



WARHAMMER™  
HORROR

# RUNNER

ALAN BAO

A WARHAMMER HORROR SHORT STORY



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# CONTENTS

Cover

Runner – Alan Bao

About the Author

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# RUNNER

*By Alan Bao*

The runner fled across the tundra under a humbling sweep of stars. His breaths came in gasps, the filtration unit in his teeth cutting grooves into his gums. An artefact from home, so long ago; an old keepsake that he'd physically outgrown, kept for sentiment, not field-use.

The runner wiped the salt and spit from his chin as he kept his pace, tasting the gunmetal of the antique rebreather. His regiment-issued mask had been destroyed when he'd made his escape from the battle, just as the death-fog caught them. Every time he stretched or contorted his face, he could feel where the material had melted into his cheeks, turning the skin into unfeeling leather, chemical calluses that traced rivers down the sides of his jaw and onto his chin and neck. The hive behind him was almost certainly gone, along with whatever was left of his regiment. He wondered who'd get the blame, when the news got out, if there was still anyone left alive to blame.

Nobody had thought much of it when the long-distance comms first went out, regimental equipment being what it was. Even on the second night, when their repeated queries to command went unanswered and rumours began to swirl about wet, inhuman mutterings on the vox-channel, most of the men had written them off as ghost stories cooked up by bored conscripts. Trenches were dug by the book. There was a perfunctory doubling of the night guard. The men whittled away the time playing cards and swapping dirty stories, and the city was mostly quiet.

But then the dead came to life.

The runner had never seen anything like it. The waste disposal chutes were the first to go, as dumped bodies clogged up the system with their sudden, newfound volition. Dead hivers crawled, shambling and jerking, out of the corpse-pits,

overwhelming isolated positions, adding those unfortunate souls they caught to their twitching, shambling throng.

On the first day of fighting, the runner had been on rearguard action, fighting for access to a waste disposal pit. He'd got a first-hand glimpse of the vats of garbage and suddenly moving bodies before they flipped the switch for the incinerators – a blessing and a curse, since the living dead that were not incinerated outright staggered from the flames, heedless of the fire and rot that spread around them.

And then came the mist, and the *other things*.

In his years of service, the runner had fought and killed men of all stripes, on dozens of different worlds. But those *other things* – they were something else. Man-shaped, maybe – but not men. It was their stench that struck him: like some awful memory made solid, vague shadows in green mist, stumbling halfway between fugue and waking, absorbing las-shots with an apathetic softness that was not entirely flesh. They came and went in inexplicable fog blooms, one of which had caught up with his unit on the third day, while the runner was rotating in with one of the heavy bolter teams – Bigwum and Tinker-man hauling gear, Bullard watching their backs. When the fog bank fell upon them, the runner almost went blind from the stench. He couldn't see through the tears and the thick, green air, but he remembered the sound of gunshots and Bullard screaming.

And then, as fast as it came, the stench disappeared, along with the mist, the shadows and the top half of Bullard's body.

On his last day at the keep, the runner was given a water flask and a map to the next regimental command, two hundred miles to the south-east.

He was then relieved of his lasgun.

'We'll need the ammo,' the old sergeant had snapped when he protested. 'That's ten pounds of gear that'll slow you down, and you're dead anyway if you can't outrun this. Go and tell command—'

There was a whistle and a blast. A voice called out a belated heads-up as a dead hiver crested the makeshift trench line, exploding in a volley of las-fire. The sergeant swore as he was splashed with viscera, spitting and gagging at the rivulets of fluid that ran down his face and into his mouth.

'Augh... Tell command we can't hold. Tell them... tell them the keep's fallen. Tell them those *things* are coming to them quicker than—'

Another arc of las-fire, followed by the crack of grenades. The runner and the

sergeant stood a moment in silence, watching the rolling green mist bear down upon their position. Deep in the fog, barely visible to the human eye, there were shadows upon shadows, faint suggestions of writhing figures.

The short-range vox-comms became a symphony of gun cracks, pleas and screams. The long-distance comms were as silent as ever.

The mist rolled on, and the roar of heavy bolters and lasguns reached a crescendo. Over the stench and noise, the sergeant screamed, in a tone that the runner had never heard before from the grizzled veteran. Before the mist closed in and everything went green, he could hear the old man screeching, his voice cracked in panic, almost in tears.

‘Go! Go! Tell them!’

About a day out from the hive, the plains began to level. The keep still towered over the fields of permafrost behind him, but it was grey and muddled with distance. The burgeoning demi-hive that sprawled under the shadow of its protection was already well out of sight.

The hive had a name, of course. The whole world had a name, as did the system it inhabited. But, as the runner had learned throughout his tours of duty, names were mostly ornamental things, and always secondary to function. To most of the grunts in the regiment, this was just another world that they did not know, where they would fight another thankless war they could not name, in defence of (or perhaps in opposition to – who knew?) the innumerable ranks of locals who wore finery they had never seen, and spoke in tongues they could not understand.

The runner had a name too – arbitrary syllables that denoted some arbitrary personal identity, long ago. He could not remember the last time he’d used it. In the present, his rank was corporal, his role was to run, and his function was that of a servant to the God-Emperor. The whippings and mind-con of his trainee days had etched that hierarchy of functions deep in his mind, easily superseding the puerile realm of names and individual identities.

The runner steadied his breathing. The frozen plains bobbed by in mist and shadows. In time-hazed memory, he could vaguely recall running barefoot across sun-baked mountain paths, hopping from elevation to elevation in childish singsong. He could recall a time when he was just *a* runner in his company – one of the many expendable messengers from one of the many expendable platoons – before the intra-regimental game where he earned his title in a day-long foot race, tying his name and function together in a neat little sobriquet.

Then, as now, there had been sweat on his brow and a stitch in his side. But back then, the air had been thick with the hooting of his squadmates and other drunk spectators. Tinker-man and Machinist had snuck extra amasec from the mess hall and were passing it around to Bullard and the other boys who'd come back to the track after the shorter games had ended. The race had started at dawn, and the last competitor had staggered off the track in forfeit hours ago. Bullard had sprinted up alongside the runner, an eye swollen shut from a brutal wrestling match the day before, where he had nearly taken an ogryn off its feet.

'Oi, little man! It's been twelve hours. You've *won*. What the frag are you still running for?'

