

WARHAMMER
40,000

SPACE MARINE BATTLES™

IN THE DEPTHS OF HADES

NICK KYME



A THIRD WAR FOR
ARMAGEDDON STORY

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Vinyar scowled at the filth on his boots. He scowled at the idling battle tanks with their tracks caked in mud and at the troops squatting around fires, playing cards, working combat drills and muttering about the heat. It was sweltering in the vicinity of what used to be Hades Hive, now little more than a crater – a rotting carcass laid open to the rain. Several months had passed since the desolation of the city, but the reek of death and the mewling presence of bereavement persisted.

Vinyar scowled about that too. He deplored weakness.

So far, he had seen precious little to be sanguine about on Armageddon. The rain was just the latest annoyance.

Three days they had been stuck out in these rancid wastes, enduring the industrial stench that infested every molecule of air like a contagion, waiting for the regiment to muster.

Now, inexplicably to his mind, they were at an impasse.

He found Sergeant Tuurok standing by a strategium table, looking at reconnaissance maps as the downpour soaked him and his war council.

Camp had been struck, the tents and prefabs collapsed in preparation for imminent assault. The need to linger baffled the Marines Malevolent captain.

‘Why aren’t we advancing?’ Vinyar demanded, barging into the strategy briefing with neither care nor recognition for the six human officers of the Astra Militarum.

One, a lieutenant judging by his dirty rank pins, attempted an introduction.

‘85th Ocanon Phalanx, my lord. It’s a pleasure to—’

Vinyar briefly turned his ire on the lieutenant. ‘Not for me it isn’t. I don’t care who you are or that you’re pleased to be fighting alongside the Malevolents.’ His attention swung like an angry search light back to Tuurok.

‘There is a problem, brother-captain,’ said Tuurok, wise enough to get straight to the point.

Vinyar glared. Warm rain pounded his shoulder guards, drenching his dyed black ermine cloak and streaking down the lines of old scars that ravaged his face. Grizzled was not the word for Vinyar; in all his years of warmongering, he had long-since gone beyond that.

‘Elaborate,’ he ordered, the broken servos in his power glove whirring impotently.

‘The orks have taken prisoners. They sent this as evidence and a warning.’ Tuurok gestured to one of his men, who pulled back a small piece of tarpaulin to reveal the severed head that had been sitting on the table.

‘It’s Commissar Rauspeer,’ uttered one of the humans.

Vinyar glanced in his direction and guessed the black-coated youth had been this Rauspeer’s second-in-command.

‘They sent it?’ Vinyar asked Tuurok, incredulous.

‘Catapulted from the ruins, sir.’

Tuurok opened his gauntleted fist. He held three human fingers. Two wore rings, the third had a tattoo.

‘These were stuffed in the mouth.’

Vinyar examined them.

He looked up to survey the assembly – the human officers, the two Malvolents. His honour guard waited quietly behind him, bolters locked across their chests.

‘And?’ he asked. ‘It’s a crater, sergeant. A shanty town. Storm the hive, or what’s left of it. Bring this fight to an end so we can move on.’

‘With respect, my lord,’ said the lieutenant, ‘if we do that, they will kill every one of their captives, including three of our commanding officers.’ He pointed at some markings on the map. ‘Our scouts have them being held at this—’

The officer stopped when Vinyar raised his gauntleted hand.

‘Enough,’ hissed the Malevolent. His jaw clenched. He looked ready to snap. Maybe he would start with this impudent mortal’s neck.

‘You’re all dismissed,’ he said, ‘immediately. I need to speak to my warriors alone.’

After exchanging a few wary glances, the Astra Militarum officers left the strategium table and returned to their own ranks. Most did so gratefully.

Sergeant Tuurok kept his head raised and his hands braced against the table throughout the sudden exodus.

‘The Ocanon won’t fight,’ he said as soon as they were gone. ‘They refuse to—’ Vinyar struck him across the chin with his club-like power fist. Mercifully disengaged, it still bludgeoned Tuurok and put him on one knee.

‘No excuses,’ snarled Vinyar. ‘Cleanse the hive. Whatever it takes.’

‘Brother-captain, the tactical situation—’

As fast as mercury, Vinyar seized Tuurok by the throat and lifted him back onto his feet.

The warrior by Tuurok’s side, his adjutant, shifted uncomfortably but said nothing and did nothing to intervene. He knew better than to cross Vinyar.

‘We’ve wasted enough time already. Orks are moving across the Diablo Mountains and I need reinforcements in that region. We cannot afford to ignore Hive Hades until the greenskins within are dead. We risk being outflanked if they choose to mobilise, but we are hunting savages in caves. It should not be beyond us.’ Vinyar clenched Tuurok’s neck a little tighter, squeezing a half-choked rasp from the sergeant. ‘Are you now clear on the tactical situation, brother-sergeant?’

Vinyar held on a little longer to make his point then released Tuurok, who had to cough some air back into his lungs before he could reply.

‘We need them. They refuse to fight with their leaders still inside Hades, and we can’t force them.’

Another bout of violent apoplexy was stalled as Vinyar caught sight of the map. The holding pens or whatever they were where the orks had their prisoners were deep in the heart of the crater, in the depths of the old sundered hive. He lifted his gaze to stare across the annihilation left by the ork bombardment. The ruins of the hive city guttered with fires. Smoke billowing from immense pyres of wreckage and human corpses obscured much of the skeletal remains.

