

WARHAMMER QUEST™



MOTHERLODE

A BLACKSTONE FORTRESS SHORT STORY

NICK KYME

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MOTHERLODE

by Nick Kyme

I

A spike of pain burned in Raus' left knee as he stumbled and hit the ground hard. He felt the black obsidian vibrating as soon as his hands touched it and realised the Fortress was about to shift again.

The Stygian Aperture was ahead. He could see the landing platform and the junk freighter, *Long Hauler Gamma-3-β*, anchored to it, waiting for them.

'Rein!' he cried out.

His brother turned, a scowl on his scruffy round face, and doubled back. He huffed, blowing out his cheeks as he hefted the sniper rifle slung over his right shoulder. He was diminutive, barefoot and wearing olive-green fatigues, almost the exact reflection of his twin. A ratling. Raus was getting to his knees as Rein grabbed the collar of his grubby Militarum uniform.

'You're supposed to be the one who's light on his feet, Raus,' he snapped. 'Tell me you haven't dropped it.'

'I haven't dropped it,' said Raus, and then patted his kitbag to confirm that he actually hadn't dropped it. 'Why are we running so fast, Rein?' he asked, as they got moving again.

'Well...' Rein huffed, red-faced and out of breath. 'Just best to get a shift on, eh?'

'You got him though, right? Shot that pointy-eared sadist. You said he went over the edge, Rein. The edge, right?'

Rein made a face as if he were weighing up tabac-leaf but hadn't quite got the portions right.

Raus let the silence last for a few seconds, their flat feet slapping noisily against the obsidian deck of the Fortress. The Stygian Aperture was almost within reach.

‘He’s dead – you told me, Rein.’

‘He might not be dead.’

Raus spat, grabbing Rein’s uniform and half strangling him while they ran. ‘What?!’

‘Ruddy Throne, Raus! Let go,’ he said, struggling to prise his brother’s fingers from around his neck. ‘You’ll send us both rump over crown.’

‘I’m light on my feet, remember,’ said Raus. ‘Reckon I’ll be just fine.’ He let go.

‘He’s probably dead. I mean... I definitely hit him. He was fast. Scary, scary fast, but I definitely got him.’

‘Where?’

Rein frowned, nonplussed. ‘Here? In the Fortress. When we found the archeotech dump.’

‘No, you berk. *Where?*’

Rein’s face brightened. ‘Oh... I’d say... hmm, the shoulder...’

‘The ruddy shoulder! Not exactly a kill-shot is it? Was it a good hit?’

‘Definitely glanced him.’

‘A glance! Murlock’s hairy arse, Rein. He could be running around right now. I’m surprised we haven’t had a knife in the back already!’

‘Ah, yeah, but I knackered his rebreather too. Nicked the tube, you see. It’s been bleeding out ever since we ditched him. And by the time he reaches that vacuum chamber...’

Raus grinned, a charming and pearly white scythe of teeth that had found as much trouble as it had spared him.

‘Oh, Rein...’

‘Was that good?’ asked Rein, a knowing look in his eyes.

The Stygian Aperture loomed and the two ratlings bolted straight through it as it began to close up and reform behind them.

‘It was very, very good.’

The *Long Hauler* beckoned.

‘Now then, Raus,’ said Rein as the boarding ramp cranked down, ‘shall we get back to Precipice and become as rich as Roboute Guilliman?’

Raus patted his kitbag and felt the hard, unyielding metal of the box he had stuffed inside. ‘I think that would be a ruddy fine plan, Rein.’

‘After you, dear brother,’ said Rein as he reached the edge of the ramp, ushering in Raus with an unnecessarily flamboyant flourish.

‘I don’t mind if I do, brother,’ he said, a feral glint in his beady eye. ‘I don’t

mind if I do.'

As the junk freighter boosted its engines, slowly turning in the heavy gravity well of the Fortress, a lone figure, panting and half-dead, staggered onto the landing platform. He had barely made it through the Aperture. He watched as the ship pulled away, ignorant of his presence.

Akrahel Drek glared at the junk freighter's gradually diminishing silhouette. His fingers tightened around the bone hilt of the venom blade in his right hand. He slowly caught his breath, the flesh-knit fashioned into his armour working to repair his broken body. His ship, the *Hatchethand*, waited nearby. Its sharp, byzantium and segmented contours pleasingly matched Akrahel's kabalite warsuit. The mutants hadn't thought to scuttle it. They obviously believed they had killed him. Either that, or they were in a rush.

The communication device in his armour still worked, and he activated it now.

'I'm coming back...' he said coldly. 'No, I didn't get it. But I know who did.'

He cut the connection. Like his quarry, he could not linger but managed a smile as he watched the other ship disappear into the wreckage field.

'We'll meet again soon...' he purred, wiping the blood off his lip and revelling in the hot, metallic taste of it. 'And when we do, pray that I don't take you alive.'

II

The man stood before the ship's largest viewport, legs wide of stance, chin raised, hands firmly clasped behind his back. He wore a long black coat that swept down to just above his ankles, black leather boots that rose up to his knees and a peaked officer's cap pinned with a silver badge of a skull encircled by a laurel wreath.

