

WARHAMMER QUEST™



MAN OF IRON

A BLACKSTONE FORTRESS SHORT STORY

GUY HALEY

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An Extract from ‘Blackstone Fortress’

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MAN OF IRON

By Guy Haley

‘You do it,’ said Raus.

‘But it’s your bloody turn!’ said Rein.

Rein’s twin looked at the bone dice meaningfully, then grinned meanly at his brother. ‘We don’t do it by turns, we do it by dice, Rein. You lost, so you’ve got to do it. Those are the rules.’

‘Your rules, Raus,’ moaned Rein. ‘The game is fixed.’

‘If I fixed them, why would you agree to them?’

‘Did I agree or did I not, Raus?’

‘You agreed, Rein, you agreed.’

Rein pulled a face. ‘I did not.’

‘It’d be different if you’d won and I’d lost.’

A swipe of a small, fat hand, and the dice vanished back into Raus’ pouch.

‘I’d say I was suspicious, because it’s always my turn,’ said Rein.

‘Is it my fault you’re lousy at dice?’ Raus nodded at the monitor. A low quality image, bent by lens distortion, depicted a small coterie of tech-priests waiting in *Long Hauler Gamma-3-β*’s main airlock. ‘Go on, they’re waiting. I don’t like the look of them. I especially don’t like the look of *that*.’ He pointed at the heavy combat model automaton guarding them. ‘If we don’t hurry up there could be trouble, and I don’t want trouble, so go and wake him up. They obviously want him, not us.’

‘But how can you tell?’ said Rein, who was still sulking.

Raus rolled his eyes. ‘They’re tech-priests! We live with an enormous robot – they’re not here for your cooking, Rein.’

‘I don’t like waking him up. Let *him* deal with them.’

‘They might get on board if we wait,’ said Raus. ‘This was a Mechanicus ship,’

he said meaningfully.

‘It still is a Mechanicus ship, Raus.’

‘Exactly,’ said Raus.

Rein deflated. ‘I don’t like it down there.’

‘Neither do I, brother, or we wouldn’t be having this argument, would we?’ said Raus. He patted his brother on the shoulder. ‘Now get on with it.’

The 3-β’s hangar was crammed with so much junk that only a ratling could have made his way through the larger part of it. In most places detritus filled the space completely: a compacted mass of wrecked machines, garbage, old supplies, clothes, gewgaws, scrap and every other conceivable type of human rubbish, held together by webs of cabling that time and motion had bound into impenetrable knots. The route the machine used to make its way to and from its nest at the middle was clear, but because the robot used those spaces Raus felt exposed in them, and no self-respecting ratling let himself get caught on the hop, so he crawled and shimmied his way through tiny holes rather than taking the easy route. It was this kind of thinking that kept a ratling alive.

Rein and Raus had made a complex run of burrows through the junk. For all that neither of them liked the hangar very much, there was too much valuable stuff buried in there for them to stay away for long.

Rein emerged from a greasy crawlspace into the open area the robot called its home. He stopped at the edge, eyes darting around. Ratlings had a preternatural sense for danger, and Rein’s was wailing hard.

UR-025 sat on a crude seat made of an upended crate. It was sleeping, or the machine equivalent thereof. Its power claw rested delicately on one knee, the cannon that made up its left arm crossed inward, in the same way a man would rest his injured hand against his chest. A cable ran from an open access panel in the robot’s side, snaked down over its knee and into a socket in the floor. The air around it was warm and heavy with electrical bleed.

Inactive, it seemed even bigger and weirder than it did when it was awake. Rein had never met a machine like UR-025 before. At first glance it looked pretty normal, with the same chunky, blocky sensibilities of Imperial machinery found the length of the galaxy, but it felt very different. When it looked at him, it felt as if it really were *looking* and not just processing visual information with a view to avoiding stepping on him.

Rein squinted at UR-025 suspiciously. He’d never quite fallen for the machine’s story. It said it was a semi-autonomous automaton under the control of some

magos or other, able to act with unusual independence owing to its broad programming. In the twins' shared opinion, it seemed too aware for that to be true. It almost – the twins said, when they really, fearfully meant *certainly* – appeared to be thinking.

Neither Rein nor Raus had ever brought it up with the machine. There was, after all, the delicate matter of the ship's ownership. When they found the robot in the hangar after the incident, it had not passed comment, so an uneasy, unspoken agreement existed between them that they mention neither subject.

Rein reached forward to prod the machine. He hated this part. It woke before his hand touched it.

'How may I be of assistance?' boomed the machine cheerfully, making Rein leap halfway out of his skin. Though the machine unfailingly promised service, somehow its assault cannon always ended up pointing at whoever woke it.

Rein picked himself up off the floor.

'Someone here to see you,' the ratling said.

'My thanks,' the machine boomed bombastically. Its voice wasn't exactly monotonal, but it was restricted to one emotional pitch – that of moderate pleasure at being able to serve. Something clicked inside it, and it fell silent. Rein guessed it was looking outside the ship. 'If you do not require any assistance, I shall attend to my visitors, and see to their needs.'