Six weeks into the war, an orbital bombardment had turned the hive into a husk. In truth, bombardment was an overly prosaic term for what the orks had done. More accurate would be to say the orks unleashed an asteroid against the city, atomising it and all those within. The earth around the blast site had crystallised under the immense pressure and heat expelled in the attack. An exothermic reaction several magnitudes greater than any conventional ordnance had vaporised watercourses, flattened structures and reduced forests to ash within a two-kilometre radius.

So rapid and whole was the city’s execution that it had become a dire reminder of Ghazghkull Thraka’s power and the ork warlord’s desire for wanton destruction. The ruins of Hades had become the domain of the ork, haunted by

ghosts – men and women who had died so quickly and violently that they didn't realise they were revenants. Like a plague that infests a carcass and begins to colonise the necrotic flesh, the orks had turned what little there was left of Hades into a fortress of sorts. And though it had zero strategic value, it did harbour a significant gathering of ork military strength. Therefore, it could not be ignored and it was almost as if Thraka knew this would be the case. Encourage men to defend ruins and fight over the dead. Let them cling to the wreckage of their cities and their lives, whilst the orks rampaged and revelled in the act of warmongering.

Vinyar considered himself a warmonger. For him, and the rest of the Marines Malevolent, their crusade was unending. In his warrior's heart, he could not conceive of a time when creatures such as he and those he commanded would no longer be necessary. War did not end. Peace was illusory. There was only the next battle.

Savagery and bestial nature aside, Vinyar wondered privately if the Malevolents and this Thraka were so different. Then he hawked up a goblet of phlegm and spat it out, as if to expel the thought as well as his grainy sputum.

A sudden burst of prickling wind skirled loudly across the barren wastes beyond the crater of Hades Hive. It stole away the smoke and carried the animalistic bellows and porcine grunting of the beasts within. So too did the wind bring forth the stench of the greenskins' dung and the boiling pig-fat reek of slow-cooked human flesh. Vinyar glared and felt his ire deepen for the ork and their pugnacity.

I'll smack that belligerence out of you...

'Captain,' a voice uttered from behind him.

Vinyar turned and saw a third warrior standing by Sergeant Tuurok. Like the other Malevolents he was clad in bile-yellow and coal-black armour and moved with a predatory grace. His helmet was loosely attached to his belt, not mag-locked but held by a strap of leather. Though still battered, some of his battleplate looked more robust than the rest, as if it were an amalgam and not a concomitant suit. Scraped paint revealed some of the nature of who it had been taken from – black with a white templar cross.

He wore his hammer strapped diagonally across his back – its haft jutted out above his left shoulder guard, the head visible just past his right hip. He looked battle-worn but vital, and was less scarred than Vinyar. Shoulder-length, pearl-white hair framed his face, giving the warrior a pseudo-angelic cast, but there was hate enough in his dark eyes to drown nations.

The sight of him brought up something unpleasant in Vinyar's throat and hardened the captain's barricade of clenched teeth.

'Kastor,' he said, almost snarling.

Amongst the Malevolents, the Vilifiers were the elite. Few in number, they were drawn from all ten companies, even the Scouts, and represented the most brutal fighters in the Chapter.

Kastor was their commanding officer.

'We can breach the crater that has confounded your men,' said Kastor, evenly.

'And do what exactly once you're in there?' asked Vinyar.

Scarcely five strides separated them and, although they were brothers-in-arms, they came across more like two fighters preparing to duel.

Kastor snorted, as if the answer was obvious. 'To rescue the hostages, of course.'

Vinyar's gravelly, roaring laughter sounded incongruous coming from the stern captain and drew several glances from nearby Guard officers who dared to look at him.

'That is amusing,' he conceded. 'I would dearly like to see you try, Kastor. Perhaps the death that's owed you will finally seek you out.'

'Perhaps, captain.'

Vinyar's sardonic humour vanished, replaced by rancour. 'I am not your captain,' he uttered darkly.

'No, you aren't,' Kastor replied, making it clear in his tone exactly what he thought of Vinyar's supposed authority over Hades, and his orders. 'So this conversation is really just a formality, isn't it?'

Looking Vinyar in the eye, he whistled loudly.

Four warriors in the yellow and black of the Malevolents stepped out into the rain from where they had been hiding amidst the throng. They had been almost invisible until summoned. The Guardsmen standing around them, suddenly finding a quartet of hulking Space Marines in their midst, immediately jerked in surprise.

One of the four eyed up the soldiers through his vision slit, glowering silently.

Two others stood stock still, their stalker-pattern bolters hanging casually over their shoulders.

The foremost Vilifier, the only one who went without his helmet and who had a youthful look about him, nodded to Kastor.

'Penetrating this camp was easy,' said Vinyar, able to mask his surprise at the sudden appearance of the veterans. 'You'll find the ork den harder to crack.'

‘Do I have your concession then, brother-captain?’ asked Kastor. He glanced at Tuurok, who seethed impotently at the other sergeant about to usurp his mission out from under him.

Kastor afforded him a thin smile, which only enraged Tuurok further.

Vinyar ignored the histrionics. ‘I thought you didn’t need my sanction, brother?’

‘Nevertheless...’

Every fibre of Vinyar bristled with the desire to teach Kastor a salutary and punishing lesson for his arrogance. Ideally, it would be a permanent one, but he let it go. This time he had overreached himself. The orks would have him, and the dirty little thorn who had been poaching warriors from Vinyar’s ranks for over two decades would, at last, get what was coming to him.

The captain stepped aside, ushering Kastor towards what he hoped would be his doom.