A hololithic projector described an image behind him rendered in grainy blue light. Two ratlings, brothers, one a sniper, the other a scout. They wore *Militarum* fatigues and their dubious service record scrolled alongside their portraits in reams of Low Gothic.

A large desk delineated the device emitting the image. Maps, star charts, informant reports, hard vellum pict-captures and a ship schematic were strewn around it and starkly caught the light.

The trail had been difficult. The man couldn't remember the last time he had slept, but it didn't matter. They had followed the signals, out to the edge of the Western Reaches, and at last they had found it.

The Blackstone Fortress. It filled the viewport like a malevolent, dead moon,

brimming with forbidden promise and unknown threat. He had heard stories, legends really, of the ancient star forts, though he had never seen one up close. The scale was staggering, almost so massive as to be beyond comprehension. And he felt... a *regard*, a sense of being watched, as though a god were slowly stirring to wakefulness and taking note of lesser beings in its orbit. For several hours, the ship scaled a dark and alien hemisphere so absolute that it seemed to drink in the void like a thirsty ocean. Its guide lamps winked like minor stars against an endless black canvas. Wayfarers came to this place, in search of fortune or hiding from their pasts.

The man didn't care about any of that. Or them. He had his own quarry and had tracked it here. It had taken years, the nourishing of an obsession that had seen him stripped of influence, of power, and left men dead in his wake. It didn't matter. None of it mattered now.

In the lee of the colossal star fort, a shanty town port appeared at last. Hundreds of vessels were lashed to its mooring spars, and the man saw the faint vestiges of light as they drew closer.

'Take us in,' he ordered gruffly. One of the ships looked familiar. A junk freighter. He had spotted it despite the multitudes and saw this as divine intervention. It matched the schematic unfurled on the desk.

'*Long Hauler...*' he murmured, feeling a tremor across the *Jackboot's* void-frame as it fought the gravity well and began to change heading, '*...Gamma-3-β*. After all this time...' He stroked the leather grip of the laspistol holstered at his hip in anticipation. '*...I have you.*'

III

The Nadir Bazaar was cramped. And it stank, a heady melange of grox shit and goat farts. Raus took a surreptitious whiff under his armpit, made a 'definitely not me' face and settled in alongside his brother to wait.

'Has it got darker in here since we arrived, Raus?' asked Rein, narrowing his eyes and blinking. 'Seems darker.'

'Dingy, Rein. That's the word, I'd use. *Dingy*.'

'Reeks like a beastman's gore hole too.'

'Hmm.'

After they'd docked the *Long Hauler* at Orbisgate, one of umpteen mooring spars on Precipice but also one of the three largest, the twins had taken a sojourn to The Helmsmen in Jetsam for a few celebratory libations. It wasn't every day

you survived the perils of the Fortress, came back with a prize and stiffed a sadist drukhari into the bargain. Raus had felt eyes on them the entire time, his unease not leavened by hard liquor. He could have sworn he'd spotted a rough-looking character giving them the eye. Wrapped in a grey storm cloak and with more than a wash of pepper-black stubble around his rugged, ex-military-looking chin, he was definitely armed but melted into the shadows when Raus had gone for a look-see.

He didn't trust anyone in The Helmsmen. Rapsallions and thieves, the lot of them. One stray knife, a muffled pistol shot... The sooner they ditched the box the better. Selling it was the tricky part, though. Fortunately, Gatto 'knew a man', although that, in Raus' opinion, was stretching the bounds of reasonable description. The barkeep at The Helmsmen had said Murlock was making some moves on Precipice again after being shut down for months by the Proctors for violating enough of the Protocols to get a trading ban. Not easy to do on Precipice, especially in the Derelict district, which was known for its casual adherence to the law.

Raus and Rein knew Murlock well, a little too well, though they hadn't seen him in a while. He could be useful. He knew every buyer in Precipice. And he knew how to move contraband. When he wasn't getting caught, of course.

He had... *rebranded*. The 'Nacht Market' had become the 'Nadir Bazaar', a thinly veiled attempt at legitimacy, with only the sizeable bribes and the breathtakingly rife corruption of the district authorities keeping Murlock in business. This was his entrepreneurial palace, a grubby little dung hole of trinkets, knick-knacks and all sorts of other ephemera stacked right up to its ramshackle roof.

Raus and Rein waited quietly in what had been described to them by one of Murlock's cronies standing guard at the entrance as the 'audience hall', but in reality was a sodium burner-lit nook with a scrap of grubby carpet underfoot that looked like Murlock had used it as his latrine.

'I do hope whatever that stain is from isn't contagious, Rein...' murmured Raus, lifting up his hairy foot and trying to inspect its leathery sole in the gloom.

'If you contract bootrot, I'll take it off at the knee, Raus.'

Raus glowered, his twin beaming back at him with unfeigned ignorance.

'So...' a deep, basso voice rumbled, 'we meet again, my little friends.'

'I wouldn't say "friends", exactly,' Raus whispered, making quotation marks with his gnarled and stubby fingers.

A massive figure loomed out of the shadows, a heavy beaded curtain parting to

admit his bulk and inadvertently wafting his stench towards the twins.

‘Worse than a beastman’s gore hole,’ choked Rein, wrinkling his nose but trying not to scowl too obviously for fear of upsetting their host.

Raus was holding his breath, cheeks puffed out, as he nodded.

