

**WARHAMMER**  
40,000

SPACE MARINE BATTLES™

# CROSSED SWORDS

BEN COUNTER



A WORLD ENGINE STORY



# CROSSED SWORDS

BEN COUNTER



A WORLD ENGINE STORY

# CROSSED SWORDS

Ben Counter

‘I see fate plays knucklebones with me,’ said Brother Valhid, the crossed swords on his shoulder plate lit by the pale green light from his auspex scanner. ‘Now I have to fight my enemies alongside a Brae.’

Brother Fejulah looked at his fellow Astral Knight through the gloom of the necropolis. ‘And here I was expecting to see the necrons rushing at me out of the darkness,’ he replied. ‘Instead I see a scion of House ban Devolon. I do not know which I would prefer.’

‘Another warrior for our band,’ came a gruff voice from behind Valhid. ‘Soon we shall have an army. Your name?’

Sergeant El’Kura came into the feeble light. The lines of his face were as proud a mark of the veteran as the long service studs in his forehead. Alongside him were the other members of his makeshift squad – four more Astral Knights, in the livery of several different companies.

‘Fejulah, of the Fourth,’ came the reply. ‘I was separated in the crash.’

‘The Fourth have suffered the worst,’ said El’Kura. ‘You have lost many brothers. Down here, our priority is to rejoin other survivors and regroup. I welcome another gun.’

‘I must link up with my company command,’ said Fejulah.

‘The Fourth has no command,’ said El’Kura. ‘I am all there is.’

‘Then I welcome the chance to fight back,’ said Fejulah.

‘I can spare no more time for niceties,’ said the sergeant. ‘We are heading for a structure to our northwest. Before we were cut off from the vox-net we heard tell of a central tomb complex. Other Astral Knights will be using it as a rally point. But we must move now. The foe are hunting us.’

The squad moved off, bringing Fejulah with them. All around them, the depths of the necropolis loomed pitch black, the hints of enormous tombs and

monumental statues edged grey in the Space Marines' enhanced vision.

Brother Valhid cast a glance at Fejulah as the squad dropped into formation. There was nothing in either man's eyes that spoke of anything but hate.

On the crest of a shattered black stone ridge, where some ancient tectonic shift had crushed a hundred tombs into a spine of broken obsidian, the necrons struck.

The Astral Knights had by that time given a name to the enemy that waited for them on the artificial planetoid they called the World Engine. The necrons were constructs, thinking machines that ignorant human settlers had woken from their tombs on far-flung worlds of the Imperium. There was next to nothing known about them, with only a handful of encounters logged in the battle-histories to which the Astral Knights had access. The Chapter was learning as they fought, and they were costly lessons.

'Filth on their bones!' yelled Brother Saahiran, leaping onto a jutting shard of black stone, hefting the weight of his heavy bolter. 'Take the life from this Astral Knight when a thousand of you k'nib-botherers lie dead!'

He was the first to see them – grey ghosts surging down from above, half-real constructs that shifted between reality and the substance of ghosts. The rest of the squad had a second's notice before the heavy bolter blazed, the strobe of the gunfire lighting up the enormous stone faces that loomed down from the darkness overhead.

A necron wraith was caught in the burst and thrown against one of the statues. Each wraith had a humanoid torso, with hands ending in bright silver blades. Below the waist, long tails of segmented steel hung like lengths of metallic entrails. In those flashes of light the skeletal shape typical of the necrons was revealed: metallic organ-components visible between steel ribs and a head resembling a barely-sketched and stylised skull.

'Form up!' yelled Sergeant El'Kura. 'Back to back!'

Three wraiths dived. Saahiran fended off another with a burst of fire, forcing it to shift into its ghostly form before it plunged its blades through him. The other Astral Knights gathered around Saahiran as if he were a fortification to be defended. Another wraith slashed past them, blades out as bolter shells burst and cracked against it. El'Kura roared as a black line appeared along one forearm, blood welling up in the wound a moment later.