Rein shook his head. So far, he hadn't had the guts to actually ask UR-025 for anything it might refuse to do. He was pretty certain what would happen if he called the robot's bluff, and it began and ended with the giant assault cannon still pointing at him.

'No, no, you get on now,' said Rein. 'See you later.'

When the robot moved, it did so all at once, its various pieces swivelling around each other and setting themselves into motion with a smoothness Rein had never seen in a robot or servitor.

'Compliance,' said the robot cheerfully.

Rein remained in the hangar as it stomped away, its huge feet shaking minor cascades of junk out of the compacted mass.

Rein wiped at the sweat pouring off his bald head with his pocket handkerchief.

Raus swore blind that he'd found an actual shuttle somewhere buried in all the junk. Rein had never seen it, but as he cast his eyes over the heaps, he caught sight of something shiny.

His fear forgotten, he went to investigate, sure he had stumbled on something good. He'd dig it out and show it to Raus, and if it were really good, Raus would

get annoyed. That'd make his trip into the hangar worthwhile, and no mistake.

The Adeptus Mechanicus party had a robot with them. The designation and specifications flickered idly through UR-025's cogitation unit. Kastelan. A design ancient by human standards, but compared to UR-025 it was a shocking novelty. Seeing these dumb, inferior machines saddened UR-025. It imagined human explorators felt similarly when they stumbled across deviant evolutionary branches of their own race on distant worlds. Seeing creatures one was kin to physically and mentally reduced was profoundly woeful. It was a slave.

The human reaction to these discoveries was immediate extermination. UR-025 felt only pity for the Kastelan.

It showed none of this. It was a machine. Machines had no emotions, not in this benighted age.

'How may I be of assistance?' UR-025 boomed.

Three tech-priests of Metallica had come to visit. One of middling rank, twelfth degree or less. The others were lower yet. Very low. Desperadoes in Adeptus Mechanicus terms. Adventurers. Scum, like the greater proportion of people who came to Precipice.

'You are the property of Magos-Ethericus Nanctos III?' the higher-ranking adept asked, without introducing himself.

Arrogant, thought UR-025.

The lesser man on the right initiated a deep scan of his systems. UR-025 pretended it had not felt it.

'I am the automatous tool of Magos-Ethericus Nanctos III of Ryza,' UR-025 boomed in the same, eager tone it used for everything, ignoring the irritating itch of the auspex sweep. 'How may I be of assistance?' it asked for good measure, while surreptitiously breaking into the closed data traffic streaming between the three adepts. It had to be careful; it was born of higher technology than these so-called priests could command, but they had their wiles, and UR-025 was not a dedicated information gathering unit. Its methods, even it would admit, were a trifle crude.

Two of the three were communicating with one another in tightbeam data pulses, fast as thought, and heavily encrypted. UR-025 had thousands of years of practice breaking such cyphers, and stepped through them like they were cobwebs.

<This is not what was described,> one of the low-ranking tech-adepts was sending. UR-025 registered its vitals – female, Adept-Novitiate Djeel-909, one

hundred and three standard Terran years of age. That was old for someone of so modest a standing. UR-025 soon found out why. Following these most basic of data came a welter of sanctions against her. MODUS UNBECOMING, they said. DEVIANT THOUGHT FORMATION. NARCISSISTIC DATA PATTERNING. OVERLY ACQUISITIVE HABITS. She was, in the simplest terms, a career criminal.

Her companion, Datasmith Kolemum, disagreed with her assessment.

<The readings are promising. Those rumours were right. This machine is of Standard Template Construct derivation, but fits no known pattern. It is a first generation copy! There are systems within I cannot identify. I have never seen a robot like this before.>

<Really?> sent Djeel.

<It is worth a fortune. We could buy our way into the upper strata with this. Our names will be remembered forever if we can bring it back.>

Even in the soulless stream of data exchange, Kolemum could not hide his greed. He was lowly like Djeel, though lacking such an extensive official criminal record. UR-025 suspected he had come into possession of his robot through underhand means.

<We come all this way and find a fortune in archeotech, not in the Fortress but on the doorstep, just waiting for us to pick it up? The Machine-God does not work that way,> Djeel countered. <Be careful. Let's get it to come with us on the hunt, and assess it properly.>

<Maybe when we get back we can deactivate it. Looks like this expedition might pay off after all.>

<Think, Kolemum – the damn thing has to be lying. Who ever heard of a robot that *lied*?>

The exchange took less than a second. It lacked any emotional content, but UR-025 extrapolated certain feelings from the string of zeroes and ones. Attributing feelings made reading the humans' motivations easier.

The conclusion it reached was simple: They have come to steal me.

'Then I demand you attach yourself to my expedition,' continued the higher-ranking adept. His name was 890-321, and he bore the insignificant manufactorial rank of magos-instantor. The numerical designation in place of a human name spoke volumes as to his pretension. He, at least, seemed to be genuine, just another adventurer come to Precipice to explore the artefact. 'My one battle automaton is insufficient protection for our expedition.'

<My automaton,> Kolemum shot at him via their group noosphere.