It was only when Kastor had walked past him that Vinyar uttered a churlish rejoinder.

‘Watch your back, Kastor.’

‘Oh, I don’t think I’m the one who needs to look over his shoulder,’ replied Kastor without even glancing back.

‘Arrogant cur,’ spat Vinyar, muttering. He was about to vent his ire on Kastor’s men but when he looked over to where they had been standing they were already gone, vanished into the rain and the dark.

Only the bellows of the greenskins remained, loud and bestial on the wind.

Though Vinyar hated Kastor with every iota of vitriol he could muster, he wondered if the orks knew what was coming. And for the first time since the war, he smiled.

In the wake of the asteroid strike, the greenskins had erected a fortified settlement in the citywide crater. It was a peculiar trait of the ork that they found utility in wreckage, for there had been precious little left of Hive Hades. The orks had infested it, seeing a wound they could infect and thrive in. Based on reconnaissance, current estimates had the greenskins in the region of thousands.

Lying on his stomach and supported by his elbows, Vathed observed one of the ork patrols at the perimeter with a pair of scopes pressed to his eyes. Thickly armoured, carrying fat-looking cannons and cleavers, their appearance was crude but also formidable.

‘Tough,’ he said to Narlec. ‘One of the more developed strains.’ Vathed panned

the scopes across, tracking past an enclosure wall of riveted and spot-welded metal sheeting. As well as several ramshackle gun towers, the wall also marked the border to the ork slum itself. A cluster of ugly, stacked hutments rose and sank at the false horizon line created by the wall, giving the impression of an undulating urban sprawl of closely abutted structures and narrow avenues.

Vathed spied two relatively scrawny specimens manning the watchtowers. They bracketed a large iron gate that was wrought into the wall. Eight metres across, it was wide enough for a vehicle column to pass through.

It was also the least heavily guarded approach into the hive.

‘Two spotters in the gun nests,’ said Vathed.

‘We’ll need to take them first,’ Narlec replied, rising into a crouched position so he could ready his bolter.

Vathed was still at the scopes. ‘No search lamps.’

‘Orks have good night vision,’ Narlec replied, patting Vathed on the shoulder to let him know he was ready.

Vathed nodded, panned the scopes across the gate area again to be sure, then opened up the vox. ‘I estimate eight targets defending this approach.’

‘Received,’ Kastor’s voice crackled over the other end of the link. ‘Ingress in one minute.’

Narlec nodded this time, and contacted his brother sniper in the field.

‘Sykar...’

‘Left or right, brother?’

‘Right,’ said Narlec without hesitation, adding, ‘synchronising,’ as a chrono flashed up on the squad’s retinal displays already counting down from sixty seconds.

Vathed packed up the scopes, staying flat, and brought up his bolter.

‘We won’t need you,’ Narlec told him.

Vathed didn’t answer.

Part of his left retinal lens was synched with his brother’s visual feed. The greenskin on the right had just come into focus through Narlec’s stalker sight. He aimed for the ear, knowing, as they all did, that this route presented the path of least resistance to the ork brain.

For a few seconds, the wind howled and the deep, distant bellowing of greenskins continued as they revelled in whatever crude entertainments occupied and diverted them. Scattered gunfire added to the clamour as the greenskins randomly discharged their weapons.

The chrono counter struck zero.

Two simultaneous coughs of ballistic discharge sounded, one close, the other much farther away.

Through his bolter's iron-sights and Narlec's feed, Vathed saw the orks in either watchtower crumple at the same time, a short puff of crimson misting the air before their skulls exploded.

The larger orks patrolling the wall were slow to react. By the time they did, two warriors armoured in black and yellow were already amongst them.

Ballack had drawn his knife. Like the lighter parts of his armour, he had dulled the blade's gleam with ash but not its monomolecular edge. Approaching the first ork from behind, he rammed the knife into its neck all the way to the hilt and then began to drag it through its rugose flesh.

He dropped the ork, letting the heavy body slump against the battlement, already moving to the second greenskin. It had half turned before Ballack managed to jab his knife under the beast's armpit where its armour was thin and push the blade all the way to the heart. Forgetting its weapons, the ork clawed at Ballack, raking the Malevolent's faceplate and gorget. Though lean, Ballack was strong, but the ork was overpowering him even in the midst of its dying. Wrenching the knife free, Ballack released a fount of dark blood and then stabbed again.

The ork convulsed in agony, barely able to croak let alone roar, and bit down on the joint between Ballack's gorget and pauldron. He cried out, managing to muffle his pain but felt savage greenskin fangs tearing at the vulnerable flesh of his neck.

Ballack clamped his free hand over the ork's skull and began to squeeze. After a few seconds, the bone began to yield but it only made the greenskin bite down even harder.

An anguished gurgle escaped Ballack's lips as he faced the genuine and unpleasant prospect of being killed by an enemy in its death throes. He jerked the knife, striving to saw upwards through vital organs but the ork's bone cage was tough and Ballack was getting weaker.

Between the blood pulsing thunderously in his ears, Ballack heard distant bellowing and gunfire as the orks embedded deeper in the slum revelled, oblivious to the lives ending at their gates.

A second burst of fire and brutish revelry resounded. It came with a much louder bolter shot, deafening next to Ballack's ear. Bone fragments and ruddy matter spattered noisily against his helmet, muddying his view through his

retinal lenses. The ork stopped biting. Its head had been reduced to biological debris now scattered over Ballack and the wall.