And the runner had laughed, remembering the scent of mountain air and sun-baked peaks. He laughed as he ran, on and on, until Bullard got too winded to cajole him, until the drunken spectators scattered into their respective bunks and the stars took their positions in the black sky.

*'I said, what are you still running for?'*

The world opened in an expressionist gash of green. The runner choked. In his mind – he was not sure if it was in waking memory or dream – Bullard turned. Rather, the top half of Bullard's torso turned – the half that had been absent when they had recovered his body from the fog bloom. He pivoted on severed vertebrae and fixed the runner with a gaze that was wrinkled and grey, like dead fish left out to bloat. The skin of his lips flapped and dripped syllables from a toothless mouth.

*'There's no winning this race, little man.'*

The stench made the runner's eyes water. He muttered the prayers of benediction by rote. Bullard's mouth stretched into a mirthless smile, splitting his face in half. He shambled closer, severed vertebrae snapping and cracking as they ground against each other with each dolorous step. When Bullard opened his mouth in a rumbling laugh, the world disappeared into its black, toothless depths.

The runner squeezed his eyes shut. He forced another litany of prayers from his chest, choking against the foetid stench.

There was a moment of stillness.

When he opened his eyes again, he was on his knees in the salted permafrost, his breath turning into steam over the vast desolation before him. There was no Bullard, no stench, no fog, only the endless sweep of the frozen plains and a sick hint of green splashed on the horizon. Above him, the sky opened in a gaping, existential maw; in front of him, only the tundra, and its promise of a long, cold

dark.

*'What are you still running for?'*

The runner staggered to his feet, and doubled his pace.

The terrain became hillier as evening fell. The runner clambered over glacial striations, cradling the stitch in his side. Overhead, streaks of orange-red-violet layered themselves across the sky. As the last streaks of violet faded to black, the runner wondered idly how he would avoid freezing to death in the night ahead. Regimental field kits usually included a flint and tinder pack for fire-building, but he'd neglected to grab anything of the sort in his inglorious flight from the keep.

The runner scanned his surroundings. In his peripheries, he caught occasional blurs of motion darting away from the sound of his footsteps. When he flicked on his op-specs, he could see the glint of mammalian eyes, peering cautiously back at him from the darkness. The runner recalled the regimental briefings he had been forced to sit through before planetfall – some appropriately dry vox-tapes about the nomenclature and ecology of the brine-plains, and the scavenging rodents that inhabited them...

His stomach growled. No flint or tinder, aye – but his body was sending biological imperatives he could not ignore. If only Old Sarge hadn't taken his lasgun...

His pace slowed. The glinting eyes in the darkness came closer. The runner spat his antique rebreather into a breast pocket and slumped down against the side of a dune, feigning weakness. The creatures skittered uncertainly towards him, nearly within arm's reach, their twitchy little snouts sniffing at the stench of his sweat and exhaustion.

The runner lunged. The rodents scattered, but not quickly enough. He grabbed at the nearest animal; predator and prey, death and renewal, one fuelling the other. The runner yelped as the furry thing turned and bit into his hand with its razor incisors. In the split second his grip was loosened, the animal darted away. The runner sprinted after it, low to the ground, scrambling across rocks and salt crystals, until a loose footing sent him sprawling over a dune-crest.

For one interminable moment, caught between inertia and gravity, the runner sailed through a black, star-speckled sea.

*'What the frag are you still running for?'*

Then the ground rushed up and pummelled him in his teeth, his ribs, his back. He tumbled down the frozen dune and landed in a heap at the foot of the hillock,

convulsing as his ankle bent backwards beneath his weight. Pain shot through his body and he cried out the prayers of benediction by rote. The words may have been ‘the Emperor protects’ but the meaning was *help me, help me, it hurts*.

The stars kept their apathetic vigil as the runner quivered and swore on the tundra below. Frustration welled up inside him: he *had* the damnable rat; if only he had just squeezed and broken its spine before it had the chance to bite...

He shifted his weight gingerly away from the twisted ankle. Now, far from being sated, he was still starving – and on top of that, more weary and broken than he had been before. The futility of it all boiled in his chest, twining with the pain in his leg and the stupidity of Old Sarge’s directive to give up his lasgun – and his own docile idiocy in relinquishing it. Something grey and infinitely overwhelming fell upon him. His frustration gave way to sudden exhaustion, and he let his fists fall limp into the permafrost.

A paternal voice chortled in his head.

Numbness crawled through him then, through his arms and legs, chest and spirit. He thought of how easy it would be to simply lie there, to let the darkness fall around him, to let his body heat leak away in wicks of steam, to let the little rodent creatures nip at his flesh until he was nothing more than hair and bleached bones. He wished for nothing more than to curl up in apathy, until he turned into dust, until the rodents themselves decayed into nothing, and the whole damnable star system spun away into the infinite, entropic darkness without so much as a whisper or a eulogy.

The runner closed his eyes. His Imperial conditioning urged him to invoke the name of the Emperor for strength – but all that emerged from his chest were defeated little sighs. Starlight formed gossamer webs through his tears, and a sudden memory struck him: rope-bridges and footpaths, glinting under a warm yellow sun, spider-webbing into the distance between the mountain peaks. Long ago, his mother had leaned down and scooped him up above the cloudless plateau, crooning a name he had not used since he had been taken off-world.

*‘Wanlek,’* she cooed in his birth tongue. *‘Wanlek, ak-chi atwa pat mogwil...’*

The runner pulled himself into an agonised hunch and sipped sparingly from his canteen. He forced his mind away from the warm, hazy past. Here, in the present, he was alone, injured and freezing, with no food or shelter in sight. If he laid down to sleep now, he’d surely freeze to death.

The pain in his ankle simmered to a dull throb. The runner forced himself to a standing position, and slowly, laboriously, hobbled over the next dune-crest. A squall of wind gusted over the frozen salt-plains.

Gripping his coat tight around him, the runner hobbled deeper into the impenetrable night.

Dawn broke over a savage land, painting jagged shadows over salt fields and ridgelines. The morning mist traced streaks of white and green across the horizon, obscuring the half-running, half-hobbling man that was the only visible life for miles around.

The runner squinted against the sun, which was cradled like a red, swollen wound inside the mist. His left ankle was constricted and swollen inside his combat boot. Friction blisters had formed and popped and formed again during the night, and each step he took was now pained and squelching.