The wounded wraith slithered to the broken ground. Sparks flew from its ruptured carapace. Brother Fejulah leapt for it, sprinting across the ridge with his chainsword in hand.

The necron rose up as Fejulah reached striking distance. It lashed at him with a hand full of blades. Fejulah pivoted and ducked, a move well practised on the duelling fields of Obsidia. The blades whistled over his head and he thrust up his chainblade.

The sword's teeth ground into steel. He fought against the resistance, the necron's living metal holding as the wraith reached down for Fejulah who put up his free hand and grabbed the necron's wrist. The two wrestled for a moment, each seeking to plunge a fatal blow into the other.

Though it was wounded, the steel of the necron's construction gave it the strength to match the Astral Knight. Fejulah tried to twist it around but the necron's other hand reached across his throat, closing to scissor through ceramite and flesh.

A second armoured shape crashed into the wraith. Fejulah recognised the livery of the Eighth Company and the flashes of assault honours on the newcomer's shoulder pad. The wraith was thrown back against the statue, more sparks spurting from its wounds. Fejulah drew back his chainsword and thrust again, but this time the wraith shifted into its ghostly form and vanished back through the stone. The chainblade ripped a spray of obsidian shards from the statue.

Fejulah only knew the name of the Astral Knight who had saved him: Brother Moxas of the Eighth Company, an assault specialist. There had been no time for proper introductions.

'Move!' barked Moxas, grabbing Fejulah's shoulder guard to drag him back to the squad.

Two more wraiths shimmered into view overhead. Blades swept by, phasing in and out of existence to come back into reality halfway through their quarry. Fejulah lashed at them with his chainblade and was rewarded with a jolt of steel against steel. The other Astral Knights kept up their fire, bolter fire stuttering and crumping through the shadows. One wraith was battered back, a stream of shots bursting against it, as another looped up high and arrowed down at Fejulah and Moxas.

Moxas hammered off a volley from his bolt pistol at the wraith diving towards him. Fire burst against its steel skull, blasting chunks of metal off its stylised face. But it did not slow down as it spread its claws.

The wraith crashed into Moxas. It phased out of reality as it hit, and its forelimbs passed right through the Astral Knight's torso. Then it became real again and it tore its blades free of Moxas, shredded his chest and wrenching his

ribcage wide open. For an awful moment, Moxas's internal organs were exposed, dark crimson and glistening in the stuttering light of the gunfire. Then gore welled up and Moxas flopped to the floor, the light gone from his eyes, dead before he hit the broken stone.

More bolter fire thudded into the wraith. One blood-slicked arm was blown off. Components spilled and pinged against the stone. Fejulah hacked at the creature and his chainblade bit deep through the necron's broken carapace. Hot sparks spattered over Fejulah's armour. The wraith's systems shorted and it jerked as it died, servos popping as Fejulah sawed through its armoured spine.

Fejulah made it back to the knot of Astral Knights as Saahiran blasted the wraith into torn components with a burst of heavy bolter fire. The last wraith slipped away into the darkness pursued by gunfire, shifting through a wall of black stone.

'I told you to form up,' said Sergeant El'Kura, casting a sideways glance at Fejulah.

The echoes died down. Brother Rach'tul, wearing the flashes of an Apothecarion aspirant on his armour, bent over the shredded remains of Brother Moxas to remove the gene-seed organ from his throat. Then, in silence, the makeshift fireteam moved on, off the exposed ridge and further into the guts of the necropolis.

There were no further words. None were needed.

'I know what you are,' said Brother Phaetax as he and Valhid crouched in the shelter of a fallen statue. The statue was of a necron, but not the steel-bodied constructs the Astral Knights had fought on the World Engine thus far. This one was rendered as if a creature of flesh, its elongated face and hunched shape an ancestor of the constructs' forms. Perhaps this was what the necrons once were. Perhaps it was what they wanted to be. In front of the two Astral Knights was the next stage of the fireteam's journey, a dangerously open crossroads between roads lined with lesser noble tombs.

