set about their assailants with hard butcher's strokes.

Most brutal of all was Akia himself. The initial blast had split his helm, shattering one black lens and cracking the faceplate. Even as Te Kahurangi fought he could sense the Company Master's monstrous fury, the rage he was battling to keep in check. The Blindness was beckoning to him, that precipice poised above a black sea of hatred and needless slaughter-sacrifice.

Blood was in the air, and Akia had its scent.

The Company Master's great chainaxe, Reaper, roared through flesh and bone. Akia wielded it with short, furious strokes, confined by the narrowness of the tunnel. The constraints only seemed to drive him to greater butchery – his pale armour was soon dripping and red. Nothing faced him and lived.

Te Kahurangi marshalled his own strength, the thrust and lunge of his force staff breaking bones and shattering skulls. One attacker managed to strike him with the beam of his lascutter while the Librarian smashed down his comrade, the powerful tool searing through his right vambrace. Warning markers blinked across his visor as pain registered from the burn wound, swiftly suppressed. He lashed out with an invisible wave of psychic force, focusing the crushing weight of an entire ocean upon a single point of the man's forehead. The attacker's skull burst beneath the pressure and he crumpled.

It was over as abruptly as it had begun. Suddenly the damaged tunnel was empty. One by one the Carcharodons deactivated their chainaxes, thick strings of gore pattering slowly from their armour, their breathing raspy over the vox system.

Te Kahurangi flexed his fingers on the grip of his staff, feeling his secondary heart decelerating. Caderik and Maudlin still lived. His foresight and reflexes had saved them. Their thermoweave suits were ragged and torn, but a quick scan revealed that they were unharmed. Besides the shock. It grew worse when Akia

removed his cracked helmet.

‘Next time, warn us,’ the Company Master said to Te Kahurangi.

‘If time permits,’ the Chief Librarian allowed. He could see Caderik and Maudlin staring at Akia’s exposed head. The Carcharodon’s pale, grey features had been revealed, the exile tattoos that swirled about his throat and jaw giving way to eyes as black and bottomless as the lenses of his helm. His words revealed razor-sharp teeth in a hard, square jaw, their whiteness matching the shock of hair that ran in a strip from the Reaper Prime’s brow to the back of his head. Such a nightmare visage was the last thing most humans expected to see when they gazed upon the face of one of Rangu’s killer angels. Te Kahurangi suspected Akia hadn’t even realised the affect he was having on the two mortals. The Librarian pressed his mind into theirs, mentally quelling the terror and shock that had paralysed them.

‘Damage assessment,’ Akia demanded. Te Kahurangi checked his visor display. His backpack had taken a beating from the mining blast, and he had las wounds on his chest, right forearm and left thigh. Beyond that, however, he was unharmed. The rest of the squad were similarly battered but unbowed.

‘We carry on,’ Akia said. ‘Before they can marshal their strength. Darkness there and nothing more.’

The miners were not done with them. As Caderik took them back into sink shaft 1’s primary tunnels there were more ambushes. The journey through the works became a blur of blood and combat stimms. Overall-clad miners and turncoat Guard, local defence and guild militia came at them in waves of desperate fear, blades and pick tools glinting in the flickering tunnel lights, their screaming hoarse.

Only Te Kahurangi’s presence averted disaster. The psyker’s premonitions twice warded them away from cave-in traps. On other occasions the Carcharodons would use the opportunity to take different routes at the last minute, cutting all but their most vital servos and auto-senses. They melded with the shadows, black-eyed, statuesque revenants looming silently in the darkness of access-ways and ore chutes while their erstwhile hunters passed by.

Two levels below their objective, they encountered the first free Zartakians that weren’t trying to kill them. Caderik’s shrill warning stopped Toa, in the vanguard, a second before the void sword cut down one of the men who’d started from the shadows of a sub loco-rail haulage line.

‘We know him,’ Maudlin said as the man cringed back. He was wearing the

respirator, ochre smelt-suit and rudimentary black flakplate of a guilder mine-militiaman.

‘Master Caderik?’ he said and then, when he caught sight of Maudlin, offered a hasty bow. ‘Guildmistress! It does me well to see you after all these years.’

‘Guildmarshal Calent,’ Maudlin said. ‘I didn’t think you still lived.’

‘By the Emperor’s grace,’ the militiaman said. Te Kahurangi sensed more men further back down the haulage line. ‘We’ve been waiting for this day for six years. As soon as news reached us of fighting in the Sub-Western works we took up arms again. For Groundworks Corp.’

‘We do not have time to waste,’ Akia said. Calent cringed visibly as the huge, bloody warrior spoke.

‘These men will be of use to us,’ Maudlin said. ‘They are armed and loyal.’

‘We are sufficient,’ Akia replied.