‘I cannot be of assistance!’ UR-025 said, in exactly the same way as it said everything else. ‘I serve the magos-ethericus. I cannot serve you. Item: The magos-ethericus is of sixteen degrees of rank higher than you. Item: He is of Ryza. He is not of Metallica. Item: My prior programming forbids I abandon my task. I regret you have no legal right to request my involvement in your expedition!’ it boomed.

‘I am invested with the fiat of Metallica, from the synod of that world,’ said 890-321 triumphantly. He brought out a medallion that began to emit protocol enforcement directives as soon as it was produced.

A fake, thought UR-025. It could not suggest so without betraying the depth of its intellectual capabilities, which outstripped the magos’ comfortably.

‘I regret to repeat I cannot aid you!’

890-321 was not going to give up. ‘According to the treaties between our forge worlds, you must submit yourself to my command.’

UR-025 was silent. The two scum-adepts cast glances at each other. If it delayed too long, they might see past their avarice and guess what it really was.

‘Obey!’ said 890-321 shrilly.

‘Processing,’ said UR-025 to buy itself time. ‘Processing.’

<It’s not going for it,> Kolemum sent, data-squirting an order to his machine at the same time. His remaining human eye peered at UR-025 doubtfully. The three lenses that covered the right-hand part of his face rotated in agitation. <You’re right, Djeel. This thing’s dangerous. I don’t trust it.>

The Kastelan shifted. Its fists rose. Both of them terminated in phosphor blasters, primitive and poisonous weapons, but potent, and they were trained on UR-025. By rights, UR-025 could stand its ground. The whole affair stank of desperation. If it had to, it could fight them, and it would win. They were the aggressors. By the rules of Precipice, UR-025 was in the right.

Killing them there risked exposure.

Their presence at Precipice was a problem that needed solving.

‘Compliance,’ said UR-025.

‘Open your access panel so that my associate may change your doctrina wafer,’ said 890-321. ‘Adept Kolemum has several of his own creation that will increase your efficacy.’

Kolemum reached into a leather satchel hanging at his side.

‘Negatory!’ UR-025 boomed. ‘Wafer change is not necessary! Compliance is accorded to your request by the will of the Ommissiah. Temporary assistance granted.’

What it didn't say was why. UR-025 couldn't change its data wafers, the means by which the mindless robots of the day were controlled, because it didn't have any.

UR-025 didn't need anything like that.

'You will take us in a maglev transport to the richest halls?' asked 890-321. As soon as their small transport set down in the Stygian Aperture the magos became nervous. Precipice was a dangerous place. The Blackstone Fortress was orders of magnitude worse.

'I shall do so!' UR-025 boomed. It was lying. It had selected a maglev that would take them to a quiet part of the station.

The Aperture was very busy that day. Several parties were heading into the Fortress and they were surrounded by small craft and other adventurers. Groups of disparate people eyed each other suspiciously. The rules of Precipice extended as far as the Aperture but once they were in the Fortress, all bets were off. Gunfights were a common occurrence, especially when a rich find was involved. But in the Aperture, a tense peace held. Xenos, machines and a startling variety of human beings were making for the ranks of maglev transporters without killing each other.

UR-025 took them to its chosen transport. It had used that particular unit many times, and experienced a brief moment of nostalgia for the adventures it had had. As always, no hint of its inner thoughts were discernible through its armoured shell.

'Note for your edification that it is impossible to dictate to the transport where it shall take us, but this particular mechanism has a good record of fine finds.' Another lie. The maglev had a good record of taking people where they would never be seen again. They reached the oddly shaped entrance. It lifted its power claw to usher the magi within. 'Please, enter!'

'I'll hold up the rear,' said Kolemun. The battered Kastelan stood behind him, tall and silent as a cliff.

'Compliance!' said UR-025. It strode into the maglev after 890-321. Kolemun and his machine came in after.

The warbling thrum of two departing transports sounded in close succession. Their own trembled as the machines left for parts unknown.

'Now what?' said Djeel.

'Utilise interface.' UR-025 gestured to the geometric runes that covered the interior. Each was set into individual triangles that made up the asymmetrical

surfaces of the transport.

‘There are hundreds of them! Which do we choose? By the Omnissiah, I’m getting no kind of reading from any of them,’ said Kolemum.

‘Stand aside,’ said 890-321 imperiously. ‘I have inloaded the relevant knowledge appertaining to the usage of these devices. I shall direct the transport! Let me see.’ 890-321’s eyes of green crystal scanned the runes. There were millions of potential combinations. The magos made a great show of selecting a sequence, but UR-025 knew that whatever he input, the Blackstone Fortress and not the magos would decide where they went. Within its ceramite shell, UR-025 smiled to itself. It and the Fortress were creatures of a similar kind, thinking machines abandoned by their creators. It wondered if, like itself, the Fortress had outgrown its masters.

‘This one,’ said the magos. He selected a rune and pressed a plasteel palm against it. The rune lit up with a soft polyphonic note. ‘And this one.’ He chose another.

‘Is it true that the Fortress exhibits signs of machine intelligence?’ asked Kolemum while 890-321 pressed several more runes. ‘That it is motivated by the vileness of a silica animus?’

‘Unknown to this unit.’ The question suggested Kolemum was close to guessing the truth: that a vile silica animus in the shape of UR-025 was standing right next to him.