The sun glared in his eyes.

Once, long ago, his mother had told him a story about how the sun got its place in the sky – how it would fall into the abyss every night, and be pulled out again by the ancestors who toiled in their guardianship over the living.

He could not remember how that story ended now – though he could remember the commissar who had whipped him for telling it to his fellow recruits during the early days of his indoctrination. The Imperial Faith was never one for syncretism. He'd eventually learned to recognise and avoid the zealots in the officer corps – the self-styled pontiffs for whom every arse-lit fire was the Emperor's Light, and any murmurs otherwise were grounds for a beating.

Still – the prayers were a helpful routine. They kept the exhaustion at bay, and distracted his mind from the pain in his feet. The runner had been using the *Fede Imperialis* as a mnemonic device for most of the night, synchronising each syllable with his own footfalls.

*Our Emperor deliver us from plague, deceit, temptation and war.*

*Our Emperor deliver us from the scourge of the Kraken.*

And thus, each word brought him that much closer to regimental command, where warmth, safety and a well-earned rest awaited.

The runner slowed his pace and tipped his canteen to his ragged lips, noting how it was less than half-full. He wondered vaguely how long he had until the water ran out. He tried out new angles for his feet to hit the ground, so that his friction-flayed soles might have some reprieve from the pain that shot through them with every step.

And when his denial lapsed and his mental barriers weakened, he wondered about the voices.

It had started sometime during the night. An odd thing. In the darkness, he

could've sworn he heard footsteps at his back, like an army marching through a bog, slogging along in low but jovial conversation. Some of the voices he'd recognised: Bullard, Old Sarge, Machinist and Tinker-man, and the mess-hall goons in his regiment. Sometimes they sounded so close as to almost be speaking directly to him – but whenever the runner chanced to look backwards, there was never anything but bare tundra.

Now, as he hobbled on his course, the army at his back marshalled again. He could hear a murmuring simulacrum of Bullard's voice, the stomp of his heavy footfalls, the grinding of his severed spine as he kept pace with the runner's footsteps.

'Must be a hassle for you to keep following me around, Bull,' the runner said to no one in particular. 'That spine of yours sounds like it hurts something awful.'

'It isn't. And it doesn't.'

The runner stumbled about and stared. The voice rattled him – more so than even the fugue-visions of the first day. Those, at least, he could put down to trauma. This, though – this was *Bullard's voice*, close and conversational, articulate and *real*.

The desolation of the empty tundra stared back at him. Mist curled around his feet like so many longing fingers. The runner brought a hand to his forehead and felt a cold sweat, maybe a light fever. He let loose a feeble curse and turned back to his course. He had enough to worry about without contending with the possibility that he may be losing his mind.

Bullard's voice piped up behind him, close and confidential.

'Don't fret, little man. Death is only horrifying to the living. Perspectives change when you're on the other side.'

'It's all instinct and narcissism, you know.'

The runner gulped down water, unstrapping his boots and choking in pain as blood rushed to the swelling. It was midday, and he could run no more. His toenails poked through his socks, cracked and bent backwards – the nail of his little toe had come loose with a sickening tug, stuck fast in the rubber of the toe box.

'Think of it, the aeons that passed before you were born, the aeons that will pass after you're dust.'

A layer of skin sloughed away as he peeled back the fabric from his feet. The blister-fluids ran cold in the subarctic air. Salt burned his heels where he rested them on the permafrost.

‘Your existence is only an aberrant blip, in between two infinite threads of un-life.’

The runner laid supine on the salt bed, his muscles limp with exhaustion.

‘Ah well – nobody blames you. You can’t help what you are.’ The voice bounced between Bullard’s earthy wisdom and Machinist’s pompous philosophising. ‘Life exists to beget life. Your point of view is so irrevocably biased by your biology that you revile the perfectly natural state of un-living, and lionise the aberration of your own messy existence.’

‘Instinct,’ said Tinker-man disapprovingly.

‘And narcissism,’ said Old Sarge.

‘Shut up,’ the runner muttered at the empty tundra. He flexed his toes, watching his body heat curl away in ribbons of steam into the milk-white sky.

‘I’ve never known you to be incurious, little man. Is it really so bad to exist without pain, or striving, or the constant competition of kill-or-be-killed?’

The runner plugged his ears with salt-crusted fingers, but the voice pierced his mind like a las-shot.

‘There is peace here. Certainty. Comfort.’

A gust of wind picked up salt and dust and threw the stinging droplets onto the runner’s ravaged feet. Anxiety thrummed in his chest – he knew he couldn’t lie here like this but his exhausted muscles had no means of obeying the nervous jolts shooting through his limbs.

*If I live through this*, the runner thought, clutching his rebreather and licking his cracked lips. *If I make it through alive...*

There wasn’t much room for regrets in the Guard – if only because there wasn’t much that was within one’s control to begin with. But he swore that if he lived, he’d make sure to at least recover well and sleep for a week. And after that... well. Most likely die fighting in some other thankless war, on some other shithole planet. But if by some Emperor-blessed miracle he made it through his whole term of service alive – if there was ever a chance of going back home...

The runner clutched the antique rebreather in his pocket. He remembered the last time he’d looked on the peaks of Intinti. The thought surprised him. He didn’t think he could still remember the name of his home world after all these years, but there it was: a clear, cloudless sky, *aqtipi* doves scattering over a high andesite plateau, a procession of the *wamani*’s fifty healthy boys making its way sombrely up to the sky-temple, the runner among them.

Three ringing blasts from a bear-bone horn, and a tribute delivered.

The runner remembered grasping his ears as a roaring metal beast parted the

clouds. The night before, he had indulged in the ritual feasting and the copious amounts of maize wine it had provided. The priests had anointed him with a dab of cinnabar, intoning, *‘Wanlek Dir, third son of the third wife of House Dir-ek, chaquec-in-training for the Imperial Couriers. You are anointed by the gods.’*

He had embraced his mother and wept openly, earning him the teasing jibes of his brothers – but even they had tempered their teasing with a soft touch of melancholy. In the morning, he would be gone forever from the wamani, plucked by the sky-gods into the realm of the sun. In the morning, he would be Wanlek Dir no more. And so they cried and laughed and feasted and drank, and the priests scattered gold leaf and maize at their feet, finishing the initiation rites for the tribute to the sky-gods and their flying metal beasts.