‘We can follow in your wake,’ Calent said. ‘We won’t slow you.’

‘I hope for your sake that you do not,’ Akia said.

They went higher, the loyalist militia falling in behind the Adeptus Astartes. The tunnels seemed empty again, as though the rebels had withdrawn, even as the Space Marines pressed towards their command centre. The reason became apparent as they secured the loading bay ambulatory outside the quota hall described by Caderik.

Only a dozen rebels stood between them and the hall’s barred doors. These ones, however, were well equipped. Each one was piloting a mining drill walker, a heavy gauge engine that stood on two stubby, thick-set legs. Their torsos were covered with heavy sheets of plasteel plating, reinforced with adamantium rods, designed to withstand cave-ins while the machines continued to work. A shielded cluster of optic nodes and stab-lumens constituted their heads, set into their thick shoulder supports, while multiple mechanical limbs ended in diamond-hard drill borers and rocksaws.

The mechanised miners didn’t approach with military coordination, but each one at their own wary pace, mechanisms wheezing and clanking, like pugilists sizing up a fight. Akia triggered Reaper, its hungry roar followed by the chainaxes of his void brothers. This time, however, there was an answer. The heavy drill heads and rocksaw rotors filled the air with spinning metal.

‘Get back,’ Te Kahurangi said to the human loyalists.

‘There’s another way into the hall,’ Caderik shouted above the din. ‘The ratholes above lead straight into the maintenance vent shafts.’

‘They will be too small,’ Te Kahurangi replied.

‘Not for us.’

‘Then go,’ the Chief Librarian said. There was no more time for words. The walkers were lumbering into close combat. Shots from First Squad’s bolters cracked harmlessly from their reinforced frontal armour. Te Kahurangi began to draw and bind together strands of psychic energy, muttering focus litanies as he channelled power into his force staff. His Lyman’s ear blocked out the first sounds of chainblades striking steel as he crafted annihilation. His genhanced muscles clenched, and his keen senses were suddenly full of a greasy, pervasive stench. The throbbing in his temple built. His vision flickered. With a final, short word, he unleashed the beast.

The floor beneath two of the advancing walkers buckled. Stone deformed and shattered, pulled apart and reshaped by his will. The bedrock of Zartak churned upwards, forming great jaws of jagged stone that slammed shut around the twin walkers with a splitting crash.

Few engines besides the walkers could have withstood such an impact. Their thick armour meant nothing, however, when the earth beneath them had disappeared. The great jaw of debris fell away into the sink hole its rise had created, dragging the two machines down. Te Kahurangi released his psychic grip, skull throbbing.

Around him, his void brothers were not faring as well. The chainaxes made little impression on the thick plate of the drill walkers, scarring and chewing but failing to penetrate. And, though lumbering, the things were powerful. One snagged Karra’s arm in a vice-claw before swinging down its rocksaw. Sparks flew as the vicious blade sheared first through ceramite and plasteel and then pale, tattooed flesh. Even as his arm was lopped off, the Carcharodon Signifier made no sound, swinging his chainblade down to amputate the machine’s own saw-limb. Blood and fyceline splattered together onto the floor as the two combatants remained locked.

Toa did better. He plunged the void sword straight through the torso of one of the walkers, the obsidian-like relic blade parting the machine’s armour with ease. Its drill chewed against the Champion’s Coral Shield but found no purchase, not even scarring the rugged surface. As Toa slide his blade free the walker slumped, its green optic clusters fading.

Another walker was coming at Te Kahurangi, negotiating the rubble unearthed by the Librarian. He clutched at the strands of power dissipating from his rending maw and swung his staff in an arc, binding the eddying psychic energies into a bow wave. Even as the walker reached for him, its drills screeching, he

sent the invisible fury of the warp crashing into its torso. The frontal plate buckled as though hit by some great fist, and its forward movement juddered to a halt, the pilot within crushed.

Beside the Librarian, Dorthor went down wordlessly, a rocksaw scything deep into his thigh plate. Only the narrowness of the ambulatory corridor, stopping the walkers from surrounding them, was keeping the Carcharodons alive. Te Kahurangi moved to help Dorthor, force staff raised, but another of the lumbering mine engines slammed into him with a crack of unyielding plasteel, its sheer bulk forcing him to the ground. Before he could rise, the walker placed one splayed metal hoof on his breastplate, pinning him in place. His auto-senses chimed a warning as the pressure threatened to burst organs and crush his fused ribcage.

That was when Akia struck. The Company Master was lost to his death-frenzy, the Blindness exerting almost total mastery. Reaper howled like a primordial beast as it took the walker at full swing, striking its cranial block like a hammer meeting an anvil. Optics shattered. Metal buckled. Reaper tore on, powered as much by Akia's terrifying genhanced strength as its own revving motor. Armour plating sheared off, hundreds of shards of razor metal spinning away in all directions as the chainaxe's wicked teeth bit and bit.