'And what does that mean?' asked Valhid.

'You're a ban Devolon,' said Phaetax. Brother Phaetax wore the marks of a veteran on his armour. He had fought hundreds of battles to earn them, and in the Astral Knights an officer like El'Kura would use the counsel of such veterans all the time. There was very little he had not seen.

'I am ban Devolon Valhid Sulufan,' said Valhid. 'I am proud. I have no reason to hide it.'

‘El’Kura might have picked up on it,’ said Phaetax. ‘He might not have. But I know.’

‘Know what?’

‘The history between House ban Devolon and House Brae. That lad Fejulah is a Brae. I saw the way you looked at him when you realised. You can’t hide something like that from eyes as old as mine.’

‘Then you know why we despise them,’ said Valhid. ‘The Brae are glory-hunters and braggarts. They sent the men of ban Devolon into battle at Daggerback Pass, to win the plaudits for themselves while we were butchered. Fejulah broke formation and Moxas died. He is no different to any others of his house. He will see us all die to cover himself in glory.’

‘But you are an Astral Knight before your house,’ said Phaetax. ‘We leave our families behind when we enter the Chapter.’

‘I thought you were a veteran,’ said Valhid. ‘You know better than anyone that that is not true. No matter how far we are from Obsidia, we never turn our backs on our family. Especially not when there is a Brae ready to march us all to our deaths.’

‘No wonder Lord Amhrad keeps the Brae and the ban Devolons separate,’ said Phaetax. ‘But we have no such luxuries down here.’

Any reply Valhid was about to make was cut off by the movement down below. The pair had been sent by El’Kura to scout the path ahead and watch for necrons waiting for them at the crossroads. A handful of necrons emerged from between the tombs, but they were broken, corroded models, the shambling refuse of whatever society the necrons had.

‘There are contacts,’ said Phaetax into the squad vox. The vox-net functioned only at very close ranges, and even with the rest of the team a hundred metres away it was still awash with static. ‘But not significant.’

‘Moving in,’ replied El’Kura. ‘Cover us.’

The rest of the Astral Knights moved into view, running across the open ground. A burst of bolter fire took down half the constructs in seconds, with the rest despatched shortly afterwards with chainblades and combat knives. Brother Saahiran mashed one against the wall of a tomb with the weight of his heavy bolter.

The crossroads cleared, Phaetax and Valhid scrambled down the slope of collapsed tombs to join them. Up close the constructs were pitted with corrosion, patches of rust and blistering like the pockmarks of a disfiguring disease.

Valhid kicked one onto its front and crunched a boot through its skull. There

was no point spending a bolter shell to finish it.

Too late, he saw the metallic spur emerging from the ruin of its face, articulating like a slender steel finger as it slid from the flaking metallic substance the necron had instead of a brain. The steel glowed suddenly blue-hot and punched through Valhid's greave, just above the ankle. He felt a tiny fleck of pain there as it slipped through skin, muscle and into bone.

Valhid gasped as a pressure clawed at the back of his brain. It felt like an invisible hand was squeezing everything inside his skull. The edge of his vision greyed out and another sight was ghosted over the wrecked necron beneath him.

It was another necron, but not the misbegotten creatures the Astral Knights had destroyed. It was tall and regal, not hunched like the others. Its carapace and ribcage were encased in bronze, and patterns of silver and turquoise decorated the crescents of its shoulder guards. A fat emerald shone in the centre of its sternum.

The only feature was a single eye, a silver orb set in the smooth iron of its skull. It turned its face towards Valhid, the eye, engraved with the pattern of a labyrinth, swivelling towards him. Valhid was absolutely certain, even with the lack of expression on the necron's face, that it was looking at him.