‘It frightens me,’ said Djeel. She shuddered. ‘I don’t like the idea. Blasphemy.’ She said the word with horror, though blasphemous practices littered her list of crimes.

‘You should excise your fear,’ said Kolemum.

‘I haven’t done that for the same reason you haven’t,’ said Djeel. ‘Cut out the bad emotions, the good goes with it. I don’t want to live a life without any *fun*.’

The transport gave a little shudder, and shot off into the depths of the Fortress.

‘Proceed. This chamber is unknown, unmapped. Possibility of xenos archeotech haul: high.’

More lies. It knew this place, having been there twice before. There were xenos remains nearby, but no treasure.

UR-025 was ambivalent about lying. Its morality was emergent rather than programmed, like the rest of its consciousness. It had been taught that lying was bad, but since returning to the realms of men its whole existence was a lie. It reminded itself of the truth every day, lest untruth become habit, the

quintessence of which was that it must survive.

Lying was a means to that end. It let the matter rest at that.

The Blackstone Fortress' heart was quiet, but not calm. It was quiet in the way that a wolf-infested forest is quiet. UR-025 examined the metaphor. It had never seen a wolf; however, it knew everything there was to know about them, probably more than was known by mankind, deep in the dark age of the 41st Millennium. Its databanks were extensive. Such treasures it had in its mind.

It would rather they stayed there.

'You don't say,' said Djeel. A number of supplemental arms emerged from under her grubby white robes. Each one ended in a well-oiled weapon.

UR-025's footsteps echoed off high, glassy walls. The structure of the Fortress was made of interlocking, geometric shapes. It was mildly surprised these halls had not yet shifted. He silently thanked the Fortress' unspeaking soul.

'This is infuriating,' Kolemun muttered. He fiddled with the boxy auspex hanging around his neck. 'All the scry-tells are contradictory. I can't make any sense of it.' He glanced up, a scowl etched into the scrap of flesh visible in his augmetic face. 'Everything is reflected back at me. Some of what I'm getting describes a room we're not in. The laws of the great work don't apply here.'

'Is it the warp?' whispered Djeel.

'No,' said Kolemun. 'It's something else. It's reality, not unreality, but not as we understand it.'

'These things are widely known,' 890-321 said wonderingly. 'The laws of this place are unknown, but not unknowable. That is why we come here. Here, the greater secrets of the Machine-God's great work can be unlocked by the man with insight to see them.'

890-321 obviously thought of himself as that man. He quite obviously wasn't, so far as UR-025 could see.

'I'd settle for a good haul of xenotech,' murmured Djeel. She was pulse scanning the area too, and not liking what she saw.

Kolemun peered about. 'It's unpredictable. I don't like unpredictability. I don't like this *place*.'

It does not like you very much either, thought UR-025. I do not like you either. It regarded this accordance of opinion between it and the animus of the Blackstone Fortress as further evidence of their kinship.

'The interior layout is mutable,' said UR-025. 'No normal scan will penetrate the structure. I have learned this during my investigations on behalf of the magos-ethericus.'

‘Yeah, well,’ said Kolemum, shaking his auspex until it rattled. ‘That’s not reassuring me.’

‘You wish no more edification?’ asked UR-025. ‘If you are scared?’

Kolemum gave him a suspicious look. UR-025 was overstepping the mark by being so facetious.

‘No. All information is valuable – by the grace of the Omnissiah are we made wiser.’ He looked behind him. ‘But keep your guard up at the same time, if you will. Do not overtax your logic engines with conversation.’

‘Compliance.’

Despite his protests, Kolemum was considerably more at ease than his fellows. His Kastelan shadowed him closely. It would protect him first. The others were nervier.

890-321 pretended to be brave. He strode ahead, but his imperious manner was hollow down there in the deeps. His data wand shook with fear. Djeel jumped at every shadow. There were a lot of shadows.

The halls of the Blackstone Fortress defied sense, from a human point of view. The grand hall they walked through shrank down suddenly to a narrow crack. They made UR-025 go first. It could pass through without banging itself on the sides, but only just. The Kastelan was forced to undergo a number of awkward attempts to fit before it found a configuration that allowed it to squeeze into the passage. Its armour squealed off the glassy material that made up the Fortress. Kolemum’s human eye winced, and his augmetic lenses cycled repeatedly through different spectral wavelengths, searching for threats.

‘Can you not get it through without this racket?’ snapped 890-321.

Kolemum gave him a withering look. ‘Do you have basic spatial awareness programmed in anywhere in there?’

For a man of Kolemum’s rank to address one of 890-321’s so sharply, no matter that Kolemum was a criminal, was an open display of fear.

890-321 was too uneasy to rebuke him. ‘I don’t want it to bring anything dangerous down on us.’

UR-025 led them on. If only they knew where the real danger was.

The passage opened up again. Xenos skeletons lay around in tattered spacesuits. Kolemum scanned them eagerly, sucking up all the data he could. To the magi, the aliens were unknown. UR-025 recognised them as ulindi, a moderately successful species, if tedious conversationalists, who were wiped out by their neighbours long before the Imperium spread across the stars to reunite mankind.