Eventually, they locked. Finally, the blow lost momentum. Then Akia ripped the weapon free and struck again.

The walker went back, its grip on Te Kahurangi lost, bending before the Carcharodon's fury. Finally, its armour split. Finally, Reaper tasted flesh. The machine crumpled, blood pouring from its shattered metalwork. Akia's voice grated out a single order over the vox.

'Kill.'

Te Kahurangi found his feet. Just in time to meet the next machine.

The sounds of battle from beyond the quota-hall doors were making the guilders moan with fear. Thornvyl glared at them, unable to hide his own tension any more, hand on the butt of his laspistol.

A grating noise disturbed the sounds of bloodshed from outside. The guilders around Thornvyl jumped, searching for the source of the noise. Only when a vent covering clanged against the floor did any of them look up.

A figure followed the covering into the room. It rolled as Thornvyl raised his laspistol and fired, the shot punching into the floor beside it. Before he could correct his aim another assailant had followed the first, and then another. The

hall's buzzing lumen strips gleamed from the autogun barrels levelled at Thornvyl.

'Drop it,' ordered the mine-militiaman with the rifle. The ornate laspistol clattered to the floor.

'Keep up your aim,' the last figure to come down through the vent ordered. He was little more than a boy, but he was a boy Thornvyl recognised.

'I remember the day you came for my family,' Caderik said. Thornvyl said nothing. Caderik turned to the militia, and Guildmarshal Calent.

'Unbar those doors and bring them in.'

In the hall ambulatory, the drill walkers were winning. Although less than half still functioned, they had driven the Carcharodons back against the stone walls, leaving them savaged and bloody. The crack of Thornvyl's laspistol, seized by Caderik, made them pause, rotor weapons still spinning.

'It's over!' the boy shouted as the mine-militia hauled the captured guilders out at gunpoint. 'Stop resisting.'

The walkers turned awkwardly, optic clusters scanning the new arrivals. A guild soldier was keeping Thornvyl, head bowed in defeat, on his knees before Caderik. The boy waved his pistol.

'You may kill these god-warriors,' he said. 'But more will come. They will slaughter you. If you stop now, I promise to have you spared. All of you. Our colony has seen enough bloodshed.'

Still the walkers remained immobile. More loyalist guild soldiers appeared at the far end of the ambulatory, led by Maudlin, her face grim.

'This is your last chance,' Caderik said.

One by one, the walkers deactivated their drilling tools. One by one, the torso plating juddered open on damaged servos, and the sweat-streaked, half-naked pilots within clambered out, hair tousled, eyes blinking, expressions caught between exhaustion, fear and defiance.

The Carcharodons had stopped fighting the moment the walkers had ceased their own attacks. As soon as the last pilot left his machine, they formed a tight phalanx that strode towards Caderik and the guildmaster prisoners. They were a terrible sight – their armour had been beaten and rent by lasrifles and autoguns, bayonets, mining tools and blast charges, and then the brutal implements of the drill walkers. They were all wounded, several grievously – one had lost an arm, another had the white gleam of bone showing amidst the torn ruin of his thigh. All were covered almost head to foot in blood, their own and their enemy's. And

yet, since making planetfall, not one had fallen. Few had even uttered a sound.

‘This is the leader of the rebellion?’ the one with the horrific, bared head demanded, looming over Caderik and Thornvyl. The boy nodded, suddenly lost for words. Without hesitation or ceremony, the giant snatched Thornvyl and snapped his neck.

‘No,’ Maudlin cried out. ‘You can’t! We need due process. We need to display them publicly to the rest of the colony.’

‘You can still display them,’ the giant said, stepping over Thornvyl’s twitching corpse.

‘I-I said they could live,’ Caderik stammered, cringing back from the Space Marine.

‘I came to this world to reap, not to judge,’ the Carcharodon said. ‘And that is what I will do.’

The gore-streaked monster hefted his chainaxe. The executions did not take long.

The rebellion was over. The population of sink shaft 1 gathered on the walkways and gantries that lined the inside of their great burrow hole. Maudlin, flanked by Caderik, Calent and the guild guard, spoke to them from the minehead, the address spur jutting from the sink shaft’s pinnacle.

‘We have done the God-Emperor’s will here today,’ she said, her stern voice reverberating through the shaft via vox hailers, gargoyle-headed claxon maws and shift change announcers. ‘After six long years of treachery and misrule, the corrupt men and women who betrayed our colony have finally tasted justice.’

The crowd’s gaze turned to the horrific, dripping remains hanging from one of the heavy haulage cranes that jutted like industrial teeth from the sink shaft’s upper sides.

