



A RAVEN GUARD SHORT STORY

Prey

GEORGE MANN





A RAVEN GUARD SHORT STORY

Prey

GEORGE MANN



PREY

by George Mann

From a distance, the bleached white figure clinging to the rocky spur might have been a snowy cap upon the mountainside, if not for the fact that it was slowly, inexorably shifting its position, creeping around the outcropping in search of its prey.

The Chaplain had been tracking the creature for nineteen long and arduous days and now his body – despite being thewed with ropey muscles and hardened against the elements – was growing weary. The endurance necessary to survive up here, high amongst the soaring Diagothian mountains of Kiavahr, had proved too much for many of his brothers and he had seen evidence of their decomposing corpses, dashed on the rocks and half frozen by the altitude, as he had climbed. He felt no sadness for their passing. There was honour in such a death. To die in pursuit of a spiritual quest was akin to dying in battle, at least in the eyes of the Chaplaincy.

He'd vowed, however, that he would not join them in their isolated, deathly slumber. He would prevail, despite the fatigue burning in his upper arms, despite the pain. He would not return empty handed.

He searched the nearby rock face for evidence of his quarry. His black eyes were like glossy pools, the colour of midnight, utterly at odds with his stark white flesh. He was dressed only in a black-feathered loincloth – the ceremonial attire of the ritual hunt – although he wore a string of ivory-coloured totems around his neck. These fragile bird skulls – his *corvia* – jangled as he shifted again, straddling two broken spurs in order to finally bring the creature into view.

It was a magnificent beast, a thing of exquisite beauty. In appearance it resembled the tiny, black-beaked Kiavahrian ravens that had given their heads to become his totems, but that was where such comparisons ended. For this scarce

creature was at least the size of a man, with sleek black feathers and a wingspan of four, or perhaps even five, metres. Its talons were daggers, designed to disembowel its prey long before its beak had ever set to work, and a fierce intelligence burned behind its beady eyes. It rested upon an adjacent outcropping of grey rock, studying the slopes below for any sign of prey.

The Chaplain felt only admiration for the creature but, nevertheless, he was there to kill it, to take its life with his bare hands and claim its sacred bones. The totems around his neck were as nothing compared to the spiritual significance of this glorious creature. He would haul its corpse back down the mountainside, and from there to Deliverance, to the Ravenspire, where he would fashion its skeleton into embellishments for his ancient, ebon armour. Its wings would adorn his jump pack, its beaked skull would become his Chaplain's mask. Such was the honour attributed to performing this ritual and slaying this beast – that he would carry its spirit with him into combat, a fearsome ally in the war against the enemies of the Imperium. Only then could he properly guide his brothers into battle, ensuring the purity of their hearts and minds, the honour of his Chapter.

The bird cocked its head and glanced in his direction. He was sure it could not see him from behind the outcropping, but he was in no doubt that it knew it was being pursued. For days it had taken steps to evade him, spiralling higher and higher up the mountainside, finding increasingly inhospitable perches upon which to land. Why, then, had it now settled upon this shattered ledge, as if granting him this brief opportunity to strike? Had it simply grown weary? Had his stamina and determination proved too much for the beast? He had waited so long for this moment, these few seconds of stillness before the sudden chaos of the battle.

He drew a long, calm breath, feeling the chill air swirl into his lungs. His twin hearts beat a discordant rhythm in his breast. He felt his blood sing through his veins, and coiled his muscles, preparing to strike. The leap across to the ledge was no more than three metres, although the ledge itself was treacherous and narrow. If he missed his footing on the loose scree and fell, it would all be over; the drop was near unfathomable. He would never even be aware that he had struck the bottom.

The bird glanced away, looking to the skies as if preparing to take flight.

He moved, knowing he could not allow himself to miss this chance. With one hand he swung himself around the spur, and then sprang across the gulf, moving with an elegance and fluidity that belied his size. He struck the ledge, landing perfectly upon the balls of his feet. He rocked forwards into the sheer wall of the

mountain, using his outstretched palms to break his momentum. Then, without missing a beat, he pushed himself away from the cliff face, spinning on one heel and reaching out to grasp a fistful of the beast's feathers with his left hand.

