

INFERNO!

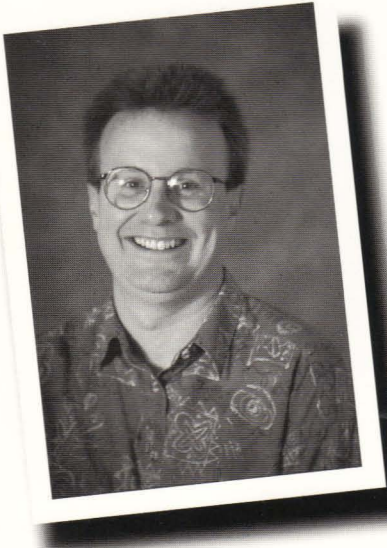
TALES OF FANTASY & ADVENTURE

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Issue 2

INFERNO!™



WELL, TWO MONTHS IN and issue one of *Inferno!* is but a faded memory. A glorious and triumphant memory, of course, but we try not to dwell on the past, especially when we have a 'hot off the presses' copy of issue two at which to marvel.

Here at the Black Library we are currently buried beneath the shifting sands of all those 'Feedback' replies you sent in – I won't be doing one of those again in a hurry, I can tell you. From the look of things, *Inferno!* issue one was generally much liked, with (so far) no clear winner in the popularity stakes. Letters, letters, you must send more letters...

For those of you who missed *Inferno!*'s auspicious debut (hahahaha, that'll teach you to pay attention!), or who have only just stumbled across this worthy tome in your

bookstore or newsagent, it's worth restating exactly what this magazine is all about. *Inferno!* is a publication full of action and adventure stories set in Games Workshop's fantastic worlds of Warhammer and Warhammer 40,000. (If this still means nothing to you, take a look at the inside back cover.) As well as our rip-roaring short stories, within these pages you will also find comic strips, 3D cutaways, mission reports and other special features.

This issue we have contributors from as far afield as Australia and the USA. New souls for the *Inferno!* include authors Ben Chessell, Gav Thorpe, Chris Pramas and Mark Brendan; and artists Simon Davis and Colin McNeil. More about these reprobates later on in the issue.

On a personal note, there's no story from me this issue. Why not? I've been brutally pushed into a poor fifth place by tales of Orc slaying, planetary destruction, burning mutants and ancient weapons of devastating power. Clearly I have already lost whatever touch I once had. And it's only issue two! Lamentations! I must try harder!

For now, though, it's time for our next foray into the *Inferno!*

A handwritten signature in black ink, which appears to read 'Andy Jones'.

Andy Jones
Editor

INFERNO!™ CONTENTS

A BLACK LIBRARY
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by Geoff Taylor

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Write to us at

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BLOODQUEST

THE FORTRESS-MONASTERY OF THE BLOOD ANGELS CHAPTER ON THE PLANET BAAL, WHERE A SOLEMN CEREMONY IS ABOUT TO BEGIN--

COMMANDER OF THE WATCH, LET *THE PENITENT* BE BROUGHT BEFORE US!

STORY: GORDON RENNIE
ART: COLIN MCNEIL
LETTERS: TONY LUKE

BROTHER-CAPTAIN LEONATOS, ARE YOU READY TO RECEIVE THE JUDGEMENT OF THIS COURT?

I AM, MY LORD.

BROTHER-CAPTAIN LEONATOS, YOU HAVE VIEWED THE EVIDENCE AGAINST YOU. DO YOU AGREE THAT IT IS THE FULL AND FAIR TRUTH?

I DO, BROTHER-LIBRARIAN.

BROTHER-LIBRARIAN MEPHISTON WILL PRESENT THE EVIDENCE, SO WE JUDGE YOU ACCORDINGLY.

MY LORDS, I BEG PERMISSION TO PRESENT THE FIRST PIECE OF EVIDENCE FROM CHAPTER RECORDS--



"... A SWORN TRANSCRIPT FROM LORD DANTE OF THE RECENT MEETING BETWEEN HIM AND CAPTAIN LEONATOS..."

YOU SENT FOR ME, MY LORD?

I DID, LEONATOS. WE HAVE RECEIVED AN URGENT COMMUNICATION FROM THE HIGH LORDS OF TERRA...

A MASSIVE FLEET OF ORK RAIDERS HAS ATTACKED THE SEKUNDAR SYSTEM AND THREATENS TO OVERRUN THE ADEPTUS ASTRONOMICIA WARP-STATION ON SEKUNDAR PRIME.

WE HAVE BEEN REQUESTED TO ASSEMBLE AN IMMEDIATE COUNTER-STRIKE. YOURS IS THE ONLY COMPANY AVAILABLE. HOW SOON CAN YOUR MEN BE READY FOR DEPLOYMENT..?

IMMEDIATELY, MY LORD! IT IS THREE WEEKS SINCE WE BROKE THE ELДАР ON MKOLDOSAN AND MY BROTHERS AND I ARE EAGER TO SEE ACTION AGAIN!

YOU DO NOT DISAPPOINT ME, LEONATOS. YOUR BRAVERY IS A CREDIT TO YOUR CHAPTER AND YOUR EMPEROR.

YOU WILL BE GREATLY OUTNUMBERED, WHEN THE OTHER COMPANIES RETURN FROM THEIR PRESENT MISSIONS, I SHALL SEND REINFORCEMENTS TO YOU. UNTIL THEN, YOU MUST HOLD OUT.

AS PROOF OF THE FAITH WE HAVE PLACED IN YOU, WE PRESENT YOU WITH THIS--

THE BLADE ENCARMINE. THE SWORD OF BELARIUS, GIVEN TO HIM BY LORD SANGUINIUS HIMSELF!

YOU HONOUR ME GREATLY, MY LORD. I SWEAR I SHALL NOT BETRAY YOUR TRUST...

CHAPTER FILE 36673/483-D. FIELD REPORT
OF BROTHER-CAPTAIN LEONATOS,
TRANSCRIPT AS FOLLOWS...

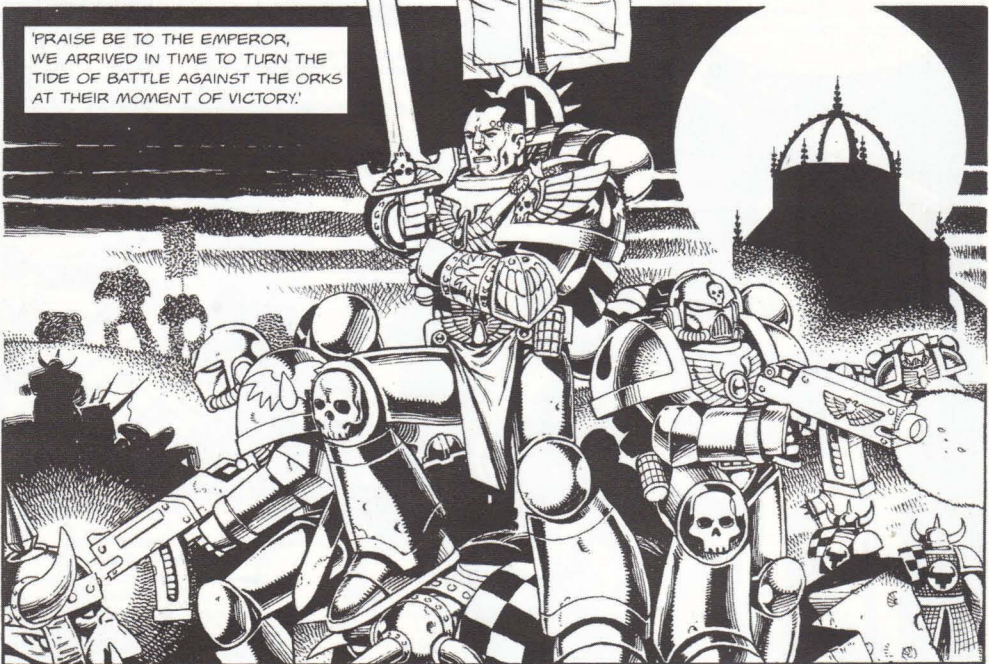


'UPON REACHING SEKUNДАР PRIME, WE FOUND THE
PLANET UNDER ORK BLOCKADE. MANOEUVRING IN
AS CLOSE AS WE DARED, I ORDERED AN
IMMEDIATE *TELEPORT ASSAULT!*

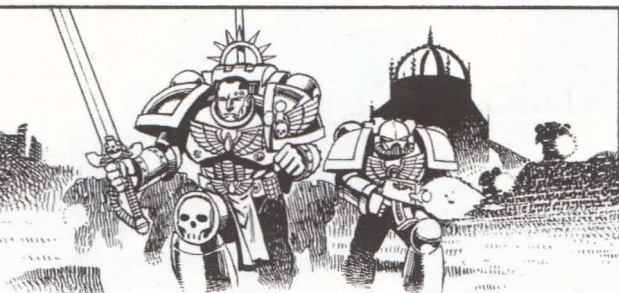
'PLANETARY DEFENCE FORCES
HAD BEEN FIGHTING A HOLDING
ACTION AROUND THE WARP-
STATION SINCE THE BEGINNING
OF THE ORK ATTACK--



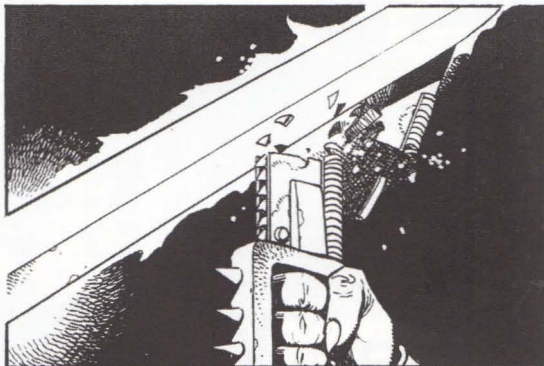
'PRAISE BE TO THE EMPEROR,
WE ARRIVED IN TIME TO TURN THE
TIDE OF BATTLE AGAINST THE ORKS
AT THEIR MOMENT OF VICTORY!



WITH THE EMPEROR TO GUIDE US
AND THE SPIRIT OF SANGUINIUS
WATCHING OVER US, WE CARRIED
THE BATTLE TO THE ENEMY!



'OUR ORDERS WERE
CLEAR. OUR PURPOSE
WAS PURE--




--I KNEW WE WOULD
NOT FAIL IN OUR DUTY
TO THE CHAPTER.'


WITH THE ORKS RETREATING IN
DISARRAY, WE SECURED DEFENSIVE
POSITIONS AROUND THE
WARP-STATION!

'BY THE GRACE OF
SANGUINIUS, THE FIRST DAY'S
VICTORY WAS *OURS*..'






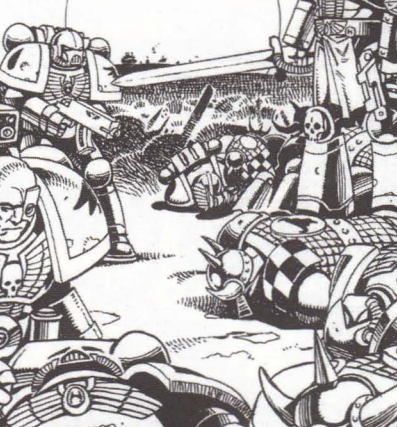
FOR FIVE LONG DAYS
WE HELD OUT, REPULSING
ATTACK AFTER ATTACK
FROM THE ORK WARHOST
THAT SURROUNDED US.'



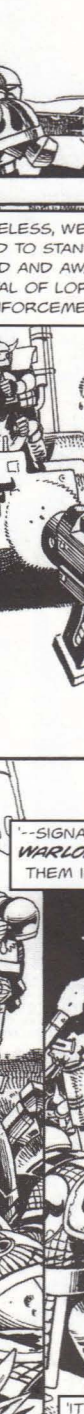
'THEY OUTNUMBERED US
NEAR A HUNDRED TO
OUR ONE AND MANY OF
OUR WARRIORS FELL BEFORE
THE FURY OF THEIR
CEASELESS ATTACKS.'




'NEVERTHELESS, WE
CONTINUED TO STAND
OUR GROUND AND AWAIT
THE ARRIVAL OF LORD
DANTE'S REINFORCEMENTS.'



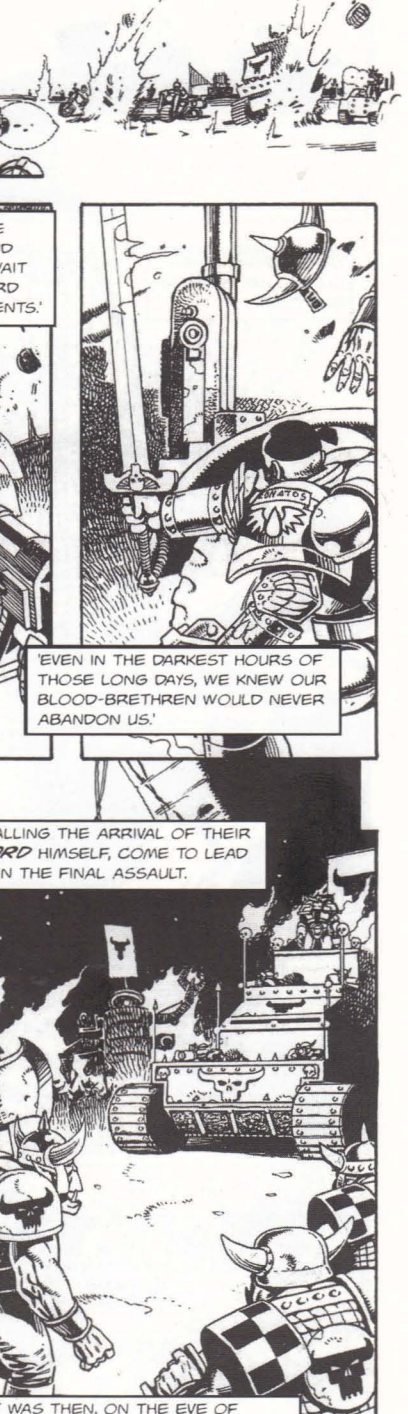
'EVEN IN THE DARKEST HOURS OF
THOSE LONG DAYS, WE KNEW OUR
BLOOD-BRETHREN WOULD NEVER
ABANDON US.'



'ON THE EVE OF THE FIFTH NIGHT,
WITH SCARCE THIRTY BROTHERS LEFT
OUT OF A FULL COMPANY OF ONE HUNDRED,
WE HEARD *WAR-HORNS* SOUNDING
FROM THE ORK ENCAMPMENT--



--SIGNALLING THE ARRIVAL OF THEIR
WARLORD HIMSELF, COME TO LEAD
THEM IN THE FINAL ASSAULT.



'IT WAS THEN, ON THE EVE OF
THAT FINAL DAY, THAT I SUMMONED
WHAT REMAINED OF MY COMPANY..'

CHAPTER FILE 36673/483-E. SWORN TESTIMONY OF VETERAN SERGEANT TRANIO. TRANSCRIPT AS FOLLOWS--

IT WAS ON THAT LAST NIGHT THAT THE BROTHER-CAPTAIN SPOKE TO US. I HAD FOUGHT BY HIS SIDE IN A DOZEN DIFFERENT CAMPAIGNS, BUT I HAD NEVER SEEN HIM SO ROUSED AS HE WAS THEN--

--IT WAS AS THOUGH *SANGUINIUS* HIMSELF WAS SPEAKING TO US THROUGH HIM!

BROTHERS, WE HAVE RECEIVED WORD FROM BAAL. *LORD DANTE* HAS NOT FORGOTTEN US AND THREE FULL COMPANIES OF BRETHREN ARE ON THEIR WAY TO US THROUGH THE WARP!

BY THE EMPEROR'S GRACE, THEY SHOULD BE HERE BY SUNRISE!

BUT OUR DUTY HERE IS NOT YET DONE. IF THE STATION WE HOLD IS DESTROYED, OUR BROTHERS MAY LOSE THEIR WAY IN THE MAELSTROM AND THIS WHOLE QUADRANT SHALL BE LOST TO THE ORKISH SCUM!

ALREADY, THEY HAVE PAID A HEAVY TOLL--TEN OF THEIRS FOR EVERY ONE OF OURS...

WELL,, I SAY IT IS NOT ENOUGH!

TONIGHT WE HEAR THEM CELEBRATING THEIR EXPECTANT VICTORY BUT, COME TOMORROW, THEIR ONLY SOUNDS WILL BE THE CRIES OF THEIR DYING AND THE LAMENTATIONS OF THEIR INJURED!

'HE DRANK DEEPLY FROM A CHALICE FILLED WITH THE BLOOD OF OUR FALLEN BROTHERS AND VOWED TO HONOUR THEIR MEMORIES.'

'WE FOLLOWED HIM IN HIS OATH, SWEARING TO HONOUR THE DUTY OUR CHAPTER DEMANDED OF US--

'VICTORY OR DEATH!'

THIS I SWEAR TO YOU, ON THE SACRED BLOOD OF OUR LORD *SANGUINIUS* AND ON THE SWORD OF HIS SERVANT *BELARIUS!*

'THE GREEN-SKINS CAME AT US BEFORE FIRST LIGHT THE NEXT MORNING. UNTOLD NUMBERS OF THEM, THEIR FACES PAINTED WITH SAVAGE WAR-MASKS.

'BUT WHEN THEY CHARGED, THEY FOUND US READY FOR THEM.'



'THEY CAME AT US IN WAVES, DRIVEN ON BY THE BESTIAL FEROCITY OF THEIR WARLORD, UNTIL OUR BOLTERS RAN RED HOT IN OUR HANDS.'



'THEY DIED IN THEIR HUNDREDS, BUT STILL THEY CAME...



'AS THEY THREATENED TO OVERRUN OUR LINES, THE BROTHER-CAPTAIN DREW HIS BLADE AND GAVE THE ORDER--

'DRAW ARMS FOR CLOSE-QUARTERS COMBAT.'



'THE BROTHER-CAPTAIN WAS FIRST INTO BATTLE, AND I RIGHT BEHIND HIM. I WOULD HAVE FOLLOWED HIM EVEN INTO THE EYE OF TERROR THAT DAY, HAD HE COMMANDED ME.'



HE SEEMED POSSESSED BY THE RED THIRST ITSELF, SO TERRIFYING WAS HIS FURY.'

'IT WAS AT THE HEIGHT OF THE SLAUGHTER THAT THE BROTHER-CAPTAIN SAW HIS ONLY CHANCE--'



'THE ORK CHIEFTAIN HAD COMMITTED HIS OWN RETINUE TO BATTLE, AND MY LORD WAS DETERMINED TO MEET HIM IN SINGLE COMBAT.'




'WE FOLLOWED HIM - MYSELF AND TWO OTHER BROTHERS - BUT WERE UNABLE TO MATCH HIM IN THE FURY OF HIS ATTACK..'




'SHAMEFULLY STRUCK DOWN, I WAS UNABLE TO AID MY LORD IN HIS BATTLE--'



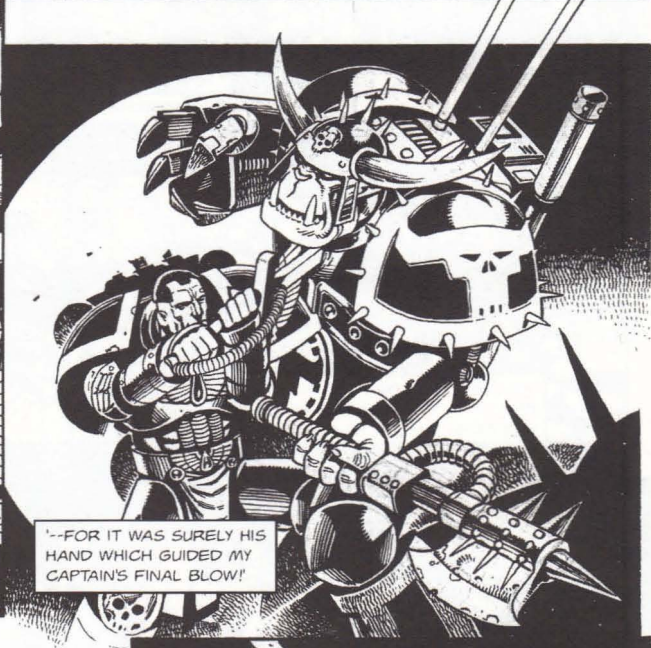
'MAY SANGUINIUS FORGIVE ME, ALL I COULD DO WAS WATCH AS HE STOOD ALONE AGAINST THE MONSTROUS WARLORD.'




COMMANDER LEONATOS FOUGHT VALIANTLY, YIELDING NO GROUND TO THE GREEN-SKIN SAVAGE, EVEN THOUGH OUR LONG DAYS OF BATTLE HAD TAKEN THEIR TOLL OF HIS STRENGTH..'




WOULD THAT YOU COULD HAVE SEEN HIM, MY LORDS. *SANGUINIUS* HIMSELF MUST HAVE BEEN WATCHING OVER HIM--



'--FOR IT WAS SURELY HIS HAND WHICH GUIDED MY CAPTAIN'S FINAL BLOW!



'BUT EVEN IN ITS *DEATH-THROES*, THE GREEN-SKIN FOUGHT ON TO THE LAST--

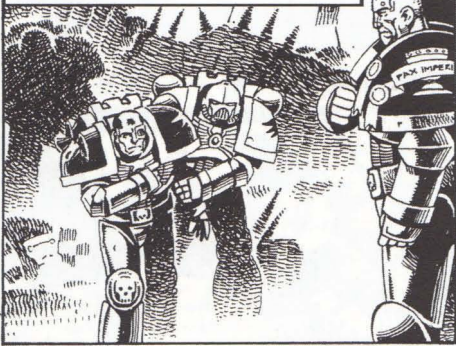


'I SAW NOTHING MORE. CONCIOSNESS LEFT ME AND I ASSUMED MY CAPTAIN DEAD.'

CHAPTER FILE 36673/483-F. SWORN
TESTIMONY OF **BROTHER-CAPTAIN
BRACCIO**, COMMANDER OF
SEKUNДАР PRIME RELIEF MISSION.
TRANSCRIPT AS FOLLOWS-



'WE ARRIVED TO FIND THE ORKS FLED
BACK ABOARD THEIR SPACE-HULKS
AFTER THE DEATH OF THEIR WARLORD
AND THE APPEARANCE OF OUR FLEET
FROM THE WARP.'



'SCARCE *TEN* OF OUR
BROTHER-MARINES
REMAINED ALIVE...'

'WE FOUND **BROTHER-
CAPTAIN LEONATOS**
UNCONSCIOUS OUT IN
THE BATTLEFIELD, LEFT
FOR DEAD BY THE ORKS.'



OF THE **BLADE ENCARMINE**
ITSELF, THERE WAS NO SIGN.
WE CAN ONLY PRESUME THE ORKS
CARRIED IT OFF WITH THE BODY
OF THEIR SLAIN WARLORD..'