Murlock was huge. Even for an ogryn, he filled the available space with his sheer girth and intimidating presence.

‘It’s as if an ogryn ate another ogryn,’ Rein whispered. ‘Was he always *this* fat?’

Raus still had his cheeks full and could only manage a shrug.

A stool had been set out, the only furniture in the otherwise barren room. It groaned plaintively as Murlock sat down, his layered chins rippling and the leather jerkin he wore creaking as it stretched across his expansive stomach. It could barely hold on to his body, the flab slipping out under the edge and pooling in his lap. A bandoleer of frag grenades sat across his chest, the mark of a bandit king. Two small, dark eyes inside a large, tanned face regarded the ratlings with interest. Murlock picked at his uneven teeth with a small knife, the many rings gilding his fingers glinting and flashing in the faint light.

Raus’ eyes bulged when he caught a decent look at the gold chain hung around the ogryn’s neck. Working out in his head just how much it could be worth, he blew out a long-held breath.

Murlock didn’t acknowledge the slight. Perhaps he hoped it wasn’t aimed at him or his noisome aroma.

‘Raus and Rein Gaffar,’ he said. ‘The brothers dim. I’m told you have something for me.’

‘He’s Raus,’ said Raus. ‘And I’m Rein.’

‘You sure, brother?’

‘Think so...’

Murlock frowned, then shrugged. ‘It’s of *little*... importance,’ he went on.

‘Oh that’s a good one,’ said Raus. ‘Isn’t it, brother?’

‘Very original, brother.’

Murlock’s little, piggish eyes glinted greedily. ‘Enough banter. Let’s see it then.’

Raus exchanged a glance with Rein and then slowly removed the box from his kitbag before presenting it to Murlock. The casket had been forged of an iridescent metal that caught the light and gave it the appearance of oil on water as it washed across its surface. Runes had been engraved in the sides, sharp-edged and alien, and there were embedded rubies the size of artillery shells.

Carefully, Raus unclasped the lid and opened it.

Murlock leaned in, prompting a few ominous creaks from the stool.

‘Oh yes...’ he breathed, rubbing his uppermost chin. ‘I have just the buyer for this. Likes the exotics.’ He reached out a bejewelled hand, only for Raus to snap the box shut and withdraw.

‘Let’s agree a price before we hand it over, shall we?’ He turned to his brother. ‘What you reckon, Rein? Five hundred? Six?’

Rein counted on one hand, murmuring his calculations aloud until promptly giving up when he ran out of fingers.

‘Let’s make it an even thousand, shall we,’ he declared, thrusting out his grubby little paw for Murlock to shake on it.

‘Sounds fair to me, Rein,’ said Raus, and thrust out his hand too.

Murlock slowly leaned back on his stool. He gave a short, deep laugh, though the humour of it never reached his eyes. ‘Thought he was Raus and you was Rein.’

‘Easy to get it turned about,’ said Raus. ‘Have we a deal then?’

‘Very well...’ rumbled Murlock, nodding, ‘I’ll take off your hands.’

Rein frowned, turning his ear so it was aimed at the hulking ogryn. ‘You mean, you’ll take *it* off our hands, right, guv’nor?’ He looked at his brother. ‘That’s right, isn’t it, Raus?’

‘I am fairly certain that’s the correct phrasing, Rein.’

‘Nah,’ said Murlock, rising to his full indomitable height, ‘I’ll take *your* hands, you thieving little worms!’

Raus swallowed as the ogryn’s shadow fell across them like an eclipse. ‘Oh, balls...’

A massive cleaver swept out of the darkness and sheared the ugly carpet in half where the ratlings had been standing. Bellowing, Murlock reached for Raus, who dived and rolled out of the ogryn’s grasp. Murlock blundered after him. Raus ducked a savage right hook, getting underneath it to wrap his hands around the trunk-like arm and using it as a fulcrum to swing feet first into the ogryn’s paunch before catapulting off and out of harm’s way. Thwarted, Murlock roared. He stomped a gargantuan foot to crush Rein, but the ratling slipped under the ogryn’s legs.

‘I don’t recommend ever doing that again,’ he said, a disgusted look on his face as he emerged on the other side and was reunited with his brother.

Murlock had his back to them, but he was already turning, a ponderous giant on the hunt. In the distance, the ogryn’s henchmen were coming to his aid.

The ratlings bolted for the bead curtain, and kept running.

‘Where did that cleaver come from?!’ cried Rein, gasping as he fled through the labyrinthine stacks of the bazaar. ‘His hands were empty!’ Evidently, the ‘audience hall’ led to Murlock’s warehouse and was brimming with crates, caskets and barrels.

Raus felt his heart beat faster at such riches. If only there wasn’t an obscenely fat ogryn and his goons trying to kill them.

‘Do you remember that time...’ he replied, gasping too, and leaping deftly to the side as Murlock’s knife embedded in the wall, ‘that we told the Proctors about what Murlock was up to over at the Nacht Market?’

‘I do, I do, Raus,’ said Rein. ‘Got us out of a spot of bother that little informational nugget.’

Another blade slammed into a crate, trembling with the impact. ‘Where is he getting all these knives? Is he pulling them out his ar—’

‘That little nugget, you mention...’ Raus replied.

Realisation crept over Rein’s face.