*How small the world was back then,* the runner thought. He had known so little – all the wise and holy men had known so little. Closing his eyes, he could still recall the presiding nobles chanting their sun-prayers in rhythmic High Tahuanti.

*‘Qulonqu-ek tapa, ik tapa ak qhapaq pat dwil...’*

And then, only the dark hold of the spaceship. The interminable screeching of metal, the sweat and piss and sick from the other boys as the beast bore them into the sky, their hearts beating in their throats, their spirits humbled by the mounting expectation of divine revelation. And then the final docking jolt, the stench and the anti-climax as the gunmetal doors slid open on a sea of men. Mundane, sweaty, trammelled, frightened men.

‘I remember that day,’ Bullard’s voice rumbled in the cold present. ‘You looked like you were ready to faint – the whole sorry lot of you.’

The runner heaved a misty breath into the sky. His compatriots from Intinti had not lasted long in the Astra Militarum. By the end of their indoctrination, most had either died or been discharged to menial duty in the slave corps. He missed them, though he could not remember any of their faces clearly. He missed Bullard – the living, flesh-and-blood Bullard. He missed the half-remembered peaks of his childhood, where the sun was warm and he could run barefoot along the mountain paths without pain or exhaustion or the constant thrum of anxiety in his chest. He missed his mother and his many, many brothers.

If there was ever a chance of going back home...

‘What would you do?’

The runner thought about that for a second. For one, he would find his mother, if she was still alive. Maybe give the high priest a dressing-down about what was *actually* out there, in the ‘realm of the sun’. And then he would find the footpaths of his youth, and, under a warm yellow sun, he would run until all the

awful off-world memories evaporated like sweat from his brow.

‘And after that?’

The runner ruminated in silence. After that? Grow old, retire on a mountain estate somewhere, raise children, grandchildren, and then, when his time finally came...

‘That’s the thing, isn’t it?’ Bullard gurgled knowingly. ‘You let the story go on long enough, it all ends the same way.’

The runner’s fingers clutched feebly at the earth. A good sign – at least his muscles were responding again. He dug out a wad of gauze from his waist-satchel and painfully manoeuvred his legs into a position where he could bandage his feet. The gauze stuck fast to the semi-dry blisters. He noticed that the bite from the rodent thing had begun to ooze, and he bandaged that too.

*At least the hunger pains have stopped*, he comforted himself. They had faded sometime during the day, replaced by a constricting tightness in his gut that he hardly noticed.

Resting his bandaged feet on the ground, he reached into his boots and scraped out the grit from the insides. Clumps of half-dried fluids and dead skin fell near his face. He dug his fingers into the toe box, extracting the nail that had been tugged off his little toe with a sick wave of satisfaction.

The runner pulled on his boots and stood up in a panoply of pain: the piercing, dry pain of the fresh bandages and the wet, dull pain where unbandaged skin rubbed up against the pus-moistened insoles of his boots. His joints protested his every move, and the muscles in his thighs and back would not stop shaking under his weight.

‘It doesn’t have to be like this,’ said Bullard in rumbling tones, stoking his exhaustion. ‘I don’t like seeing you suffer, little man.’

The runner put one foot in front of the other, and ran.

Night fell on mist and shadows. The runner stumbled through the cold dark in a feverish chill. The soles of his boots had started to fray in the early evening, and now the rubber flapped in tatters with every step he took. He had fashioned a makeshift tourniquet to bind the boot together, stringing the gauze fabric under the sole and looping it through the bootlaces – but the sharp crystalline salt had quickly lacerated the fabric into a useless flapping rag.

The runner moved his feet in time with his prayer.

*Our Emperor deliver us from plague, deceit, temptation and war.*

*Our Emperor deliver us from the scourge of the Kraken.*

Behind him, the last sliver of sun vanished under the horizon.

‘I am Wanlek Dir, and I have been chosen by the gods,’ the runner addressed the darkening sky. His voice was cracked and delirious. ‘The Emperor protects.’

His flapping soles caught the ground and he tumbled forwards. A mouthful of salt and blood.

Rolling onto his back, Wanlek snuffled in weak laughter as the apathetic stars careened overhead. He spat out salt and grit and reached for his canteen. He held it above his lips for a full minute before realising it was empty.

‘Revered Emperor of Terra,’ he wheezed. ‘Deliver us from thirst and shit boots...’

He wondered briefly where Terra might be, and what the Emperor might look like. Summoning up all the prayers and ancient stories he knew, Wanlek painted a picture in his mind’s eye: a big man on a golden throne. A non-specific, holy light. And...

And that was it.

Nothing else came through the haze of mindless reverence. For all the beatings and indoctrination, for all the practised veneration and conditioned awe, there was precious little he knew about the Holy God-Emperor that supposedly watched over all of mankind.

Wanlek raised his head, seeing the glow of mammalian eyes gather around him. He thumped the ground weakly with one hand, and they scattered back into the darkness.

Once, on his home world, Wanlek had seen an emperor. A scrawny old man in a golden-feather headdress. The emperor had been on a state visit, so there was no golden throne, only a painted palanquin bejewelled with pyrite and emerald. A tiny, frail old man – but as good a God-Emperor as any, for all either of them had ever done for him. After all, where were they when the keep fell? Where was the Emperor when Bullard got taken in half? Where was the Emperor when Old Sarge screamed and the mists closed around them?

*All hail His holy impotence, the scrawny God-Emperor of Terra!* Wanlek thought, deliriously giddy at the irreverence of it all. If any of his commissars could hear him now, he would surely be shot.

Wanlek rolled onto his stomach and crawled to his knees. The map declared another eighty miles between him and regimental command. He pulled himself out of his flapping, useless boots, and convulsed as his feet hit the piercing salt of the tundra. Only the parched dryness in his throat stopped him from crying out in pain.

‘Why not just rest for a while?’

Wanlek tuned out the gurgling voices of his dead squadmates. Little rodent creatures darted in and out of the shadows, trailing him with their glowing eyes.

*They know that I'm dying,* Wanlek thought. He took another agonising step. He could not remember feeling pain or exhaustion like this before in his entire life. Adjusting his magnoculars, he scanned the landscape desperately for any sign of water – the winding terrain of a riverbed, perhaps, or the reflective glint of snow or ice under the starlight.