BROTHER-CAPTAIN
LEONATOS. YOU HAVE HEARD
THE EVIDENCE AGAINST YOU.
HEAR NOW THE JUDGEMENT
OF THIS COURT.

YOU SUCCEEDED
IN YOUR MISSION BUT
AT A GRAVE COST-*NINETY*
OF OUR BROTHERS DEAD
AND A **SACRED RELIC**
LOST.



YOU ARE TO
BE **EXILED**, NEVER TO
RETURN, AND YOUR NAME
STRUCK FROM CHAPTER
RECORDS AND ALL
FORBIDDEN TO SPEAK
IT EVERMORE.

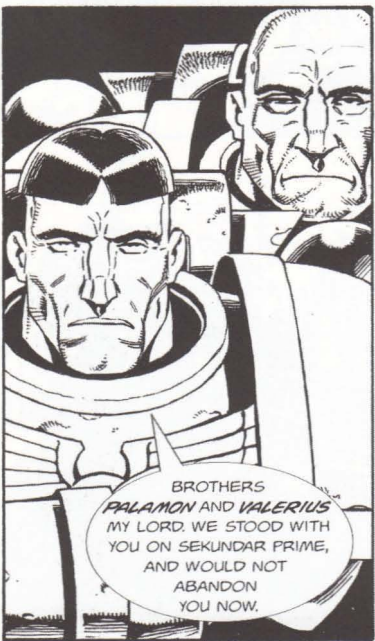
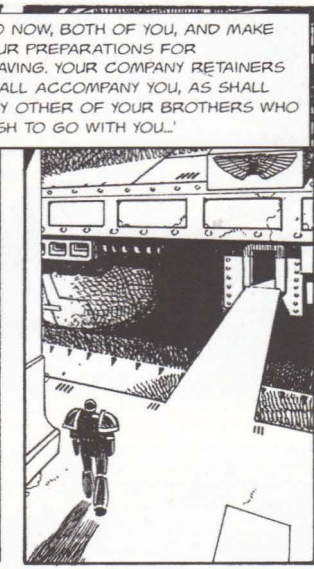
THIS IS OUR
JUDGEMENT. THIS
TRIBUNAL IS AT
AN END.

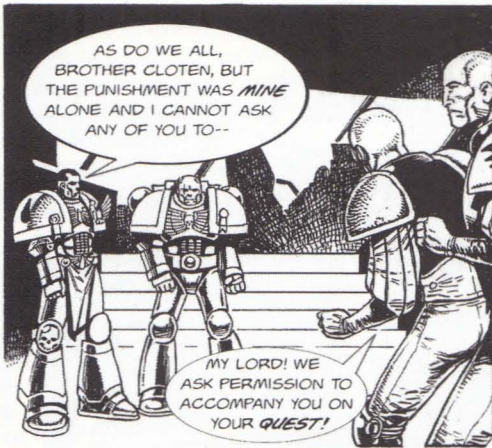
HOLD THERE
IS ONE MORE THING,
LEONATOS.
YOU HAVE FAILED
ME, YET YOU FOUGHT WELL
AND HELD THE STATION. IT IS
MY RIGHT, AS **CHAPTER
COMMANDER**, TO
GRANT YOU
LENIENCY.



THE JUDGEMENT
STANDS, BUT IF YOU SEEK
OUT AND FIND THE LOST RELIC
THEN YOU MAY ONE DAY **RETURN**
TO US AND BE RECOGNISED
AS OUR BROTHER
ONCE MORE.

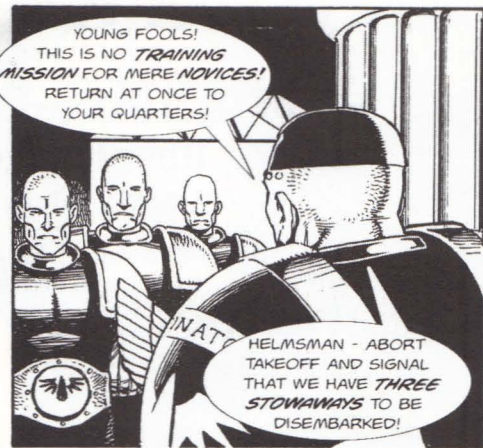






AS DO WE ALL, BROTHER CLOTEN, BUT THE PUNISHMENT WAS *MINE* ALONE AND I CANNOT ASK ANY OF YOU TO--

MY LORD! WE ASK PERMISSION TO ACCOMPANY YOU ON YOUR QUEST!



YOUNG FOOLS! THIS IS NO *TRAINING MISSION* FOR MERE NOVICES! RETURN AT ONCE TO YOUR QUARTERS!

HELMSMAN - ABORT TAKEOFF AND SIGNAL THAT WE HAVE *THREE STOWAWAYS* TO BE DISEMBARKED!



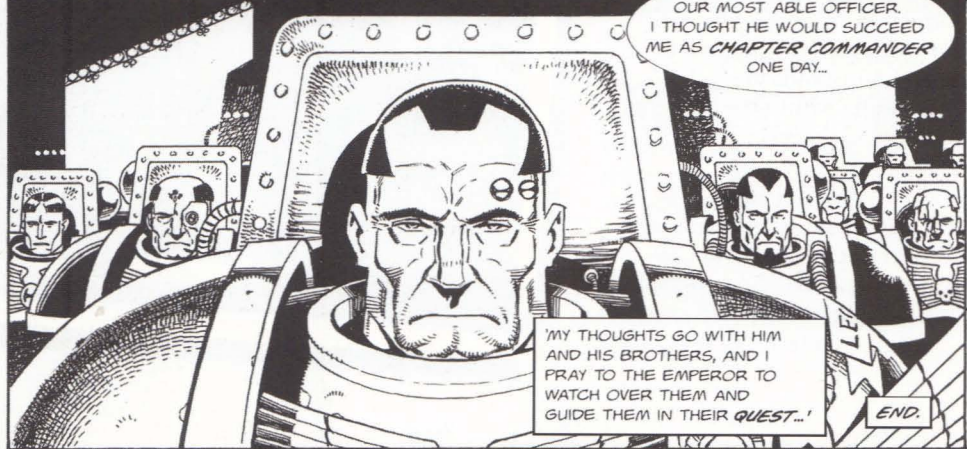
NO ANSWER. MY LORD! THEY ARE REFUSING TO RECOGNISE OUR SIGNAL!

WE HAVE ALREADY BEEN *REMOVED* FROM CHAPTER RECORDS AND ARE NOT BEING ALLOWED TO RETURN!

A *HARSH* JUDGMENT, BROTHER MEPHISTON...

BUT A *NECESSARY* ONE, LORD DANTE, TEMPERED ONLY BY YOUR MERCY.

LEONATOS WAS OUR MOST ABLE OFFICER. I THOUGHT HE WOULD SUCCEED ME AS *CHAPTER COMMANDER* ONE DAY...



MY THOUGHTS GO WITH HIM AND HIS BROTHERS, AND I PRAY TO THE EMPEROR TO WATCH OVER THEM AND GUIDE THEM IN THEIR QUEST...!

END.

• **From the Archives** •
of
**Codicier Thaliart, Matriculate Prime,
Blood Angels Chapter
Adeptus Astartes**

Personnel Records

Section MXXIII.VI.001a1

Name Arcite, Menelus

Subject Metaform Helus/
Genestealer Purge
commendation

Situation

Space Marine Captain Menelus Arcite is remembered for his most ardent leadership of strike elements of the 5th Company of Blood Angels in the Metaform Helus hive city assault.

Summary

Intimation of Genestealer infestation first came to the attention of the Adeptus Astartes two standard years after initial contact between Metaform Helus and the alien element was estimated to have taken place. It was first noted that resources and munitions production from the hive was below directed output levels and of a substandard grade. Subtle shifts within the Imperial Cult were observed.

Within 18 months, up to 70% of the hive was infiltrated, infected and overwhelmed. Royal Clan Porackt, the ruling body, was of questionable purity.



CAPTAIN ARCITE'S HELM AND BREASTPLATE ARE PRESERVED ON PRECINCT OCTUS.



The Strike Cruiser, *Sanguis Blade*, was deployed to the Metaform system to investigate and stabilise the situation.

Upon arrival, Captain Arcite and his battle brothers established a sub-command force of untainted hive defence forces and initiated their assault. The battle raged for ten days and all traces of infestation were eradicated.

Of Note

The campaign culminated in a final strike upon the Hive Lord's personal apartments. Captain Arcite directly interrupted the escape of a lone Purestrain Genestealer and Broodmaster headed towards the Hive Lord's private escape craft. In the sealed docking chamber a vicious hand-to-hand confrontation took place. The Broodmaster was despatched by Arcite but at the price of a jammed bolt pistol. And so Brother Cloten faced the Purestrain Genestealer with only his chainsword.

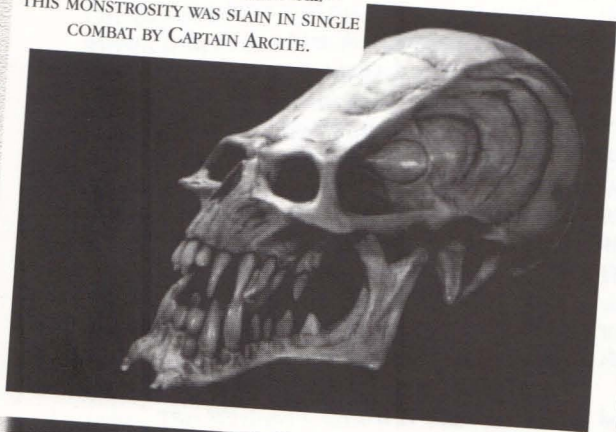
Recommendations

Submit to enshrinement

Captain Menelus Arcite is remembered in honour for his victorious efforts in the Metaform Helus campaign and, due to his fatal injuries, his ultimate sacrifice. Submit that these personal effects and weapons be withdrawn from service and enshrined in the Malthus 4 Sanctum, together with the Purestrain skull – observe the abrasion marks left by a single blow from a chainsword.

**File Alpha/personnel/
historic/artifactum/textual-
visual • RECORD ENDS**

PURESTRAIN GENESTEALER SKULL – THIS MONSTROSITY WAS SLAIN IN SINGLE COMBAT BY CAPTAIN ARCITE.



Adeptus



Astartes



BIRTH OF A LEGEND

By Gav Chorpe

GRUGNI'S BEARD, I wish they'd quieten down! I've got one hell of a hangover!' Kurgan spat derisively at the burly greenskin watching over them.

The four Dwarfs were tied to stakes, their hands and ankles bound with crude rope. A huge bonfire raged not far off and the Orcs were celebrating their victory. The air was filled with the sound of beating drums and the woods reverberated with the constant pounding. As the night passed, they broke open huge barrels of their foul intoxicating brew to wash down the hunks of charred Dwarf flesh eaten earlier. The flames of the fire leapt higher and higher and the Orcs shouted louder and louder.

Kurgan's blood boiled. He strained at his bonds with all his strength. It was to no avail; the knots remained as tight as ever. He was condemned to look on despondently while the foul creatures made a banquet of his household. Over to his left, Snorri slumped semi-conscious against his pole. The others, Borris and Thurgan, seemed similarly dazed. The King's gruff voice cut across the laughter and shouts of the Orcs.

'Snorri! Hey, Snorri! A curse upon us for being captured rather than killed, wouldn't you say?'

The venerable advisor groaned and looked up at his king, one eye screwed shut with pain, the lids stuck together with congealed blood from a cut on his brow.

'Aye, a pox on the green devils for not ending it honourably, sire. I'll see them all rotting in hell 'fore I'm for the pot! Mark my words!'

Despite their predicament, Kurgan was heartened by Snorri's defiant words and he grinned to himself. Out beyond the fire he could see the Orcs smashing open the barrel of ale he had been taking with him to his cousin in the Grey Mountains. A tear glistened in Kurgan's eye as he thought of that fine brew, made over five hundred years ago and matured in oak casks stored in Karak Eight Peaks, wasted in stunted Orc throats. What he had paid for that small keg could have trained and equipped an army for a month. The potent ale had seemed like a good investment at the time, but when the Orcs had poured from their hiding places yelling their shrieking war cries, he had realised that perhaps the money should have been spent on that army after all.

Kurgan pushed aside thoughts of ale and studied the Orc camp, trying to figure out a plan of escape. Most of the Orcs – he wasn't sure how many there were – sat in small groups, dicing, squabbling or just sprawling, bloated. The smaller Goblins scurried to and fro, fetching and carrying for their bigger cousins, who would occasionally kick or punch one of them for raucous entertainment. A particularly inventive Black Orc used his spear to elicit a yelping noise which the Orcs found amusing.

Kurgan could see that most of the Dwarfs' stolen weapons, armour and treasure was piled all over the camp, with no plan or order. In one part of the clearing, Kurgan's mighty field tent had been crudely erected for the Orc leader, although the sides of the massive

marquee had not been unfurled. Inside, gold and gems were piled high, but Kurgan was looking for the magical weapons and armour that had been stripped from him and his Longbeard retainers. Across the darkness Kurgan could make out the massive Warlord, sitting in a fur-backed throne at one end of the tent while his drinking cronies squatted around him. A mass of glittering treasure was spilled around them. They laughed heartily at some brutal jest. Perhaps the Warlord felt Kurgan's gaze lingering on him, for the Orc slowly turned his heavy head to fix the Dwarf king with evil red eyes. That malevolent glance fastened Kurgan to the wooden stake as surely as the ropes which bound him. For a short moment he stopped struggling.

Kurgan regained his composure, scowling at the dark savage with what he hoped was his most frightening glare. The Warlord back-handed one of his subordinates for some misdemeanour, sending the Orc sprawling in a spray of teeth. The huge brute stood up abruptly, shouting something to his subordinates, his Bosses. He grabbed a passing Goblin and tossed the unfortunate creature into the blazing campfire. As the Warlord's comrades laughed at this jest, the huge Orc began stomping towards Kurgan. His glowing eyes never left the Dwarf for a moment. The milling throng of Orcs and Goblins parted effortlessly before the stride of the mighty Warlord, closing in behind their leader as he marched towards his most prized captives.

The Orc Warlord was dressed in heavy black mail and studded plates, and even Kurgan found himself thinking that he presented a fearsome sight. At his belt hung a string of grisly trophies: severed heads, hands, feet and ears dangled from a chain looped around a thick leather strap. The Warlord's skin was dark green in colour, almost black, and slab-like muscles rippled beneath the surface. The Black Orc's bucket-jawed head thrust forward from between two chain-bedecked shoulder pads, his red eyes burning with fierce power. They were pinpoint of pure hatred, smouldering

with a barely-repressed violence that made Kurgan tremble with fearful anticipation. Switching his gaze before he betrayed any weakness to the advancing Orc, he looked at the huge column of smoke pouring into the sky, lifting burning fragments of his comrades' clothes into the chill night air.



ACROSS THE WOODS, other eyes had seen the smoke. Now they moved silently through the forest towards its source.

Ansgar turned to the youth leading the hunting party and asked the question which had been nagging him.

'Are you sure this is a good idea? We've got no clue as to what's out there!'

The burly young man simply turned to him and winked, before pressing forward along the rough track. Ansgar sighed and beckoned the rest of the party to follow, swapping worried glances with a couple of the older members, veterans of no few battles. Eginolf passed by and Ansgar fell into step with his twin brother.

'I don't like this at all, Eginolf. He's a fine lad, but he's not ready for something like this. Headstrong, if you ask me.'

'I didn't,' came the grunted reply.

Ansgar shrugged and padded along the game trail in silence, his hand holding his sword to his thigh to stop it making any noise. The hunting party included warriors of all ages, from veterans in their thirties like Eginolf and himself, to seasoned warriors in their early twenties and untried boys who had seen only a dozen summers.

Their leader, perhaps surprisingly, fell nearer that end of the scale. The youth was a fine-looking young man. Only fifteen, he was already over six feet tall and his well-muscled body put any man to shame. It wasn't only his physical prowess that impressed Ansgar, though. The hunt lord was clever and canny, with an experience of hunting and battle that

belied his age. The lad had a toughness inside too, a resolute stubbornness to overcome any problem.

Ansgar fondly recalled a time, maybe five years ago, when a party had gone to the river to catch fish. The group had been confronted by a massive bear, there for the same purpose. Everybody else had frozen, but the young lord had strode forward, hands on hips, until he was a few paces from the huge beast. 'These are our waters, fish somewhere else!' he stated in a level voice. Ansgar had expected the bear to swipe the boy's head off, but instead it had looked at the youngster's unwavering stare and had turned and lumbered into the woods without a growl.

From that day, the young lord had become known as Steel-eye, and his reputation had done nothing but grow. He was a good leader, generous to those who served him well, swift to act against the enemies of the tribe. He was very much like his father and when that great man was eventually ushered into the halls of the dead, his successor would bring a time of equal prosperity. But that was for the future. All that mattered now was finding out who was trespassing on their lands.

The warriors of the hunting band were dressed for the cold night, their brightly patterned woollen breeches and fur-lined leather jerkins protecting them from the biting north wind. Most of the men wore their hair in one or two long braids down their back, woven with bright ribbons and beads to match their chequered leggings.

As the lord's hunting party, they were equipped with the finest weapons forged from sturdy metal mined in the south-eastern foothills. Each of the men also had a short hunting bow, carved from the horns of mountain cattle. The warriors of the tribe were taught how to use the bows from the time they were able to lift one, and even in the darkest night they rarely missed their mark. Ansgar was proud to carry the Champion's Bow, edged with gold and silver thread, which he had won four times in the last six years. Whatever his words of caution,

Ansgar was as eager for as fight as any of them, looking forward to the promise of more glory in battle. If there was some fighting to be done this night, he would be ready for it.

The party moved on in silence, the forest around them in almost total darkness as the cloudy sky obscured the twin moons. Now that they had dropped into the dale and the distant flicker of fire could no longer be seen, but the scouts had taken their bearings well and they were headed almost straight to the north to investigate the intrusion. Soon they would find out just who it was who thought they could camp within their borders.



BY THE TIME the Warlord was stood in front of his Dwarf captives, most of his warriors were behind him. His head cocked to one side with concentration, the large Orc looked at each of them in turn, assessing their remaining strength. Noticing Snorri's injury, the massive Black Orc's mouth twisted in a cruel smile and he stepped forward for a closer look.

It was just the opportunity Snorri had been waiting for. Lashing forward with his head, the old Dwarf delivered a smashing butt to the bridge of the Orc's nose, sending a spatter of green blood spilling through the night air. The mumbling throng behind him fell silent except for a few gurgling gasps of horror and the clatter of the odd weapon or cup dropped in stunned disbelief. As the Chieftain shook his head to clear the dizziness, one of his lieutenants stepped forward, a bared scimitar lifted above his head. His intent was clear. Angrily, the chieftain pushed the Orc back into the mob and grinned evilly at Snorri. Wiping away the mixture of blood and mucus dripping down his long top lip with the

back of his gnarled, scarred hand, the battle-hardened Orc chuckled. 'I likes dis wun - 'e's gorra lorra spirit, hur hur!'

When the stunned silence continued, the Warlord slowly turned on his heel to glare at his warriors. Under his hostile gaze, the mob broke into howls of sycophantic laughter. Satisfied with this display, their leader turned back to the Dwarfs, his attention now firmly fixed on Kurgan.

'Wotcha, stunties! Are we cumfurtable? Do yooze knows what I'm gonna do wiv yooze lot? Dere's lots of fings we can do togevver, and it'll be a lorra fun. We 'ad a lorra fun wiv yer mates!'

To illustrate his point, the Warlord let rip with an enormous belch, spattering Kurgan with spittle. The stench of charred Dwarf flesh and fungus beer was nauseating and the Dwarf king felt his stomach lurch uncontrollably. With some effort, Kurgan quelled the bile rising in his throat and grimaced at the Warlord.

'Course, we woz 'ungry den, so we 'ad to be pretty quick wiv da butcherin'. Yooze fellas, we's gonna take our time over, ain't we lads?'

The Warlord turned to his ragtag army, his cavernous mouth yawning open to display an impressive set of yellowing, cracked fangs in what Kurgan assumed was the Orc equivalent of a grin. This time the mob cheered on cue, laughing heartily. Kurgan tried once more to loosen his bonds, without success.

'Da furst fing we's gonna do is put yer feet inna fire. Dat'll warm yer up fer sure. Den we can stick fings in yer eyes, so's you don't see no more. Den we's gonna chop off yer fingas and toes and ears and noses and hack off yer luvverly beards. I fink yer king's beard will go well wiv me uvver mates.'

The Orc stretched and grabbed a handful of Kurgan's hair, dragging his head forward until it was level with the vile decaying decorations on the Orc's belt. The stench of rotting blood and filth emanating from the Warlord's unwashed fur leggings made Kurgan want to retch, and he had to muster every ounce of self-control not to heave up his breakfast. The Warlord released his grip and continued.

'Den I fink we'll start boilin' bits of yer inna pot, and we'll feed 'em to yer so's yer don't go 'ungry. Yooze stunties are tough 'uns, no mistake, and I reckon dere'll still be plenty of life left in yer after dat. So den we start peelin' yer skin off an' feedin' it to da boarz. Da last fing we's gonna do is cut out yer tongues, cos by dat time yer'll be screamin' really loud and musical, beggin' us ta stop 'avin so much fun.'

Kurgan spat again, and raised his head to stare straight at the old Orc. Clearing his throat of smoke and ash, the Dwarf King's voice rang clearly out over the camp.

'You have plagued us for many years, Vagraz Head-Stomper, and we have never been afraid of you. You don't frighten us now! You will never get me to beg anything from you, you worthless dung-head! I'd bite off my tongue before I would give you that pleasure. You can torture us, but you'll never break our spirits.'

The Warlord frowned at the interruption. With a non-committal grunt, the Orc delivered a short punch to Kurgan's jaw, smashing his head back against the post and splitting his lip.

'You mite not fink I'm very smart, but I knows a few fings about yooze stunties. F'rinstance, I knows dat da worst fing for you is gonna be to watch yer mates gettin' it furst.' Gazing at the roaring fire and then back to the Dwarfs, Vagraz gave an evil chuckle. 'Enough words. Let's get started!'

With that he spun and delivered a mighty kick to Snorri's midriff. The ancient counsellor fell to his knees, doubled up with pain. Another kick from the iron-capped boots knocked Snorri sideways, spiralling down the pole until he was left choking in the mud. Eager to regain his lost standing, the burly Orc with the scimitar pushed forwards again, two swift hacks severing through the ropes binding Snorri. As a Goblin darted forward to wind more cord around the Dwarf's wrists, the Orc subordinate leant down and snarled into Snorri's ear.

'Lucky you, da boss wants yer furst!'