As the greenskin fell, Ballack saw Kastor finishing off the last of them. His hammer's haft was pressed against the ork's neck from behind as he slowly crushed its trachea and strangled it.

'You still alive?' he asked, releasing the dead greenskin to slump down with the others.

There were two orks killed in the nests, another six on the wall and two of those were ranged executions.

Ballack nodded, irritated, and pressed a hand against the jetting artery in his neck until his Larraman's organ clotted the blood.

'You owe Vathed a life,' said Kastor.

The appearance of a ninth sentry below interrupted Ballack's reply. Looking up, the ork noticed its slain comrades and their killers but the realisation was slow to dawn as it went to draw a pistol.

'Mine,' snarled Ballack, now with something to prove. He cast his bloody knife, lodging it between the greenskin's eyes. The creature stared dumbly at the Malevolent for a few seconds before collapsing dead.

Kastor holstered his pistol and voxed the others.

'The gate. Three minutes,' he said, then turned to Ballack. 'You're getting slow.'

Ballack scowled. 'The beast was lucky.'

Kastor didn't answer as he made his way down from the wall.

The blood had clotted. Ballack pulled out the ork teeth lodged in his neck, and followed.

From beyond the wall, Vathed and Narlec were moving. Leaving his enfilading position in the distance, Sykar did the same.

'You were saying?' Vathed asked Narlec.

The marksman shrugged.

'I said it wasn't necessary. It wasn't. Not for me.'

Narlec then gestured towards their destination. The wall was getting closer.

'I doubt Ballack will thank you, though.'

Vathed frowned. He was still relatively new to the unit and had yet to fully appreciate and understand its dynamic. 'I just saved his life.'

'No, brother,' Narlec corrected. 'You just took his kill.'

Vathed scoffed. 'That's ridiculous.'

‘Tell that to the Black Templar whose armour Ballack’s wearing.’

They spoke no further. They reached the gate and continued into the ork slum of Hive Hades.

Kastor had only got a glance at the reconnaissance maps. It was all he needed. The configuration drawn on the map was a solid representation of the actual position of the crude structures within the cratered hive. Despite the obvious devastation unleashed by the asteroid strike and the subsequent deprivations of the greenskins, much of the lower hive remained. Below ground it had survived some of the impact, even if its occupants had not.

Charred bodies still mouldered, left out in the rain, their broken limbs difficult to differentiate from the industrial debris jutting from the morass of wreckage.

Kastor moved low and quickly through the charnel fields, using the drifting palls of smoke to obscure his approach. The hammer on his back was an impediment, but it was the spoils of a much earlier conflict and one he did not plan to relinquish. Ork spoor was everywhere. It lay thick on the air, which was already heavy with heat and animal sweat. Something porcine resonated about the greenskins, especially the larger ones. Their close guttural grunting, their willingness to wallow in their own filth together with a propensity to herd gave the association weight.

Kastor had studied the ork since before the incident aboard the *Byzantine* and months prior to the Third Armageddon War. He had watched their behaviour on the battlefield, paid attention to their habits and tactics, their hierarchy, even going so far as to observe apothecarion autopsy. It had made him a more efficient killer of the xenos, whilst also enhancing his chances of survival in every encounter with them. It was the same with all of his enemies.

Know thine enemy.

It was a maxim adopted by all Adeptus Astartes, but none more so than Kastor.

He paused, dropping to his haunches as he signalled for the warriors behind him to emulate.

A few seconds later, a sizeable horde of the beasts tramped by, snorting and grunting in their crude tongue. They were armed with guns and cleavers as before, and muscular bodies strapped with plate. They clanked noisily as they moved, making Kastor’s task easier by degrees. Even so, he stayed low until he was sure they were gone, hunkered down in a wreckage-strewn alleyway with high-sided corrugated structures on both flanks.

Relaxing a little, Kastor signalled for the squad to resume their advance

through the slum.

When they had reached an abandoned hutment, Kastor moved inside and gave the order to halt.

‘We are close,’ he said, keeping his voice low. ‘Those orks we narrowly avoided are part of the ruling caste.’

‘One ork looks much the same as the other,’ said Vathed, without sarcasm.

Kastor nodded. ‘Darker skin, a more pronounced brow,’ he gestured to his own physiognomy for emphasis, ‘and their size, of course. The larger ones dominate by strength, but are also more disciplined and intelligent. Don’t be fooled by their bestial nature.’

Vathed nodded, grateful for the lesson.

‘How soon until the sentries we killed are discovered?’ asked Ballack, eager to be moving so he could expunge the stain on his honour. He had removed his damaged helmet and his thin face appeared gaunt in the shallow light.

He, Kastor and Vathed were huddled in the middle of the dirty hutment, surrounded by greenskin detritus. A flickering lamp pack swung overhead that looked like it was jury-rigged on a whim. The air reeked of dung. Dark tracts of it streaked the rough walls. Whatever purpose the hutment had served previously, it now resembled a latrine.

‘Patrols were erratic,’ Vathed answered, but continued at Kastor’s silent urging. ‘I’d estimate no more than an hour before the sentries are missed.’

‘Even if the orks do find their dead before then, it’s not guaranteed they will sound an alarm,’ said Narlec, partially distracted as he affixed an underslung grenade launcher to his stalker-pattern bolter.

His brother, Sykar, maintained watch by the hutment’s north-facing vision slit. The roof would have offered a better vantage, but it was too exposed and might have yielded beneath his power armoured weight. He kept quiet. Narlec knew his mind and could speak it in his absence.