The roc squawked in fury and beat its wings, scrabbling with its claws as it tried to pull away, but he held firm, bunching the feathers tighter and willing them not to pull free. His feet skittered as he was dragged across the ledge by the creature's sheer strength, pulled dangerously close to the edge. A slurry of loose stones skittered over the side, tumbling away into the depths.

He couldn't allow the bird to take off. If it managed to get into the air, with him still clinging on, he'd have no means of killing it without dashing himself on the rocks below. He'd be entirely at its mercy.

The bird lurched suddenly, twisting and almost breaking free. He wrenched it back, his forearm burning with the strain.

An angry, ear-splitting shriek pierced the air from above. He glanced up, confused, to catch sight of a second bird diving out of the sky. It must have been half the size again of the one he now held, and it spread its immense wings as it neared the cliff face, rearing up with its claws. It swooped in, intent on spearing him upon the end of them.

He had nowhere to go, and only moments to act. He glanced across at the smaller beast, a wry smile of admiration on his lips. 'Clever...' he muttered, releasing his grip and allowing the roc to scramble away. It launched itself from the ledge and drifted off on the currents, wings outstretched.

Now he understood why his brothers had failed. The creature had tricked him. Despite his admiration, despite his acknowledgement of its intelligence, he had underestimated it. All the while the beast had known it was being hunted, and had toyed with him, leading him further and further up the mountainside. Its goal had been to tire him, to draw him ever on towards this trap.

He laughed, despite himself. The hunter had become the hunted. Now there was only the battle to decide his fate.

He waited until the last moment and then leapt sideways, trusting his instincts that the ledge would hold. The bird screeched in frustration as its claws raked the rock where he'd been standing only seconds before. He lashed out with his fist, striking it hard across the beak and sending it reeling away again, hissing and shaking its head as it attempted to right itself.

The roc circled the broken spur upon which he had stood only a few minutes earlier, cawing shrilly. He could see its beady eyes watching him, gleaming in the light of the setting sun.

He glanced around him for anything he could use as a weapon. A loose rock, about the size of his fist, was balanced on the edge of the precipice. Could he use it to down the beast? He had little chance of getting the creature to land, and if it came close again its talons would rake him to shreds. He could pitch the stone at it, but if he missed – and there was a high probability that he would – his only weapon would be gone. He longed for his jump pack, to be able to take the battle to the air. If only...

The bird suddenly went into a dive, and he was left with no other choice. He could see the only way to defeat the creature was to risk his own life, to do something it wasn't expecting. Otherwise he was simply a sitting target. He dove for the loose rock, knowing that in doing so he would be putting himself directly into the path of the swooping beast.

He felt the thunder of its gargantuan wings before the talons struck him in the chest. The knife-like claws pierced his secondary heart, collapsed one lung and shattered at least three of his ribs as they impacted, skewering him completely. The talons erupted from his back with an accompanying spray of dark blood. He cried out in pain as the creature reversed its momentum and pulled away from the mountainside, dragging him across the ledge. His trailing fingers closed around the rock as he was lifted bodily into the air, trapped and unable to free himself from the creature's deadly embrace.

The roc shrieked in triumph, soaring higher and higher, its wings beating powerfully to compensate for his dead weight. He allowed himself to go limp, encouraging the creature to think that it had won, trusting that it would not drop him to his doom in favour of finding somewhere relatively safe in order to peck him apart and consume his organs.

For almost twenty minutes they swooped and dove through the air, rising higher, up towards the pinnacle of the mountain. He had not stirred during this time, despite the throbbing agony of his wounds, and despite the constant risk that the creature might decide to discard him like an unwanted rag doll at any moment, casting him down into the abyss.

He felt the beating of the bird's wings slow, and risked twisting his neck to peer around. They were soaring low over a wide ravine, a gully at the bottom of which a dribbling stream wound and bubbled down the side of the mountain. He judged the distance. It was still a risk, but he probably wouldn't get a better chance.

The bird cawed suddenly and twisted in the air, and he realised it must have felt him tense. Its grip loosened as it tried to pull its talons free from his chest

and his wounds erupted in fiery pain, but he reached up and grabbed its leg with his left hand, clinging on desperately as it tried to shake him free.

The bird went into a blind panic as he shifted his weight and unbalanced it, causing them to dip suddenly in the air. They turned, spiralling out of control, the beast's wings beating frantically as it tried to gain height, to no avail. Its other foot clawed at him in desperation, raking a talon across his face and opening a wide gash on his cheek. Blood sprayed, blinding him momentarily, but still he clung on.