THE MOONS BROKE from the cloud and the party halted briefly by a swift-running brook. The men sat down in the undergrowth along the bank, splashing the cold water onto their faces, swallowing a few gulps of the cool, refreshing liquid and chewing on the odd meat twist or fruit they had brought along. Soon they were moving again. Slipping silently into the darkness, disturbing the bushes and branches less than the touch of a breeze, the scouts ran off ahead. Soon the first of them returned, melting back from the shadowy darkness. They gathered around the hunt lord to report. The oldest of them, Lando, spoke first.

'It's an Orc camp, lord. It's difficult to say how many, they keep moving around, but by my reckoning it's odds of at least four to one in their favour. They've got a few guards, but they're all drunk. We could slit their throats without any problems. From the trails they seem to be heading westward, from the mountains.' Frodewin carved a picture of the scene in the dirt. 'The most sheltered approach is from the west. We can circle round the Korborg and move up Aelfric's Vale to attack. The moons are almost set; soon it'll be completely dark. With that massive fire they've got burning, their night vision is going to be worthless. We should be able to pick off half of them before they realise there's anything amiss.'

The blond curly hair of Ringolf bobbed up and down with excitement as the young lad pushed his way to the front to add his news.

'They've captured somebody, but I couldn't get close enough to find out who.' The young man gulped a breath. 'There's a whole horde of them. Maybe we should wait for the others to arrive.'

Steel-eye sighed and looked at each of his men. Without a word, he turned and started off towards the Orc camp at a run. The others exchanged confused glances and then followed without protest. The going was easy, following a deer track to the west through the ferns that studded the base of the mound known as Korborg. The scouts slipped ahead once

more, spreading out to silence the slumbering sentries they had located. The main party continued around the tor, breaking to the north when it reached a small stream which splashed down the steep slope from a high spring.

Quickly and carefully, the hunters passed through the woods without a sound. The twin moons dipped out of sight and the forest was plunged into blackness. Steel-eye signalled a stop and then moved forward, tapping Ansgar and Eginolf to indicate they should accompany him. They half crouched, half ran towards the clearing. Ansgar could hear the drums and the chants of the Orcs quite clearly now – and smell the stench of burning flesh on the breeze. The old huntsman uttered a whispered curse and Eginolf placed a warning finger to his lips. He pointed towards a small thicket where a dozing Orc leant against a tree, its crude club lying next to it.

Without a sound, Eginolf drew his long hunting knife and slipped into the trees. A moment later he was rising out of the bushes behind the Orc. His hand clamped around its long jaw and the knife flashed down in one swift stroke. Eginolf laid his prey down carefully before rejoining his fellow huntsmen who lay in a clump of ferns at the edge of the clearing. From here they could clearly see four Dwarf prisoners tied to stakes, two of them pretty badly wounded. As they watched, an immense Black Orc walked over to the Dwarfs, followed by almost the entirety of his warband. There was a brief exchange, during which the chieftain was knocked sprawling by a head butt from one of the captives. All three of the humans grinned in appreciation of this act of defiance, and both Eginolf and Ansgar nodded when their lord started to string his bow and gestured for them to fetch the other warriors. Before long, the whole war party was hiding along the western face of the clearing. In the centre of their line, Ansgar and Eginolf flanked the hunt lord. One of the Dwarfs was being dragged from his post and they watched as he started to fight with his captors before being savagely beaten into acquiescence.

Ansgar spat and whispered another curse, before shooting an inquiring look at his master.

'As much as it riles me to see such creatures on our lands,' he whispered urgently, 'why should we risk ourselves for the stunted beardslings? They've never offered a hand to us.'

Steel-eye spoke for the first time that evening. His voice was strong but quiet. It had an authoritative ring to it which forestalled any quarrel.

'I don't like Orcs. Any being, man or Dwarf, who can still put up a fight when bound certainly earns my respect.'

He pulled an arrow from his quiver and rose to one knee.



SNORRI WAS HAULED roughly to his feet. As the Orcs jostled him towards their leader, the venerable Dwarf lashed out with his foot, smashing the knee of one of his guards. As the other Orcs grabbed him, Snorri stamped on the fallen Orc's neck, producing an audible crack. He was bundled to the ground, the Orcs kicking him and jabbing him with the butts of their spears. Throughout the cruel, mocking laughter of the Warlord cackled out over the roar of the fire. Bloodied, smeared with mud and half-fainting from pain, Snorri was dragged across the camp towards the fire. The Orc mob gathered around, whooping and cheering, eager for blood.

The air was suddenly thick with black-feathered arrows, each picking out a separate target with lethal accuracy. The Orcs had no time to scream before they were dead. Even as the others in the camp looked around with dumbfounded disbelief, a second hail of shafts picked off another swathe of greenskins. The air was filled with startled, raucous cries. The drunken Orcs fumbled to get their weapons ready, stumbling over their dead companions and tripping over the stashes

of loot that littered the clearing. Another deadly volley poured from the dark trees, followed by a series of whooping cries as a band of humans broke from their cover, dropping their bows and drawing long knives and swords from their belts.

Kurgan strained again at his bonds, then looked up at Thorin's yell.

'This is our chance, uncle! Let's try to get out of here while the greenskins are diverted by these primitives.'

A glance to his right confirmed to Kurgan that Borris was still unconscious, hanging from the ropes like a tattered rag doll. The massive bruise on Borris's head was as dark as coal and dried blood stained the whole side of his face. Escape didn't look very likely, but Kurgan was not one to look a gift pony in the mouth. He clenched his teeth and wrenched at the ropes once again.

The Orcs had now recovered from their initial surprise and had started to organise themselves. Compared to the mass of greenskins, Kurgan thought the humans looked pitifully few. Gnashing his teeth in frustration, he strained at his bonds until his arms went numb, but there was no give in the ropes. Despite their lack of numbers, the humans were taking a heavy toll of the stunned, drunken Orcs. One young man in particular was cutting a bloody path through the horde, slaying another Orc with every swing of his sword. The greenskins were beginning to surround their attackers though, and Kurgan feared the reprieve from the Orcs' bloody attentions would be short-lived.



ANSGAR WAS GRINNING with the rush of battle, even as he parried another serrated Orc sword. Lunging forward with his left hand he buried his hunting knife in the savage's midriff. As the Orc dropped gurgling to the floor another stepped forward, only to be felled by a blow from Eginolf, who

fought to his brother's right. The twins looked around for more foes. Their hunt lord was surrounded by a throng of greenskins, but even if they'd been sober the Orcs would have been poor match for the mighty human lord. Although covered in a dozen light scratches and bruises, he paid no heed to his wounds and fought with the ferocity of a bear. Roaring the tribe's battle cry, he plunged his sword through the neck of a Goblin and, with a backhand blow of his knife, disembowelled another.

Most of the Goblins were dead or fleeing into the welcoming darkness of the forest, and no few Orcs too. Nevertheless, Ansgar could see that the surprise attack would peter out unless they could break the main Orc horde. Suddenly his attention was drawn to Steel-eye. Screaming in anger, the youth leapt over the heads of his attackers to come crashing down in the middle of their impromptu shield-wall. Ansgar lost sight of him behind a wall of green bodies and flailing swords.

Concerned for his lord, Ansgar shouted for his trusted veterans to follow him. He set off through the throng, hacking his way towards their lord. Ansgar's worry was short-lived. The muscled young man burst into view, rearing up from a tangle of corpses to hack at the exposed backs of his would-be attackers. Breaking in panic, the Orcs tried to run, only to be cut down as Ansgar and Eginolf led their seasoned fighters to support their leader. There was an open route to the captives now, and Ansgar directed some of the men to act as a rearguard while the rest followed Steel-eye as he hurried towards the Dwarf prisoners.



KURGAN COULDN'T HELP but be awed by the fighting prowess of the young human, obviously their leader from the way the savages clustered around him. Even as the Dwarf King

watched, the youngster effortlessly dodged a clumsy spear thrust, before stunning his attacker with the pommel of his sword. Ducking beneath a wild axe swing to slash the hamstrings of another greenskin, the youth stabbed upwards with his knife, showering himself in a fountain of Orc blood. Kurgan almost felt like a spectator at some macabre dance; watching carefully choreographed moves executed with grim precision. The young man was constantly moving, weaving between the blows of his adversaries while his own weapons bit deep with every strike. A powerful kick to the spine sent a Black Orc crumpling to the ground, while the lad head butted another adversary, snapping the Orc's spiked helmet back with a jarring crack.

Kurgan noted that the other humans weren't faring badly either. A few had fallen, but nowhere near as many as the Orcs. The lithe huntsmen darted through the throng in pairs and trios, singling out a foe to gang up on. After dispatching one individual they would find another, and so on, moving through the Orc camp with ruthless efficiency. For all their primal savagery, the humans were brave fighters.

Kurgan heard Thorin spit a curse and he turned to see his nephew glaring angrily at the approaching humans.

'What's wrong, lad?'

'Those damned pinkskin humans. They're fighting over us with the Orcs. I don't know which of them is worse. With Orcs you know they're a bunch of cut-throat scum, but these humans are all falsehoods and backstabbing. They've probably come to cart us off to whatever foul pit they call a home. And they'll take the treasure too, I'll warrant.'

'Mayhap, lad. Whatever their reasons, as long as they're killing greenskins I've no quarrel with them. I'll give them their dues, they know how to swing a sword when the going gets tough. Quit bellyaching and try to get free!'

Kurgan turned his attention back to the battle. Some of the humans had broken through the Orc line and their leader now led a small group of their oldest

warriors towards the Dwarf King. Seeing their painted faces, foam-flecked lips and wild, bloodthirsty eyes, Kurgan was unsure he wanted to be the object of their attentions. Still, these stupid humans might unwittingly provide him and the others with some chance of getting away. Without a word, one of the youngest warriors ran behind the posts and Kurgan winced as he anticipated a dagger thrust to his kidneys.

It never came. Instead, Kurgan felt the rasping of a knife against his ropes. They were wound loosely around the pole itself, looped many times over and the lad was having difficulty cutting through them as they slipped and slithered up and down the rain-slicked pole. Kurgan exerted all his strength in one last mighty effort. With a snap the ropes parted and he pitched forward into the mud. In another few moments his legs were free and he looked up to see how the battle was progressing.

A quick glance showed Kurgan all he needed to know. Despite the casualties inflicted on the Orcs, things still looked grim. Skill and speed was one thing, but in this battle raw muscles and numbers counted for more and the pressure was beginning to tell on the men. Almost half the humans had fallen; now only the toughest and most skilful fighters remained. Hoarse war-cries were drowned out by the clash of metal on metal and the screams of the wounded and dying. Foot by foot, the humans were being pushed back.

Thorin was free now, but the humans were having trouble cutting loose the bonds on the unconscious Borris. With a snarl, their blood-drenched leader sheathed his sword and grabbed the stake itself. He heaved upwards, muscles bulging under the pressure. His legs were slowly straightening, even while his booted feet sank into the mud. Kurgan looked on in astonishment as the top of the pole began to rock from side to side, first only a few inches, and then a foot, and then it was swaying wildly. With a grunt and a twist, the stake came free and toppled to the ground. A tall human with plaited hair and a drooping moustache

stepped forward, slipped off the ropes holding Borris to the stake and draped the inert Dwarf over one shoulder.

The young human leader was about to start back towards the fight, but Kurgan grabbed his cloak. He formed the unfamiliar words of the human language with difficulty, speaking in a thick accent.

'You not hold them off by your own. Thorin and I can help. Ancient Dwarf weapons here, lots of runes. Magic. Understand me?'

The young man stepped back in astonishment, then grinned widely. Kurgan was surprised by the calm strength in his voice, even though his chest was rising and falling rapidly from his recent exertions.

'You've got magic weapons here? Why are we standing talking? Let's go get them!'

They set off at a run towards the Warlord's ramshackle tent, even as the human line began to falter under the constant onslaught of the Orcs. A few of the greenskins broke through and raced across the muddy clearing, eager to intercept the freed prisoners. Kurgan and Thorin both looked around for something to fight with, stopping to grab a couple of axes and shields from the piles of loot left over from the Orcs' ambush.

By now the main fight was raging around the part of the camp given over to the Warlord, and the humans were being pressed back to within an arm's reach of the tent. Vagraz wasn't about to give up the treasure and prisoners he had already fought for once that day. The humans around Kurgan shouted their battle-cry once more and charged into the fray. The human leader was leaping amongst the Orcs, sweat gleaming off his rippling muscles in the flickering firelight. He moved with a grace rarely found in one of his size, darting through the crowd and hacking down a mountain of foes.

Now Vagraz himself led the greenskins, a mob of Black Orcs around him. They were fearsome foes and the heavily armoured Orcs smashed into the humans with terrible ferocity. The Warlord cleaved

through a handful of humans with a single blow from his massive axe. Vagraz's backswing beheaded another unfortunate before the Orc strode forward to deal more death. The humans fell back before him.

Having gained the Warlord's tent, Kurgan and Thorin rummaged through the treasures stolen by the Orcs, searching frantically for their ancient weapons and armour. Nothing else would hold back the tide of greenskins now. Beside them lay the still form of Borris, whose deathly pallor did little to cheer Kurgan. Looking up briefly, he saw the Orc Warlord crush the face of a hunter with a mighty punch, before swinging his axe round in a deadly arc that left three more fighters dismembered. Cursing his befuddled head and aching limbs, the Dwarf King redoubled his search.



BEFORE THE TENT, Ansgar and Eginolf fought back to back, surrounded by a crowd of Orcs whose blows rose and fell with relentless ferocity. Each of them was marked by a dozen light cuts, but the pile of bodies around them testified that each drop of blood had been drawn at a heavy price.

As Ansgar gutted one Orc and stepped back to avoid the swipe of a sword, he felt Eginolf stumble behind him. Hacking wildly at his foes to push them back momentarily, Ansgar glanced over his shoulder. Eginolf, his twin brother, was on his knees. A spear had punched through his stomach; its barbed point now jutted from his back. Eginolf still swung his sword and screamed at the Orcs.

'It'll take more than a green scum twig like this to end me. I'm going to bathe in your blood, you cowardly wretches!'

Time slowed for Ansgar as he saw a Black Orc push forward from the throng,

a mighty cleaver in each hand. Even as Eginolf weakly fended off one blow, the other arm swept down with unstoppable force. Helpless to intervene, Ansgar watched with horror as the head of his twin tumbled to the ground.

Something inside Ansgar snapped. Yelling incoherently with pure rage, he threw himself at the Orcs with renewed vigour. He was berserk, giving no thought for his own life, as he hacked and slashed, stabbed and jabbed with his sword. Startled by this unexpected fury, the Orcs fell back.

Ignorant of everything except his raging hatred of his brother's murderers, Ansgar pressed on wildly, each step taking him further from the sanctuary of his comrades. As he shouldered one foe aside, Ansgar's blade was knocked from his grasp and was lost beneath the Orcs' stamping feet. Ansgar tossed his knife from his left to his right hand and ducked his head down. In the press, the Orcs' heavy weapons were useless. Ansgar's hunting knife was far more deadly; opening arteries, severing windpipes, ripping tendons and puncturing vital organs.



DESPITE THE VETERAN'S frenzied counter-attack, Kurgan thought the humans looked close to fleeing. The Dwarf King was hastily hauling on his rune-encrusted armour, feeling its ancient plates fold over him like an old lover's embrace. Thorin was busy strapping on his studded gauntlets when he gave a cry of dismay. Turning, Kurgan watched in horror as Vagraz burst through the ranks of humans. The Orc's massive axe glittered with dark magic, black flames playing along its edges. A few foolhardy men tried to interpose themselves between the awesome killing machine and the Dwarfs, but in a few swift heartbeats they were dead, their

blood seeping into the forest floor to mix with the gore of a hundred other warriors, Orc and human.

Then the humans' youthful leader was there, leaping over the axes and swords of the Orcs to attack their Warlord. The young warrior stood with his legs slightly apart, ready to face the oncoming butcher. Still staring at the approaching Orc, the human shouted to Kurgan.

'Where's your magic, beardling? I think now would be a good time to see it!'

Bellowing his wrath, Vagraz charged. Rolling beneath a wild swing of the Warlord's baleful axe, the human youth dived to one side, then swung his long sword down at the Orc's neck with his whole weight. The blade shattered on the enchanted armour of the Warlord, who turned slowly and grinned at his would-be killer. Without hesitation the hunt lord flung the shattered stump of his sword into the Orcs' face and leapt, his feet thudding into the Warlord's jaw with a sickening crunch. The Orc was knocked sprawling by the unexpected blow.

Allowing the hulking brute no time to recover, young Steel-eye moved behind Vagraz and started raining punches into the back of his thick neck. Roaring in anger, the Orc spun around, smashing a plate-sized fist into the lord's chin, hurling him to the ground. Shaking his head to clear it, Vagraz lifted an immense booted foot to stamp on the young warrior, but he was too slow and the hunter rolled to his feet with fluid grace. The young man delivered a sweeping kick that made the Warlord buckle at the knees.

Kurgan was cursing constantly now, throwing heaps of gold and gems aside in his frantic quest for his ancient weapon.

'Where the hell are you?' he spat, but even as he spoke his hand fell upon sturdy stitching wound around cold steel. With a yelp, he pulled the rune-forged warhammer from the concealing pile of glittering treasure. Kurgan fervently prayed he wasn't too late.

He span around to see the beleaguered human leader slip on the slick of mud and blood that covered the ground. As the Orc Chieftain lifted his massive axe

above his head, its blade shining with unearthly energies, Kurgan flung his hammer to the young man. It arced across the campsite, spinning slowly, its head flashing in the glow of the bonfire. The youth's long arm snapped up to grab it, his fingers closing round the hilt. As Vagraz's dark axe swept down, the barbarian leader brought up the rune hammer to meet it. The weapons clashed with a shower of black and blue sparks and the two fighters were locked together.

The Orc had the advantage and pressed down with all his weight, bringing the sorcerous axe blade ever closer to the young man's throat. The youth's arms trembled with the strain, sweat poured across his body and his face was purple with effort. His huge muscles twitched and veins stood out like cords across his neck and shoulders. With a scream Steel-eye thrust the Orc back with all his remaining strength, swinging the hammer to one side to knock the Warlord off balance. Howling, the hunter leapt to his feet and the two adversaries stood facing each other again. The human was grinning wolfishly, his eyes ablaze. The Orc's hand constantly clenched and unclenched on the haft of his massive axe in agitated anticipation. Gauging each other carefully, the two leaders circled slowly.

'Your axe is very pretty, scum, but this hammer will be your doom. Even unarmed I was besting you and now I have this, you have only a heartbeat left to live! Enjoy your last moments, greenskin offal!'

'Keep talkin', pretty boy! Froat Biter hasn't finished wiv yer yet. Perhaps yer voice won't be so dainty once I've cut yer froat from ear ta ear!'

'I'll bathe in your blood and count the heads of your friends before that clumsy lump of pig iron touches my skin!'

'Let's see if yer muscles are as big as yer mouf!'

As one, both combatants swung. Their mighty weapons rang against each other with an explosion of magical energy. Steel-eye ducked Vagraz's swing and

brought the warhammer around in a mighty blow that smashed off one of the Warlord's shoulder pads. Amazed that his magical armour had been penetrated, the Warlord was thrown off-guard. Vagraz barely had time to throw a hasty parry as the warhammer swung upwards again, knocking the Orc backwards. Without pause, the young human leapt forward to sustain his attack, raining blow after blow against the Orc.

Vagraz was not going to fall easily. A wild swing opened up a gaping cut in the hunter's side, but left the Orc leader's defences open. With a defiant yell, the young man ignored his injury and swung again, the head of the hammer sweeping Vagraz off his feet with an audible cracking of bones. A second blow snapped the Orc's head backwards and sent his axe tumbling from his grasp. Somehow the Orc still clung to life. With a grunt it raised itself to its shattered knees and held up a hand. Confused and suspecting treachery, the hunt lord checked his next blow, staring distrustfully down at the broken creature on the ground before him.

To Steel-eye's surprise, the Warlord started laughing, a dull chuckling that rose to a guttural thunder. Vagraz snorted contemptuously, spitting several teeth into the mud, and he raised a hand to form one final, vulgar gesture.

His patience gone, the hunt lord stepped forward. 'Was that really the best you could do?' Steel-eye taunted, stepping on the Orc's other hand with a crunching of bones, as it stretched towards the fallen axe. Steel-eye steadied himself and swung one final blow. As the body slumped to the ground, the hunter stepped absent-mindedly to one side to avoid a rivulet of green, viscous fluid that drained towards the trees. He was staring intently at the body, as if suspecting it still presented some danger.

After a moment's pause, Steel-eye turned to look around him. Kurgan strode up, laughing heartily. The Dwarf King tugged hard on the hunter's ragged, bloodstained cloak, stopping him as he took a stride towards the fight. The lad turned quickly

to glare at the Dwarf, his wide, battle-crazed eyes full of questions, the hammer in his hand half-raised to attack.

'Woah there, it's only me! You're a fine fighter, lad, and no mistake. Perhaps you pinkskins aren't so bad as we thought.'

Steel-eye looked down at the Dwarf and held out the hammer, haft first. When he spoke, his words came in panting gasps, his breath carving misty shadows in the cold air.

'Thank you for... your weapon... Talk later... Orcs to kill... Take it back... I'm sure I can find... something else.'

The Dwarf King shook his noble head. Stroking the tangles out of his long beard, he looked up at the human with a wry smile on his face and a mischievous glint in his eye. Kurgan took the proffered warhammer and patted its rune-encrusted head. With a short chuckle, he handed it back to the surprised youth.

'I think he likes you better than me. Keep him. His name is Ghal Maraz, Skull Splitter. You've done us a great service today. A small gift hardly compares to the life of a Dwarf King, now does it?'

The youngster nodded his thanks and turned to rejoin the fight. The remaining Orcs were falling back into the woods, all thoughts of battle gone now their Warlord was dead. Kurgan laid a hand on the hunt lord's arm and halted him again.

'This day will be recorded in our annals with joy. What's your name lad, that we might honour you?'

Steel-eye hefted the hammer in his hand, his eyes straying towards the fleeing Orcs. He looked at the Dwarf King again, his eyes smouldering with energy. The rest of his face was in darkness and as the flames flickered in those intense grey eyes, they took on a eerie light. Even the baleful gaze of the Orc Warlord hadn't exuded the raw power of the youth's stare. His reply was short and simple.

'Sigmar.' ♦



THE DOOM OF KAZAD GRUND

OVER A THOUSAND years before the founding of the Empire, in the northern reaches of the World's Edge Mountains, the Dwarf stronghold of Kazad Grund flourished under the rule of the great Dwarf King, Wulfram the Gruff. Since the Great Betrayal, the clans of Kazad Grund had been the guardians of the ancient hammer, Gorlnir. This mighty weapon had once belonged to one of the fabled Ancestor Lords and was possessed of great magical powers bound up in the intricate runes with which it was decorated. If the mighty hammer was thrown in battle by a Dwarf, the weapon would always find its target sure and true, before returning to the hand of its wielder.