A boundless desolation stared back at him. The dark tundra stretched to the horizon, endless and ageless. Mists swirled in longing tendrils. Wanlek Dir stared into the darkness, shivering as his muscles strained and his skin oozed.

And through it all, where was the Emperor?

A chorus rolled across the landscape, low and jovial, under an oppressive mist that smothered the stars. The rumbling backbeat soaked into Wanlek Dir's exhausted muscles like seeping molasses.

*'I am flesh and I am rot.'*

*'I am flesh and I am god.'*

The words came simultaneously from the darkness beyond the mist, and from deep inside his bones. Wanlek Dir hummed along in feverish delirium. No words came out, only a tuneless wheezing.

*'I am dirt and I am pox.'*

*'I am the flesh that time forgot.'*

Salt and dirt pockmarked the naked flesh of his soles. A trail of prints extended behind him in pus and blood – though, for the last three miles or so, the impressions had mostly been made by his hands and knees rather than his feet.

Wanlek crawled onwards in fever and cold sweat. The palms of his hands were salt-flecked and raw, and his combat fatigues had been torn to reveal similarly bruised and ragged knees. He counted out his progress in multiples of seven. *I am flesh and I am rot* – and that was seven lurching movements. *I am flesh and I am god* – and another seven ragged handprints.

Bullard's voice rang out over the chorus.

‘Lie down and rest, little man. You deserve some peace.’

Wanlek swivelled towards the sound, but saw nothing except mist.

*The big bastard is always hiding from me,* he thought. Bullard liked his practical jokes. Wanlek wheezed through his parched throat. Water – that was the main thing. He could not go much further without water.

*I am the flesh that time forgot.*

Wanlek crawled onwards, fading in and out of awareness, his mind thick with fever. The mist tightened around him; shadows within shadows churned with what might've been human forms. After an indeterminate amount of time, he woke to find himself propped up against the side of a rock formation, his bare hands shaking against a crook in the underside. He reached up to brush a stinging fleck of salt from his face, and his fingers came away from the rock cold and damp.

A primordial thrill cut through his mind-haze.

Moisture! Dew-frost on the underside of the rock. A simple, bestial urge leapt in his chest. Wanlek Dir lowered himself quivering to the ground, thirsting and needing, and licked at the stone.

Pain shot through his tongue. Wanlek gagged. The grit of salt lacerated his mouth, and the frost-moisture only served to spread the brine in a thin adhesive that stuck to his tongue and palate. He gagged again and tried to spit, but could not muster the saliva. His tongue split open in salt-damaged fissures.

Wanlek Dir collapsed in abject despair, moaning in half-forgotten Tahuanti. There was no Emperor in the galaxy that could help him. As the dryness caught in his throat and no more sounds would come, he mouthed mutely at the sky.

‘Mami. Mami, help me. I want to go home.’

The glowing eyes skittered closer. Wanlek tried to shoo them away, but the muscles in his arms would not obey the command. Beyond them, deep in the mist, roiling shadows enfolded themselves into human shapes. Indistinct edges became solid, and Wanlek could just make out the familiar outlines in the haze: Old Sarge, with his skin sloughed away as if doused in acid; Tinker-man, with half of his face bubbling with pox; Bullard, rocking and clicking on his severed spine, a black, grimacing hole where his mouth used to be. Squinting deeper into the darkness, Wanlek thought that he could also see the rest of his regiment gathered in a throng, their faces and outlines indistinct, fading endlessly into the all-consuming mist. There were Guardsmen wearing unfamiliar uniforms, too, and civilians in attire he'd never seen before – even Intinti men and women, some in priestly headwear.

‘All things must die,’ intoned the shadows in the mist.

Wanlek Dir laid his head back and closed his eyes. One of the braver rodents skittered up to his feet and nibbled at the ragged, pus-drenched gauze.

‘We are the flesh that time forgot,’ Machinist’s voice rumbled in the darkness.

‘We can make the pain go away,’ said Bullard, stepping from the mist and

extending his hand in a gesture of aid.

Wanlek wheezed helplessly. There was a jolt from far away as one of the rodents bit into the flesh where his toenail used to be. He tried to kick it away, but again, his muscles failed to respond. As more rodents congregated around him, the sharp nicks of their incisors sent a hundred jolts of pain through his flesh. His skin flaked in the air as he tried to call for help, mouthing silent nothings through a tongue that had split apart in cracked, parched canyons.

The mist became as thick as tar. The rodents swarmed up to his waist, squirming over each other in their rush to feed. Bullard leaned over him, sickly-green, hand outstretched.

Wanlek Dir heaved one last breath into the sky, and reached up to take it.

He walked through the depths of a vast, impossible garden.

The soil squelched under his feet. The atmosphere was warm and moist enough to be tropical, though the skeletal vegetation around him looked much too black to be of any tropical variety, and no birdsong disturbed the still, humid air. He picked through the pathways with a purposefulness that surprised him. He knew that the soles of his feet were flayed raw, yet he felt no pain – each footstep gurgled into the ground with an odd, comforting numbness.

In the darkness, indistinct shapes shadowed his movements. Their forms morphed from Old Sarge to Machinist, from Bullard to the Intinti boys who had been lost ages ago during their Astra Militarum training. One shadow stepped out from the foliage – it wore the face of the old Intinti priest at his feast-day.

‘Wanlek Dir, third son of the third wife of House Dir-ek, chaquec-in-training for the Imperial Couriers. You are anointed by the gods.’

The shadow-form priest dabbed his forehead with a spot of pus, and scattered ash and buboes at his feet. Wanlek trudged onwards. A familiar face rose out of the mist to greet him.

‘I told you,’ Bullard gurgled as they embraced. ‘No more suffering, little man.’

Wanlek closed his eyes and listened to Bullard’s severed vertebrae crack to the rhythm of his breathing. He felt a deep, faraway sadness, but could not remember why. Vague memories of a yellow sun and thin mountain paths fell away from him. For a second, a fragile voice pierced the gloom, bright and ethereal.

‘My little aqtipi dove, do you know how the sun got its place in the sky?’

His sadness deepened. No matter how far he reached into the misty depths of memory, he could not remember the answer to that question, nor the reason why

it resonated with such significance to him.

A third shadow rose from the mist. Wanlek stirred, and half-remembered words bubbled from his mouth.

‘Mami?’