‘Agreed,’ replied Ballack, nudging one of two greenskin corpses they had found inside. It was rank, recently dead. So too was the other one. Some kind of territorial dispute as far as anyone could tell. Ballack gave a low chuckle. ‘Leave them long enough and the orks will probably kill each other before we even need to fire a shot.’

Kastor gave a derisory snort.

‘No,’ he said, shaking his head, ‘these creatures clearly have leadership. Yes, they squabble, they fight and even kill each other, but they also patrol, arm themselves and mass in squads. It isn’t a horde – it’s an army. Organised,

calculating and in numbers. Vinyar is a piece of filth I wouldn't deign to scrape off my boot, but he was also right. We have to cleanse the hive. Quickly.'

According to the reconnaissance map, they were standing close to the outer edge of the pit, ground zero for the asteroid strike. Several hundred metres below was where Imperial intelligence had placed the location of the prisoners.

'Here is where we break ranks, brothers,' Kastor told them. He gestured to Vathed. 'Auspex.'

Vathed proffered the handheld device. It was already engaged and flashing silently.

One of the Imperial officers had been implanted with a loc-beacon. Command had the requisite ident frequency but it had only recently activated with the Vilifiers' proximity to the pit.

'We three will follow this down,' said Kastor, eyeing Ballack and Vathed.

Ballack was quick to object. 'Two men are quicker and quieter than three.' He jerked his chin at Vathed. 'Let the fresh blood keep sentry. You and I can do the necessary killing.'

Ballack had been a Vilifier for over three decades. He and Kastor went back a long way, but none of their history prevented Kastor from shaking his head.

'You almost got yourself killed on the wall, brother. You almost threw this mission. I know the Templar clipped you, Ballack. The wound is slowing you down.'

'That was months past,' Ballack protested. 'I am fine. I can—' He stopped talking when he felt the knife edge touching his exposed neck.

'Did you even see it drawn?' Kastor asked, holding his blade in a steady, certain grip. 'There was a time when you would have. If I thrust now, you would be dead.'

Ballack's hand gripped his own combat knife, but it stayed sheathed.

He snarled through clenched teeth. 'I can still serve.'

Kastor nodded. 'If I believed anything other than that, I would kill you myself at this very moment.' He sheathed the knife.

Ballack sagged a little, but did not reach up to touch the blood on his neck. He glared at Vathed, who looked utterly unfazed.

Kastor had already moved on.

'Narlec, Sykar...'

Narlec spoke for them both. 'We'll secure egress for your return. Try not to tarry, though, sergeant.'

'Noted,' answered Kastor, without humour. The guttural cadence of greenskins

grew louder as a patrol drew near. ‘We move.’

At the heart of the impact crater, the proliferation of greenskin construction intensified.

Crude gantries and ramshackle walkways crossed the mouth of the pit in an ugly web of corrugated iron and sheet steel. Barricades had been pressure-bolted to the sides of the larger concourses, and there were ladders trailing down to where the orks had fashioned rough landing platforms and salvage yards. Nothing was wasted, and in the light of hundreds of drum fires the Vilifiers saw an army of greenskins scurrying and toiling. Some were the large, brutish orks they had fought already. More numerous were the diminutive gretchin, shrieking and cackling as they laboured. Tracked cannons, half-finished tank chasses, the scratch-built fuselage of a lander; a great war machine was slowly taking shape in the pit, a horde of cannons, vehicles and aircraft that concerned Vinyar.

Somewhere in the midst of all the heavy labour were the prisoners the Vilifiers sought.

Without the auspex, Vathed could not determine exactly which of the hundreds of workshops, hangars or silos contained the Imperial officers. He suspected it would be deep, so he aimed his magnoculars down towards the nadir of the pit. The dark rock still squatted there, sharp-edged, black and bleeding radiation heat.

His armour’s biometrics told Vathed that the radiation was sufficiently low level not to present a hazard. He assumed the orks were largely immune to the immense rock’s effects as they cut into it with drills, explosives and pneumatic picks. They were harvesting, cutting out the asteroid’s core and using it as fuel. The potential volatile reaction appeared not to perturb the greenskins in the slightest, who hewed away merrily.

Kastor’s voice came over the vox-link through a minor ripple of radiation distortion.

‘There.’

The three Vilifiers maintained a dispersed squad coherency, close enough to see one another but needing the audio feed in their helmets to communicate.

Kastor had marked the position of the prisoners and fed the data to the retinal display of all three Vilifiers. It was close to where Vathed had predicted, and he smiled at the vindication of his instincts.

‘Descend and converge on marked location,’ said Kastor, before going vox-silent.

Vathed assessed his first target, then looked across at his comrades expecting to see them doing the same but Ballack and Kastor were already gone.

With no suppressor fitted to his bolter like Narlec and Sykar had, Vathed knew it would be blade-work all the way down to where Kastor had marked the hangar. Taking sight of his prey, he vaulted the short lip of the barricade surrounding the pit and drew his knife.

Close kills were Ballack's preference. To his mind, there was no surer way to confirm an enemy's death than when you looked into its eyes and saw life depart. His weapon of choice, though, would have been the chainblade currently strapped onto his back.

Anointed with transhuman blood, it was the weapon with which he had defeated Tiamed in an honour duel, claiming his armour as the prize and earning the eternal enmity of the Black Templars. That selfsame duel had left Ballack diminished, with a deep wound yet to properly heal.