It was during that savage time known to future generations as the Troll Wars that Kazad Grund met its doom. The violent eruptions of Thunder Mountain were driving the children of Mork and Gork northwards. The Orc warlord Gruk Boartusk mustered his tribe and, uniting with the Night Goblins of the Black Moon, marched on the isolated Dwarf fortress. Kazad Grund was caught unawares, but thankfully not totally unprepared, as its farsighted ruler had long before decreed that the Guardians of the Hammer should always be ready to protect their sacred treasure.

The fort at the northern entrance to the pass which led to Kazad Grund proved no match for the might of Gruk's greenskin horde. The full force of the Waaagh struck the stronghold like a hammer blow from the gods themselves. King Wulfram was among the Dwarf force that found itself facing the teeming green tide. The Dwarf engineers wheeled out boltthrowers and flame cannons to counter the threat posed by the Orcs' crude war machines. Battle was also joined in the skies above the World's Edge Mountains as Gruk's shaman, Scarbone, riding his trusty Wyvern, launched an attack on the fortress. In no time at all, the Dragon Squadron of Engineer Nordok Craggenstson had taken to the air, flying

their gyrocopters from Kazad Grund's crag-top launch bay to meet the shaman's challenge.

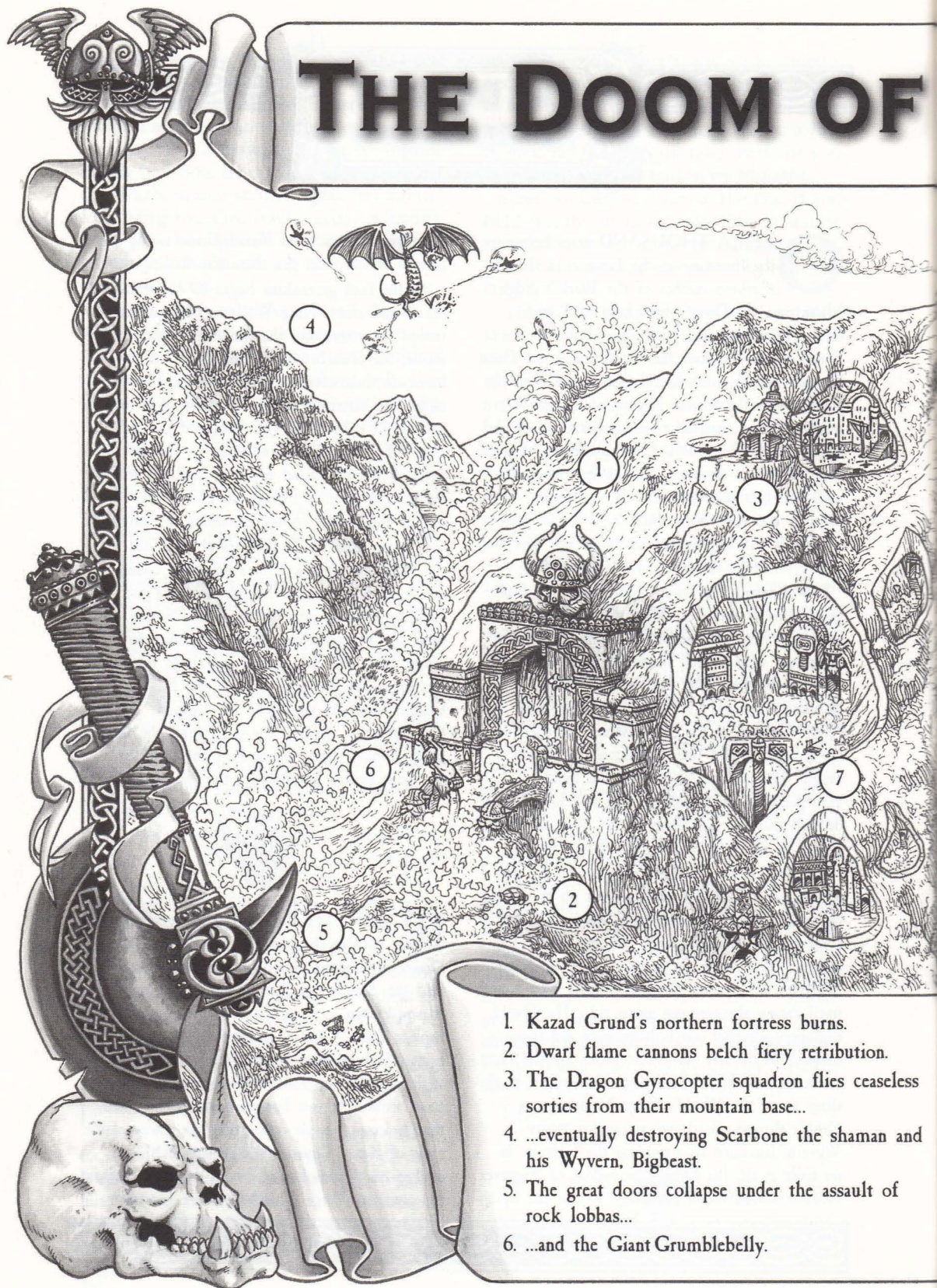
As the foul greenskins began to overwhelm the Dwarf army, King Wulfram ordered his troops to retreat into the mountain. Once safely inside, the Dwarfs quickly did their best to barricade themselves into the fortress. However, under the battering of the countless rock lobbers positioned behind the Orc vanguard and an assault by the Giant Grumblebelly, the great gates of Kazad Grund began to feel the strain. So it came to pass that at the end of the second day of the assault on the mountain the gates fell.

A great band of Trollslayers charged out of the shattered main gate in a desperate counter-attack, trying to stem the tide of Orcs and Goblins pouring into the mountain. Seeing the piles of Dwarf corpses, they were filled with insane fury and immediately set about them, clearing a bloody path through the Night Goblin lines and taking on the enraged Grumblebelly. When they were done, the Giant's head adorned what remained of the lintel over the great bridge leading into the ancient fortress.



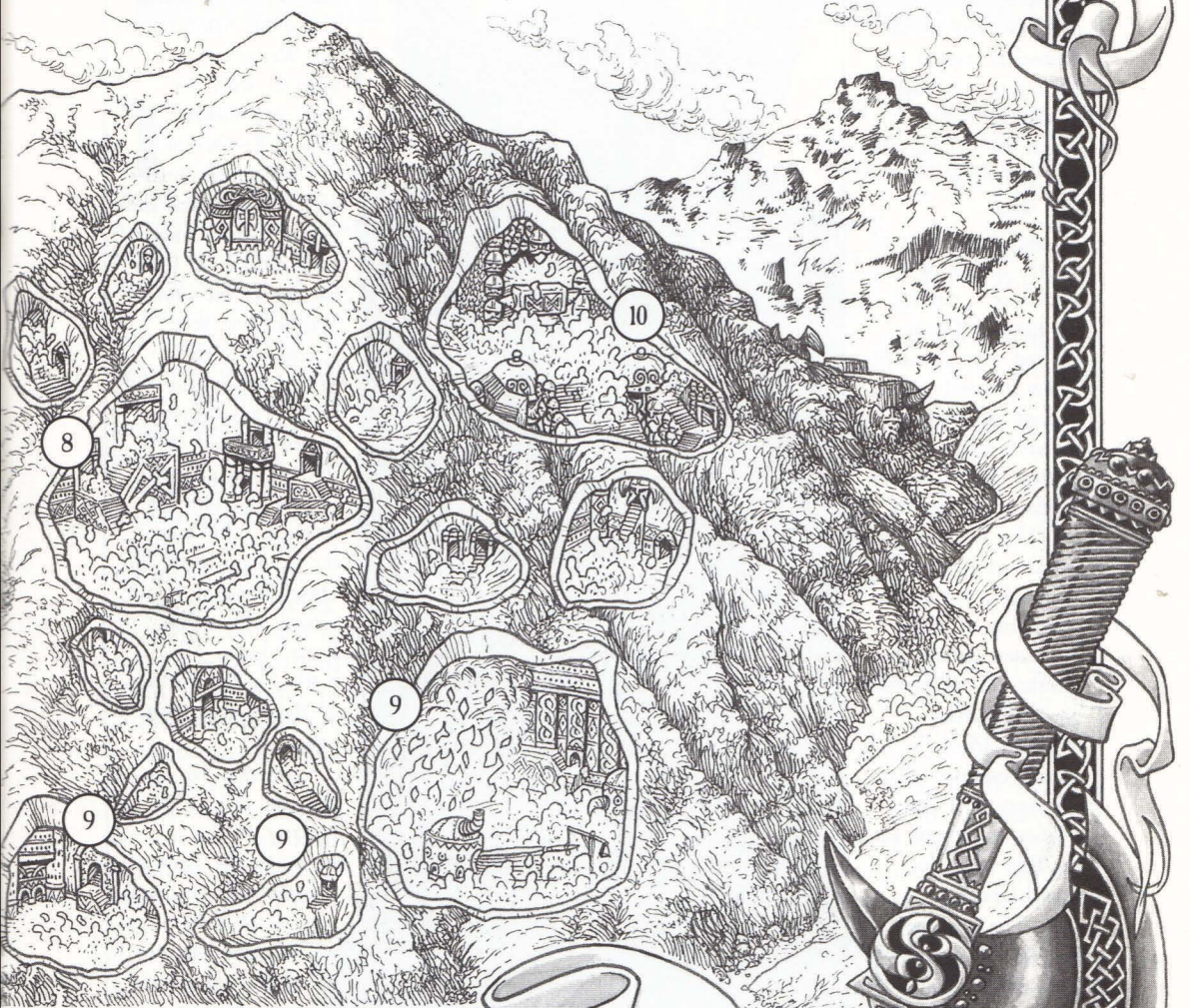
BY NOW, THOUGH, Gruk Boartusk's army had overrun the fortress. An aged champion Dragonslayer, Sven Bristlingbeard, single-handedly held the Axe Bridge that spanned the bottomless chasm, known as Karagar's Woe, sending several hapless Stone Trolls plunging over the edge of the bridge. Fighting was taking place in every hall, vault and stairway. Many Dwarfs made their last stand within the vast feast hall which rang with the clamour of battle rather than the voices of the clans of Kazad Grund raised in song. Others choked on the smoke and fumes that poured from the cavernous Forge Chambers where fires raged

THE DOOM OF



1. Kazad Grund's northern fortress burns.
2. Dwarf flame cannons belch fiery retribution.
3. The Dragon Gyrocopter squadron flies ceaseless sorties from their mountain base...
4. ...eventually destroying Scarbone the shaman and his Wyvern, Bigbeast.
5. The great doors collapse under the assault of rock lobbas...
6. ...and the Giant Grumblebelly.

KAZAD GRUND



7. Sven Bristlingbeard holds the Axe Bridge for four hours.
8. The Feast Hall becomes a charnel house.
9. Fires rage out of control in the Deep Forges.
10. King Wulfram and his Hammerers fight Boartusk and his Orc host in the dust and smoke. All are killed and the mighty warhammer Gorlnir is stolen. Kazad Grund is lost.

THE DOOM OF

KAZAD GRUND

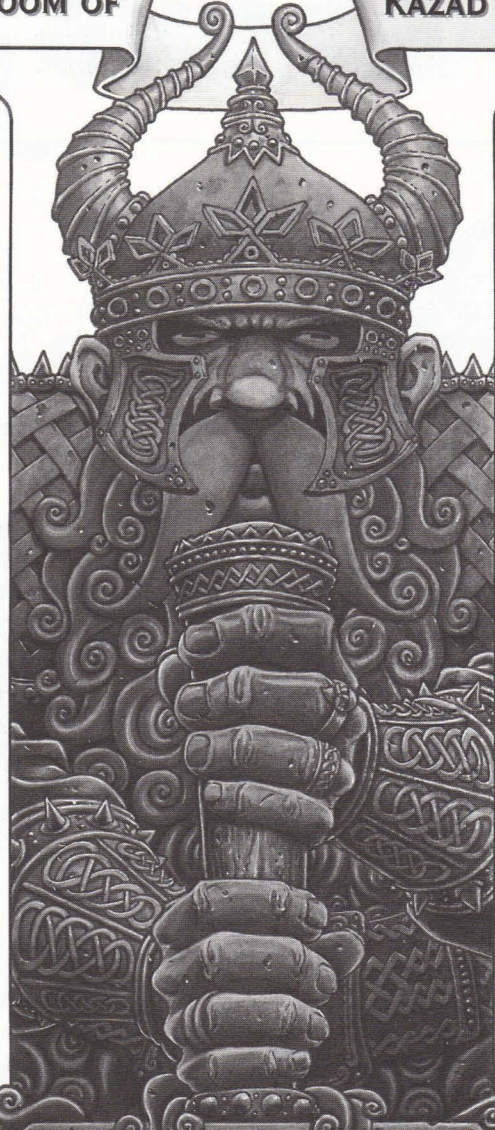
out of control. Several hard-pressed regiments of Hammerers found themselves trapped by the flames and fought to their last breath against the Goblins that they had trapped in with them.

King Wulfram raced for the Shrine of the Ancestors to protect the hammer Gorlnir. He and what remained of his personal retinue reached the topmost chamber of the fortress just before the Warlord and his elite Big 'Uns stormed into the Dwarf temple. Incensed at having the most holy of places desecrated by the mere presence of the brutish greenskins, King Wulfram lifted the ancient hammer from the great anvil-altar, rallying his troops for the final battle for Kazad Grund.

One by one the Dwarfs fell to the Orcs until only Wulfram the Gruff was left standing atop a mound of steaming green-skinned corpses. At last he found himself face-to-face

with Gruk Boartusk himself. As Wulfram swung his hammer, so the Warlord thrust upwards with his cruel axe. Gorlnir struck the Orc on the side of the head with a loud crack and one of Gruk's huge tusks broke off from his jaw as the foul Warlord was sent reeling. But for Wulfram his time had come. The shaman-cursed axe had cut through his gromril armour and into his stomach. Clutching the gaping wound, the Dwarf King of Kazad Grund sank to his knees, dying. The battle for the Fortress of the Hammer was lost.

From that day to this, the fall of the Fortress of the Hammer, the theft of Gorlnir and the cruel death of King Wulfram the Gruff and all of his people, have been recorded in the Great Book of Grudges of Karaz-a-Karak as the Doom of Kazad Grund!



MET YI BE KINNI MI Y
 MRYRE YS ZEKWYREK YYYWYRE
 HRS NE PE BHTPYS MYBE HIR
 PE KET NE PE PKYI TY HNER
 INRWYR YWYHR PE SWYMTK
 NE MNS BEYK ZYYS MNI KWM
 YTE JNH NE KYIY IERN. MET
 MYS YKRYMERE BE YWYK YNS
 MET INNE NE PE ZEKWYRYS NE
 MNS YWYRYH PE IREY KET
 YWYR INRWYR YS PEKEREK.

BCH 2-97

THE BLACK PEARL

BY CHRIS PRAMAS

THE ENGINES of the gunship roared as the Thunderhawk tore through the atmosphere. Inside, Interrogator-Chaplain Uzziel of the Dark Angels led four squads of Space Marines in the Litany of Battle. As he chanted the sacred words to prepare them for the imminent combat, Uzziel ran his fingers over his rosarius. But today he did not pray in the prescribed Imperial manner. Today his fingers kept returning to the single black pearl on his string, the only pearl that really mattered. He had earned it by coaxing one of the Fallen Angels to repent and receive the Emperor's mercy.

That wretch was much on his mind as he finished the prayer, the enthusiastic voices of his twenty marines joining him to boom the final refrain. As their voices faded, Uzziel pushed back his cowl. Filled with his faith in the Emperor, he launched into his sermon.

'Brethren,' he began, 'it has been a long journey and now, at last, battle is upon us. Before we engage the enemy, I want to tell you all something. This is no ordinary mission.' He paused to let this sink in. 'My brothers, this is a quest, a most holy quest to bring back to the Rock... a sacred artefact, long-missed.' Uzziel stared intently at the marines. He saw men of varied origins, but they were all united in their blazing faith in the Emperor, in their oath as Dark Angels and in the Sacrifice of the Lion. He wished they could understand the full meaning of their mission but knew such a revelation could shake their faith. Today, he needed that faith.

'Should we succeed,' he continued, 'your names and deeds will long be praised in the halls of the Rock. We will sit in the company of the Chapter's

greatest heroes. So fill your heart with the grace of the Emperor, remember the sacrifice of our blessed Primarch, Lion El'Jonson, and gird yourself with the righteousness of faith!' Uzziel leapt up, possessed by holy fury, and slammed his fist to his chest. 'For Jonson and the Emperor! Victory or death!'

'Victory or death!' the Dark Angels returned his salute with barely suppressed savagery.

Uzziel smiled. With such men at his back, how could he fail?



IT WAS NOT so long ago that Uzziel, newly-promoted to the position of Interrogator-Chaplain after his inspirational leadership on the Bylini campaign, had walked the halls of the Rock, the giant space fortress that was home to the Dark Angels. He remembered the looks of envy on the faces of his comrades when he brought back his first Fallen Angel for interrogation. They couldn't believe that one so young had succeeded where they had failed. Many had dismissed it as pure luck but Uzziel knew better. To prove it, he swore to extract the confession due from the renegade himself.

It was not the first oath Uzziel had ever sworn, but it proved the most difficult to fulfil. The traitor had roundly mocked Uzziel, the Dark Angels and the Emperor. He told gleeful stories of his hundreds of campaigns as a mercenary, an endless catalogue of rape, murder and torture. Uzziel was not a man who shrank from

violence, but he believed that it needed to serve a greater, righteous purpose. The wanton slaughter of the Fallen Angel's tales had sickened him, and he had to suppress a powerful urge to rip the wretch before him limb from limb, to pay him back in kind for each of his deeds.

Uzziel had fought off his immediate desire for vengeance. First, the confession. The Fallen Angel had seen the hatred in Uzziel's eyes and laughed. 'What's the matter, whelp, do my stories frighten you? Can't you stand to hear how a real soldier goes to war? You can keep your cowls and your prayer beads, monk. A true warrior goes into battle with lust in his heart, lust to spill the red blood of victory and taste the glory of war. That's what you lack and that's why you'll always lose!'

Those haunting words were with Uzziel even now, echoing sickeningly inside his mind as the Thunderhawk screamed through the atmosphere. Even now, just by closing his eyes, Uzziel was once again in that cell, reliving every moment of the days leading to the Fallen Angel's confession.

Back there, in the interrogation cell, he had let his emotions overwhelm him for just a moment. Uzziel had backhanded the traitor, then grabbed him by the hair and slammed his head hard against the stone wall. 'You seem to have forgotten which one of us lies in chains, filth!' he had shouted. 'I've already won. We need only determine if the Emperor will have mercy on your soul!'

'You understand nothing!' the Fallen Angel spat back. 'After all you've heard, you still don't know why I fight, do you?'

Uzziel had stepped up close to his prisoner and the two had locked eyes, faith and faithlessness colliding with unmatched fury. 'You fight because you are tainted by Chaos,' Uzziel had begun. 'You had your chance to serve the Emperor and you failed him utterly. You, and Luther, and all of your wretched cohorts chose to betray he who gave you life!'

The Fallen Angel had stood firm in the face of these accusations, and stared back at Uzziel, his every feature

screaming defiance. Snarling like an animal, the traitor had lashed out at his tormentor with venomous scorn. 'I was once like you, monk! Loyal, righteous, dutiful.' He paused to spit, as if the words themselves were poisonous. 'Despite my virtues, I was left behind on Caliban by Jonson while he went fighting across the galaxy.'

The renegade's harsh voice had become strained with emotions long-buried as he continued, 'While my brothers fought battle after battle, I was left at home with the invalids, the women and the children! What did I do to deserve such a fate? I was born to go to war, but the Lion and the Emperor turned their backs on me and the others.' His voice had risen to a scream of pure hatred. 'That's why I've fought and killed my way over more worlds than you could even name. And now you think you have the right to judge me!'

The Dark Angel had said nothing at first, so shocked was he by the monstrousness of the traitor's replies. How the Fallen twisted the truth to hide their own failure! It would be tragic, had the traitor's hatred not driven him to a life of mindless butchery.

In sadness, the Interrogator-Chaplain had turned away and walked towards the heavy iron door that sealed the room shut. The rusted hinges gave out a tortured shriek as he forced it open, but he had paused before leaving his prisoner alone to ponder his sins.

'Heretic,' he had intoned, 'I had hoped for more from you. I prayed that some trace of the Lion still lurked in your soul, but I can see I was wrong. By your unrepentant actions you force me to use any method to save your soul. So let it be done.'

The door had slammed shut, entombing the Fallen in the bowels of the Rock. Over the following days, Uzziel had displayed his expertise as he ground the Fallen Angel down. The weak would call it torture; Uzziel knew it to be justice. Eventually, when his tools were sticky with the traitor's blood and the screams had ceased, the Fallen Angel had broken.

He had admitted his guilt, and that of the other Fallen Angels, and repented in full for his crimes. Ultimately it had been a pitiful spectacle, as the broken man, once one of the Emperor's elite, poured out his litany of evil deeds.

As Uzziel prepared to give the man the quick death his repentance had earned him, the Fallen Angel had spoken for the last time. 'Confessor,' he had whispered through broken teeth and swollen lips, 'there is one thing that I have yet to tell you.' His body was wracked by a coughing spell of such length and intensity that Uzziel had thought the repentant traitor might pass away. Hacking and wheezing to draw more of the stale air into his tortured lungs, the Fallen Angel was finally able to speak again. 'I am sorry, Confessor, but this deed fills me with regret as no other.'

'Go on, brother,' Uzziel had urged. 'Your repentance will not be complete until you tell everything.'

The Fallen Angel had nodded slowly before continuing. 'Confessor, three years ago I was in the Knight Worlds serving as a mercenary. My unit raided the Eldar Exodite worlds regularly and I relished the opportunity to spill the blood of such a spineless and decadent race. We went on countless sorties, hunting down the cowards and slaughtering them as they deserved.' At this point, the Fallen Angel's voice had become animated once more, talk of bloodletting seeming to arouse him from his pain. 'On one such raid, a band of Eldar took refuge in an ancient place of power. They called on their gods, but the gods did not listen to their pathetic cries. We stormed the place and left not one of them alive.'

The Fallen Angel had paused, caught up in the memory. The obvious pleasure on his face had brought bile to the Chaplain's lips. 'It was while we were sacking the place that I found it, Confessor – an artefact of power lost since the breaking of Caliban.' The Fallen Angel had abruptly stopped again, overcome with another spasm. The spell did not pass until he had coughed up a wellspring of his own lifeblood.