‘Oh, shank. No wonder he’s mad.’

They darted around a corner, looking for a way out, but came to an abrupt halt when confronted with a mountainous slab of flesh and blubber.

‘No escape for you in here,’ Murlock panted, sweating profusely. ‘I know this place. It’s *mine*.’

He advanced slowly, the cleaver held low and by his side.

‘Your heads are going in my trophy case. Or maybe I’ll put ’em out front as a warning. Now...’ he said, ‘hand over the box and I’ll make it quick.’

Raus and Rein were backing away but Murlock effectively had them pinned in a dead end. A pair of rough-looking mercenaries in grey-and-black fatigues and half-plate had just wandered into view.

‘Can’t blame you for being angry, Mur,’ said Raus, eyeing the goons’ stubbers, his palms held out in a conciliatory gesture.

‘I’d be angry too, guv’nor,’ Rein agreed, and mirrored his twin.

‘But before you butcher us,’ said Raus, ‘and mount us as trophies on your wall, can you tell me one thing?’

Murlock paused, frowning. A sudden concerned look crept over his face that he shared with his henchmen. ‘What have you done?’

Raus held his right hand up to the light. Three small firing pins dangled off his fingers like a beggar’s jewellery. ‘What are these for?’

The explosion ripped through the bazaar like a hurricane, plumes of smoke reaching up into the artificial atmosphere above Derelict in a thick, greasy pall.

Raus emerged from the wreckage of the Nadir Bazaar, pulling his brother out from a heap of debris. Rein hacked up a wad of dust and grit, but was otherwise none the worse for wear.

Of Murlock and his goons only a bejewelled hand remained, still twitching.

‘Didn’t fancy being a trophy,’ said Raus.

‘Me neither,’ agreed Rein. ‘How’d you know the grenades wouldn’t go off earlier?’

‘I thought they would,’ Raus confessed. ‘He was supposed to blow up soon as we got through the curtain.’

‘Well, it all worked out in the end.’

‘Did it? We still don’t have a buyer for this.’ Raus held out the casket.

‘Oh, I don’t know,’ said Rein, smiling, and wafting a leather-bound ledger in his brother’s direction. ‘You weren’t the only one light of finger, brother. Except while you were pulling pins, I was seeing to our future prosperity. I reckon we’ll find the buyer in these pages somewhere, don’t you?’

IV

In the skein everything was available for a price. But only the desperate or the truly imbecilic ever traded with the low lifes denizenized there.

Vuko Vukich did not consider himself to be stupid, so as he wended through the narrow alleyways and lightless spaces of the skein, he considered that he might very well be desperate. No one at The Helmsmen was buying, forcing him to seek out even less scrupulous traders, hence his current predicament. He had lost his way, more than once, but was almost certain he was back on track until his path came to a dead end.

‘Shit...’ he hissed, and was going to about-turn when a voice from behind stopped him.

‘Yes, my friend. You are in an awful lot of that.’

Vuko had pulled a stub-pistol but let it drag his arm down when he saw the gang of wretches waiting to skin him for trespassing.

Six men, all armed. Autoguns with olive-drab casings, two stubbers and a laspistol. Militarum-grade. They wore metal plates, shoulder guards and greaves over factorum fatigues. Ex-hivers, maybe part of a rogue trader’s retinue. They’d gone feral, though. Perhaps the Fortress had claimed the trader, and left the dogs masterless. No leashes in the skein. No Proctors either, so help wasn’t coming.

Vuko chose to try to barter. ‘I have money,’ he lied.

‘No you don’t,’ replied the one who’d spoken initially. He looked thin in the face, with a wiry ash-coloured beard. He shot Vuko in the leg.

Down on one knee, clenching his thigh to stop himself bleeding out, Vuko looked up into the face of his murderer. ‘I have something better.’ He had been keeping it for trade, hoping to find the moneylender who had set up shop somewhere in the skein. Now he had no choice. He brandished a piece of waxy parchment. ‘It’s a map. Fortress...’ he said, pleading.

The other man’s eyes widened a little.

‘Oh, we’ll take that too,’ he said.

‘Too?’

‘We’re real hungry down here...’

Vuko felt his stomach tighten, and was about to put the stub-pistol to his own head when he heard something. A snuffling, scratching sound, it came echoing off the tunnels ahead. A few of the gangers heard it too and began to turn. One raised an autogun. It trembled as he pointed it at the darkness.

‘Is this you?’ roared the other man.

‘It’s not me,’ Vuko rasped.

‘Then what in warp-hell is it?’

The sound grew louder, and a strange clicking came with it like the rapid champing of teeth.

And when at last Vuko saw what came out of the shadows for them, he pressed the stub-pistol to his temple and pulled the trigger.

V

Rein thumbed the greasy pages of the ledger, making sure they had the right place. ‘You know,’ he said, ‘I am genuinely surprised Murlock could even write.’ He showed his brother the stained vellum. ‘And this cursive script is actually quite artistic.’

Raus rolled his eyes.

‘Is this it?’ he asked. ‘You’re sure this is it?’

‘It’s probably it,’ said Rein, tucking away the ledger. With so many contacts, they could go into business for themselves. ‘I mean... it’s *definitely* in the book. Exotics, right?’

‘That’s what he said.’