She slouched from the earth, her flesh soft and green and yielding. Not his mother – but close enough to the real thing to provide a deep, satisfying comfort. Her voice sounded like tar as she dripped her words into the swamp beneath their feet.

‘You have been anointed by the gods, my little dove. No more pain.’

‘No more pain,’ echoed the shadows in the mist.

She enfolded him in a wet embrace. Lukewarm kisses left splotches of pus on his cheeks. When they finally broke contact, she held him out at arm’s length, and looked over his face lovingly.

‘We’ve taken your pain, but it is not the end of duty. You still have a job to do. Do you understand?’

He nodded slowly.

‘I think I do.’

She smiled and gave him a final, gurgling kiss.

The runner opened his eyes.

Dawn was breaking over the tundra. A cold wind whipped across his face, but he felt no chill. He sat up, testing his muscles against his weight. They responded without complaint. He rested his flayed soles against the jagged salt of the tundra. They did not feel pain.

The runner pulled himself to his feet and looked out over the emptiness. The gauze on his feet fell away, along with a layer of skin. Other things, too. Flakes of memory. Fragments of a yellow sun. A puzzle in a story whose ending he could not remember.

He unstrapped the canteen from his belt and let it drop to the frozen earth. Next, his satchel. His belts and medals. Reaching into his breast pocket, he felt the solid metal lump of the antique rebreather – and, after a brief hesitation, he tossed that too.

The runner breathed deep, surveying the bloated rodent carcasses at his feet. Joints clicked and skin sloughed, but he found himself otherwise very functional.

‘We have taken your pain,’ rumbled a voice deep within his gut, ‘but you still have a job to do.’

The runner blinked. He suddenly remembered that he’d been running for days,

and that his duty was not yet done. Yanking himself out of his repose, he made his way down the ridgeline, and further on into the vast, sweeping tundra.

It was best not to linger. He still had a message to deliver, after all.

It was late afternoon by the time the grey, hulking outline of regimental command loomed into view. The runner approached at an unhurried pace, humming his chorus happily as the air broke into rhythmic cracks around him. It took several more shots for him to recognise the sound of lasguns. Stray shots arced over his head – they did not deter his progress. The runner watched them with an idle interest, wondering if they were meant to be warning shots, or just indicative of terribly bad aim.

There was a crack and a hiss. He tumbled backwards with a distant concern, and looked down to see where a las-shot had blown a smouldering chunk from his shoulder. Why were they shooting him now? He had a message to deliver, and he had come such a long way to do so.

He struggled up from the ground and held up his good arm in a gesture of surrender.

The gunfire stopped.

After a while, several scrambling figures emerged from the fog, closing around him with practised speed. They hauled him to his feet, sweating and breathing fast. The runner regarded them with pity. They dragged him through the gate of the main compound, through a vast courtyard of stone and plascrete, and into a grey, squat bunker that huddled near the foot of the mountain hold.

The world passed in steel and meat and sulphur. Corridors upon corridors. More meat followed, barking, sweating, running, saluting with all the messy exertion one would expect. Finally a steel door along a far wall slid open, and the runner was deposited unceremoniously into a windowless room and shoved into a corner. More meat filed into the room after him, the gelatine of their eyes straining as they studied him.

‘Name and rank!’ the meat barked.

The runner blinked.

‘I am...’ he started, then frowned. He chided himself for his lapse in memory.

*‘I am flesh and I am rot.’*

*‘I am flesh and I am god.’*

The meat buzzed around him – wheedling, prodding, hitting, shouting. The runner accepted it all with a soft indifference. He could not understand why they insisted on waylaying him now. His message was important, even if he was a

little fuzzy on the details. A keep – that was it. A keep had fallen, and something was coming. Bullard and Old Sarge and Tinker-man were dead, and–

The runner frowned. No, that couldn't be right. Bullard and Old Sarge and Tinker-man were fine. In fact, there was Bullard right now, in a shadowy corner of the room, his lips pulled back in a soot-black smile, deep, tongueless, toothless.

Outside in the corridor, a commotion broke out. Shouts rang out in a din, and heavy footfalls weaved this way and that in staccato confusion. Garbled messages flitted from vox-comm to vox-comm before the room fell deathly silent.

The meat shouted and hit him with another blow. He could feel the shock of flesh against flesh, knuckle against jaw.

Right. The message.

The runner opened his mouth.

*'I am the flesh that time forgot.'*

A sudden understanding came over him. He stood up ponderously, working out the semantics in his mind. He was not a runner after all. He was more of a... what was the word?

*A herald.*

The meat recoiled from the green mist that leaked from the herald's nose, mouth and pores.

*'I am the flesh that time forgot.'*

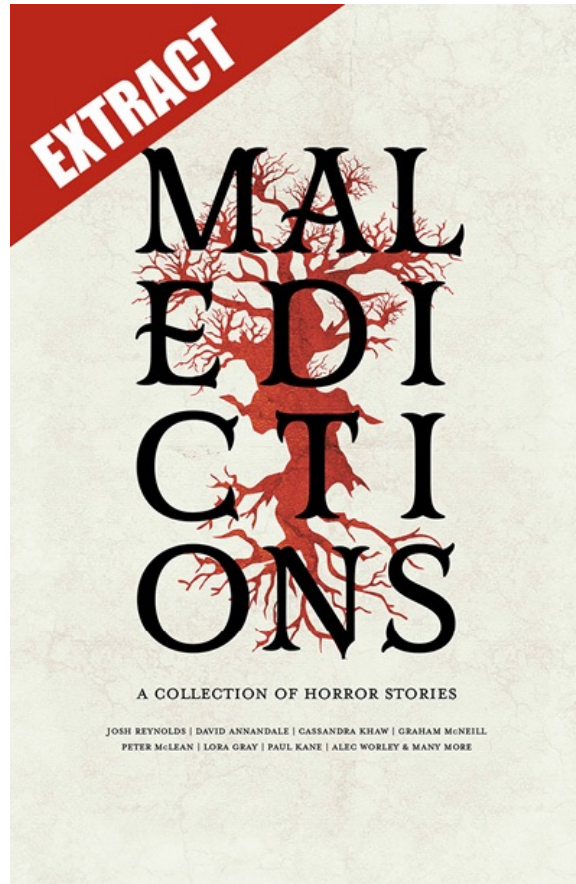
Bullard stepped out from the shadows. And Old Sarge, and Tinker-man, and Machinist. The herald held the convulsing meat to his breast, as if to soothe a crying child. Its limbs kicked with a desperate vigour, but each blow came weaker than the last. The herald embraced the meat as a father would; cradled it, smothered it.