Uzziel grew concerned, knowing the signs only too well. Even a marine's body could take only so much punishment, and the Chaplain had pushed this one past its breaking point.

Consumed with impatience, Uzziel shouted, 'What did you find, damn you? Tell me!'

The prisoner had pulled his body erect. Blood ran freely from his mouth, giving an evil cast to his grin. 'Fear not, Confessor, I am not finished so easily.' The pain had washed over him again, but he fought it this time and forced out the words by willpower alone. 'In the temple, Confessor, amongst the bodies of the slain... I found the Lion Sword.'

Uzziel had been stunned. The sword of Jonson, lost these ten thousand years? It could not be.

The Fallen Angel had seen the disbelief on Uzziel's face, but he was determined to be heard. 'I know it sounds fantastic, Confessor, but I swear it is true. I could never forget the sword of Lion El'Jonson.' His confession delivered, the Fallen Angel's body had gone limp.

Uzziel's mind had swirled with confusion. How could he trust one of the Fallen? But if he didn't, the confession was meaningless. Still undecided, the Chaplain had held up his prisoner's head, wiped the blood from his mouth, and spoken to him gently. 'Brother, what did you do with the Lion Sword?'

The Fallen Angel's life was near its end. He had struggled to talk, only a barely audible croak escaping from his lips. 'I was afraid... to face up to what I had done... so I left the sword where it lay.' His body had convulsed, blood gushing from his nose and mouth. Choking and spitting, his words ran together. 'I regret that I didn't take it. I could have returned it... to where it belongs, but I... failed again. Forgive me, Confessor.'

Uzziel had almost been overcome in that moment. He could not deny the power or dignity of the confession, but neither could he forget the deeds that had brought his prisoner to the dungeons of the Rock. Holding the Fallen Angel's head, he had used his dagger to deliver

the man's absolution. 'Brother, you are forgiven.'

The juddering of the Thunderhawk snapped Uzziel from his reverie, and he shook his head to clear his mind, so clear and vivid were the images. Steeling his brow, Uzziel took his hand from his Rosarius and returned his mind to the task at hand. They had a battle to fight, and he would not let himself be distracted when his men's lives were at stake. Striding the length of the command bay, Uzziel called the sergeants to go over the assault plan again, before checking his weapons one last time. Moments later, the Thunderhawk reared up suddenly, engines screeching like a bird of prey, before hitting the ground with a bone-jarring crash. The bay doors opened and the first squad rushed out, their bolters singing a song of death. The symphony of battle had begun.



AILEAN STOOD at the Martyrs' Tomb, his fist clenched over the runes around his neck. Even now, days after the dream, the runes of divination gave him no clue to its meaning. He had dreamt of a bird of prey, a sword of power and a man with no soul. He looked for a pattern but saw only blood. He opened his senses but felt only a cold wind running through him, as if a great evil were about to awaken.

From the east came Dragonlord Martainn of the Seana. Tall, gaunt and wrapped in robes of black, Martainn looked like a wraith on his great steed. From the west rode Dragonlord Barra of the Eamann. Long hair flowing in the wind and brightly polished armour shining in the sun, Barra appeared blissfully unconcerned. Laughing and joking with his warriors, the Eamann leader signalled for a halt. His rival did the same. Leaving their retinues behind, the two chieftains rode up on their great

stomping beasts. Their dragons hissed and spat at each other, raking their claws in the earth and lashing their tails in eager anticipation of battle. Both leaders dismounted, but did nothing to calm their beasts.

Ailean could see that their frosty exteriors belied the raging anger within. Let their hatred flow, he thought. They will need it this day.

Barra, so raucous amongst his men but now icily intent, spoke first. 'Warlock, why have you summoned us to this accursed place? Are not the living trouble enough?' he asked, shooting a vicious glance at Martainn. 'Why disturb the dead?'

'We meet here because the spirit runes demand it,' Ailean pronounced.

'I've no time for your cryptic comments, warlock,' growled Martainn. 'I fear neither the living nor the dead.' He looked meaningfully at Barra and the ancient temple ruins. 'I've only come here at your bidding and out of respect for our King. But Ailean, know this: the so-called knights of this coward cut down my son in cold blood and there will be no peace between us until the matter is settled.' He looked keenly at Ailean. 'Blood has been spilled, warlock, and blood will be spilled again before I am satisfied!'

Barra spat in disgust. 'Your son died because he was feeble and that is no fault of mine.'

Martainn bristled at the insult, gripping his sword so tightly that his knuckles cracked. He took one step forward and drew his blade half way out of its ornate scabbard. Before the warlords could take further action, Ailean was between them.

'Martainn,' shouted the warlock angrily, 'draw that sword now and I will banish you from Lughnasa!' He pointed his spear at the enraged Seana warlord and invoked the power of his office. 'None shall disturb the King's Peace until judgement has been passed. Now sheathe your sword and hear my judgement.'

The warlock and the Seana Dragonlord faced each other while Barra watched with dry amusement. Martainn slowly

pushed the sword back into its scabbard and removed his hand from the hilt. 'My quarrel is not with you,' he said. 'Pass your judgement.'

Ailean remained between the two Dragonlords, and pondered a moment more before speaking. 'It pains me to see Eldar lords consumed with hate,' he uttered, 'but sometimes our follies can still serve a higher purpose. I find the grievance of Dragonlord Martainn of the Seana to be legitimate and I decree that it should be settled on the field of battle.'

Both Dragonlords smiled. Martainn stared past the warlock and addressed his rival. 'Barra, you have robbed me of my only son and for that I will make you pay.' With that, he strode off to his dragon. The mighty beast reared and gave out a roar of defiance, as Martainn pulled his laser lance free from his tall saddle levelling it at Barra. 'Prepare to die, Eamann scum!'

'The reckoning is indeed at hand, Seana,' Barra shot back, swinging up into his own saddle. 'Your mate will weep the tears of Isha before nightfall.'

'Both of you, cease your prattle!' Ailean ordered. 'The Seana and the Eamann do not fight each other this day.'

'What?' shouted Martainn. 'You promised me vengeance, you traitor!'

'I did not,' Ailean said icily. 'I said you would settle your grievance on the field of battle, and so you shall. But you will not fight each other.'

'What in Khaine's name are you talking about?' asked the bewildered Barra. 'Who are we to fight, if not each other?'

A deafening sonic boom rolled over the temple. Looking up, all could see the Thunderhawk gunship swooping down upon them. Ailean was immediately forgotten, as the two warlords whipped their beasts around savagely and returned to their men. War cries echoes across the field as the two veteran warriors prepared the Exodites for battle.

Ailean, alone in the ruins, returned his attention to the runes. He did not hear Martainn's angry voice drift across the battlefield, proclaiming, 'Barra, this is not over!'

The runes were speaking to the warlock again and the critical moment bore down upon him. He reached for the runes of summoning and cleared his mind. 'The hawk,' Ailean whispered, 'we fight the hawk.'

In the Martyrs' Tomb, only the dead could hear him.



UZZIEL STOOD at the top of the Thunderhawk's landing ramp, heedless of the shuriken that hissed all around him, and scanned the battlefield. Squad Beatus was in the vanguard and they had found cover behind a low stone wall some thirty paces ahead. To the right of the wall, there was a small copse of trees; Squad Strages was busy hauling its heavy weapons under the cover it promised. Beyond the marines' makeshift line was the target of their attack: an ancient Eldar temple.

Uzziel stared intently at the old ruins but not could not see any defences. Good. The Chaplain strode down the ramp of the gunship, unhindered by the heavy jump pack strapped to his back. Squad Beatus was already receiving heavy fire from Eldar warriors, who seemed determined to keep the Space Marines pinned down behind the stone wall. In the distance, Uzziel could see Exodite Dragon Knights mounting their beasts and preparing for battle. It seemed that his surprise attack was barely a surprise at all. The Eldar were obviously ready for them and Uzziel could only wonder how. Whether he liked it or not, however, the battle had started and was escalating rapidly. He could analyse it later; now he had decisions to make.

'Squad Beatus, stay in cover. Watch for a counter-attack,' Uzziel began. 'Squad Strages, on my signal, lay down a suppressing fire with your heavy weapons. Squad Redeptor, left flank and support Squad Beatus. Squad Ferus, you're with me!' He started forward,

followed by the members of Squad Ferus, whom he had chosen specially for the mission. Armed with chainswords and plasma pistols, they had a well-earned reputation for savagery. Uzziel could see that only the tight leash of command prevented them from jumping forward to engage the enemy immediately.

Soon, my brethren, soon.

Behind them, the Thunderhawk fired its massive thrusters and clawed its way back into the sky. Uzziel activated his communicator again. 'Gunship Cestus, adopt Strafing Pattern Primus until the enemy is engaged. Then fire at available targets and be prepared for pick-up.'

The gunship's commander replied without pause, 'By the Emperor, it is done.'

Uzziel turned to Codicier Ahiezar, the Librarian accompanying them on this mission. Uzziel had never fought with Ahiezar before, but he knew him by repute. Unfamiliarity in the heat of battle always worried Uzziel, and he prayed that his wavering of faith was unwarranted.

'Ahiezar, do you detect any psychic activity?' asked Uzziel.

'No, nothing yet, Interrogator-Chaplain.' The Librarian's voice was cool, as if he were unused to being questioned.

'Then remain vigilant, brother,' Uzziel ordered, 'and shield us from the witchery of the cursed Eldar!' Turning his attention back to the enemy, the Chaplain could see that the Dragon Knights were massing in two impressive formations.

As alien warriors frantically lashed their beasts into action, the Thunderhawk dropped back out of the clouds. Screaming low over the battlefield, the gunship swivelled its multi-lasers at the two clusters of mounted Eldar. Deadly accurate pulses of white-hot energy swept over the Dragon Knights, blowing holes in their elaborate armour and slicing through their raging beasts. The Thunderhawk roared past the decimated Eldar battle groups, its mighty engines kicking up dust and debris as it swung around for its next attack.

Even in the face of the withering fire from above, the Eldar reformed their

ranks with admirable discipline. The earth shook as the two Eldar formations charged the Space Marine line. Filling the air with cacophonous battle cries, the alien warriors held their weapons high as their beasts' clawed feet propelled them violently towards the waiting Dark Angels.

Calmly, Uzziel noted that the ruined temple, clearly visible behind the streaming pennants and laser lances of the Exodites, now seemed all but undefended. If Uzziel could break this charge, the Lion Sword would be his! 'Squads Beatus and Redemptor, hold fast and concentrate your fire on the left-hand group. Squad Strages, you take the right-hand. In the Emperor's name, fire!'

Guns erupted all across the Dark Angels' line. Standing firm, the Space Marines rained destruction on the charging knights. On the left, round after round slammed into the massed Eldar ranks, sending knights tumbling from their saddles and riddling the dragons. At the same time, the heavy weapons of Squad Strages were blowing holes in the other Eldar battle group with missiles and plasma.

Despite the rain of destruction, a few of the Dragon Knights on the left completed their charge. With wild shouts of 'Seana!' they smashed into the Space Marines' line. The bolters, so effective just seconds before, were all but useless in close-quarter fighting. The Eldar drove home their laser lances, blasting open Dark Angel power armour, sending them flying backwards or impaling them on their wicked tips. Others were trampled by dragons, torn apart under clawed feet.

Uzziel wasted no time. 'Squad Ferus, for Jonson and the Emperor, attack!' He immediately activated his jump pack and let the jets propel him towards the swirling melee. Codicier Ahiezar and the rest of the squad were a heartbeat behind, howling with delight now that they had finally been unleashed on the foe. As the Dark Angels arced over the battlefield, the remaining Eldar foot troops brought their shuriken catapults to bear on them.

The air was immediately filled again with vicious discs of razor-sharp metal. Uzziel cursed aloud when Brother Alexius fell from the sky, his armour punctured in a dozen places. Solemnly the Chaplain commended his fallen soul to the Emperor, and added a prayer of thanks for the stout armour that had protected him from the hail of Eldar fire.

Moments later, he landed, power sword in his right hand and bolt pistol in his left, scant metres from a bellowing Dragon Knight. Uzziel watched in horror as the enraged Eldar warrior plunged his laser lance through the visor of Brother Caleb, killing him instantly. Seeing Uzziel, the knight tried to pull his lance free, but he was already too late. Filled with righteous fury, Uzziel raised his bolt pistol and unloaded half a dozen shells into the Eldar, blasting him right out of the saddle. The dragon opened its gaping jaws and howled a forlorn cry at the loss of its master. Uzziel swung his power sword in a mighty arc and silenced the beast with the bite of steel. The dragon's body collapsed to the ground, pumping steaming blood onto the scarred soil. Uzziel looked down at the lifeless body of Brother Caleb and whispered, 'Rest easy, brother. You are avenged.'

Looking about for fresh opponents, Uzziel saw that his assault squad had broken the charge of Dragon Knights. With deadly chainswords and white hot plasma, Squad Ferus had smashed the proud Eldar and continued to rain death down on them as they fled. Codicier Ahiezar stood proudly over the smoking skeletons of two knights he had annihilated with crackling blue bolts of psychic energy.

Dead and dying Eldar lay everywhere, their lovingly-etched armour shattered and useless, their loyal dragons quivering in death-throes and filling the air with the stench of charred meat, their brilliant pennant broken and trampled in the blood-stained grass. The pitiful survivors had turned their mounts around and were fleeing the battlefield in disarray, unable to defend themselves from the preying Thunderhawk that continued to harry them with death from above.

The Chaplain saw his chance. Realising that the Eldar temple was now undefended, he turned to the Librarian and yelled, 'Ahiezar! Follow me!'

Again the jets of his jump pack lifted him across the battlefield. As he flew through the air, aiming for the Eldar temple, he saw that it had become mysteriously obscured. A dense and swirling mist covered the area where Uzziel knew the temple to be. Cursing, the Chaplain cut his jump short and landed just outside the fog. The Codicier landed behind him, force sword at the ready.

'What witchcraft is this?' Uzziel asked angrily.

The Librarian licked his lips. 'I am unsure, Interrogator-Chaplain. Perhaps there is a warlock in the area. I sense something,' he said in a slow voice, 'but I've never felt its like before.'

Uzziel turned back towards the mist. He hardly needed Ahiezar to tell that there might be an Eldar witch in the temple. 'If there's a warlock in here,' the Chaplain growled, 'he'll taste the Emperor's steel.'

Chanting the Lion Hymn quietly to himself, Uzziel stalked into the mist. An unearthly quiet immediately enveloped him and he quickly became disoriented. The Chaplain couldn't hear himself praying – he couldn't even hear himself breathing. Surrounded by swirling darkness, the Dark Angel could barely see two metres in front of his hand. He felt he was floating in limbo.

Gritting his teeth against the sorcerous manifestation, Uzziel tried doggedly to keep walking forwards, but it was difficult to keep to any kind of bearing. Strange thoughts crept into his mind, and his concentration drifted. He saw the Emperor's Golden Throne, but the body inside was a decayed corpse. Twelve hooded figures surrounded the throne, laughing as they carved up the Emperor's corpse with cruel knives and issued edicts in his name. Nearly overcome with the force of the vision, Uzziel stopped and shook his head violently, willing the evil thoughts to cease. He was a Dark Angel and a Chaplain, and nothing would shake his faith!

A startling flash of crimson lit up the miasma in front of him, illuminating an enormous serpentine mouth bearing down on him. Uzziel barely had time to fling himself out of the way, as row upon row of razored teeth lunged for his head. The beast loomed over him, its gargantuan body an indefinable shadow in the mist. As he tried to scramble away, a long tail snaked out of the darkness and thrashed him to the ground. The Dark Angel could see the beast's mouth, open as if screaming in rage, but in the all-enveloping dream-mist he heard nothing. He could only feel the awful shaking of the earth as the dragon drove its weighty bulk forward on monstrous limbs.

That dreadful head descended again, but this time Uzziel was ready. As the widening jaws plunged to engulf the Chaplain, Uzziel rolled beneath the beast's slavering maw, jamming his power sword through the underside of its cavernous mouth. Black blood burst out of the wounded beast as the sword drove through scales to pinion the creature's jaws shut. The beast reared back in pain, clawing and lashing in fury. Uzziel tried to pull his sword free but it had become deeply embedded in the dragon's sinew and bone.

Desperate but determined, Uzziel refused to release his grip on the power sword, and found himself lifted bodily off the ground by the enraged monster. Suspended ten metres off the ground, Uzziel struggled to use his bolt pistol as the crazed beast thrashed in agony. Straining his muscles almost to breaking point, he heaved himself upwards and planted the pistol against the skull of the monstrosity. Despite the frenzied creature's desperate efforts to dislodge him, Uzziel hung on, squeezing the trigger again and again until he had emptied the magazine. The mighty dragon fell to the ground with a soundless crash, the top of its head a bloody ruin. Using his last reserves of strength, Uzziel managed to twist his body away as the dragon fell, narrowly avoiding a crushing death under the monster's dead weight.

Heart singing with the joy of victory, Uzziel staggered to his feet. Planting his

foot on the what was left of the monster's head, the Chaplain yanked his power sword from its fleshy sheath. He was alive!

Even as he stood panting and exhausted, the body faded into the mists and was gone.

The Chaplain's sword arm was burning with pain, but Uzziel would not slow. Such sorcerous defences could only mean that the prize was near at hand.

'The Lion Sword!' The words were sweet upon his whispering lips.

Uzziel began chanting the Lion Hymn anew and strode forward. He would not be stopped. Suddenly, a wall emerged from the gloom in front of him – the temple, at last! Stumbling over the ruined remnants of the temple wall, Uzziel entered the Martyrs' Tomb. The mist was thinner here, mostly swirling about the floor and walls, and a pulsing red light illuminated the place. Uzziel stepped into the temple and immediately his boot sank into a deep sludge. Puzzled, he bent down and dipped his glove into the mire, raising it to his face through the fog so he could see its nature. He realised, to his revulsion, that his gauntlet was covered with congealed blood. He gasped. What cursed place was this? As if in answer, dim figures staggered from the mist.

Uzziel brought his sword up, ready to defend himself, until he saw them more distinctly. From all around him they came. Eldar men, women, and children, walking towards him, their bodies bearing terrible wounds. Here a man with no legs pulling himself across the floor, there a woman staggered with her shattered brain exposed. Uzziel's battle-trained eye could see the horrid tearing wounds of chainswords, the gaping holes that only bolter shells could make, flesh seared by boiling plasma. Countless victims with countless wounds, the Eldar dead paced towards him. They said nothing to the Chaplain, merely stared in silent condemnation.

With savage clarity, Uzziel realised what he beheld. These were the victims of the Fallen Angel and his cohorts, brutally murdered so many years ago. Stunned,

the Chaplain could do nothing but stare back at their accusing faces. As the dead approached, Uzziel fought an overpowering urge to flee. The phantoms assaulted his mind, threatening to overwhelm him with madness. He cried out to the Emperor but his prayer was swallowed up by the hungry silence.

Surely nothing is worth facing this for? The seductive whisper snaked through his mind. Your wounds justify an honourable withdrawal.

Uzziel almost obeyed the voice in his head. Almost! Then he thought of his brethren, even now valiantly fighting and dying in the Emperor's name. Could he abandon his quest after his men had served him so well, giving up their very lives so that he might bring the Lion Sword back to the Rock? Of course not! He was compelled forward by his loyalty to the Emperor, by his oath as a Dark Angel, by the sacrifice of the dead. For Brother Caleb and all of his fallen brothers, he knew he must fight on.

'The Lion Sword will be mine, no matter the cost!' he roared in rage. Driven by will alone, Uzziel lifted his sword and slashed at the nearest of the walking dead. It melted to nothing before his blade. Relief flooded his mind as he banished the apparition. As a Chaplain, he recognised too well that fear was the weapon of the dead, and he had proven himself fear's master.

With mounting confidence, Uzziel passed through the dead, their images fading before him, and strode purposefully towards a low slab of rock, an ancient altar. Uzziel paused for a moment, before raising his power sword high and bringing it down hard, cracking the time-worn stone in two. Something metallic glinted beneath the shattered stone. Uzziel pushed aside the rubble, revealing an ancient Eldar box of intricate design. Cold sigils blazed on its surfaces. It had the look of some kind of weapons case and crackled with arcane energies. Maybe this was the stasis field generator which held the Lion Sword?

With trembling hands, Uzziel touched the box. As he did so, he heard an

unearthly humming noise. Sound had returned to the world. Uzziel looked around to locate its source, but could see little despite the thinning mists. Even as he searched, the noise increased in pitch to a keening wail, followed by a gurgling scream. Spinning around, Uzziel saw Codicier Ahiezar framed in an emergent doorway, sharp metal sticking through his chest. The metal slowly withdrew and Ahiezar collapsed into the sludge of blood.

The fallen body of the slain Librarian revealed a tall Eldar wearing rune-encrusted armour and carrying a silvered spear. The Eldar weapon was alive in the warlock's hand; it purred with pleasure now it had tasted the Librarian's blood. The Exodite spun the spear around and held it before him.

'I am Ailean, warlock of the King of Lughnasa. I know why you have come and I am here to deny you. You, human, have no right to disturb this place and you may not have what that stasis chest holds.'

Uzziel shook with rage. 'You speak so of the sword? No right? I have every right! That sword is the birthright of my Chapter and has been kept from us for ten thousand years. I will take it back to my brethren or die in the attempt. So I swore.' The Chaplain removed his hand from the stasis box and gripped his power sword with both hands, wincing at the daggers of searing pain which streaked from his injured arm. He was ready to face the meddling warlock.

'You humans are strange,' Ailean said, seemingly unaware of the towering anger that filled the Dark Angel. 'You should thank us for keeping a sword such as this safe for as long as we have. Instead, you come to my world, kill my people and disturb the dead. Is the sword really worth all that? It would be better locked away for all eternity than loosed again upon the world.'

'Heretic!' Uzziel screamed. 'You will feel the Emperor's wrath for your insolence!' Uzziel charged, power sword tracing a deadly arc. Ailean, apparently ready for such a manoeuvre, parried the blow

swiftly. He tried to unleash a bolt of psychic energy at the Dark Angel, but found his power neutralised by the Space Marine's armour. Uzziel smiled inside his helmet, and silently mouthed a prayer of thanks for his Aegis suit. He would not fall to this warlock's witchcraft.

Ailean tried another psychic blast and this too was quashed. The warlock began to take the duel more seriously, shifting his spear into an offensive position and lunging with deadly intent at the raging Dark Angel. Uzziel met the spear stroke for stroke and the lance howled as it was thwarted time and again. The two were well-matched opponents, Ailean fighting with graceful elegance, Uzziel countering with berserk fervour.

Eventually, the sheer power of Uzziel's blows began to tell, and he drove the warlock back into a lichen-covered wall. Ailean tried still to pierce Uzziel with his hungry spear, but the Dark Angel grabbed the weapon's haft with his injured hand and held it fast.