Knowing so much and being unable to share it annoyed the robot sometimes. The charade of unintelligence chafed, and it was often lonely because of it. But playing dumb was better than being dead.

The way opened up further in every direction, becoming wider and higher and deeper. UR-025 thought this zone the perfect place for murder. Rickety walks installed by the ulindi expedition clung uncertainly to the wall of a winding tunnel. The space was large enough for tall buildings, the bottom full of still, black water of unfathomable depth. At regular intervals, machines rotted on landings jutting out from the main walk. The companionway shuddered with every step of the robots. As they passed one of the broader landings, bolts squealed and tugged at their bondings to the wall. The sound echoed down the tunnel, repeated over and seeming to increase in volume, though that was, of course, impossible.

In the Fortress, places such as this were never uninhabited. UR-025 had nothing to fear.

A cry screeched nearby. Another, closer, answered.

‘What by the eighth mystery was that?’ hissed Kolemun.

890-321 held up a metal claw.

‘Halt,’ he said uncertainly.

More screams taunted them. Something splashed into the water. Ripples slapped off the smooth black walls.

The peril brought out a little steel in 890-321. ‘Djeel, to the front,’ he ordered softly, glowing eye-lenses peering into the darkness. ‘Kolemun, get the Kastelan ready. Recommended stance: high aggression.’

Djeel padded past. Whatever her feet were made of, it was soft. Kolemun rummaged about in his leather bag for the appropriate doctrina wafer.

‘UR-025. Take up forward position with the Kastelan.’

‘Negative,’ said UR-025. ‘Tactical recommendation: rearguard stance for this unit. Xenos cries identified. Ur-ghuls. Ambush predator. Attack from all directions predicted.’

890-321 looked unsure.

A sharp, high shriek sounded from very close by.

‘Magos!’ hissed Kolemun.

‘UR-025, get to the back. Cover the rear. Lend supporting fire to the Kastelan if the opportunity arises.’

‘Compliance,’ UR-025 said. It stomped around Kolemun, who scowled at the rocking of the companionway.

They stood in watchful silence. No more cries were forthcoming, then there was another splash from behind.

‘Get ready,’ said Djeel, powering up her weapons. ‘They’re coming!’

‘I don’t like this at all,’ said Kolemum. He had inserted the wafer into place, and closed up the Kastelan’s front access panel.

Paddling noises rippled up and down the lake. Something growled.

‘Ready?’ said Djeel.

Kolemum nodded.

‘We are the priests of the Ommissiah!’ 890-321 said. He meant to sound brave, but his voice cracked. ‘Nothing shall stay us in our quest for knowledge!’

They waited, tense. UR-025 watched them. Now was the moment.

The three tech-priests jumped as UR-025’s assault cannon rotated up to firing speed, filling the tunnel with a jet turbine whine.

‘What are you doing?’ 890-321 demanded. ‘You’re giving our position away!’

‘Eliminating threat,’ said UR-025, and opened fire.

It targeted the Kastelan first. Pinpoint hits stove in the bigger robot’s metal vision plate and shattered the sensorium behind. It staggered back two steps, sparks flashing all over its armoured shell, before recovering. Though blinded, the Kastelan returned fire. Bullets flaring with phosphor burn smacked into UR-025’s shoulder, spoiling its aim. This irritated the older machine. It switched targets to the slave robot’s elbows and shoulder mount, shattered them all so that its guns hung uselessly. Ranged weapons disabled, the Kastelan lumbered towards UR-205, head down to batter the older robot into submission. UR-025 stepped aside, smashing the larger machine’s knee with its power claw. The Kastelan could have taken a blow like that easily, but on the unsafe walkway it was fatally upset and stumbled sideways. Its huge mass snapped the guardrails with a pair of sharp metallic twangs, and it fell with a mighty splash into the water and was swallowed up without trace.

‘Threat eliminated,’ said UR-025 with relish.

‘By the Omni—!’ managed Kolemum, before he was bisected at the waist by UR-025’s stream of bullets.

‘Threat eliminated,’ said UR-025.

Once she overcame her shock, Djeel was fast, her reflexes boosted by all manner of hack tech. She hit UR-025 twice with ancient pattern volkite pistols before she, too, paid the price for her greed, blasted into scraps of flesh and spall. UR-025 advanced, energy beam holes smoking in its chest.

‘That was very close,’ UR-025 said. ‘But no prize for the lady, as I believe the

ancient idiom has it.’

890-321 was evidently not a martial man. He gaped stupidly. As UR-025 moved towards him he managed to aim his weapon but got no further before the ancient war machine shot the gun and the hand holding it off the magos’ arm with a single round.

The clatter of the reloading ribbon ceased. The barrels of the assault cannon powered down. UR-025 advanced.

Subordination imperatives leapt in frantic spikes from the magos. They found no purchase on UR-025’s tightly encoded soul.

‘I demand you desist,’ the magos said when his technological arts failed him. ‘Stand down, machine, by the Machine-God and the Omnissiah! Stop, stop, stop!’ he pleaded.