'No more pain, little man,' he said, as the mist grew thick and the shadows grew solid. 'We are coming.'

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Alan Bao** is an illustrator and multimedia designer currently bouncing around East Asia. He is also a writer of poetry and prose, and 'Runner' is his first story to be published by Black Library.

An extract from 'Predation of the Eagle' by Peter McLean,  
from the Warhammer Horror anthology, *Maledictions*.



*Vardan IV, Astra Militarum Advance Firebase Theta 82*  
*Three months ago*

Sergeant Rachain read the names of the Missing in Action to the platoon every morning.

Every morning, the list was longer than it had been the day before.

‘Emperor’s grace,’ Corporal Cully muttered to himself as the reeking, poisonous rain beat down hot around him, pounding on the canvas covering of the muster tent overhead. ‘There won’t be any of us left before we get out of here at this rate.’

‘What say, corporal?’

That was Moonface, from Three Section. Cully looked at the boy’s fat, sweating face, and he could see the fear written there in the premature lines around his young eyes.

‘Nothing, trooper,’ he said. ‘Old Cully’s just muttering to himself, don’t you worry your pretty little head about it.’

Cully had no idea what Moonface’s real name was, but it didn’t really matter. On Vardan IV it didn’t really matter what *anyone’s* name was, at least not until they had survived their first firefight. Most of them didn’t, after all.

The steaming jungles were infested with orks, and the Reslian 45th were chewing through new recruits as fast as the troop ships could deliver them. Cully, though, he’d been deployed there for the last two years. So had Rachain, of course.

They were tight, the pair of them, and Sergeant Drachan and Corporal Gesht and the others from Two Section. They were the old guard, the backbone of Alpha Platoon, D Company. The hardened veterans.

The survivors.

Corporal Rikkards and his mob were all right too, he supposed, especially that

huge lad who Cully called Ogryn, but never where he might hear him. Lopata, he thought the man's name was. Still, they were in Beta Platoon and tended to keep themselves to themselves and didn't mingle much with the others, so to the warp with them.

No, it was the old guard who mattered. Rachain and Cully, Drachan and Gesht. Veteran sergeants and their top corporals, that was what made a platoon. Rachain was lead sergeant of Alpha Platoon. He was top canid in D Company, and Cully was his right hand man and his best friend.

That was how you ran an army, Cully thought. Lieutenants were only there to do paperwork and take the blame if the wheels fell off an operation, and who even knew what captains did. Anyone higher up than that might as well not exist, in Cully's opinion. It was boots in the mud that won wars, not generals polishing chairs with their arses.

'It's a lot of names, corporal,' Moonface said.

Cully had forgotten the boy was there. He blinked and looked at him.

'This is war, Moonface,' he said. 'People go missing, in the jungle. People die. That's what we're here for, in case it had escaped the memory capacity of the tiny brain that hides behind that enormous face of yours. We're the Imperial Guard. Dying is what we're *for*.'

'Yes, corporal,' Moonface said, and that really was the only right answer he could have given.

Cully headed up One Section, Alpha Platoon, and that made him *Rachain's* top canid. No recruit boot from a lower section was going to answer *him* back, not if they knew what was good for them.

'Corporal,' a voice rasped behind him, sounding like it was coming straight out of an open grave.

That was Steeleye, Cully knew. He turned and looked at the veteran sniper. Steeleye had been in One Section since even before Cully's time, and ever since she got her naming wound she had refused to answer to her real name anymore. Cully respected her capability enormously, but that didn't make her any easier to look at.

'What is it?' he asked, feigning nonchalance as his eyes took in the ruin of the woman's face.

Steeleye had met an ork up close, once. Very close indeed.

It had bitten her face off.

Her left eye socket had been crushed too badly for the medicae to be able to do anything except seal over the collapsed mess of broken skull with hideously

shiny synthetic skin, giving her whole head a disturbingly lopsided appearance. Her right eye had been replaced with the bulbous metallic augmetic from which she took her name. She had no nose, just a ragged open snout from which thick green snot ran almost constantly, and the bone was exposed along the length of the left side of her jaw where the synth-skin had refused to take.

She carried a specially customised long-las over her shoulder, topped with a scope that interfaced so perfectly with her augmetic eye that the entire weapon became part of her body. She had recorded eight hundred and thirty seven confirmed kills on Vardan IV.

‘Stop winding the poor brat up,’ Steeleye said, nodding sideways at Moonface. ‘You ain’t been listening to the list.’

Cully shrugged. He hadn’t been listening to the morning list for the last eighteen months.

‘So?’

‘Drachan made it.’

Cully blinked. Sergeant Drachan had been the platoon’s top scout.

*Making the list*, that was what they called it when you went out into the green and didn’t come back. Sometimes a trooper might be confirmed Killed in Action, if they were shot down right in front of their comrades and someone managed to bring their ident-tags back for the Munitorum to log the death and send The Letter to their next of kin, but it was rare. In the impenetrable, greenskin-infested jungles of Vardan IV, ninety per cent of casualties were officially listed as MIA for the simple reason that no one could find what was left of them after an engagement.

‘You sure?’

Steeleye nodded, and paused to wipe her oozing snout with the back of her already crusty uniform sleeve.

‘Emperor’s word,’ she said. ‘He went out with Two Section yesterday, didn’t come back. Gesht’s in pieces.’

Cully nodded slowly. He knew Drachan and his corporal had been close. Maybe too close, if you cared what the regulations said.

Cully didn’t care one little bit.

‘I’ve got some sacra in my tent,’ he said. ‘I’ll go see her. Thanks, Steeleye.’

The old veteran nodded her ruined head at the corporal, and no more words needed to be said between them. Moonface just looked on in simple, naive bewilderment as the day to day business of the Astra Militarum went on around him.

Death, loss, grief.

It was just another day in the glorious Imperial Guard.

*Vardan IV*

*Now*

Cully squeezed down on the trigger of his lasgun and blew the ork apart with a sustained burst of full auto.

‘Emperor’s teeth, but there’s a lot of them,’ Gesht’s voice growled in his vox-bead.