At night it discomfited him, but pain was a warrior's only bedfellow, that and his memories of war. It was how the wound had made him slower that haunted Ballack. He knew Kastor was watching him now. He had to prove he was still worthy of the Vilifiers. No one ever left by choice or sanction; the only way out was the end of duty and Ballack was not yet ready to relinquish his.

A brief flash of movement to his far left caught Ballack's eye. He saw Vathed, and followed his bloody progress across the gantry.

Ballack's own kills were mounting up too and his knife blade was ruddy with smeared ork blood. He crouched, taking up a position behind a barricade, knowing he would not be seen. Vathed was oblivious to being watched. Cutting down a greenskin with a stealth and efficiency that Ballack had to admit was impressive, Vathed approached the edge of a junction. Two sentries loitered at either fork. A third stood in Vathed's path, as yet unaware of the other Malevolent's presence.

'Kastor says I owe you a life,' Ballack murmured, drawing his bolter and taking aim.

He waited for a lull in the industrial clamour before executing the third sentry.

Blood and matter spattered Vathed's armour and faceplate as he was about to make the kill. The shot that took out the ork sentry was still resounding. Instinctively, he sought cover before realising it wasn't a greenskin that had missed its mark – it was a shooter that had known exactly what he was doing.

Several orks in the immediate vicinity turned, trying to pinpoint the sound. They looked in the shooter's direction but he was already gone, dropped out of sight. Instead, their collective gaze was drawn to Vathed.

As the two sentries bellowed their anger, three more orks nearby clambered from their own vantage points to join them. Through the grated metal under his feet, Vathed saw another two greenskins jabbing fingers in his direction and shouting gutturally to their comrades.

He mumbled something under his breath, sheathing his knife and pulling out his bolter.

Ballack, he thought, trying to focus his anger at the greenskins. *It had to be.*

Vathed downed the first sentry, putting a round through the ork's neck, before the solid slugs from the greenskins' guns hammered around him in a storm of shells.

Ballack smiled from below, quickly moving through the shadows now that his route had been miraculously cleared of sentries.

'Debt paid,' he muttered, glancing at Vathed retreating back along the gantry and drawing the orks on. 'A life for a life.'

Kastor had not been specific about whose.

Ballack met Kastor at the north side of the hangar where the Imperial officers were being held. He had missed him at first, overshooting the sergeant's clandestine position and only righting his error when Kastor had hissed from the shadows.

'Over here.'

Now they were both crouched on their hands and knees in a rusted section of ducting that fed directly into the hangar.

Ballack observed the activity in the main hangar bay through a wire mesh, taking care to keep within the shadows.

'The prisoners are here,' he whispered to Kastor, who was leaning against the side of the duct to check his weapons.

Even though the hangar was only lit by a single drum flame, Ballack discerned the Astra Militarum officers in the penumbral gloom. They were on their knees, heads down and hands behind their backs. Judging by the flecks of blood on the floor and the ragged bearing of the men, all six had been beaten.

'Then let's move quickly,' Kastor replied. 'That distraction you orchestrated with Vathed won't last long.'

Ballack gave the equivalent of a facial shrug. 'He might survive.'

'Even if he does, he'll have to make a lot of noise. The greenskins will know we're here.'

Ballack nodded, turning his full attention back to the hangar. There were six ork guards, two hugging the main entrance, three directly below and one more occupying an improvised gun nest that overlooked the entire bay floor.

That one would have to die first.

Ballack did not bother to kick in the mesh, he just leapt through it.

The mesh grate landed with a loud clatter. Humans and greenskins inside the hangar turned, surprised by the sudden clamour.

By the time Kastor got through, Ballack had already executed the lookout with a three-round burst from his bolter. A hard, metal *chank* signalled that the gun had jammed. Ballack dropped the bolter to unhitch his chainblade. The teeth were already growling as Kastor's booted feet struck the metal floor with a heavy thunk.

He shot the two at the door, opting to strafe and incapacitate rather than kill. A kill-shot would be too slow. He needed the orks down immediately.

Ballack was weighing in against the three who had been standing guard by the prisoners. He cut the forearm off the first before cleaving its leg in two. A second went at him with its already drawn cleaver, ork steel meeting Adeptus Astartes adamantium chain-teeth. Sparks cascaded in a violent cataract of light.

The third ork racked the slide of its gun, a boxy-looking cannon with a perforated barrel and a wide, yawning muzzle. It was belt-fed with shells the size and thickness of Kastor's fist. It was going for the prisoners, some rudimentary part of its base intelligence or instinct telling it that the enemies in its midst had come to rescue them, and that denying them victory was all that mattered.

To their immense credit, three of the captured Imperial officers rose as one. With their hands still bound behind their backs, they barrelled into their captor in an attempt to buy their rescuers more time.

Kastor saw one of the orks he had incapacitated at the entrance crawling on its belly and reaching up to escape and signal for help. He ignored it for now, running for the Imperial officers that had attacked the other guard.

Two of them were down, and one was almost certainly dead with his neck bent at an awkward, unnatural angle. The other was prone but unmoving. Kastor hit the ork around the waist, using his momentum and sheer armoured bulk to tackle the beast to the ground and get it away from the prisoners.

It struggled on its back, aiming a wild punch that glanced the side of Kastor's helm. Ears ringing, Kastor brought the stock of his bolter down hard, breaking the beast's nose. It roared, angry and in pain, but threw the Malevolent off and across the hangar floor.

Heaving itself to its feet, the ork charged at him, just as Kastor had wanted it to.