Screeching, the roc twisted again, opening its jaws in order to snap at him, and he took his chance, lashing out with the rock and catching it hard across the side of its head.

The bird reeled, dipping low, disorientated. He struck again, and then again, and the bird lolled suddenly, finally becoming insensate. Its wings folded back, fluttering frantically in the wind, and then they were falling, plummeting out of the sky like a black and white drop pod careening towards the earth. The white raven and the black roc, both tumbling to their deaths.

There was nothing he could do. He had to trust that his instincts had been right, that he would survive the fall. Nevertheless, he braced himself for the impact as they dipped out of the sky.

Falling...

Falling... and then he was plunged into ice cold water, and his body, shocked, was attempting to draw breath as he was forced beneath the surface by the speed of the impact. Water was rushing up his nose, in his mouth, and the weight upon him was immense. He thrashed, feeling the wounds in his chest protesting, feeling the cold compress of the water inside him, clutching at his hearts.

He kicked, and surfaced, gasping for oxygen. His collapsed lung burned as he dragged desperately at the thin air. He swam to the bank, blinking the water out of his eyes. He glanced around urgently and was relieved to see the massive black bulk of the roc in the stream behind him, its broken wings buffeted back and forth by the ebb and flow of the water. Its head was lolling on the bank of the stream.

He took a moment to right himself, and then waded across to where it lay, still in the water. Its wet feathers shimmered in the dying light. He dropped to his haunches. The bird's chest still rose and fell with a rattling, dying wheeze.

He met its gaze and saw panic there. He, Cordae, this bloodied, pale figure, must have seemed like a vision of death itself to the dying beast. Its broken body spasmed suddenly as it made one final, desperate attempt to get away, and then,

as if realising the futility of the gesture, it flopped back and lay still, regarding him with calm resignation.

He reached out and ran a hand across the top of its head, and felt a sense of peace wash over him.

‘I honour your spirit, bird,’ he said, his voice low. ‘We go forward together. From this day on, we are kin.’ Then, with both hands, he reached down and snapped its neck.

‘Victory Aut Mortis!’ he bellowed in triumph, and the sound reflected off the walls of the ravine, startling a flock of small ravens that were watching him from a nearby bush. They took to the air, squawking as they wheeled like tiny shadows cast by the setting sun.

Cordae stood, hauling the corpse of the dead roc out of the water, grunting with the exertion. He hoisted its massive bulk up onto his shoulders, staggering slightly beneath the weight. The ragged wounds in his chest and face were already beginning to knit themselves together, staunching the tide of blood, and although he knew it was going to be a long and difficult climb back down the mountain with his burden, he relished the challenge. The hard work was already done, and besides, he knew that he now had the spirit of the bird to guide him.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

GEORGE MANN has written two Raven Guard audio dramas for the Black Library, *Helion Rain* and *Labyrinth of Sorrows*. He is the author of the Newbury & Hobbes steampunk mystery series and has written new adventures for both Sherlock Holmes and Doctor Who.

He lives in Grantham, UK, with his wife, children and rather large collection of books.



More Raven Guard stories from George Mann.

In *Helion Rain*, the world of Idos is plagued by ravening tyrannids. Into this maelstrom come the Raven Guard 4th Company, the warzone perfectly suited to their lightning-strike methods of combat.

Labyrinth of Sorrows sees the Raven Guard swoop back into action alongside their suspicious allies, the Brazen Minotaurs.

Download now from blacklibrary.com



BLACK LIBRARY

A BLACK LIBRARY PUBLICATION

**Published in 2012 by Black Library, Games Workshop Ltd.,
Willow Road, Nottingham, NG7 2WS, UK**

Cover design by Rachel Docherty

© Games Workshop Limited 2012. All rights reserved.

**Black Library, the Black Library logo, Games Workshop, the
Games Workshop logo and all associated marks, names,
characters, illustrations and images from the Warhammer
universe are either ®, TM and/or © Games Workshop Ltd 2011,
variably registered in the UK and other countries around the
world. All rights reserved.**

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

ISBN 978-0-85787-667-6

**No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a
retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means,
electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise
except as expressly permitted under license from the publisher.**

**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 the Black Library on the internet at

blacklibrary.com

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

www.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.