In one hand the necron carried a tall segmented staff, topped with sickle-shaped blades. In the other was a cube of black crystal that shifted and opened. A sickly purple light bled out. Valhid's attention was drawn to the labyrinth of the spectral necron's eye as he followed its pathways, focusing tighter and tighter as he followed the path through an infinity of blind turns and dead ends.

Valhid tore his attention away. Whatever link existed between him and the necron was broken and he shook the vision out of his head. He was back at the necropolis crossroads, with the Astral Knights finishing off the last of the shattered constructs.

'Brother?' asked Phaetax. The veteran was looking straight at Valhid. 'I said they looked diseased. Do you think the necrons can suffer disease?'

'I... I do not know,' said Valhid. His mind was still full of the afterimage of the necron and, though he knew nothing of the xenos society, he was certain it was an aristocrat among their kind. A leader – something very dangerous indeed. 'But if they do, we should not tarry.'

'Valhid speaks the truth,' said El'Kura as he approached. 'We must move on. The wraiths are still on our tail. Fejulah and Rach'tul, take the lead.'

The Astral Knights left the crossroads behind. Valhid gave the diseased necrons a final glance. A thought forced its way into his mind, though he tried to

keep it down. Were they outcasts? They might be the equivalent of the lepers on human worlds. Or were they something worse?

Biological weapons? Acolytes of a forbidden cult? Experiments?

‘There’s movement behind us,’ said Brother Rach’tul. He clambered onto the lintel of a lesser tomb for a better view. The necropolis was almost completely dark, but a Space Marine’s eyesight could cut far through the gloom. ‘The ghost-constructs. They’re following us.’

‘Persistent grox-suckers,’ growled Saahiran.

The wraiths glittered in the distance, their metallic carapaces shimmering as they shifted in and out of reality. And below them, more metal picked up the faint slivers of light from isolated glowglobes or shining hieroglyphics. A Legion of necrons, marching along the route the wraiths had scouted for them, heading straight for the Astral Knights.

‘We need to get to higher ground,’ said El’Kura. ‘The vox-net will be clearer.’

‘We should find somewhere to defend,’ said Phaetax. ‘We can run for a long time, but I doubt these machines will tire before we do.’

‘Either way,’ said El’Kura, ‘we move.’

The higher the Astral Knights reached, the deeper the darkness sank. A layer or two above the crossroads was a district of gargantuan tombs, the resting places of entire necron dynasties within massive obelisks or pillared temples. On Imperial worlds, they would have been monuments to power and wealth. In the necropolis of the World Engine, they were temples to death.

The squad breached the doors of one tomb, forcing apart slabs of black granite two storeys high. Inside were hundreds of sarcophagi, lined up in neat rows along the ground floor.

Brother Rach’tul ran a hand along the top of one stone coffin. It was inscribed with hieroglyphics. ‘How much could we learn of them,’ he said, ‘if we could only read their language?’

‘Rach’tul, get to the upper floors,’ said El’Kura. ‘See if you can do your philosophising with our fellow Astral Knights over the vox. The rest of you, secure any other ways in or out.’

The necron dynasty entombed here were depicted in stylised carvings, surrounded by the faces of their retainers and allies, or perhaps defeated enemies. Some coffins were plain with a single crest, the same image of an orb surrounded by ovals like a planet with multiple orbiting rings.

‘Then this is what they do with their dead,’ said Phaetax. ‘There must be

hundreds of them in here.'

'Their dead?' replied Rach'tul. 'The necrons teleport away when they are deactivated. It is why we have so little knowledge of them. They leave no dead.'

'Perhaps this is where they teleport to,' said Fejulah.

'Make ready to fight,' ordered El'Kura. 'The enemy approaches.'

The necrons had gathered their strength as they pursued the Astral Knights. The wraiths had gathered a Legion of warrior-constructs that marched in step, their feet beating a regular metallic rhythm from the steel and stone of the necropolis. Scarabs scuttled along beside them in a glittering silver carpet. A walker lurched on six skinny legs, a swivelling gun mounted on the underside of its armoured body.

'Well, gnaw an ambull's—' hissed Saahiran.