He left the bolter and came up swinging with the hammer instead. One blow, tight beneath the ork's jutting chin, was enough to separate its head from its body. It ran on a few paces, arterial spray painting the ductwork above it a dark crimson, before it slumped to its knees and fell forwards.

Kastor was breathing hard and his hearts were beating strongly, vitally. Hatred for the ork was slow to subside, but he forced a thin smile. War was good, he had decided long ago; it showed you who you were in the eyes of your enemies and the glorious countenance of the Emperor.

Ballack had given his own demonstration. Two orks lay dead and dismembered at his feet. Unlike Kastor, he grinned wildly through a mask of blood.

The sound of claws scraping against metal seized Kastor's attention and he remembered the ork that was trying to escape.

Two hard bangs rang out, echoing loudly in the vast hangar expanse.

Ballack lowered his bolter, having cleared the jam and hefting it one-handed.

Both orks by the entrance were dead, each killed by a headshot.

'Still too slow?' he asked, facing Kastor.

Kastor had removed his helmet, glad to be free of its confines for a minute at least. He gestured to the blood oozing through the savage rents in Ballack's armour.

'Still slow, but you are more than deadly enough.'

'I'll take that,' he conceded.

The vox crackled.

'You bastards.'

It was Vathed.

'If you're angry, it means you're alive and can still walk,' answered Kastor.

'Barely.'

'Then regroup with the others. We have the objective and are making our extraction now.'

Vathed grunted some expletive and cut the link.

'He sounded far from sanguine,' uttered Kastor, hitching his hammer before

picking up his discarded bolter.

‘At least he lives.’

Kastor raised an eyebrow.

‘You sure you’re glad about that?’

Ballack sheathed his chainblade and checked his bolter’s ammunition gauge.

‘He knows the rules now. My kills are my kills. If he respects that, he will live longer.’

‘More than ruthless enough too, brother.’

Ballack paused a beat before asking, ‘Were you goading me?’

‘Yes,’ Kastor said honestly. ‘I found out you still have your edge and that Vathed is a worthy warrior for the Vilifiers.’

‘You knew I would do that to him.’

‘I hoped you wouldn’t kill him. The rest was open to your interpretation.’

Satisfied, Ballack nodded as Kastor donned his helmet again. He turned to the prisoners.

‘Hadn’t we better take what we came for?’

Kastor nodded, acknowledging the Imperial officers too. Four of the six were dead, killed during the fight or having already been slain.

Of the two who remained, only one was still on his feet. He looked like a commissar, possibly another subordinate of Rauspeer whose headless corpse was busy putrefying slumped against the hangar wall.

‘Traeger,’ he said, by way of introduction. ‘Do you have a weapon?’ he asked, matter-of-factly.

‘Several,’ Kastor replied, looking down at the impudent man and taking an instant dislike to him.

‘One I can wield.’

Traeger had been beaten, but was unbowed. The proud defiance of the Militarium Tempestus emanated from the man’s bearing and his frost-bright eyes.

‘What for?’ asked Ballack, noticing one of the man’s fingers was missing.

‘We’re getting you out of here, Commissar Traeger,’ Kastor told him. ‘You and...’

The commissar glanced at the other Imperial survivor, unconscious on the floor.

‘Colonel Egilson,’ he said. ‘And we can’t leave yet. There is another group of prisoners, held deeper into the pit. Your knife?’ he suggested.

Kastor glanced at the monomolecular blade sheathed at his hip then met the commissar’s querying gaze.

‘You alone were our mission. There are no others.’

The commissar was adamant. ‘There are six men still being held against their will.’

‘Those men are dead, commissar,’ Kastor told him.

‘They are alive,’ Traeger argued.

Kastor took a forward step. They were running out of time. By now, the orks would have suspected what was going on and would be moving on the hangar.

‘No, you don’t understand. Those men are dead.’

Traeger understood, but could not mask his disgust.

‘This is heresy.’

‘No it isn’t,’ said Kastor. ‘This is war, and you don’t survive it by engaging in foolish heroics. We cannot reach those men. Even now we are being surrounded. Time has run out for your comrades. Those men are already dead.’

Commissar Traeger stood straight, chin raised imperiously towards the Vilifier. He was adamant. ‘We are not leaving without them.’

Kastor sighed, lifting his gaze to Ballack as an unspoken agreement passed between them.

Vinyar was waiting in the rain with Tuurok by his side. His command squad lurked in the background as still as statues.

Behind them stood several armour columns and the serried infantry ranks of the Astra Militarum. Camp had been struck and emptied; men and materiel had been readied for war. Thousands of tanks and infantry, enough to breach even the depths of Hades.

Wrathful, eager for vengeance, these men would tear down the hive city’s walls to get to the murderous greenskins. Arguably, the rage of the rank and file was more incandescent upon hearing of their officers’ deaths than it was when they had first learned of their capture.

Only two had come back from the thirteen who had been taken. One, Colonel Egilson, would likely not survive the night. The other, Commissar Traegar, had apparently died during the desperate mission undertaken by the Vilifiers to extract the prisoners. It was sour news, but all who heard it could not help but applaud the heroic efforts of Brother-Sergeant Kastor and his squad.

As the armoured columns rolled out and the long-ranged, heavy ordnance erupted with tectonic peals of plosive thunder, Vinyar found himself in the presence of the sergeant again.

‘You owe me a debt, brother-captain,’ Kastor said.

Vinyar laughed. 'For what?'

'Conflict resolution.'

'Emerging from that hellhole with barely a scratch...'