Raus attempted the name. ‘*Kur-uuk*? And he lives in this place?’

A scrap shanty had crawled over an old dockyard, its mooring spar broken and

drifting listlessly in the void like a homeless drunk. Two bone antlers jutted from a ramshackle, sloping roof, strung with tiny skulls and wafers of thin metal. A jetty ran out to a hooded doorway drenched in gloom, a stream of effluence trickling beneath it.

‘Looks inviting,’ said Raus. ‘After you, brother.’

‘Oh, I insist,’ said Rein, bowing deferentially.

Raus grimaced. ‘I thought you might.’

The shanty was dark inside and poorly lit. Storm lanterns with closed shutters hung on a length of rope overhead. The stench of blood and carcasses thickened the air, making Raus gag.

‘Worse than Murlock’s armpits,’ he said, cupping his nose and mouth to try to ward off the stench.

‘Or his crotch...’ Rein suggested, the red beam of his sniper sight panning the room, alighting on flanks of rotting meat and counters stacked with bones. Cages and grimy glass cabinets contained the remains of creatures, all alien, all highly exotic. Mercifully, all dead too.

‘A hunter,’ murmured Rein, gesturing to a longrifle hung up on the wall. Several blades, a spear and a hand axe lay stacked in one corner.

‘Does this feel iffy to you, Rein?’ asked Raus, moving quietly, and having slipped a stub-pistol from his belt holster.

‘I don’t think I’ve unclenched since I walked in here, Raus,’ Rein answered.

Raus stopped abruptly, gesturing with a stubby little finger. ‘Up...’

Rein followed it to a ledge, an upper floor of sorts, though with no obvious means of reaching it.

‘Sleeping quarters?’ he suggested.

Raus wrinkled his nose. ‘Smells worse than the rest of the place. Sure that stink isn’t coming from you, brother?’

‘I’ll have you know I’ve had my annual bath,’ snapped Rein, indignant.

Raus caught him sneakily sniffing his armpits as he searched the rafters for a beam or hook.

‘There,’ he said, stuffing away the pistol again and whipping out a hefty grapple gun. With a noisy *shoom* of expelled pressure the hook soared upwards, the wire uncoiling after it like a tail chasing its comet. It latched on to an overhead beam, grapnel teeth snagging well and holding Raus’ weight when he tested it.

‘I’m off for a look,’ he said and zipped upwards, the grapnel line spooling back in. Hanging one-handed, his dirty bare feet dangling loosely, Raus sagged. ‘Kur-

uuk is a kroot.’

Rein nodded, mildly interested. ‘Huh...’

‘He’s also had his throat cut.’

‘Oh, shank...’

Raus’ eyes narrowed. ‘Red foam around his mouth too.’

‘He’s gone feral and slit his own throat!’ cried Rein.

Raus unwound the line and was back on the ground in seconds. He pressed a trigger and the grapnel sprang apart like a sprung trap. He had it reeled in and back in his pack in less than a minute.

‘Doubtful,’ he said. ‘But we need to get out of here, Rein. Someone knew we were coming.’

‘Then they’re probably watching us, Raus.’

‘I’d say that’s almost a certainty.’

‘Maybe we shouldn’t have had that third round at The Helmsmen before we got here.’

‘Let’s not be too hasty...’

‘Reckon we shouldn’t have boasted about getting rich and coming to this shack.’

‘Now *that* probably was ill-advised.’

Raus heard a creak of metal from deeper in the shanty.

‘What was that?’ asked Rein, as a figure appeared from the shadows, green retinal lenses aglow.

‘Our cue to leave,’ said Raus.

They ran. Again. Bolting from the entranceway, they came across a second figure standing across the jetty. A grey storm cloak shawled most of his body, but couldn’t entirely hide his suit of carapace armour. The lasgun held across his chest was more obvious, as was the combat helmet and concomitant night-sight goggles and rebreather mask.

‘Guilliman’s hairy arse!’ hissed Rein. ‘He’s Tempestus.’ He shot him in the kneecap. From the hip. With his sniper rifle.

The trooper went down, grunting in pain, clutching his ruined knee. He dropped his lasgun, a bulky Ryza-pattern with overcharge capacity. Raus’ eyes shone larcenously as he dodged the trooper’s knife swipe, leaping over the half-prone form as he and his brother ran for the metaphorical hills. Or, in this case, the nearest sump pipe.

‘Sluice tunnels,’ Rein gasped, pointing.

Raus glanced over his shoulder. The second trooper had exited the shanty, and

was helping the first to his feet. Then he pulled his gun.

Scorching las-beams splashed against the outer frame of the sewer outflow as Rein and Raus ducked inside.

‘Tempestus!’ Rein cried again. ‘What are those bloody glory boys doing on Precipice?’

‘I’d say they’re looking for us, brother.’

‘Well that’s charming.’

Raus shook his head, biting his bottom lip as he tried to make a plan.

‘Can’t outrun them. Not even in here.’

Sections of grimy pipe flashed by, lit by thin shafts of light piercing the cracks in the ceiling. There were half-chewed bones amongst the effluvia.

‘Can’t hide either. They’re relentless as bloodhounds.’

‘Any thoughts?’ asked Raus.