The Chaplain longed to sheath his blade in the Eldar's flesh, but couldn't at such close quarters. Instead, he struck the warlock full in the face with the hilt of his power sword. The blow drove Ailean's head into the wall with an audible crack, and the warlock joined Ahiezar in the mire of blood.

Wasting no time, Uzziel sheathed his power sword and staggered towards the stasis chest. He was breathing heavily and bleeding from a number of spear wounds. Without further ceremony, the Chaplain picked up the long box and all but ripped it in two. He could feel the energy dissipate as the alien device cracked open and the stasis field faded.

Reaching inside the shattered chest, Uzziel pulled out a sword encased in an ornate sheath. The shock near overwhelmed him, and he leaned on his own blade for support. Up to this moment, he had been prepared for disappointment and lies. A Fallen Angel was never really to be trusted. But how could he have passed up any opportunity to recover the Lion Sword, no matter how remote the chance?

Now he, Uzziel, stood in this alien temple with the very sword in his hand! What a moment!

Uzziel began to pray fervently, thanking the Emperor and Lion El'Jonson for choosing him for this moment. The sword came free of the sheath and shone with a blinding brilliance. The remaining fog and mist burned away in seconds, exposing his surroundings for the first time. Uzziel was alone in the temple, save for the bodies of Ahiezar and Ailean. Now Uzziel could see that the once elegant temple was mostly a ruin. The towers that once flanked it had fallen and parts of the roof had caved in. Lichen covered the walls, which somehow glowed with an inner light.

A little calmer now, the Chaplain examined the sword. The hilt was carved of gold, in the shape of an angel, its spreading wings forming the weapon's guard. Overcome by its beauty, Uzziel took the sword to a place where the sun shone through. There it gleamed in the light for the first time in ten thousand years. Uzziel hefted the blade and tried its balance. Perfection. This was a sword of kings, of conquerors. As if in a vision, he could see himself at the head of armies, wielding the unmatched blade and vanquishing the enemies of the Emperor.

His mind swam with heady visions of power and conquest. With this sword none could stand before him. Surely he was chosen! A weapon of greater power even than that wielded by Azrael, Supreme Master of the Dark Angels. Now Uzziel knew his time was upon them all! This was the evidence and the power to silence all his most jealous brethren back at the Rock.

Uzziel gasped involuntarily and laughed aloud that fate had sent him to this place! Soon he would be hailed as the greatest Interrogator-Chaplain in the Chapter's history, greater even than the legendary Molocia! All would fall before him, all would bow to him, and not just those of his Chapter.

No, now was the time to put away petty differences of Chapter and creed. The

Imperium would be his. Swordbearer, Conqueror, first of a new breed of Primarch. Giddy with elation and power, Uzziel saw the universe laid bare for his legions, ready for the taking. This was decreed. It must be.

As Uzziel continued to gaze at the gleaming weapon, he noticed an inscription on the blade. This is below your notice, Lord Uzziel, an inner voice chided him, and so persuasive was its tone that he almost ignored the battle-worn lettering. But the small cold presence of his conscience pulled at his mind. Looking closer, he squinted to read the ancient letters. Each word pierced him like a dagger to his heart.

'TO LUTHER, FRIEND AND COMRADE-IN-ARMS. MAY YOUR FAITH BE YOUR SHIELD. LEJ.'



UZZIEL STAGGERED back and dropped the sword. Immediately, its treacherous power was broken, and he realised the full extent of his folly. This was not the Lion Sword, but the Sword of Luther, arch-traitor and most hated of the Fallen Angels. Once a noble weapon, it had been twisted by the power of Chaos as Luther lead the Fallen Angels down their doomed path.

And had Uzziel not felt its power, listened to its lies and been ready to make it his own? How could he have been so blind? Tempted by the very sword that had killed the Lion! The Chaplain shuddered with horror, thinking of the Lion's noble sacrifice. What folly! And so many noble Eldar dead!

Thoroughly disgusted, steeped in self-loathing, Uzziel carefully sheathed the cursed blade. He would not be tempted again. He would not listen to the now-raging voice. He must, would deny it!

Inside his helmet, his communicator crackled to life. 'Interrogator-Chaplain, this is Gunship Cestus. Strong Eldar

reinforcements are heading towards us from the north. What are your orders?'

Uzziel paused a moment. He considered ordering his men away and staying to die at the hands of the Eldar. 'I deserve no better!' he howled in torment at the sky.

But he could not. As an Interrogator-Chaplain and a Dark Angel, he had to face up to his actions. Sighing heavily, he replied at last, activating his communicator link. 'Tell the troops to fall back by squads to rendezvous point secundus and meet there.'

'Yes, sir. By the Emperor, it is done.'

Uzziel walked to the stone doorway, where the prone form of the dead Librarian lay. He looked out over the battlefield; more bodies lay everywhere. Many of his brethren had fallen today, their lives thrown away because of him and his pride. He had wanted to find the Lion Sword so much that he had let himself be fooled by one of the very traitors who had torn the Dark Angels asunder. Even the heretic had been given a merciful death as well!

Now there would be consequences, of that he was certain.

He considered leaving the sword in the temple, but too many had died for him to go home empty-handed. It was a part of the Chapter's history and as such belonged in the Rock. Perhaps Asmodai would know what to do with it.

Asmodai. He could not think of the aged Space Marine, the greatest living Interrogator-Chaplain, without touching his rosarius. Asmodai's rosarius had only two black pearls, and that was the work of hundreds of years. Uzziel looked at his own black pearl, the source of so much pride just hours ago. Now revulsion filled his soul at the sight of it.

Slowly, Uzziel unclasped his rosarius and slipped off the black gem. He placed it carefully on the hard rock of the temple floor before bringing the heavy boot of his power armour down upon it. The black pearl shattered and Uzziel ground it to bitter dust beneath his foot.

Next time, there would be no doubt. ♦



LET IT BE KNOWN!

I, BALDO UMBALDI DO DECLARE THAT ALL WHO PASS BEYOND THIS SIGN ARE DOOMED TO DIE A SLOW AND AGONISING DEATH, TORIN LIMB FROM LIMB AND LEFT TO ROT IN THE FLAMING PITS OF CHAOS FOR ALL ETERNITY, FOR THE CRIME OF TRESPASSING UPON MY SACRED TERRITORY.

IN A TIME LONG PAST, I WAS ONCE A MIGHTY WARLORD IN THAT PLACE YOU CALL HIVE. CAST OUT, I WAS LEFT TO DIE IN THIS HOSTILE LAND. BUT I DID NOT DIE. YOU HAVE FORGOTTEN ME. I HAVE GROWN POWERFUL IN THIS PLACE. NOW I AM STRONGER THAN EVER I WAS IN THAT ACCURSED HIVE. MY LOYAL WARRIORS NUMBER IN THEIR THOUSANDS, EACH ONE READY TO DIE IN MY SERVICE.

MY POWERS ARE GREAT. I CAN SET YOU ON FIRE AND SEE THE FLESH BURN FROM YOUR BODY. I CAN INFEST YOU WITH PUSTULENT BOILS AND SET MAGGOTS EATING OUT YOUR STOMACH. YOURS WILL BE A SLOW DEATH AS YOU CLAW YOUR WAY ACROSS THIS LAND. CORROSIVE WINDS WILL LASH YOUR BODY. THE HOT SAND WILL CHOKE YOUR LUNGS. ITS ACIDIC TOUCH WILL BURN YOUR MOUTH.

ONCE I HAVE THE POWER TO GIVE LIFE IN THIS FORSAKEN PLACE. RETURN FROM WHENCE YOU CAME. GO BACK TO YOUR ACCURSED HIVE. TELL ALL YOU SEE ABOUT ME, BALDO UMBALDI, FOR ONE DAY I SHALL RETURN. AS SURE AS THE SUN RISES EACH DAY, WHEN THIS WORLD GROWS OLD AND THE GREAT DEVOURER COMES, I SHALL RETURN, TO BE YOUR SALVATION.

SO TURN BACK NOW, WEARY TRAVELLER, FOR YOUR JOURNEY IS NOT YET DONE.



UMBALDI



Hatred

By Ben Chessell

I AM HATRED. *I am revulsion. If you know me and do not bate me, you are evil. I have enough bate for myself.*

The gibbet in Kurtbad was unoccupied. Swinging in the gentle breeze, the empty loop of rope regarded the village like a macabre eye. The people of Kurtbad slept, though they had gone to bed afraid. The two guards posted outside the barn which served as meeting hall slumped against the wooden door, blankets wrapped around them like shrouds. Their pitchforks lay discarded on the black Averland soil. If the humble wind which shook the noose had been so bold as to sniff the breath of these men, it would have smelt of wine, much wine.

The midnight watch in the midst of an Averland witch hunt was not a duty to face unfortified. The small stocks of wine, kept in Kurtbad for Taal's day of Spring-return, had been cracked open and distributed to all the villagers. When that day came, and it would be soon, everyone but the children would understand. Now all that mattered was that a man had been killed.

GUNTER PULLED his woollen cloak tighter about his shoulders and made enough noise to wake the form in the bed he had recently left – but got no response. The thin moonlight didn't help Gunter see whether she really

was asleep. He buckled on his sword, his since his father had died on a frosty night early in the winter, and drew back the bolt on the door of the house which had come to him the same way. Ice on the stone step cracked under his militiaman's boots and the breeze blew away the last cobwebs of sleep. Gunter found much solace in his duty, the sole permanent militiaman in the village of Kurtbad, responsible for more than a hundred men, women and children. He straightened his back and headed for the barn to see how his new recruits were doing.

Anja waited for the door to close behind him before sitting up and lighting the candle from the last coals which winked like dying stars in the ashen sky of the hearth. She returned to bed via the door, where she drew the bolt again. Gunter's side of the bed was warm but cooling quickly. She crawled back to the corner where she had curled like a cat on the night when Gunter fetched her from her family, telling her mother that she would be safer with him. It was probably even true. How could her mother, older now than most women in the village, tell the militiaman, tall as a bear, he could not take her only daughter. It was for Anja's protection, after all.

Anja and Gunter were not married, and had he not been arguably the most important man in Kurtbad, action would

have been taken. As it was, many people in the village muttered after she passed by and looked at her as if to see some sign of her sin worn openly on her garments.

Anja curled up and thought about these things, looking at the candle flame and how the beeswax melted and ran down the stem like tears. The candle cried itself to death.

OUTSIDE THE VILLAGE, on the road to Nuln, the night was shredded by a startled cry and a flash of blades. A man leapt from the back of a horse and stumbled in the mud at the side of the road. Another man rolled on the ground, the winter leaves sticking to his face, his wrist in his mouth. The struggle was as bloody and quick as a dogfight. When it was over, the inadequate moon lit only naked skin and cooling blood.

The victor of the battle rode through the forest toward Kurtbad, searching for something.

UNTIL THE BUTCHER slept well that night, despite a nagging feeling of guilt. He was used to that.

KURTBAD NESTLED on the edge of the Reiksbanks Forest in central Averland, four days' ride from Nuln. It sat beside an old trading route which led from that great city of commerce and industry to a Dwarf outpost at Hammergrim Pass in the Black Mountains. There, for centuries, the Dwarfs had sucked lead and iron from the guts of the fat mountains. The ore was loaded onto oxen carts and passed through Kurtbad on its way to the markets at Nuln, and thence by river to whatever Imperial foundry was prepared to pay the best price: gold for steel. Kurtbad had seen some business in those days.

The greed of the Dwarfs eventually exceeded their skill and the bounty of the Black Mountains and the ore dried up like a staunch wound. Hammergrim

Pass was abandoned and the Dwarfs returned to fight the Goblin Wars or whatever Dwarfs do. Kurtbad became a ghost town overnight. The inn was closed and its keeper, who was a business-man, left for Nuln with a girl from Kurtbad he had married. She later returned to the village with a young child, no money and a brand on her arm. The inn was knocked down. Perhaps it was anger or perhaps the people of Kurtbad needed the wood for their sheep pens, living in wolf country as they did.

Nevertheless, in the space of a generation, the village had purged itself of the influence of the Dwarfs and merchants, and grass had grown on the road to Hammergrim Pass.

Into this small village, a single black stitch on the great embroidered map which hangs in the commerce hall of the Merchant's Guild in the city of Nuln, came a black horse with hooves of silver. On its back was a tall man clad in dark cloth. He wore a hat the colour of coal, with a plume which must have been dyed because no-one knew of any bird with feathers like that. He wore a sword and a knife, in the manner of a gentleman, and his boots were of soft leather, also stained the colour of moonless night. His arms were scarred and scratched, from old battles and new, and he grasped the reins with his left hand as if the right was unequal to the task.

He sat on his horse for some time, surveying the village and its people as they stirred in the dawn grey. He sat there long enough for Wilhelm, chastened for being asleep on duty at the barn, to ring the huge bronze bell. This bell was the last remnant of the Dwarfish mining days, except for the occasional brightly painted rail which kept the sheep in. It had originally been used to warn the wagons as they left the mountain trail that the road was too muddy for reliable passage and they should wait for a drier day. Now the bell, which bore the crossed hammer and axe stamp of the miners, was struck with a mallet to summon the villagers to the common, the steam mechanism long since decayed.

I AM A SNAKE. *I am a worm. There is poison in my blood. I can never die a peaceful death. I am burning now as I will burn then.*

Gunter heard the bell as he stared for the fifth time at the place where Gregor's body had been found. There were signs to read here, he knew that, answers written in the ground as clear as any illuminated manuscript.

Just as he couldn't read the scratchings in ink which adorned the pages of his father's books, so he couldn't comprehend the signs in the mud which had hardened and cracked since Gregor's violent death two days ago. He had found the pieces of clay from the shattered bottle, but they only served to confuse things further. The only marks he could read reliably were his own deep boot prints, four sets.

He turned away and straightened himself as he made his way to face whatever disaster had befallen Kurtbad now.

ANJA LOOKED out between the curtains of Gunter's cottage. The man sat silently on his horse like a sculpture cast in black leather. She thought he didn't look well. He had the balance of a drunkard, and as she watched he shut his eyes and swayed like a young tree in a breeze. Anja pulled on the shoes which Gunter had bought for her on one of his trips to Nuln and unbolted the door.

She was the first of the villagers to approach the man and she straightened her hair as she walked carefully towards him. He made no sign of having seen her, so she moved around to the front of his horse. The big brown eyes of the stallion regarded her critically but the man's head remained slumped. There was a stain of dried blood, Anja knew it by its colour, on the man's right wrist, above his black leather glove. Anja could see he was alive; his chest rose and fell slowly.

She summoned up the courage to address him without considering that she didn't know how one should properly address a Witch Hunter.

GUNTER DREW breath and held the air in until all the goodness had been taken from it. A Witch Hunter. Just what we don't need.

He sized the man up. Anja had helped the man from his horse, which was now grazing contentedly on the lush grass of the Kurtbad common, before Gunter had banished her inside. Foolish girl. These Witch Hunters had no purpose but the discovery and destruction of Chaos, he knew that, and although there was a dangerous killer on the loose, perhaps even a monster of some kind, the man in black might be just as dangerous. Didn't she know that? Of course she did.

Even now she watched proceedings from the window and heated water on the stove for the man. Anything to make contact with the world outside Kurtbad, that was what Anja wanted. Why can she not be content with me? Gunter knew that it was likely only his training and foreign postings with the Empire army had brought Anja to his home in the first place, and that was a fragile bargain he was determined to protect.

He turned his attention to the Witch Hunter. The man sat slumped against the wall of his house like a wilted flower, except that he knew no blooms that were the colour of Death. Gunter addressed him formally, welcoming him to Kurtbad and asking his business.

When the man spoke it was in a voice which sounded like it was squeezed through a throat too small to let the words pass, and he shut his eyes in pain. His name was Dagmar, he was indeed a Witch Hunter, and he knew about the troubles in Kurtbad. Gunter had no choice but to offer him the hospitality of his cottage.

DAGMAR LAY IN the strange bed and contemplated the rafters. They were oaken and old. Like strong ribs which held the thatched skin of the roof from collapsing, they met at a huge beam, a great rounded trunk which still bore bark in some places. A crossbow hung from one end of it, he noticed, well oiled and maintained. The other

held cooking pots and bundles of roots and spices.

Dagmar shifted in the bed and turned his head to watch the girl who stirred the pot. A whip-crack of pain shot through his ribs when he turned his body to the side, so he contented himself with the briefest of glances and returned to looking at the thatching. Grey sunlight filtered between the straw; it lay across him like gashes.

He had allowed the girl to remove his boots but otherwise he was clad as he had been when he arrived, in ill-fitting Witch Hunter's clothes. The fight in the forest last night had almost been his last and only the overconfidence of his opponent had saved him. Dagmar waited patiently for the girl to return with the stew she was making and wondered if his luck might be changing.

Anja had to feed the man as he couldn't easily sit up. Gunter had not told her his name, saying that he thought it was better if she didn't know such things. He had gone now, to attend to the horse or get wood or something.

She fed the man patiently, noting that he was most polite. He told her his name in an attempt to learn hers. She learnt that he was called Dagmar and freely named herself. What was the danger in that? From what she knew of Witch Hunters, they were good folk who hunted monsters throughout the Empire. She had never seen one but Gunter had occasionally mentioned them in one of his many travel stories. If he had come here to catch Gregor's murderer then wasn't that a good thing?

She looked at the man's mud-spattered and blood-stained clothes. Normally she would have undressed him and washed his clothes for him. He was clearly wounded beneath the expensive garb. Gunter had not protested when the man had climbed into his bed fully clothed but Anja had seen his face. She did not want to anger him further. Not now.

I am evil and it is consuming me. There is no place in me but hate. There is no place in me but disease. Do not touch me.

GUNTER CUT WOOD as if each log was the head of an enemy. He saw many faces beneath the wedge as he drove it deeply into the chopping block: Goblins, Bretonnians, men who he had slain or almost slain. Most of all, he saw what he imagined was the face of the monster who must have killed Gregor: scaled, with tusks and fangs. The creature's head split with a satisfying snap but there was nothing inside. He lifted his axe for the coup de grace but the face he saw became that of his guest and he held the stroke.

Angry with himself for unworthy and inhospitable thoughts, Gunter reasoned, as he gathered the wood, that the Witch Hunter had done nothing to earn his enmity. Perhaps he could bring resources to bear on the problem that would enable them to catch the killer. He determined to consult with this Dagmar, after they had all eaten, and returned to the house in a better mood.

What he saw as he came through the low door destroyed his good nature as surely as if a daemon-wizard had banished it to another realm.

ANJA MOPPED Dagmar's brow with one of Gunter's kerchiefs and sat by him as he dozed. When Gunter returned with the wood she was cleaning the cut on the man's right arm. The wound was not very deep but had bled a great deal and had ragged edges like a newly ploughed track. She tried to take off his leather glove but he clenched his fist, the pain was obviously too great.

She bathed his arm and wrist but did not ask to take off the glove again. There was clearly something wrong with the arm, which had a bulge in it where hers did not. He had talked of a fight in the forest. Perhaps he had broken a bone then. When Gunter suggested she should return to her mother while the stranger stayed in his house, she shrugged him off. Gunter might be a great soldier but he had no idea how to look after a sick man. When he tried to order her, she responded by reminding him that they had taken no vows and that she only

need take orders from her mother until such a time as they did.

Things became more heated and Anja was forced to stop stitching her sling and stand up to face him.

Dagmar got out of bed at this point and made excuses about needing to perform his ablutions.

Anja's pointed comment about the stranger's good manners did nothing to pacify Gunter.

WHEN HE RETURNED, she had gone and Gunter sat by the soup pot. Dagmar could not be sure whether the man or the fire glowed more hotly.

The two men found they could talk easily enough and Dagmar imagined that he might have more in common with this lonely man than he thought.

For his own part, Gunter was surprised to find himself trusting the engaging Witch Hunter, and rethinking what he knew about their kind. This man, Dagmar, although very knowledgeable about mutant creatures of Chaos, was unlike any Witch Hunter he had ever heard of.

Dagmar talked with Gunter for several hours, making various suggestions for the defence of the village. He suggested, and this is just one example of his useful ideas, that some mutants have thick, strong necks, and might survive a hanging. Dagmar proposed the building of a pyre, with a stake set into it, so that the criminal, when captured, could be burned.

He also said that the mutant was quite possibly living in the village and promised to hunt the man down. Dagmar asked many keen questions about the habits of the villagers of Kurtbad, and Gunter told him who was reliable and who was suspect. Then Gunter took a deep breath and told Dagmar his suspicions.

I AM UNCLEAN. *How can you not smell it on my breath? The rot of my body, the decay of my heart. We are so much the same, and so different.*

Otto Fleischer was a very fat man. He was not a nice man. If the villagers knew everything there was to know about Otto, instead of just suspecting it, they would never have let him be their butcher, let alone their undertaker. When Otto had buried Gregor he had made no secret that he would not grieve for the man.

ANJA THOUGHT that the cottage looked like Gunter had been carousing all night with one of his mercenary friends who occasionally came to Kurtbad, most likely to hide from the law, and not like the place where a sick man had been quartered. There were two empty clay bottles next to the fire and Gunter was snoring loudly. He had obviously slept on the hearthstone and his face was covered with a thin layer of ash which lifted in tiny clouds with each snore. The veins on his cheeks were red like a fox and his moustache curled upward on one side.

Anja looked at this man, her lover, as a farmer might appraise a new-born lamb, and turned as if to compare his visage with Dagmar's. The bed was empty.

Anja put the steaming breakfast she had brought onto the scarred table and walked outside.

DAGMAR EASED the glove off his right hand and washed both in the stream. The small stream ran down from the Black Mountains beside the road from Hammergrim Pass and beneath the stone bridge at the north of the village. The small graveyard for the people of Kurtbad lay on the top of the opposite bank. The water was like knives of ice but the hand was mostly numb anyway. He stared at it in disgust.

He unbuckled his belt and took off his boots. The touch of the water on his feet was agony but he forced himself to stand, unsteady on the slippery rocks beneath the shallow flow. He watched the dirt and blood billow and mingle with the water, quickly lost in the enthusiastic stream. He imagined a purifying experience.

He heard the girl approaching just in time to get the glove back onto his hand.

OTTO SCUTTLED from behind Gregor's gravestone and picked up his sack. He knew what he had seen. He took the long way back to the village.

GUNTER PINCHED the skin above his eyes, his hand clasping together at the bridge of his sharp nose. He shook the ash from his clothes and, wiping his eyes again, looked around the cottage. Breakfast. No Anja. No Dagmar. He took a knife from the roof beam and began to eat the spiced tomatoes. He tried to remember the conversation of the previous evening. Had he gone so far as to mention Otto's name? That was unworthy.

Gunter had long disliked the butcher and declined to eat his meat, preferring to kill and smoke his own, but he had no evidence that the man was a murderer. What had possessed him to tell a Witch Hunter? Dagmar had been talking about mutations caused by exposure to Chaos he had had experience with and had mentioned that such a man might become extremely fat but otherwise remain normal. That did fit Otto's description.