‘And what justice it is,’ Maudlin went on, voice hoarse. ‘Administered by our glorious Emperor’s holy angels.’

The crowd gasped as Akia, Te Kahurangi and the rest of First Squad emerged onto the spur behind Maudlin. They looked more like monsters than angels, the few parts of their armour that weren’t coated with drying viscera gleaming a scarred, pitted silver. Maudlin gestured once again to the silent giants towering behind her.

‘These are our protectors! Salvation sent to purge away our sins! We owe them our thanks, and our devotion. As part of our great debt, they will take the tithe that is now so long overdue.’

None of the Carcharodons moved, though a clicking sound betrayed their internal communications. Moments later, a rising shriek filled the sink shaft. Leaden shapes plummeted from the skies, heavy grey gunships that lowered into landing plates ringing the jungle surface around the great burrow. From the darkness of their open holds came more giant warriors, their ashen armour unblemished by battle. They began to move down into the mine habitat, corralling and manhandling the colonists along the walkways. Maudlin turned to Akia.

‘What is happening?’ she demanded over the rising noise filling the sink shaft. ‘You have come for our missing tithe? We are ready to pay it in full, and much more besides.’

‘We know nothing of this,’ Te Kahurangi said. ‘Your debts do not concern us. We have come to take a tithe of our own. The Red Tithe.’

‘I don’t understand,’ Maudlin said. ‘Guildmarshal—’

Guildmarshal Calent went for his pistol. He never laid a hand on it. A black blade cut his head from his shoulders.

As the sink shaft descended into screaming chaos, Te Kahurangi watched Caderik. The boy alone didn’t react as those around him were snatched and subdued by the silent giants. He didn’t react as his shrieking grandmother was picked up, as easily as a parent might lift a child, and taken towards the waiting fliers. He didn’t react as the skies filled with the fat-bellied shuttle sows that would take the population of Zartak to the *White Maw*’s slave bays. He watched it all with dull, dead eyes. Te Kahurangi touched upon his mind, and knew that the boy had already begun his first steps towards Initiation. If he survived he would bear an honour-name, a rarity among the Carcharodon Astra.

The Chief Librarian unclamped his helm and mag-locked it to his belt. Then he knelt before the boy so that their eyes met, Caderik’s light blue gaze a contrast to the bottomless void-black of the ancient Adeptus Astartes. The Librarian smiled, the razor-toothed expression without warmth or comfort. Caderik would need neither from now on.

‘Bail Sharr,’ the Carcharodon said, uttering the name-honorific for the first time. ‘Welcome to the Outer Dark.’

+ **Sub-file 6675-112** +

+ **Jurisdiction: Ethika Subsector** +

+ **Timestamp: 21151676.M41**+

+ Subject header: Imperial Navy Mars-Class Cruiser *Andromidax* In-System Report #3+

+ Clerk Attendant: 3772-Wilhelm +

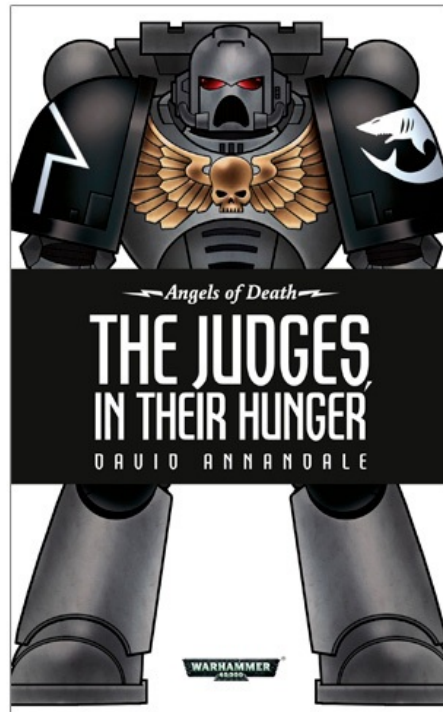
Naval Report Summary: Zartak mining colony [ref. 228-16b] has been entirely depopulated. There are no traces of life remaining whatsoever. Ordo representatives have been contacted. Pending Inquisitorial quarantine, Subsector Auto-Clerk 21811-Veissmann has recommended redesignation of Zartak as a penal colony. Calculations show this will ensure minimum disruption of the planet's adamantium tithe quota. The suggestion has been filed for consideration.

+ Thought of the Day: Oblivion awaits us all +

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Robbie MacNiven is a highland-born History graduate from the University of Edinburgh. His hobbies include reenacting, football and obsessing over Warhammer 40,000. He has written the Deathwatch short story 'Redblade', and the Warhammer 40,000 stories 'A Song for the Lost' and 'Blood and Iron' for Black Library.

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