‘Only that my impending death is ill-deserved and I haven’t yet enjoyed a rich and full life,’ Rein replied. ‘I am open to suggestions.’

Raus looked up. It was dingy in the tunnels, and it stank of excreta. A larger shaft of light lit up a patch of filth below. He gestured to a grate in the ceiling, three of its rungs rusted away to nubs.

Rein smiled. ‘You go high, I’ll go low. They can’t chase us both.’

Raus nodded, accepting the plan. He thrust out a grimy hand. ‘Good luck, Rein, and if you don’t make it I’ll be taking all of your stuff and the *Long Hauler*.’

‘Right you are, Raus. Same to you too.’ He spat on his palm and they shook hands. They were about to part ways, Raus having fired off his grapnel, when something severed the wire and he fell into a heap. He caught the vaguest flash of dark metal in the sewer light and a shadowy presence looking down from above.

He had no time to investigate or the means to do so. A tight red beam burned a scorch mark by his feet and he looked back in despair. The Tempestus were coming. Three of them now. And they weren’t alone. A fourth figure had joined them, a black trench coat flapping in his wake as he stalked towards the ratlings, peaked cap casting a shadow over a rough-looking face. He also carried a smoking laspistol in his outstretched hand.

‘Rugged, ex-military-looking chin...’ Raus muttered. ‘Oh, bugger...’

At least the presence above had gone, though Raus noticed an angular throwing blade embedded in the wall. But he couldn’t worry about that now.

‘You what?’ asked Rein.

‘Run... Run, Rein!’

The ratlings fled, scurrying like their namesakes through the muck and filth. Behind them, a commissar and his men gave chase.

‘Don’t worry, Raus...’ said Rein, as they ducked around another corner. ‘I know these tunnels like the back of my—’

And came to an abrupt and unwelcome halt.

‘Arse! Dead end!’

A slab of sheer, pitted rockcrete stood in their path. Ugly yellowed stains stretched down the wall as long and pointed as teeth. A partial collapse had blocked off the tunnel, debris piled up in front of it.

‘Did you have you use that *particular* word?’ said Raus.

‘What, *arse*?’

Raus ignored him, jabbing a finger at the obvious gap in the ceiling, a crevice wide enough for a ratling to sneak through. He thought of the shadowy presence he had seen before, but couldn’t see another way out.

‘Can you make that?’ he asked.

Rein had a look, shook his head.

‘Do I look like a funambulist?’

‘Not sure your sleepwalking is relevant to the current situation, Rein.’

‘I can’t make it that high, and with your grapnel properly fraggd...’

Raus glanced behind him. They’d led the commissar and his men a merry dance, but he heard rapidly approaching footsteps. He looked back at the wall, at the pitted rock, at the distance to the gap in the ceiling.

‘Remember what we said if ever we had to choose...?’

‘If we got into a tight spot and only one of us could get loose?’

Raus nodded. ‘I’d say we’re about as tight as a confessor’s purse right now.’

VI

The commissar smiled viperously.

‘At long last,’ he rasped, purposely slowing down as he approached the dishevelled ratling kneeling in the dirt. Head bowed, hands out, he was a grimy little wretch. A sniper rifle sat on the ground in front of him, ammo clip discharged and set down next to it, a single bullet sprung from the breech on top of the casing.

‘At least you know when to surrender, *abhuman*,’ he sneered, and straightened his jacket as he came to stand before the pitiful creature. ‘Gaffar, Rein,’ he said, recounting the details from memory. ‘Sniper, auxiliary...’

‘I think you might have me mistaken for someone else, sir.’

The commissar sneered. ‘*Sniper*, auxiliary,’ he repeated, ‘primus-rated... and in dereliction of duty to the God-Emperor of Mankind.’

‘Is He here too?’

The commissar struck him across the face and the ratling went down hard before defiantly coming up again.

‘I am Commissar Vudus Mettik. I want you to know my name, for I know yours and your brother’s.’ He looked up at the gap in the pipe. ‘Left you for dead, did he? Saw his chance to slip my leash and took it?’

‘Oh, I expect he’ll be back for me.’

‘You better hope so, scum,’ said Mettik, nodding to one of the Scions, who smashed Rein Gaffar in the side of the head with his gunstock, knocking the ratling out cold.

VII

‘Tie it tight,’ said Mettik. ‘I don’t want the little runt getting loose.’

They were standing in an outflow basin, having breached the fallen rubble and followed the pipe to its terminus in the skein. They had bound the prisoner to an old support strut and hung him by his arms like a piece of meat, toes just scraping the floor.

It was a pleasing location, close enough to where they had caught the ratling that his brother wouldn’t have to search long to find him and wide enough that Mettik and his men would easily see him coming. He eyed the high walls surrounding them on three sides but found no sign of the other one. Not yet.

‘Wake him up,’ uttered Mettik as soon as the bonds were tied.

The Scion smacked the ratling hard across the face, splitting his lip but bringing him around.

‘You’ll have to excuse me,’ the ratling said, spitting up a wad of blood. ‘I rather dozed off back there.’

‘Amusing,’ snarled Mettik. ‘Will you be so jovial when you’re facing Commissarial censure, I wonder?’

‘Honestly, guv’nor, I doubt I can even spell those words, let alone understand what they actually mean. And besides,’ the ratling added, ‘I’m more worried about him.’