Gunter had to admit that the Tilean wine was mostly to blame for the liberties he had taken. It was not fair to his guest, who seemed to be a decent man, to burden him with wild suspicions.

Gunter lurched to his feet like a becalmed ship which suddenly finds the wind, and went off in search of Dagmar.

ANJA SAT ON a dry rock in the stream and listened intently to Dagmar's story. The man was charming, there was no doubt of that, and appeared to be well recovered, almost impossibly so, from his illness of the previous day. There was colour in his cheeks and his beard seemed to have grown overnight.

Dagmar was standing solemnly on the bank of the stream in mock concentration as he related an apocryphal tale about an acolyte of the Temple of Verena in Nuln. The story was convoluted but Dagmar told it faithfully and well, keeping his face serious until the punch-line, which made them both laugh.

Dagmar bent double, exaggerating his laughter and slipped on the muddy bank. He fell heavily on his right arm and his face screwed up in pain. Anja pounced across onto the bank and helped him to sit. Her face was a flag of concern. A great deal of blood stained the sling she had made and she could see bone sticking through the skin below the elbow. He held her away with his good arm, which was surprisingly strong, like a man shielding himself from the sun.

Eventually she calmed him down and they both sat together on the bank. When she went to put her head on his good shoulder, he let her.

GUNTER STOOD on the bridge and gouged the moss of the low stone rail with his knuckles. He felt the water flow beneath his feet and felt the blood flow through his body. He made himself breathe the air as he watched them. Gunter remembered how he felt when he saw Anja dance with other men on Taal's day. He stood there for some time.

When he finally managed to uproot himself from the bridge and make his way down through the trees to the stream he walked noisily, so they might hear him and untwine by the time he reached them. Gunter completely forgot his purpose in seeking Dagmar.

Anja met him as he emerged from the trees, smoothing her dress and pulling leaves from her hair. She matched his gaze and her eyes danced.

Dagmar stared into the stream and cradled his right arm like a babe. Gunter could have sworn he was talking to it.

When Anja had gone, the two men looked at each other for a moment, the

kind of moment which might be the prelude to anything. As it was, Gunter suggested that they go together to examine the tracks at the place where Gregor was killed.

OTTO KNOCKED on the door again. He was sure someone was in there. This was the one time he had ever been desperate enough to call on the help of the militiaman. He was dismayed when the door was opened not by Gunter, but by his harlot.

DAGMAR STOOD behind Gunter as he crouched over the tracks, pointing at various features which he had indicated with muddy sticks in the turf. They stood like a blighted forest, marking the last steps taken by the man called Gregor.

Gunter was trying to understand how Gregor could have been ambushed by the mutant in such an open area as, apparently, he was always a careful man.

Gunter did not suggest that Gregor might have been very drunk on that night. Perhaps the bottle he had found did not fit the fiction of the man's death which Gunter was trying to write in muddy characters on the killing ground.

Dagmar suggested that perhaps Gregor had been the attacker and the mutant had merely tried to defend himself. Gunter was vehemently opposed to the suggestion.

Dagmar explained to Gunter his own version of the tracks. He moved some of Gunter's markers with his good arm, showing exactly where the mutant had been surprised, where Gregor had picked up a stick, and where the broken halves of the stick now lay, stained with the mutant's blood. He finished by showing where the mutant had finally fought back and where the body had fallen.

Gunter concluded that Gregor must have been drunk to be so foolhardy.

I AM TRYING to tell you. I am amongst you. I am Chaos. Destroy me.

Anja sat on Gunter's bed and stared into the fire. She had heard what the butcher had had to say, heard his testimony about the scaled hand of the Witch Hunter. She had asked him what business he had had in the graveyard but Otto had pressed his case. The man, apparently, had red-green scales on his right hand below the wrist – a sure mark of Chaos. The fat butcher had pointed out how badly the man's clothes fitted him, how he was clearly not a natural rider of that perfect stallion.

Anja had listened to all of this and she saw that it might be true. She promised Otto she would fetch Gunter, and told him to retire to his cottage and wait for them. Then she sat in the dark and tried to recall the taste of the man's breath, as it had been on the bank of the stream.

She tried to remember the taste of decay, of corruption, but she could remember nothing but the sound of the stream and the look in his eyes.

GUNTER CAME slowly back to the house as the burning galleon of the sun sank behind the Grey Mountains. He thought about what Dagmar had said, how he had shown him a different way of looking at the signs in the mud. How he had forced him to see the truth which had all the time been set before his eyes.

More than ever, Gunter felt he was in a great library, like the one he had seen in Middenheim, where all the knowledge of the world was kept and yet he could not read a word of it. He walked past the waiting pyre and smelt the oil. A small group of Kurtbad residents stood about it, like birds of prey who anticipate a kill. Gunter felt it too and began to trot back to his cottage.

Anja was waiting at the open door for him, a sight which grasped his heart. She brought him inside and after looking to see that he was alone, she closed the door. She told him: I have found the killer.

DAGMAR STOOD on the slope above the village in the struggling light. He looked at the cottages and their hearthfires which sent up vines of smoke from holes in the thatch. He imagined the meals being prepared. There would perhaps be children, certainly animals, underfoot. There would be both happiness and unhappiness in those cottages. He hated them, every one.

I am batred.

Except her. He thought of her by the stream. Reflected sunlight splashing her face, cooling her eyes. He thought of the way their faces had touched.

How can you not smell it on my breath?

He shattered the picture with the mallet of his hatred.

How dare she?

Do not touch me.

Doesn't she know what she's done to me?

He pulled off his right glove and shook his arm free of the sling. As he flexed it he felt blood course through it and the cuts at his wrist opened again and bled freely.

There is poison in my blood.

How dare she? I am a killer.

I am Chaos.

I will show her.

He drew the Witch Hunter's sword from the Witch Hunter's belt and strode down the hill.

I have changed my mind. I will not die. I will live as I am and I am as I will.

GUNTER SURVEYED the assembled crowd. Fifteen or so men and boys had gathered in the gloom. Each carried a weapon of some kind, many carried torches which they lit from the coals of Gunter's fire.

Anja sat on the bed and said nothing.

Gunter gave his last instructions and the group moved out. Gunter led them. He was the only man with military training and although they felt they knew their quarry, who could tell what strength the curse of Chaos could lend to a man? They were not scared – there were too many of them for that – but there was a thrill which ran through them as they moved

closer. They spoke of revenge and justice, though not one was thinking of Gregor.

Gunter gripped his sword and strained his eyes in the dark. He thanked Sigmar that Anja was safe, having come so close to danger. Images of the library returned to him but Gunter no longer needed to read.

ANJA HEARD him coming. He was walking loudly and didn't seem to know anything about the mob. She stood behind the door and cancelled her breath while he tried the handle.

Dagmar staggered into the room and she saw that his left hand held a sword. His right hand hung at his side, the fingers moving, almost as if he was not aware of it. It looked as if the first two and second two fingers were in the process of fusing and they did not move independently. Perhaps that was why he no longer wore the glove.

'Dagmar?'

He turned on her like a cornered boar and she saw his face contorted by pain and rage. She brought the iron firestick down on his left hand and the sword bounced off the flagstones.

He moaned, no, growled in pain and sank to the floor. He looked at her. Tears of black blood streamed from his eyes.

GUNTER GAVE the signal and the mob moved forward. They had trapped the murderer in the house and all that remained was to apprehend him. As far as they knew, he was alone. Hardly surprising. By all accounts, Chaos carried a stench that was enough to make a soldier cry.

Gunter steadied himself and kicked the door with his mercenary's boot. It gave way easily and he almost fell into the room. The sole inhabitant of the cottage leapt up in shock, banging his head on one of the butcher's tools which hung from the central beam. The mob piled in behind Gunter, pressing him forward.

Otto cowered away from them, but some spark of unworthy courage flared and he grabbed a cleaver. He wore no shirt and Gunter stared in disgust at the

rolls of fat which hung over his linen breeches. The skin was pasty and white and the whole cottage smelt of dead flesh. Gunter disarmed the man with a chopping stroke to his right wrist. The mob grabbed him and silenced his protests.

ANJA MET THEM at the pyre. She held fresh torches in her hands. She watched without flinching as the unconscious Otto was lashed to the stake. It had been easy enough to convince Gunter. He had seen Otto many times with the blood of pigs on his hands. Such a man could kill. There was little distance between the butcher of Kurtbad and The Butcher of Kurtbad.

Otto was a hateful man and Anja told herself that the village would be better off without him.

Gunter was calling for the matter to be settled and judgement to be passed. The eyes of the crowd, hungry and violent, turned to where she stood, supporting Dagmar with her shoulder. His right arm was back in its sling and the hand was tightly bound with linen bandage.

She nudged him forward. Dagmar stepped into the torchlight. He smelled the oil. He looked at the circle of people, death in their faces. He turned to look at the fat butcher tied to the stake like a grub about to be roasted. He thought of the dead, drunk man, buried by the butcher in the graveyard. He thought of the Witch Hunter, stiffening beneath a pile of forest leaves. He thought of the militiaman, who surely knew and wondered why he stood there amongst the ignorant, blood-driven rabble.

He thought mostly of Anja, of what she had said to him, of how she had looked at him, of what she must have seen when she did, and of how she had again brought him back to himself. He tried to imagine what might happen after this night was over. Someone was forcing a torch into his left hand.

He spread his damaged fingers apart and held the wood as if in a claw, between thumb and forefinger. He hesitated. He asked the crowd: Why

should this man die? The crowd told him: *He is Chaos. Destroy him.*

Dagmar's right arm twitched and stretched against the fabric of the sling. Anja touched him gently with her fingers, a reassuring squeeze. The sling tore and scales backhanded her away.

Dagmar leapt onto the pile of oil-slicked logs. He looked at the men and women with their torches and their murderous fear.

We are so much the same, and so different.

The butcher tried to lift his head. Dagmar thrust the torch into the logs and a forest of flames sprang up. Otto screamed and Dagmar howled. He embraced the fat man and locked his claw hands around the back of the stake.

The people of Kurtbad drew back from the thick, fetid smoke and the stench of decay. All except Anja, who stood in the glow of the flames and wept gently, her tears mingling with blood from a cut on her cheek.

Gunter dragged her away, put himself between her and the flames.

Dagmar's body melted like a candle as if the blaze inside him was hotter than the fire of oil and sticks. It took longer for the butcher to die.


I am burning now as I will burn then.

THOUGH KURTBAD remained a single stitch on the merchant's map it was never the same town. Some believed that they could always smell the stench of the mutant on the common. Chaos had touched them, they said, and that was the reason the crops were poor. The lonely gibbet was demolished and the wood used to make a new sheep pen.

Gunter tried to resign his post but he was forced to stay by the people who said that now they truly understood the gravity of the threat. He tried to learn to read. Anja left the town on the black stallion with the silver hooves, which she was said to have sold for a fair price in the market at Nuln. She never returned to Kurtbad, either with a child or a brand on her arm. ♦

OBVIOUS TACTICS!

Episode Two



THIS IS MADNESS, THE BREACH EXPLOSION HAS WARNED THE REBELS THAT THE TRAP WAS SPRUNG.

WHY CARRY THE CHARRED REMAINS OF *VESALIUS* WITH US INTO THE FRAY?

AND HORDES THERE ARE, I FEEL THEM POURING OUT OF THE DEEP HALLS.

THEN WE NEED TO BE *LEGION* TO MEET THEM. LET US CALL ON THE SPIRIT OF THE *BLOOD DRINKERS*...

THERE IS ONLY DEFEAT TO GO BACK TO. *LIVING AND DEAD* WILL FACE THE HORDES TOGETHER.

... AND THE *FLESH TEARERS!*

BROTHER SERGEANT, WHAT YOU PLAN IS AN *ABOMINATION!*

NO, I TAKE *VESALIUS'S* STILL RAW HEART INTO ME. NOW WE SHALL BE *THREE* AGAIN.

I SUMMON THE *RED THIRST*... THE SOULS OF ALL OUR *LONG DEAD* SHALL FIGHT WITH US...

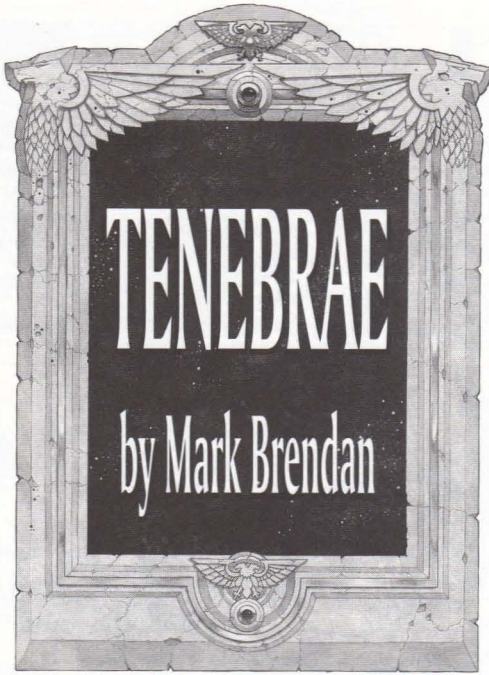
... LET THE *HORDES* COME!

YYEEAAAARRGH!



SCRIPT & ART
DAVE PUGH

TO BE CONTINUED..



CHINKS OF reddish-grey glow filtering between eddies in the layer of atmospheric debris announced the break of dawn over Tenebrae's capital. The city known as Wormwood had stood for the past ninety years of the seven hundredth century of the forty-first millennium. Now Wormwood was dying. The screams of men mingled with the gibbering of daemons and the thunder of weapons. Upset by the warping influence of Chaos gates opening to provide access to creatures who had no rightful place in the material world, the burgeoning clouds over the city periodically rained blood, sometimes toads, upon the death-strewn streets.

The old man strode with rare haste through the vaulted halls of the Adeptus Arbites' fortress in Wormwood's war-torn central plaza. Governor Dane Cortez reflected that the pandemonium within the building was almost as distressing as the chaos without. An ageing man, he nevertheless carried his tall, thin frame with authority. His hawk-like features, coupled with the resplendent robes of his office which billowed in his wake, lent him an air of power and mystique. This was but a well-practised front, providing a facade of strength to a man inwardly broken and in turmoil.

All around Cortez, the subjects of his planet, his charges, panicked and fled before the unholy invaders. Even now, within this very building, the Arbites struggled to order the evacuation of civilians to a heavily-defended landing pad on the roof of the great edifice. This final chapter in his personal catastrophe was almost too much for Cortez's ageing heart to bear, but he knew he must appear strong in the face of adversity if there was to be any hope for the survivors.

Striding through the hall of his inauguration, the milling citizens of Tenebrae parted to allow Governor Cortez passage. Amazing, he thought. Even in the hour of my greatest failure, they continue to show me deference.

At his heels, a constant two steps behind, trotted his vulpine advisor, Frane. The snivelling wretch burred a continuous stream of sycophancy and unctuous nonsense which the Governor had long since learned to politely ignore. As they passed underneath yet another cyclopean archway on their way to the fortified command chamber express elevator, a commotion caught Cortez's attention in the ornate hallway. A young man had somehow wrestled the bolt pistol from the holster of one of the grim-faced Arbites. Before the security men could stop him, he sprayed his wife and their infant son, cutting them down where they stood, white-faced and terrified. As the lawmen descended on the wretch with their power mauls, he used the space cleared around him to turn the weapon on himself. The man's chest erupted into a fine red mist as he pumped the deadly explosive bolts into his own torso.

Cortez closed the lift doors on this scene of carnage, and felt his inner spark wither a little more inside him. The ancient elevator shuddered into life and began its rapid ascent.

'One more heretic bloodline severed. Praise the Emperor,' Frane remarked in what he obviously considered his most superior fashion.

The two heavily-armed guards in the lift maintained their statuesque stoicism. Cortez regarded Frane with open disgust, earnestly hoping that the insidious man did not mistake his own expression as contempt for those poor people who now lay dead. Dead because of their superiors' complacency.

Because of my own complacency, Cortez mentally corrected himself.



ARRIVING AT the relative safety of the command chamber, Cortez ordered Frane and his guards to evacuate with the rest. He would remain to order his affairs. Frane protested – just enough to escape possible future recrimination, Cortez noted – but was summarily ignored. He, too, eagerly joined the evacuation of the rest of Wormwood's cowed administration, finally leaving the Governor to his own council.

The command chamber was spacious, and Cortez noted abstractedly that for now, at least, the generators still worked. Bright strip lighting threw a sterile, artificial glare from the polished white surfaces of the fittings. Dane Cortez moved slowly towards the broad window to watch the horror unfold. Chaos and heresy engulfed his home before his stricken eyes. Cortez realised that he must present a forlorn figure gazing wistfully from his eyrie, and he desperately attempted to maintain his tall and dignified bearing, despite the terrible events which had overtaken him.

Cortez had served his time in the military, reaching the exalted rank of Commander, fighting on a hundred planets in a dozen systems. But with time he had sickened of war, and in the final years of his military career he had begun to realise that he needed a measure of peace to discover himself. By then his influence had not been entirely insubstantial, so strings had been pulled and the name Tenebrae had been mentioned.

Tenebrae! The planet had seemed ideal at the time, and Cortez had thought that securing the governorship would solve all of his problems. Standing at the impressive window, Cortez laughed ironically to himself. There was, after all, no one else to hear him.

In the street below, the horrible hissing and popping of plasma-cooked bodies mingled with the screams of the wounded to teach the old man above the meaning of fear. Far above the streets, a cold and unhealthy train of thoughts flooded the mind of Tenebrae's ruler with uncomfortable clarity.

Perhaps there is no escape, he mused, plucking absently at the ornate brocade of his cuffs. Life itself is fear, the universe is fear, and vitality itself naught but a morbid energy, fed by the joyous relief that it is the next man who is dead and not oneself. Tears flowed down the pain-wracked cheeks of an old and broken man. Is fear of death the only joy of life? Shocked by his own thoughts, Cortez felt strangely ashamed by this obscure revelation, for he was yet a man with a military background, and still found it difficult to surrender to fear. 'Now I truly am a man alone, and yes, I am afraid!' he muttered, and terror fluttered within his heart.

As explosions wracked the palace, and the screams of the dead and dying reached even through the reinforced windows of his chamber, their leader stood immobile. Cortez's eyes looked on, but his anguished mind was lost in distant thought as he tried to wrest some solace from the comfort of memory.

Cortez's mind groped back through the years to the first days of his affair with Tenebrae. 'A harsh mistress indeed, and given to treachery at the last,' he whispered, his mind drifting ever on. He recalled those first impressive documents, records he studied earnestly in preparation for his posting as Governor and Overlord. Even now, he could recite the text. It had become a shallow litany to him, bereft of all meaning other than the comfort brought by the repetition of familiar words.

'Tenebrae – forty-five light years from Fenris, the ancient bulwark of the Space Wolves.

Tenebrae – in the Prometheus star system.

Tenebrae – the planet of eternal darkness.'

Cortez gripped the guard rail at the window as terror washed giddily over him. In truth, he knew that Tenebrae was nothing more than a world which should never have borne life at all. Perhaps in the very act of settling this world, the Imperium had transgressed into areas best left untouched. Unbidden, the words flowed like a prayer in sibilant mutterings from his thin lips.

'Tenebrae – a world a mere 180 million miles from Prometheus, a Class-A supergiant which burns 10,000 times more brilliantly than Sol, the sun that brought life to Terra itself.

Tenebrae – at some point in its aeon-shrouded past, a miracle befell the scorched rock of the planet. A meteor struck, throwing a thick pall of ash and vapour into Tenebrae's thin atmosphere.

Tenebrae – protected by a tender blanket of thick ash clouds from the worst of Prometheus' destructive radiations.

Tenebrae – the stage was set for oceans to form and the theatre of life to perform its first act.

Cortez wiped an unsteady hand across his pale and sweating forehead. The words brought no comfort. None at all. 'Maybe it was always a trap, the hand of Chaos guiding even that fateful meteorite.'

The old Governor stumbled from his vantage point, his mind in turmoil. Instinctively he sought solace at his great desk, hands automatically sorting through the jumble of papers in his desk drawers, even as his mind whirled through uncontrollable planes. He smiled wanly at the mass of agricultural data before him. Ten years of research. Utterly irrelevant now. Just memories of better times.

Cortez shuffled through the records of colonising scientists, reading as if for the first time about the eyeless, slug-like worms which crawled in the filth of Tenebrae's shorelines, creatures which were the planet's best evolutionary effort in the absence of sunlight.

While plasma licked hungrily at the walls of his bastion, Cortez absently scanned through lengthy reports about the sulphurous algae-trees glowing in tide pools in their own leprous light.

The planetary overlord toyed with his ornate letter opener. He considered that in truth, for such an apparently drab and lacklustre world, Mistress Tenebrae had proved that she harboured terrible dangers for the unwary. He considered, not for the first time, whether her proximity to the Eye of Terror, abominable gateway to the heart of Chaos, had sealed her fate. Was it this which had whispered the many temptations and terrors into his dreams – and were those nightmares long established in the hearts of the dispirited inhabitants of the planet of eternal darkness by the time his governorship had commenced?

An explosion rocked the palace and a once-valuable glass ornament tumbled from its marble plinth to shatter into countless fragments. Cortez barely shrugged as the spray of razor shards brought scarlet droplets to his forehead.

'Yes,' he muttered. 'She sold her soul long before my time.'



A COLOSSAL RHYTHMIC pounding started outside. The governor's attention tore away from his reminiscences and he scurried back to the window to see what new horror transpired in the streets below. Lumbering past the window of Cortez's shelter, with strides which easily cleared the smaller buildings, Tenebrae's Emperor-class Titan pounded through the city.

'Prosperitus Lux!' Cortez snorted ironically. It was typical to name such a war machine on a recently colonised world thus, the hopes and delusions of the people it served to defend reflected in its title. 'Prosperitus Lux' had not been scrambled quickly enough to be effective against the invasion, and had consequently failed in its protective capacity. Now it must surely fall along with the rest of the world.

'As with everything else in this sorry situation,' Cortez moaned, 'it is me, my own indecision which is to blame!'

While the problem had still been a civil matter, of heretics and malcontents rioting upon the streets of Wormwood, Cortez had been unwilling to send in the guard. He preferred instead to leave such matters for the Arbiters to resolve.

'Idiot! Blind, stupid idiot!' Repeatedly cursing himself for a fool, Cortez came to the bitterest conclusion. The conclusion that his ineffective governorship was the primary cause of their defeat.