Now it was Kastor's turn to laugh. 'I had hatred to sustain me.'

Vinyar nodded at the vengeful Imperial Guard hordes surging past them.

'Men can be savage when pushed.'

'And savagery can be useful,' Kastor replied. 'Vengeance is a much better motivator than gratitude.'

'Indeed.' Vinyar turned to face him. 'So, the debt I owe you...'

Kastor was already walking away.

'Let me think on it,' he replied. 'Have a good war, brother-captain.'

Vinyar watched him go. The vainglorious cur. He wanted to kill Kastor where he stood, but he would not do it whilst the scales between them were unbalanced and Kastor knew that. Unscrupulous he might be, Vinyar still had a code of honour.

Kastor was a student of conflict. He had a way of escaping danger, both physical and political. Not to say he was a coward; far from it. He was merely adept at reducing risk, and blunting his enemies' knives before they had even thought to draw them. It was a talent, but Vinyar also had talents. He knew things: names, information. History. He might be impotent to move against Kastor whilst he was in the sergeant's debt but trouble could still find him.

'A good war,' Vinyar murmured. 'You too, brother-sergeant.'

He turned to Tuurok. 'I need to speak to the Templars, specifically a Sword Brethren named Vorda. He is here on Armageddon, in command of Tiamed's old squad. I believe they used to fight together.'

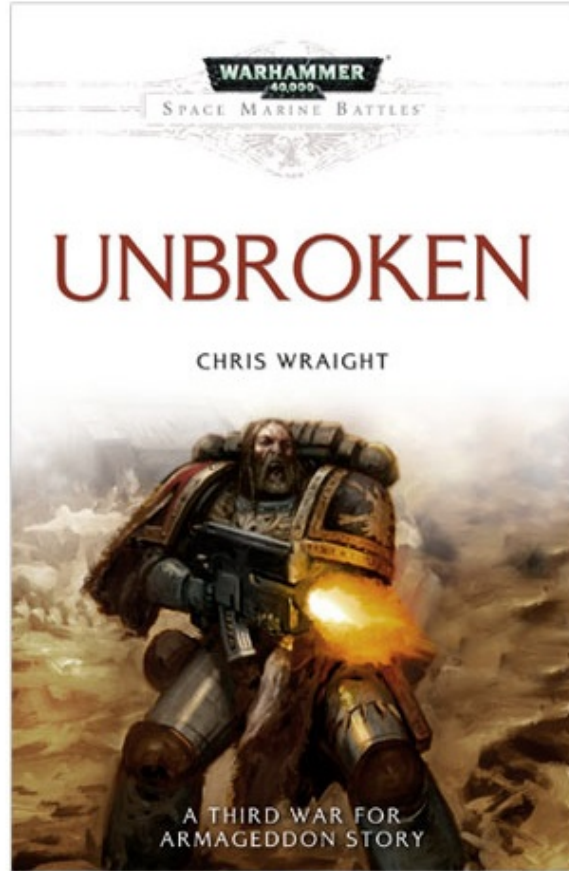
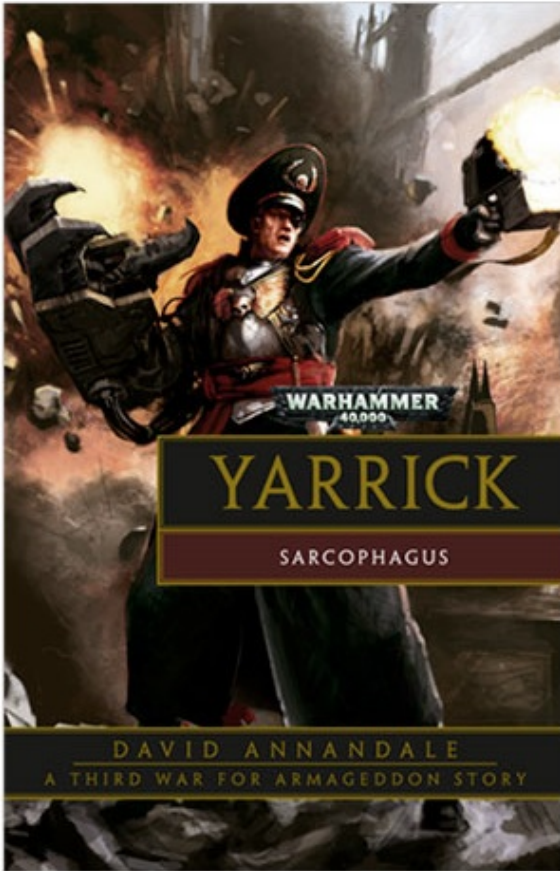
'Our relations with the Black Templars are still strained, sir,' replied Tuurok. 'Some of them hate us.'

'Then we are kindred spirits, Tuurok. Besides,' added Vinyar, a viper's smile creeping across his grizzled face, 'I know someone they hate even more.'

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Nick Kyme is the author of the Horus Heresy novel *Vulkan Lives*, the novellas *Promethean Sun* and *Scorched Earth*, and the audio drama *Censure*. His novella *Feat of Iron* was a *New York Times* bestseller in the Horus Heresy collection, *The Primarchs*. For the Warhammer 40,000 universe, Nick is well known for his popular series of Salamanders novels and short stories, the Space Marine Battles novel *Damn*, and numerous short stories. He has also written fiction set in the world of Warhammer, most notably the Time of Legends novel *The Great Betrayal* for the War of Vengeance series. He lives and works in Nottingham, and has a rabbit.

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