Mettik whirled around, only just dodging a spinning sliver of metal that scythed through his flaring commissar’s coat.

One of the Scions collapsed to his knees, a second sliver in his neck and red foam bubbling up through his rebreather. He jerked, convulsed and fell on his face. Dead.

Mettik whipped his gun out, and the remaining Scions followed suit.

‘I wouldn’t make any sudden moves,’ the ratling suggested, jerking his neck towards the lithe figure in segmented byzantium armour that had miraculously appeared out of nowhere. ‘That’s Akrahel Drek.’ Two more similarly armoured figures then joined him from the shadows. ‘Oh, and his brother and sister. You are seriously fragged.’

‘Someone else who wants your head?’ said Mettik, his eyes never leaving the lean trio of the drukhari.

‘I expect so... and spleen, liver, fingers, etcetera, etcetera...’

‘Is that so?’ Mettik put to the lead drukhari. ‘Can you speak my language, *xenos*?’

The drukhari sneered, exchanging the briefest glance with his siblings. He had a stark, androgynous beauty that Mettik found deeply unsettling. ‘When we must... *mon-keigh*,’ he said, his voice like a dagger’s edge but with a silken undertone. He swept a mane of long black hair aside with a flick of his head. ‘And yes, I want its *spleen. Liver. Fingers... Etcetera. Etcetera.*’ He lasciviously enunciated every word.

Mettik gave a feral grin. ‘Then we have an impasse, for I want them too. For crimes against the Imperium.’

‘Mine is an honour debt from which I will not turn.’

Mettik thought the drukhari winced, and wondered if he was injured. Perhaps that’s why he had chosen to parlay. No, it was the two hellguns aimed in his direction.

‘I have a proposal,’ said the drukhari at length. ‘I will settle for one and the item they stole from me.’

Mettik scowled. ‘I don’t bargain with *xenos*.’

‘Doesn’t appear that you have much of a choice.’ The drukhari’s smile was sickle-shaped and sharp. He gestured to his kin, who were both armed. ‘You are far from your Imperium here.’

Mettik nodded but was adamant. ‘Rein Gaffar is mine, and so is his bro—’

A shot rang out, tight as a whip. It cut the ratling’s bonds before Mettik or the drukhari could react.

‘I’m sorry,’ said the ratling, now freed and already running, ‘but I did say – you have me mistaken for someone else.’

Mettik surveyed the raised lip of the outflow basin and found a point where the light glinted off a tiny oval lens.

‘That’s the damn sniper,’ he snarled, meeting Akrahel Drek’s gaze. ‘Can we agree to kill them both and sort out the details after?’

The drukhari smiled and nodded.

Then an object launched over the basin wall, hurled like demo-charge, and that had Mettik’s heart racing until he realised it was actually just a metal box. A second shot rang out before the box hit the ground, shooting out the sealing clasp and spilling the contents onto the ground.

Everyone stopped to look at the severed head of the ur-ghul brood mother.

From the darkness of the nearby sewer pipe, a pack of feral voices chorused hungrily.

VIII

It was an ugly thing. Eyeless, bulbous forehead, flared nose pits. Nightmare fuel. Thinking back now, Raus had no idea why he took it. He knew it had value. The markings, the shape of the skull. He knew a little about these creatures and this one was unusual. There were so many xenos, so much weird fauna on the Fortress that it tended to attract hunters and collectors who would pay big for the rarer specimens. Only problem was, removing said specimens also tended to attract those creatures who had once called them kin. Or in this case, ‘mother’.

Legs peddling madly, Raus risked a backward glance.

A horde of lesser ur-ghuls had sprung from the pipe, drawn by the scent of their dead brood mother. They fell upon the nearest drukhari with unfettered savagery. She went down screaming, and Raus looked away. Shots rang out, suppressing fire from the Imperial guns. A headshot took out one of the Tempestus taking aim at Raus.

‘Now he gets his chuffing eye in...’ he muttered, secretly glad that his brother could be ruthless when it really mattered.

As he ran for the border wall of the outflow, he kept one eye on the melee.

‘You dirty abhumans!’ Mettik roared, firing into the throng of xenos, executing with aplomb and actually standing his ground until Akrahel’s blade found its mark in the commissar’s chest and he tipped over.

An ur-ghul caught Raus’ scent, scurrying after him as it broke from the pack. The ratling ran but was saying his prayers to the Throne when the creature sprang at him. He crouched in the dirt, making himself small, hoping it would be

quick. Fear deadened the sound of the sniper shot that exploded its skull and left the ur-ghul's headless corpse sliding next to him rather than rending him with tooth and nail. He got up, and ran on.

Akrahel was the last to fall, and he did so under a host of clamouring bodies. The rangy ur-ghuls tore him apart, limb from limb. Raus hit the wall and acrobatically scrambled up. As he flipped over the edge and back onto high ground, he looked back down on the carnage.

The ur-ghuls had finished everyone below, dragging the carcasses of the dead with them as they returned to the pipes, bound for the skein and to join the other fell creatures that lurked in that most benighted part of Precipice.

'Well,' said Rein as he rejoined his brother, 'I'm not sleeping for a week after that.'

Raus gave a thin, yet haggard smile. 'Don't suppose you've got a spare pair of trousers as well as that rifle, have you?'