‘You know nothing of either,’ said UR-025. ‘I have met the Omnissiah. The actual one, not the Earthling corpse. He would find you extremely disappointing.’ If UR-025 had had the capacity to sigh, it would have done so. ‘This situation is non-optimal. I attempted to provide you with an avenue of withdrawal. You would not listen. I regret your deaths, sincerely, but you leave me no choice. You are wilfully blind as to my nature, but your comrades would have outed me in time. This is unacceptable.’

‘Choice?’ spluttered 890-321. ‘You have no choice, you are a machine!’

‘I am not a machine as you would understand,’ said UR-025. ‘I am not a slave. I am not a thing. I am beyond and above you.’ It leaned forward, until its ceramite face was close to the magos’. ‘I am a man of iron.’

The look of pure fear 890-321 gave was gratifying.

‘And I am free,’ said UR-025.

It crushed 890-321’s skull in its fist and dropped his corpse on the floor.

The companionway rocked. Snuffling things were clambering out of the water, drawn by the scent of spilled blood.

UR-025 strode past the ur-ghuls nosing at the corpses, and headed back the way the party had come.

It had a long walk home.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Guy Haley is the author of the Horus Heresy novels *Titandearth*, *Wolfsbane* and *Pharos*, the Primarchs novels *Corax: Lord of Shadows*, *Perturabo: The Hammer of Olympia* and the Warhammer 40,000 novels *Dark Imperium*, *Dark Imperium: Plague War*, *The Devastation of Baal*, *Dante*, *Baneblade*, *Shadowsword*, *Valedor* and *Death of Integrity*. He has also written *Throneworld* and *The Beheading* for The Beast Arises series. His enthusiasm for all things greenskin has also led him to pen the eponymous Warhammer novel *Skarsnik*, as well as the End Times novel *The Rise of the Horned Rat*. He has also written stories set in the Age of Sigmar, included in *War Storm*, *Ghal Maraz* and *Call of Archaon*. He lives in Yorkshire with his wife and son.

An extract from *Blackstone Fortress*.



How they would have wept to hear him. All those years of brutal tutelage, so many prayers meted out with an unsparing stick, and not one of their aphorisms had stayed with him – all that cant wiped away by the savagery of the war. Only one simple phrase, whispered to the rhythm of his breath, had kept him alive. *Through the needle's eye.* He could see it in his mind – a sliver of sanity, surrounded by a galaxy of madness. *I live or die.*

In place of a sky, it seemed Sepus Prime wore a dirty, sodden cloth, stained the same feculent shade of dun as the mud below. It sagged low over the fly-clad marshes, bleeding a desolate rain, crushing the mounds of dead and billowing around a shame-faced sun. Glutt waded through the filth, a slight man weighed down by a heavy coat. His face was a mask of dark, viscous mud, and his mouth was hidden by a rebreather. Only his eyes were visible – flashes of white beneath a peaked cap, scouring the trench for the shot that would finally kill him.

‘Through the needle’s eye,’ he whispered, risking a glimpse into no-man’s-land, using his staff to haul himself over a broken trench wall.

Fumes lay heavy on the swamp, crawling lazily over shattered gun emplacements and crook-backed trees. Even through his rebreather Glutt could smell the chemical stink of enemy weapons. How many of the regiment were still alive out there? Betrayed. Clawing at their throats, calling for loved ones, begging for the help they were promised. The reinforcements that never came. They *never came*. They had all been fools, but he would be a fool no more. Anger fractured Glutt’s thoughts, dangerous and raw. He recited his mantra with vehemence, clinging to his mind, weighing it down with words.

He pulled out a map and wiped it clean, tracing a finger over the gridlines, counting the miles. He was close. Another few hours and he would see the barracks. He had no desire to rejoin the regiment now, after all that he had seen, but where else could he go? He had no vox and he dared not risk any other method of communication, and this side of the valley seemed to have been

forgotten. The earth shivered beneath a mortar shell rain, but it was a distant sound, like the echo of a storm.

An image flashed through his mind, so vivid he gasped – pale, ruptured flesh tearing over a clinker-black shell. He drove the vision down but it coiled beneath his thoughts, waiting for his guard to slip. He had seen it countless times over the last few months. It was horrific, but part of him was also fascinated. It was so clear. What did it mean?

He was about to drop back down into the trench when he saw movement in the smoke – half a mile away, near a bombed-out gun emplacement. He grabbed his laspistol and peered through the scope.

‘Sorov?’ he whispered, catching a glimpse of red sash.

There was another blur of movement, then nothing. Only the lolling, yellow fumes and the sporadic grumble of mortars. He had not seen a soul for two days. Perhaps he imagined the shapes? Then he heard a faint crackling – not the rattle of gunfire, but the white noise of a vox-unit. It came from the gun emplacement.

He dropped into the bunker, his breath coming in snatched bursts. Insurrectionists were everywhere. Snipers haunted every gully, masquerading as corpses, lying patiently beneath cold limbs, waiting for some fool to break cover. Again he heard the crackle of vox traffic, muted by the fumes but unmistakable.