He gazed in wide-eyed desperation as the hulking form receded from view, trying to deny the evidence of his eyes. The Emperor was listing badly, flames gouting from its hull. Greenish clouds of plasma periodically vented from the carapace, and Cortez well knew that this indicated a catastrophic reactor breach. From his fortified window, the governor could see the tiny faces of the proud crew flash past, mouthing 'O's' of fear and anguish. He knew the machine was doomed along with all the souls on board.

'Doomed as my planet!' he groaned aloud. At last he acknowledged that this situation was down to him, the great Governor Dane Cortez, and in the end the responsibility had proven too much.

Even now, facing utter defeat at the hands of warped creatures from the very abyss, Cortez could not stop the flood of hateful memories which assaulted his mind. Amidst the papers strewn his desk, Cortez's leaden eyes fell on the long-ignored Adeptus Arbites reports of cult activity. The unbelievable reports of Chaos worship which had so swiftly burgeoned from a couple of isolated incidents in the wastelands into a full-scale heretical rebellion stared back at him, undeniable evidence of his inaction.

'The signs were all here, all here!' he wailed, scattering the reports from his desk with a wild sweep of his hand. In the secret place of his heart, Cortez long knew that Tenebrae bred a certain dissolution of the senses. He had felt the lassitude of the spirit which left such sophisticated lifeforms as humans craving sensation. Perhaps, Cortez supposed, such a biologically primitive environment resulted in a correspondingly underdeveloped spiritual climate.

Whatever the reasons, the passing of his years of Governorship on Tenebrae had seen worship of the Emperor slide further and further into meaningless abstraction, and the whispers from the Eye of Terror grow ever more strident. Now the end was upon him, Cortez could see clearly why it had happened. He derived small comfort from the knowledge that there wasn't a thing he could have done about it, but that did not excuse him of his responsibilities.

Cortez was certain that in the eyes of mankind, he would be held culpable, perhaps even complicit, in the disaster which had befallen his planet.

'They will make their own excuses,' Cortez groaned, aware that elsewhere in the galaxy the powers of the Imperium would doubtless create their own, unfavourable subtexts for why he had not undertaken the obvious and lawful course of action. That is to say, why he had not called upon the Inquisition.

'Heretic Cortez!' he wailed. 'Cortez, thrall of Chaos!' Cortez tortured himself with such thoughts of how history would perceive him, for he was yet merely human, and subject to human pride. Losing

Tenebrae was one thing, losing his life another, but losing his name and dignity too?



SLUMPING WEARILY into his great, padded chair of office, Cortez remembered the day when vast, baroque battle barges, covered in the hateful iconography of the Chaos gods, had appeared from warp space to hang silently over Tenebrae's atmosphere. They had rained fleets of landing craft towards the planet's surface. Now the payload of those death carriers stalked the streets of Wormwood: twisted, malevolent machines and beings who left tragedy, ruin and terror in their wake.

'Why? Tell me? Why?' Cortez implored to empty air. 'This backwater planet may not mean much... but it is my home!' Despair overcame him and anguished, gulping sobs wracked his aged frame. 'Why did I ever come here? Why?'

When he had been offered the Governorship of this world so many years ago, he had taken it gladly. A small backwater world, of little importance. A place to be happy and untroubled. A place to put his memories of military service and the horrors he had seen behind him. It had become a place of fear and death.

'Why?'

Picking a leaf at random from the pile of reports on his desk, Cortez selected one of the many fateful reports on Tenebrae's heretical activity. Yet another report which he had personally ensured the Inquisition had never received.

'The Inquisition?' Cortez muttered resentfully. If he had requested their assistance, and in truth he knew that they represented the only force in the galaxy capable of preventing events of such enormity, then he also knew he would be standing in despair at this very window again.

'The cure? Every bit as lethal as the disease!' The irony caused his tear-stained lips to form a rictus grin, and Cortez shook his head. 'The only difference lies in the fate of the victim's souls.' He shouted aloud, as

if addressing a rally of doubtful subjects. 'If I called the Inquisition,' he shrieked, 'we would now be watching the grim troops of the Imperium ranging through our beloved thoroughfares supplying "absolution".'

He had left the military after becoming involved in such cleansing operations, for he had come to call them by another name. Murder. Genocide.

'Oh, what's the use in any of it?' he sobbed, crushing the hateful reports between his balled fists. Ripping and shredding, Cortez systematically began the destruction of all the useless paperwork which had bound him to his desk when he should have been leading his people.

His ravings were abruptly interrupted again, this time by an urgent rapping at the door of his office.

'Who's there?' demanded Cortez irritably.

'Jezrael, Captain Jezrael, sir!'

A good man. One of the best. Loyal. Sanity tugged at Cortez insistently. He stopped scrabbling at the remaining papers and readjusted his robes.

'You may enter.'

The Captain of the Arbites curtly entered the office and stood to attention. He was a tall, solid man, dressed for battle and brandishing a bolter.

'Sir! We're evacuating the last of the civilians, sir! You must leave now, if we are to have any chance of survival, sir!'

Cortez smiled weakly at the soldier, then indicated the doors with a slender, wasted finger. 'You go, Jezrael. You have served Tenebrae well. See to it that her people continue to prosper elsewhere,' he said in a tired but kindly voice.

'Sir?' queried the captain, confusion creasing his uncomprehending face.

'I will remain here. It is my duty.'

The governor forced himself to stand and faced the soldier with steely eyes. 'Now go, captain. That is an order!' he barked, some fire returning to his voice.

With that, Jezrael struck his breastplate in salute, turned curtly on his heel and was away. The doors swung shut behind him and closed with a quiet click.



WANDERING OVER to his window once more, Cortez felt as if he was in the grip of some strange dream. His attention was once more captured by the ruined streets of Wormwood. Thirty floors below, swaggering gangs of Chaos-warped Space Marines strolled amongst the wreckage. Their booted feet crunched on the shattered stained glass that once illuminated Wormwood's proud buildings. Any pockets of survivors they chanced upon were swept away in a vague wash of bolt gun shells, swatted like gnats.

Following in the wake of the Traitor Marine cordon, Cortez glimpsed a procession, of all things, approaching the plaza. A victory train of incongruous gaiety and celebration attended by ragged heretics and capering daemons, to the Governor it looked almost medieval. Here a Plaguebearer, foul daemoniac servant of Nurgle, dipped an infected finger into the wounds of a dying man, there a heretic carved designs into his own flesh in the name of Slaanesh.

At the centre of the march, an honour guard of traitors from the Word Bearer legion of Chaos Marines, four in all, reverently bore a large, upright metal cylinder approximately four metres in height and two in diameter. Cortez's uncomprehending eyes took in its rich decoration, bas reliefs of foul, warp-spawned creatures carved from an oily green rock which filigreed the shining silver surface. Wisps of ephemeral vapour emanated from vents atop the singular device.

Perplexed, Cortez watched the procession draw up outside the ornate Adeptus Administratum building, seat of his governorship and the centre of the civil service on Tenebrae. The traitors came to a halt and the square began to fill with the adulants of Chaos. The Word Bearers carried their load up the long, broad steps to the forecourt of the building. Between the majestic pillars of the entryway, now defaced with graffiti and riddled with holes and abrasions from small arms fire, the large casket was set down.

Cortez viewed the events unfolding beneath him with mingled intrigue and disquiet. Something was afoot here which he did not understand, a puzzle that called to him, enticing. The creed of the God-Emperor had always taught unquestioning

servitude, and that had sufficed for Cortez. But here, the shadow of his own mortality looming longer and longer, he wanted to at least fathom something of the nature of this forbidden enemy. His destroyer. His doom.

He saw the crowd in the square stirring, becoming agitated. The governor knew instinctively that this had something to do with the contents of that dread casket.

'What is that?' Cortez was only dimly aware of the dread rising like a behemoth to join his curiosity.

Far below, the roiling chaos throng waited impatiently for the coming of the thing which Cortez could not see. 'Vog! Vog! Vog! Vog! Chastise! Chastise! Chastise!'

Cortez was at once afraid and awfully fascinated by what could be lurking behind the seals.

'Vog, Vog?' he mumbled, transfixed by the growing sense of rhythm. Vacillating, nervous, he was unsure if he even wanted to know the truth at all. Perhaps it was fitting that a plunge into the unknown would draw closed the final curtain on his life. He drew a breath. He watched. He felt ready.

A door cracked opened on the graven cylinder, and a billowing carpet of vapour escaped, to roll down the steps in heavy fetid waves. Cortez quickly reached for his field glasses to better view the spectacle.

'Terminator!' he gasped, and his blood ran cold. An armoured figure stepped over the threshold of the cylinder with a heavy, deliberate tread. The Governor could see that this creature's eyes were closed, as if in a trance.

'Stasis slumber,' he whispered, hoping for a logical and less than sinister explanation.

Then recognition struck him as if with a physical blow, and he reeled back from the hated window. In a sudden flurry of revelation Cortez knew what transpired below.

'Vog!' he whispered, barely able to form the name. Cortez now remembered where he had heard the name before. This was Lord Vog, the Chastiser of Worlds. Also known as the Apostate of Charybdis, Vog was a notorious creature of Chaos from beyond the Eye of Terror. Vog was a Word Bearer priest, a twisted parody of the Chaplains of the Imperial Space Marines. He was also rumoured to be mutant, a being whose voice could loosen the veil between reality and the warp.

'Bringer of demons!' Cortez gasped, horrified that such an entity sought out Tenebrae for its ministrations.

With terror came a strange dulling of his senses, and Cortez was surprised to find that now he was more curious than ever, for he knew beyond doubt that Vog's presence could only signify one thing: the absolute defeat of Tenebrae. The Chastiser was here to perform a victory mass for Chaos.

The Governor shuddered involuntarily, watching Vog as though hypnotised. Slithering over the collar of his Terminator armour came a glistening, slender tentacle. Vog's head tilted back and he inhaled sharply. The whites of his eyes showed through slits as the slimy, pink limb writhed and whipped with its own, unwholesome volition.

An aperture on the side of the Terminator's thick neck dilated and oozed a glutinous clear fluid. The point of the tentacle dug into the hole and began to feed its length into the Apostate's neck. The skin on his throat bulged obscenely, its moisture catching glints of the weak light. Vog came fully awake when the organ was in place, embedded in his larynx.

Lord Vog stepped out into the twilight of Tenebrae. All eyes were upon him, and Cortez almost joined the chorus of his demented acolytes as a great cheer rose up from the adoring crowd. Vog scanned his congregation imperiously, his chin held high. Lord Vog radiated arrogance and pride and, it seemed to Cortez, a strange nobility every bit as impressive as the great Space Marine leaders he had encountered during that distant military service.

As Vog started his address to seal the victory of Chaos, the governor marvelled at the way the Apostate's voice carried throughout the broad plaza. His words were at once perfectly clear to Cortez, yet somehow buried within a sonic murk which was truly inhuman. The cacophony from the Apostate's mouth covered a broad spectrum of sound and was counterpointed by an eerie chanting. This sound, which might have emanated from the very pit of hell itself, redolent with the torment of a million damned souls, all came from the lips of a single man. For such was the Eulogy of Pandemonium, the corrupt chorus of the Word Bearer Chaplains.

'Those gullible fools who daily endure the worship of that rotting monolith, the

Emperor, would do well to heed the word of Lorgar.' Vog's voice clutched mockingly at Cortez's heart. 'We offer our worship to true gods who govern the affairs of mortals. Not a mortal whose affairs are governed by the delusion that he is a deity.'

The discord of his address and the dreadful import of his words wracked the Governor's soul with its vile, atonal reverberations. Cortez doubled over, gasping, and attempted to block the unholy sound by claspng white, trembling hands over his ears. Kneeling on the sterile floor of his office, high above the ruin of his world, Dane Cortez convulsed with long, shuddering sobs of denial. It was over and there would be no atonement for him.



THE TONE OF the address had changed. Lulled by the droning, white noise of the Word Bearer's pontifications, Cortez was drawn, almost hypnotically, back to the window.

His attention was drawn and held by the sight of a corpse far below him. It was huddled in a corner of the forecourt where Vog was giving his speech. Yet another mute testimony to a tired, frightened old man's failure. The body was that of an Imperial Stormtrooper who had fallen trying to defend the Administratum building.

'Rigel Kremer.' The name swept into his memory, but there was no space in Cortez to mourn one friend in the midst of such atrocity. It all seemed... inconsequential. As his consciousness swam to the chant, Cortez found that he could find room to marvel at the play of light on the wet lips of Rigel's wounds.

'Beauty or horror?' The old man abruptly cackled, seeing that the warm, red defilement of flesh almost looked beautiful when viewed in a certain way.

'Rigel?' Cortez asked querulously, as if expecting some answer from the corpse below. 'Rigel, how soon will your carmine beauty give way to the lurid hues of putrefaction? Your attractive red liquid fester into rank, black necrotic fluids?'

Cortez's wet eyes glazed over, drained of vitality and volition as bizarre, alien thoughts flayed at the layers of his consciousness, sinking keen talons into his essential being.

'Then what, Rigel? Answer me! I am your lord, damn you!' Cortez's fingers scrabbled in futility at the window as the Chastiser's voice droned ever on. 'After decay has taken hold of the sack of meat that was once you, Rigel, what then?' He wagged an admonishing finger at the distant body. 'Let me tell, you young Kremer, let me tell you!' Spittle flew unheeded from snarling lips and smeared the window. 'Your thrice-damned carcass will generate new life. Oh yes, Rigel, maggots will burst from the eggs laid around your eyes and mouth, and bacteria and mould will break you down into nutrients for the humblest of plants to thrive on.'

Abruptly, Cortez leapt back from the window and screamed in anguish, terror and horror. He was appalled at the heretical train his thoughts had taken, realising that somehow the droning voice of the false priest below had slid into his stream of consciousness, tempting him. And he had succumbed so easily.

Tears of shame and loss burned on seamed, leathery cheeks.

'All for nothing?' He shouted, anger beginning to blaze within his core. 'All this to no end save Chaos?' Anguished, he was assaulted by a rush of memories. They overwhelmed him as if eager to escape his corrupted mind.

The long and fraught journey through life. The disappointments, and the fresh hopes. But most cruel of all was the opening of his eyes to the excesses of tyranny during military service. He had left the Imperial armies to become a planetary governor and use his new found understanding to make a better life for people.

'A better life! All I wanted was a better life!' He sobbed, chest heaving with barely controlled misery. 'And this is how the mighty Imperium repays me?'

This dead end. This inevitability.

Cortez howled aloud. In a frenzy of violence, the old man heaved his desk over, scattering precious artefacts and ornaments to be trampled unheeded. 'Oh Emperor, where are you now? Have you forsaken me?'

Regret, disappointment, terror and misery were gone in a blinding explosion of all

consuming, inarticulate rage at this most subtle of temptations, and at just how badly he had been betrayed by uncaring fate. Bellowing like a maddened beast, Cortez pounded on the window with liver-spotted fists.

'Where is my Emperor?' he howled.

And what succour could the Emperor offer this poor, tormented soul now? he thought bitterly, face reddened in helpless anger. Striding to his neatly ordered shelves, he cleared them in one swoop of his arms. The medals of the various campaigns in which he had served and the sundry paraphernalia of his office he hurled across the chamber with an inarticulate howl.

'As the traitor claimed, so you are!' he shrieked, pointing accusingly toward the skies. 'A... a... a deluded rotting monolith!'

The last medals clattered from his fingers with a finality that told him he no longer had any allegiances.

'Only myself now!'

In that moment of deepest betrayal, of deepest loneliness, of deepest despair, Dane Cortez hated with the purity and intensity that could change worlds.

Red, shifting haze started to appear within the room. Cortez stared aghast yet transfixed as the fabric of space and time dislocated. Charnel smells assaulted his nostrils as shifting, nebulous figures coalesced within the gathering miasma.

'No!' he shrieked, his shrill voice an entreaty to the uncaring gods of both Chaos and men.

An awful eerie, mocking laughter ballooned within his skull. His only answer.

A warp gate was opening.

Too late Cortez realised what he had done. By the very act of resisting the temptation he had been subjected to, the violence of his maddened thoughts had opened the way for Khorne, the god of blood and war. The one being missing from the assault on Tenebrae was come in full glory.

Crimson light glowed eerily as the gate widened, allowing sleek, red-skinned humanoid figures access to this dimension. Heavily muscled and fearful in aspect, they stepped into the chamber, uncertainly at first, as though unfamiliar with the sounds and textures of this realm.

Cortez backed away, mouth agape, choked with stark terror.

Cruel mouths were filled with rows of carnivorous, glistening fangs. Nostrils flared wickedly as they smelt his mortality. Blazing daemonic eyes fixed him with a predatory glare. There was to be no escape from that malign intelligence or the bloodlust so driven by it. The Bloodletters wielded serrated black swords which were enchanted with the power of death, fit to reap a harvest of souls for their lord.

The old man scabbled at his belt for the laspistol as the snarling fiends shook themselves free of the fading warp gate. Grinning in terrible anticipation, they loped towards the heavy wooden desk, long tongues flicking down to the bases of their chins in expectation of the soul-kill.

Cortez knew without a flicker of doubt that he was about to die.

'And for what?' he lamented, gibbering in near mindless terror.

Death stalked ever closer, and he was overcome by a sulphurous blast, the infernal reek of Hades.

To die for the Imperium – unwieldy and uncaring behemoth which would have as soon put him to the sword had he approached them for help?

'No!' he cried, and the Bloodletters hissed appreciatively. A tang of terror was such a sweet morsel.

Then for the foul abominations released by his very own weakness?

'No! Never that!' Cortez shrieked, backed hard against the far wall of his chamber.

As the daemons approached, bearing his doom on their wicked blades, a solution began to form in Cortez's anguished mind. Against all odds, the governor found a new strength of resolve within him.

He determined it would be neither. Not the Imperium nor Chaos. The answer was obvious. So obvious that he smiled even as he unlatched his holster flap.

So obvious.

The daemons paused momentarily, confused by the unexpected change of emotion. Fear they knew. Terror they relished. Confidence they despised.

The delay was enough.

'For me,' he whispered.

Before the daemons could strike, Dane thrust the muzzle of his ornate laspistol into his mouth and depressed the trigger.

Against all the odds, he had escaped. Finally he was at peace. ♦



• ROLL OF HONOUR •

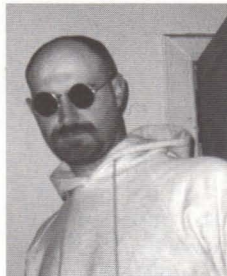
HERE ARE JUST A FEW OF THE WORTHY HEROES WHO CONTRIBUTED TO THIS ISSUE OF INFERNO!



GEOFF TAYLOR's first art was an act of vandalism, when he was allowed to scribble stick men in his mother's recipe books. This set him on an inexorable path that took in Chesterfield Art College, ad agencies, album sleeves, SF and fantasy book covers, and finally led him to Games Workshop. He loves rock climbing, wolves, trees, wide open spaces and his three dogs, but these days he almost never draws stick men. His ambition is to pay off his debts.

GORDON RENNIE, a product of a failed genetic experiment, was grown in a lab by a group of mad scientists. An expert exponent of the

'Sorry, but you're one millimetre out of range' school of wargaming, he lives and works in Edinburgh under an assumed name, since his former creators are still trying to recapture him. He writes Judge Dredd, Missionary Man and Witch-World for *2000 AD* and the *Judge Dredd Magazine*, and his name also crops up with tedious regularity on the covers of various American comics. He claims to have a mutant superpower making him invulnerable to the carcinogenic effects of nicotine, but urges none of his readers to follow his example.



COLIN MACNEIL was born very early in his life, but only achieved

consciousness much later, something for which his family are grateful. These days, he draws and paints for money or beer if he likes the subject. Having won many prestigious awards for his outstanding work, Colin is well used to adulation and takes it all in his stride. His only loss in recent times has been his hair, and quite a few pounds. Best known for Chopper, he is now in search of the meaning of life, or his fortune, whichever comes first.

BEN CHESSELL lives in the near-Arctic climate of south Australia, where he spends much of his time cutting peat for the fire. Dwelling in a log cabin built by his convict ancestors he seldom has time for anything except roleplaying games. He doesn't have cable TV but enjoys watching films through the kitchen window on the big drive-in screen next door. He writes one-liners for White Wolf Publishing and

Chaosium Inc., and hopes one day to publish a book of jokes for young Game Masters. He has played a lot of games. Some of these have been Games Workshop games and his Blood Bowl team, the Kislev All-Tsars, are currently languishing at the bottom of the league. Various genres excite him.

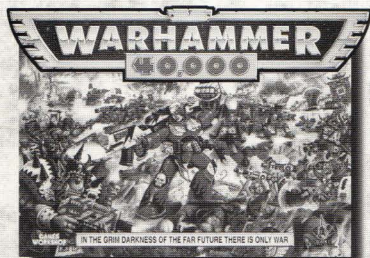


SIMON DAVIS began illustrating comics in 1993, working predominantly on the Missionary Man strip in the *Judge Dredd Magazine*. He now works for *2000 AD* on various prestigious projects, but mainly those loveable gun-sharks Sinister Dexter. He lives near Stratford-upon-Avon, in a state of child-like wonder.

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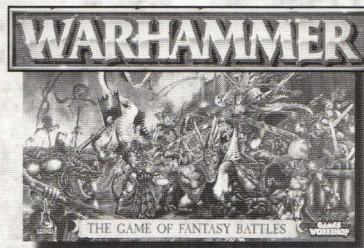
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Bloodquest – a Warhammer 40,000 comic strip by Gordon Rennie & Colin MacNeil

'If the station we hold is destroyed, this whole quadrant shall be lost to the Orkish scum. Already they have paid a heavy toll – ten of theirs for every one of ours... Well, I say it is not enough!'

Birth of a Legend by Gav Thorpe

'The Warlord frowned. With a non-committal grunt, the Orc smashed Kurgan's head back against the post. "Da worst fing for you is gonna be to watch yer mates gettin' it furst." Gazing at the roaring fire, Vagraz gave an evil chuckle.'

The Black Pearl by Chris Pramas

'The Fallen Angel had spoken for the last time. "Confessor," he had whispered through broken teeth and swollen lips, "in the temple, amongst the bodies of the slain... I found the Lion Sword!"'

Hatred by Ben Chessell

'Dagmar looked at the circle of people, death in their faces. He turned to look at the fat butcher tied to the stake like a grub about to be roasted. He asked the crowd: Why should this man die? The crowd told him: He is Chaos. Destroy him!'

Tenebrae by Mark Brendan

'Slithering over the collar of Vog's Terminator armour came a glistening, slender tentacle. The whites of his eyes showed through slits as the slimy, pink limb writhed and whipped with its own, unwholesome volition.'

Also featuring...

'The Doom of Kazad Grund', a detailed look at the storming of a Dwarf hold, by Ralph Horsley and Jonathan Green; more 'Obvious Tactics' from David Pugh; and jaw-dropping artwork from Geoff Taylor, Simon Davis, John Blanche and Bright Light Studios.

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