'Enough,' said El'Kura.

'Quite the honour,' said Phaetax, watching the advancing necrons through the tomb doors alongside the rest of the fireteam. 'I can't imagine how mortified I would be to be killed by less than an army.'

El'Kura approached the doorway. 'Hold these doors and fall back to the upper floors when they reach the threshold,' said the sergeant. 'They will pay for every floor in their fallen. In the narrows here, a few may fight many with great profit. And Brother Phaetax, you may have seen many battles, but I doubt you prevailed in any of them by speaking of your death before battle was joined.'

'Forgive me, sergeant,' said Phaetax. 'I am grim of humour and forget myself.'

'Atone yourself in the rending of the enemy,' replied El'Kura. 'Saahiran, hold your fire until the enemy is within the range of your brothers' bolters.'

'What the night-filth is that?' asked Saahiran, indicating the rear ranks of the enemy.

Behind the walker was another necron, this one far taller than the warrior-constructs around it. The figure was plated in bronze and silver. Its shoulder guards were curved as scythe blades and its long, sombre face lacked a mouth and nose. Its eyes glinted blue-green, and the staff it held shone with crackles of flashing power.

'That is the one who commands them,' said Valhid.

'Explain yourself,' said El'Kura.

'He is the lord of this circle of the necropolis,' said Valhid. 'He has been watching us since we entered. To him, the tombs are a labyrinth. And we are prey lost within it.'

‘And how do you know this, brother?’ asked El’Kura.

‘At the crossroads, I... I saw him. One of the fallen necrons speared my leg with a probe and it... it imparted the knowledge into me, like a cogitator spooling information into a data-slate.’

‘And you did not tell us?’ asked Phaetax.

‘Because you would see in me the taint of the xenos,’ replied Valhid. ‘You could have left me there in the darkness!’

‘No,’ snarled Fejulah. ‘He is a ban Devolon. Lies come as easily to him as breathing.’

‘You will denigrate the name of my house,’ retorted Valhid, ‘when you carry the mantle of the Brae?’

‘Why do you think the xenos sought him out?’ asked Fejulah to the other Astral Knights. ‘It knew he would keep its secrets. It knew what he was. The ban Devolon slew our patriarch by stealth four generations ago and, ever since then, they have been good for nothing save treachery.’

‘And the Brae are vainglorious butchers!’ shouted Valhid. ‘You led our fathers to their deaths, to steal their share of the glory. And you led Brother Moxas to his death, to claim the head of a foe for yourself!’

‘The blood of a thousand brave men is on your hands, ban Devolon dog.’ Fejulah’s hand was on the hilt of his chainblade.

‘And the blood of my brother is on yours,’ said Valhid.

Sergeant El’Kura grabbed Valhid by the collar of his armour and slammed him against the tomb wall. Before either young Astral Knight could react, Phaetax had hooked both Fejulah’s arms from behind and held him fast.

‘Were we on Obsidia,’ said El’Kura, his voice ice-cold, ‘I would cut a strip from your flesh, so that every time you remove your armour your brethren will see the shame of your failing carved into you. I would chain you to the floor of the Shrine of Guilliman’s Ire, and stand over you for a thousand nights of penance. But we are far from Obsidia, and so I will say only this: if you waste one more drop of your anger on your brothers instead of the enemy, I will throw you to the xenos myself. I will wrap you in the colours of shame and send your corpses back to the houses you love so much.’

El’Kura took his hand away from Valhid’s throat. Fejulah shrugged off Phaetax’s grasp. The look that passed between them was more poisonous than anything El’Kura might have said.

‘Are you done?’ asked Saahiran. ‘They’re closing.’

The necron Legion had reached the steps of the tomb. The Astral Knights lined

up their bolters, gauging the range as Saahiran peered down the sights of his heavy bolter.

‘Open fire!’ ordered El’Kura, and in that moment, Obsidia had never seemed further away.