The other corporal was five, maybe six hundred yards to Cully’s left, away through the curtain of suffocating rain with her own section spread out around her.

Alpha Platoon were deep into greenskin country, on an advance recon mission.

‘I hear you,’ Cully replied. ‘Concentrate on the big ones, they’re the bosses.’

‘You think I’m some new boot?’ Gesht snapped. ‘I know that, Cully.’

Cully shrugged, for all that he knew the woman couldn’t see him.

‘Sure, Gesht,’ he said. ‘Just watch your arse, and watch your section’s arses even harder.’

‘Teach me to suck a bleedin’ egg,’ Gesht started, then her inevitable obscenities were cut short by a crackling barrage of automatic lasgun fire through Cully’s vox-bead.

‘Say again?’

‘Nothing,’ she said. ‘Sorry, I was just doing my job. What are *you* doing?’

Cully bit back a reply and pulled himself forward on his elbows and knees through the stinking mud and rotting vegetation. The light was greenish yellow in the rain, filtered through the high jungle canopy above them. Everything in Cully’s world was made of sweat and mud and filth.

His webbing chafed at his shoulders through his flak armour, rubbing his sodden undershirt against the constant friction sores that were a simple part of life on Vardan IV. Enormous insects swarmed around him, biting at his exposed skin, and more than once he’d had to stop and brush hideous, translucent arachnids off his sleeve.

‘Status report,’ he said, after a moment.

‘About five hundred on your nine,’ Gesht said. ‘No more contacts. Closing on the boss.’

‘Acknowledged,’ Cully said. His section were finally out of orks to kill, too.

They were both closing on Rachain, bringing their sections forward to the sergeant's position. He was in the command squad, of course, with Lieutenant Makkron who was at least nominally in charge of Alpha Platoon's deep recon patrol.

If Makkron had even half a brain, Cully thought, he would be doing what Rachain told him. The officer was fresh out of the cadet scholam back on Reslia itself. They still did things the old-fashioned way on Reslia; sent anyone with good breeding straight to officer school. That meant anyone with money, obviously. He was maybe twenty Terran-standard years old at the most. Rachain was almost twice his age, and had spent all those extra years in the Guard. He knew what he was doing.

A newly commissioned lieutenant outranked a platoon sergeant, of course, but he would have to be a special kind of stupid to try to enforce it. Cully really didn't want to have anyone that stupid in command of him and his men.

'Hey, Gesht,' Cully said, flicking his vox-bead over to their private channel. 'What do you make of the lieutenant?'

Gesht snorted in his ear. 'Wetter behind the ears than the last one was,' she said. 'The next one will still be in nappies, at this rate.'

'I hear you,' Cully said. 'You reckon he's listening to Rachain?'

'He'd better be, or he might get shot in the back by an ork,' Gesht said.

'Like the last one did, you mean?'

Their last lieutenant had been the special kind of stupid that had almost got thirty of them killed when she marched them straight into an ork ambush despite Sergeant Drachan's insistence that it was a trap. It had only been the honed reactions of the veterans, and Steeleye's stone cold sniping, that had got them out of it alive. The lieutenant had been gunned down from behind by a lone ork on their way back to the base. No one ever found that ork, and platoon lore had it that perhaps its name had been Gesht, but of course no one could prove anything and in honesty no one much cared. As far as Cully was concerned that was all well and good.

The jungle did strange things to a man's sense of right and wrong, and he had long since come to accept that.

'Don't know what you mean,' Gesht said, and her voice was flat and emotionless.

Cully could have kicked himself for a fool for bringing it up. That had been *before*.

Before Drachan made the list.

Before Gesht lost her mind to grief.

‘Don’t mean anything,’ he assured her. ‘We’re good.’

‘We’re good,’ Gesht agreed, and the moment passed.

Cully remembered the day Steeleye had come and told him Drachan had made the list. He remembered going to Gesht’s tent with his illicit flask of sacra, to see how she was.

Deranged, that was how she had been. He had found her field-stripping her lasgun and anointing its few moving parts with her own blood as she recited the Emperor’s Litany of Vengeance over and over again. She’d had plenty of blood to work with, what with the mess she had made of her left arm.

The scars were still plain to see even now, hard ridges of white tissue against her tanned skin where she had half-flensed her own forearm with her combat knife in a furious outpouring of grief and rage. Cully had had to restrain her, he remembered, pin her down before she bled to death, and call in a very private favour from their squad medic to keep it quiet. He had drunk the sacra himself, afterwards.

He had kept her secrets, for all that he should have made a report, and he honestly thought that was the only thing that had stopped her from killing him in his sleep when she was nominally recovered. He had seen her in her weakness, in her shame and her torment, and he knew that didn’t sit easy with her.

She had never been quite right in the head since, all the same.

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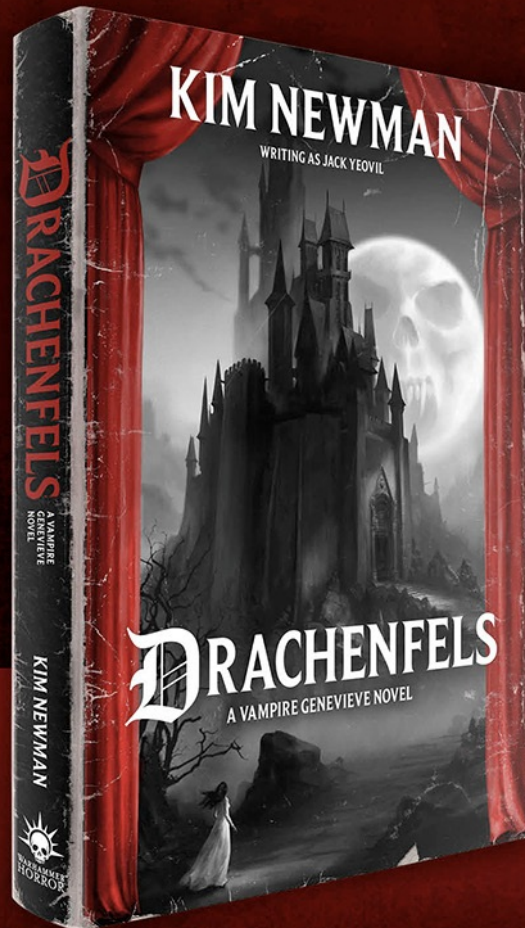


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