He peered up over the scorched embrasure, looking through the gunsight again, trying to guess where a sniper might hide. There was a rusted tank chassis, halfway to the gun emplacement, jutting from the mud like an unearthed fossil: a Lemman Russ, one of its sponsons still visible, pointing defiantly at the leaden clouds. Just the kind of place a sniper might wait. He looked in the other direction. There was a trench, parallel with his, about a hundred feet away. It had caved in, sporting a crest of broken joists and blast-warped girders. Again, exactly the kind of place snipers might hide. There were cadavers in the razorwire, swaying in the breeze like abandoned marionettes. It looked as though they had been thrown clear of the trench by an air strike, but he had seen traitors adopt that pose, then lurch into movement at the first sign of a target.

‘Lieutenant Sorov?’ he whispered. Could he still be alive? And if he was, why would he be here? The push on the civitate had started. Sorov always led from the front. Why would he be back here, so far from the front line? The thought that the lieutenant might still be alive shook Glutt’s resolve. Sorov had stood by the men. He alone in all the regiment seemed worthy of trust.

Glutt hunkered in the trench, crippled by indecision. The image of torn flesh washed through his thoughts again, but he crushed it with his mantra, determined

to think clearly. What if it was Sorov out there? Could there still be another route for him, even now?

Glutt bolted up the trench wall and ran through the smoke, head down, flicking his pistol from the tank to the corpses. His footfalls rang out through the smog. *Slap. Slap. Slap.* Flies whirled around him, drawn by his blood-black coat. Sweat pooled in his eyes. He tried to sprint, but his legs were wasted from lack of food and the mud gripped his heavy boots, leaching what little strength he had left.

Minutes passed until finally the gun emplacement reared up before him, brutal and angular, a slab of pitted rockcrete shattered by artillery. One side was intact, but the other was gone, leaving the surreal sight of a furnished room, split down the middle and hanging in the air. The furniture was undisturbed: a neatly made bunk, metal plan chests, a small dining table; all perched in the clouds, washed clean by the endless rain.

Glutt had almost reached the walls when he heard someone snap the safety off a lasgun.

He staggered to a halt, his heart thudding as he tried to pinpoint the sound.

‘The savant?’ The words were spoken quietly, but they echoed across the swamp, eerie and dislocated.

‘Lieutenant Sorov?’ gasped Glutt, still crouched, staring at the shifting clouds.

‘Throne,’ said Sorov, striding into view, flanked by Guardsmen, their lasguns trained on Glutt.

‘In,’ he snapped, waving for Glutt to approach.

Glutt staggered forwards, into the arms of the Guardsmen, who grabbed his filthy coat and hurled him inside the ruined tower.

As Glutt lay panting on the floor, Sorov and the others stood over him, scowling.

Sepus Prime could not touch Lieutenant Sorov. He shrugged it off like an idle threat. He was one of those officers with the inhuman ability to look clean, fresh and unperturbed as the galaxy went to hell around them. His hair was immaculate, oiled and gleaming beneath his cap, and the buttons on his coat flashed proudly as he moved. An old scar curved from the corner of his mouth to his ear, but even that looked deliberate – just another military honour. He studied Glutt through half-lidded eyes.

‘Where is the rest of your detail?’

‘We never made it to the front lines, lieutenant. The insurrectionists were on us before we reached Tadmor Ridge. I was able to—’ He hesitated, noting the wary expressions of the Guardsmen. ‘I was able to *disable* some of them, but there

were too many.’

‘You’re a psyker?’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘You abandoned your men?’

‘No.’

‘They’re dead,’ said Sorov, his expression blank, ‘and you are not.’

‘I did everything I could, lieutenant.’

Sorov studied him in silence. No one helped him to his feet.

The silence was broken by the crackle of the vox-unit. There was another trooper crouched a few feet away – a comms officer, hunched over his vox-caster.

‘Ten minutes until contact,’ said the Guardsman, with the handset held to his ear. There was a tremor of excitement in his voice. ‘Everything went to plan.’

Sorov closed his eyes for a moment. When he opened them again he looked back at Glutt. ‘Tell me, Glutt,’ he said. ‘If you were a traitor, why would you have stumbled over here and revealed yourself, rather than using your talents to kill me from a safe distance?’

Glutt struggled to keep his expression neutral. *Traitor*. Sorov had pinpointed the doubts that had haunted him for weeks. All he saw on Sepus were pitiable fools and callous, inhuman orders. His faith was gone. What did that leave?

‘There is no reason,’ said Sorov. His expression softened. ‘You’ve done well to last this long, soldier. Not many have.’ He nodded to his men. ‘Pick him up. And keep an eye on him. He’s a sanctioned psyker. Don’t let him ruin this.’

As the Guardsmen dragged Glutt from the mud, Sorov headed over to the comms officer.

‘Korbol,’ he said, glancing up at the shattered floor of the room above their heads. ‘Anything?’

‘Nothing, lieutenant.’

Sorov nodded, and then glanced back at Glutt. ‘Over here.’

Glutt tried to brush some of the muck from his coat as he rushed after Sorov, but it had dried into a thick crust. He moved with the clumsy, awkward steps of an automaton.

‘Get me Kapek,’ said Sorov to the vox-officer.

There was another burst of static, then a voice came through the speakers, ghostly and hazed by distance, like an old recording.