Every Space Marine was created ready for death. Even before their recruitment, they were individuals willing to die. They were the noble youths of Obsidia who fought for the honour of their families in the duelling halls of their fathers, knowing a single lucky sword-stroke would end everything. As Space Marines, they considered death in battle an inevitability, their duty to ensure they left countless enemy dead in their wake to redress the balance.

And in the necropolis of the World Engine, Astral Knights were dying. Some were hunted down by the wraith-constructs and other necrons adapted for pursuing prey through the tombs. Some were swarmed by thousands of scarabs, cutting through ceramite and bone with laser-armed mandibles. Many fell in firefights with ranks of warrior-constructs, or were simply lost to the darkness, consumed by the raw malice of death in which the necropolis was steeped.

The Astral Knights who had gathered by Sergeant El’Kura died fighting, raking fire through the warriors until a rampart of broken steel limbs littered the doorway to the tomb they had chosen for their stand. They brought down one wraith as it dived at them, and more warriors were scattered as the larger construct crashed down into the middle of their ranks. A necron who reached the threshold was speared through the neck by El’Kura’s chainblade, and another was pinned to the floor by Phaetax’s boot as Rach’tul put a bolter-round through its skull at point-blank range.

They died fighting. But they died.

Brother Valhid ran up the slope towards the upper floor as the necrons poured in through the tomb doors. The warriors carried guns which fired bolts of strobing green energy that stripped away layers of the tombs walls to leave acid-like scars all over them. A blast had already bored through most of one greave and clipped Valhid’s shoulder guard. He fired behind him, cutting down one warrior and spinning another around with a hit to its shoulder.

The necron crashed into Valhid. Valhid fell to one knee. More necrons barged into him full force, ignoring their guns to bring Valhid down with the weight of their numbers. Valhid was forced down onto his back and his sword arm was trapped underneath him. He tried to twist it free as he blasted three bolt shells

through a steel skull and fought to get the weight off him.

He could not. He was pinned down and trapped. In the confines of the stairway to the tomb's upper floor, the necrons could fill the entire passageway and keep Valhid there.

Valhid could see to the upper floor above him. The Astral Knights scattered as one of the wraiths ghosted through the wall, slashing about it with its unnaturally sharp claws. Brother Fejulah jumped onto a necron coffin, matching the arcs of the wraith's blades with parries of his own chainsword.

Of course, the Brae had to get his kill. Even in death, even with his battle-brothers dying around him, he had to win his share of glory.

The action of Valhid's bolter fell on an empty chamber. Absurdly, he wondered exactly how he would die. Would the necrons dig him out when the other Astral Knights were dead, for the wraiths to cut him apart or the energy weapons to melt him into slag? Or would they simply leave him there beneath the damaged constructs, to die slowly and in pain? The necrons would not care. They had bodies to spare.

Fejulah looked down towards Valhid. No doubt, thought Valhid, the Brae was rejoicing inside, to see a ban Devolon dying like the low-born vermin he was while the Brae went down in single combat.

Fejulah drew back his arm and hurled his chainsword towards Valhid. He jumped down from the coffin to avoid the wraith's claws as the chainblade clattered to the stone beside Valhid's head.

Valhid reached up and grabbed the sword, dropping his empty bolter. He held it in a reverse grip and plunged the blade down through the neck and torso of the construct on top of him. He felt the teeth shearing through components and carapace. He hacked again and again, feeling the weight on him fragmenting as he carved the constructs apart.

Valhid finally had enough room to move. He dragged himself out from under the pile of wrecked components, scrambling to his feet and onto the upper floor, reloading his bolter as he went.

It gave Brother Fejulah an odd form of comfort to hear Saahiran's last words, and know they were as foul-mouthed as anything he had ever said. Saahiran died as the wraith swooped past Fejulah, through the stone tombs, and shifted into reality in time to impale him through the chest with its blades. Saahiran was pinned against the wall, still struggling as he tried to bring his heavy bolter to bear.