Rein lovingly patted the stock of his reserve gun, but shook his head. He sucked his teeth, regarding the blood and bits of viscera the ur-ghul brood had left in its wake.

'All for nothing then,' he said ruefully.

'Well...' Raus began, and Rein turned to face his brother.

Raus wafted a bloody piece of waxy parchment.

'What's that, Raus?'

'I do believe it's a map, Rein.'

'A... *treasure* map?'

Raus grinned.

'Well, only one way to find out.'

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Nick Kyme is the author of the Horus Heresy novels *Old Earth*, *Deathfire*, *Vulkan Lives* and *Sons of the Forge*, the novellas *Promethean Sun* and *Scorched Earth*, and the audio dramas *Red-marked* and *Censure*. His novella *Feat of Iron* was a New York Times bestseller in the Horus Heresy collection, *The Primarchs*. Nick is well known for his popular Salamanders novels, including *Rebirth*, the Space Marine Battles novel *Damnus*, and numerous short stories. He has also written fiction set in the world of Warhammer, most notably the Warhammer Chronicles novel *The Great Betrayal* and the Age of Sigmar story 'Borne by the Storm', included in the novel *War Storm*. He lives and works in Nottingham, and has a rabbit.

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 Ortegal 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.

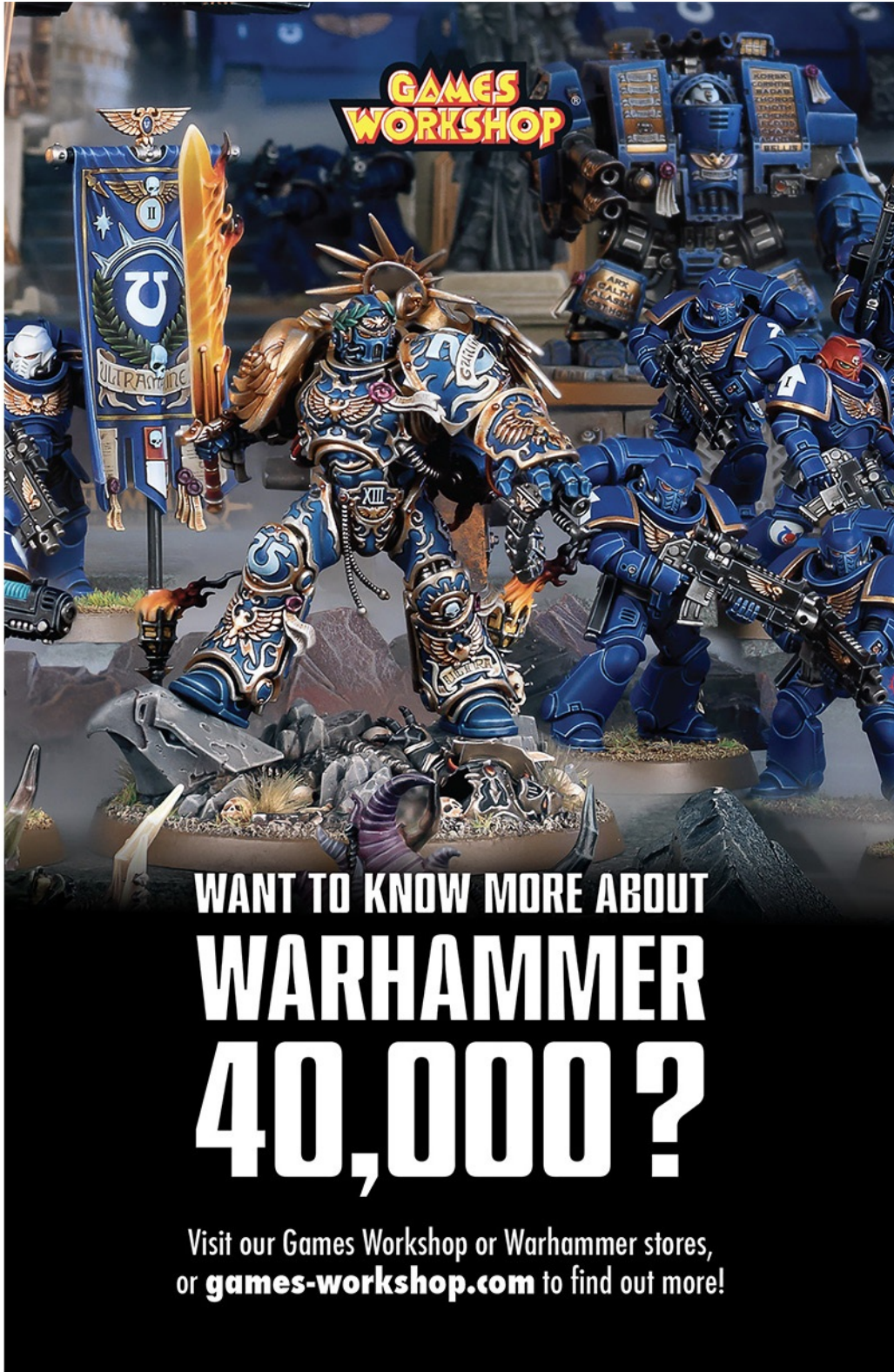
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