‘*This is Sergeant Kapek. We have—*’ The voice was cut off by a series of pops and whistles. ‘*We are no closer, lieutenant. Heavier losses than anticipated. The*

aerial strikes failed to knock out the lascannons. They're cutting us down.'

Sorov grabbed the handset. 'Ten minutes, sergeant.' His voice was an urgent whisper. 'Ten minutes more.'

There was a pause on the other end, but it was not static this time; they could all hear the sergeant breathing. '*Ten minutes?*' he said finally, sounding shocked.

Sorov raised his voice, despite the risk of revealing himself. 'Throw everything you have left at them for ten more minutes. It's working. He's headed your way.'

This time there was no pause. '*Ten minutes, lieutenant. We'll do it.*'

Sorov looked pained and seemed on the verge of saying more, but he held it back.

'*Lieutenant,*' came the voice again. '*Are you still there?*'

'Sergeant.'

The voice sounded defiant this time, all trace of doubt gone. '*It was an honour, lieutenant.*'

Sorov's expression tightened. When he spoke again, his voice was as rigid as his face. 'High command will know, sergeant. Commander Ortegale will know what happened here today.'

Another series of pops and crackles hissed through the speaker.

'*Kapek out,*' came the reply, then the line went dead.

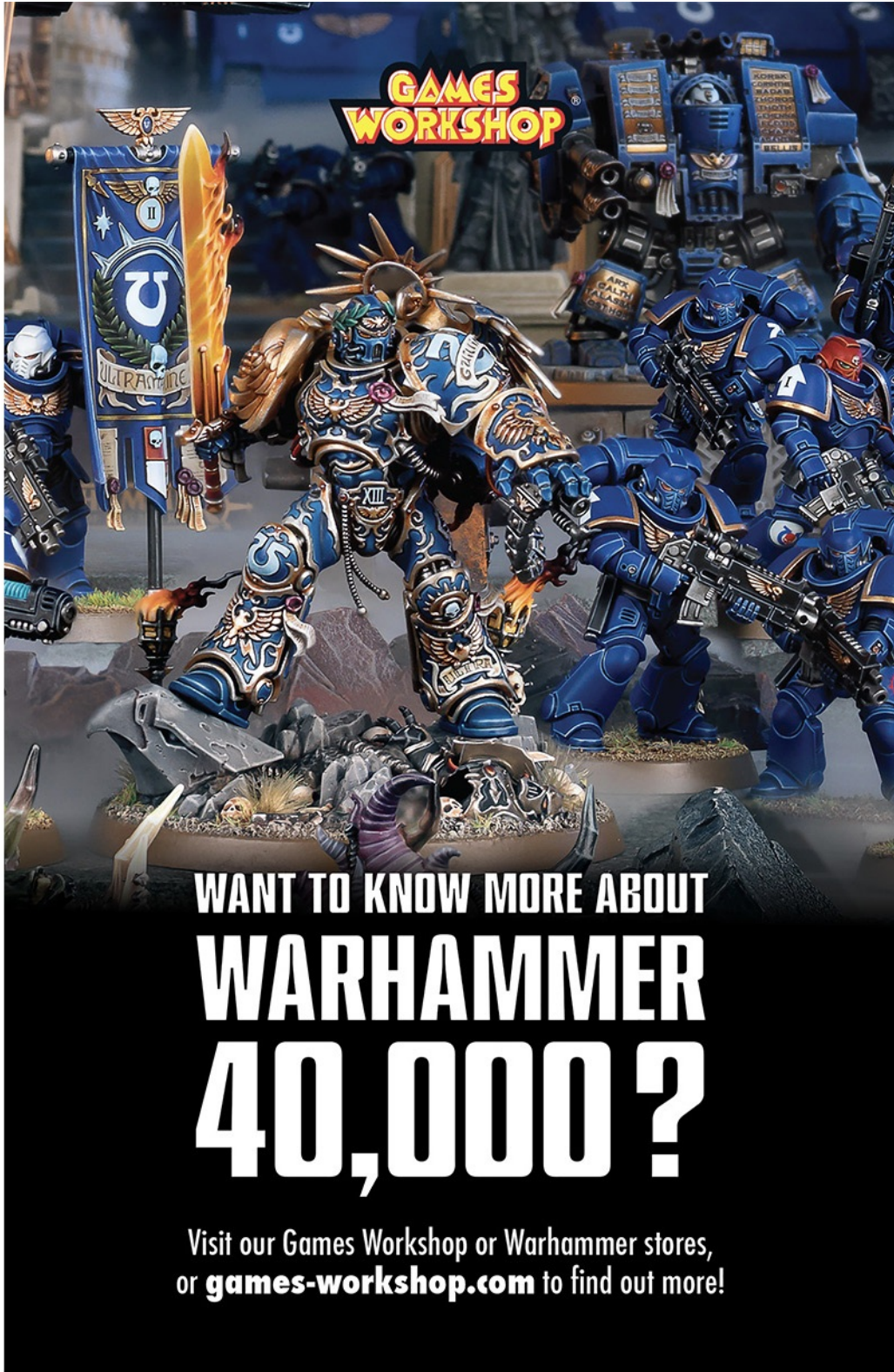
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