With a flourish of its blades, the wraith sliced Saahiran into three pieces. Hot crimson sprayed across the stone. Fejulah rattled off most of his remaining bolter shells at the wraith, but half of them passed right through it to burst against the bloodstained wall.

More necrons were pouring in. Their wreckage filled the way up from the lower floor, but the mass of those behind was too great to be held back.

‘Get to the roof!’ yelled El’Kura, and the Astral Knights ran for the passageway leading upwards as they kept up fire into the advancing wall of constructs. Fejulah ran upwards alongside Phaetax and El’Kura.

Below the rooftop, Fejulah could see the necrons ranked up around the tombs. There were hundreds more of them, standing motionless as they waited for their turn to file into the tomb. Every necron felled would have one to replace it, and the Astral Knights could not kill them all.

Energy fire sprayed up from below from the necron walker, stripping away the carvings the Astral Knights were using for cover. Fejulah dropped to a knee as fire streaked overhead.

The rooftop in front of him shimmered and the wraith slid up through the stone. Its carapace was scarred and smouldering from the bolter fire it had absorbed. Its barely-featured face was somehow able to show a gleeful malice as its claws spread out like a steel fan.

Fejulah drew his combat knife, his only remaining weapon. It seemed pathetic compared to the arm-long blades that tipped the wraith’s fingers. The wraith slashed at Fejulah, slicing off a chunk of his shoulder guard and a good mass of muscle and bone with it. Fejulah dropped onto his back, absorbing the red wash of pain, and brought his knife up.

He might parry one blow, but not two. At least he would force the necrons of the World Engine to waste an extra second of energy to kill him.

A bulky shape leaped onto the wraith. The wraith, caught unshifted, was slammed against the low wall running around the edge of the rooftop. Fejulah rolled to his feet to see Brother Valhid grappling with the creature, trying to force Fejulah’s chainblade up under its throat.

Fejulah snatched the bolter from Valhid’s other hand and aimed it at the wraith’s face. He blasted the faceplate away, a second trio of shots ripping through the back of its skull. Everything above its neck joint was a smoking, sparking mass of shattered components. The wraith shifted again and sunk back down through the rooftop.

Valhid reached down to help Fejulah to his feet.

‘I did not think I would be accepting help from a ban Devolon,’ said Fejulah, taking Valhid’s hand.

‘No stranger than a Brae giving up his kill to help one,’ replied Valhid.

More fire raked up at the rooftop. The entire tomb was being stripped away to dust.

Across the expanse of the waiting necrons was one construct the Astral Knights had seen from the tomb doors, watching the assault with his single engraved eye, lit by the glow from his staff.

‘Do you want this kill?’ asked Valhid.

‘We will take it together,’ said Fejulah. ‘Brother.’

If the necrons could think as humans understood it, they would see much at the Tomb of the Neokhares Dynasty that would strike them as strange. They would not understand, for instance, why the two Astral Knights leapt from the rooftop into the mass of necrons. Doing so would, according to every possible metric, dramatically reduce their remaining lifespan. But they did it anyway.

There was no logic to the way they hacked their way through the warrior-constructs, making their way towards Lord Cryptek Czazarin, the lord of that district of the necropolis. There was no chance of the two Space Marines defeating the cryptek. Czazarin’s superiority in combat was illustrated by the lance of energy he sent leaping from his staff to fall upon the tomb, shredding the armour and flesh of the Astral Knights still sheltering between the rooftop carvings.

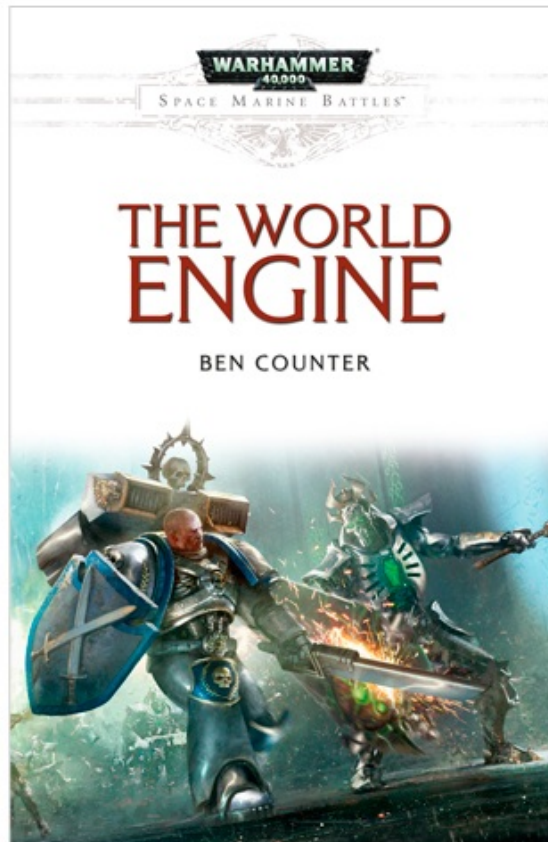
That superiority was demonstrated again as Czazarin, seeing the two Astral Knights forcing their way towards him, summoned forth a sphere of crackling energy containing the fury of a caged lightning storm. The cryptek stood in the centre of the storm as vast reserves of power forked around him. The Space Marines vanished, the last image of them graven into the labyrinth of the cryptek’s eye.

There was nothing in the necron psyche – if they could be said to have one – that found any sense in the final moments of Brother Valhid and Brother Fejulah. There was nothing that could take, from that moment of death and despair, their very human victory.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Ben Counter** is one of Black Library's most popular Warhammer 40,000 authors, with two Horus Heresy novels to his name – *Galaxy in Flames* and *Battle for the Abyss*. He is the author of the Soul Drinkers series and *The Grey Knights Omnibus*. For Space Marine Battles he has written *The World Engine* and *Malodrax*, and has turned his attention to the Space Wolves with the novella *Arjac Rockfist: Anvil of Fenris* and a number of short stories. He is a fanatical painter of miniatures, a pursuit which has won him his most prized possession: a prestigious Golden Demon award. He lives in Portsmouth, England.

For months, the World Engine has blazed a trail across the Vidar sector, destroying planets and devastating every fleet sent to destroy it. Now, the Astral Knights Space Marine Chapter enact a daring plan to get to the heart of the mighty edifice and bring it to an end.



BUY NOW



**READ IT FIRST**

EXCLUSIVE PRODUCTS | EARLY RELEASES | FREE DELIVERY

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

A BLACK LIBRARY PUBLICATION

First published in Great Britain in 2015 by Black Library, Games Workshop Ltd, Willow Road, Nottingham, NG7 2WS UK.

Cover illustration by Leonid Kozienko.

*Crossed Swords* © Copyright Games Workshop Limited 2015. *Crossed Swords*, Space Marine Battles, GW, Games Workshop, Black Library, The Horus Heresy, The Horus Heresy Eye logo, Space Marine, 40K, Warhammer, Warhammer 40,000, the 'Aquila' Double-headed Eagle logo, and all associated logos, illustrations, images, names, creatures, races, vehicles, locations, weapons, characters, and the distinctive likenesses thereof, are either ® or TM, and/or © Games Workshop Limited, variably registered around the world.

All Rights Reserved.

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

ISBN: 978-1-78251-694-1

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

See Black Library on the internet at  
[blacklibrary.com](http://blacklibrary.com)

Find out more about Games Workshop's world of Warhammer and the Warhammer 40,000 universe at  
[games-workshop.com](http://games-workshop.com)

## **eBook license**

This license is made between:

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

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

(jointly, “the parties”)

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

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

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

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

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

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

o 3.1 you provide the e-book to any company, individual or other legal person who does not possess a license to use or store it;

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

\* 10. Any failure by Black Library to exercise its rights under this license

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