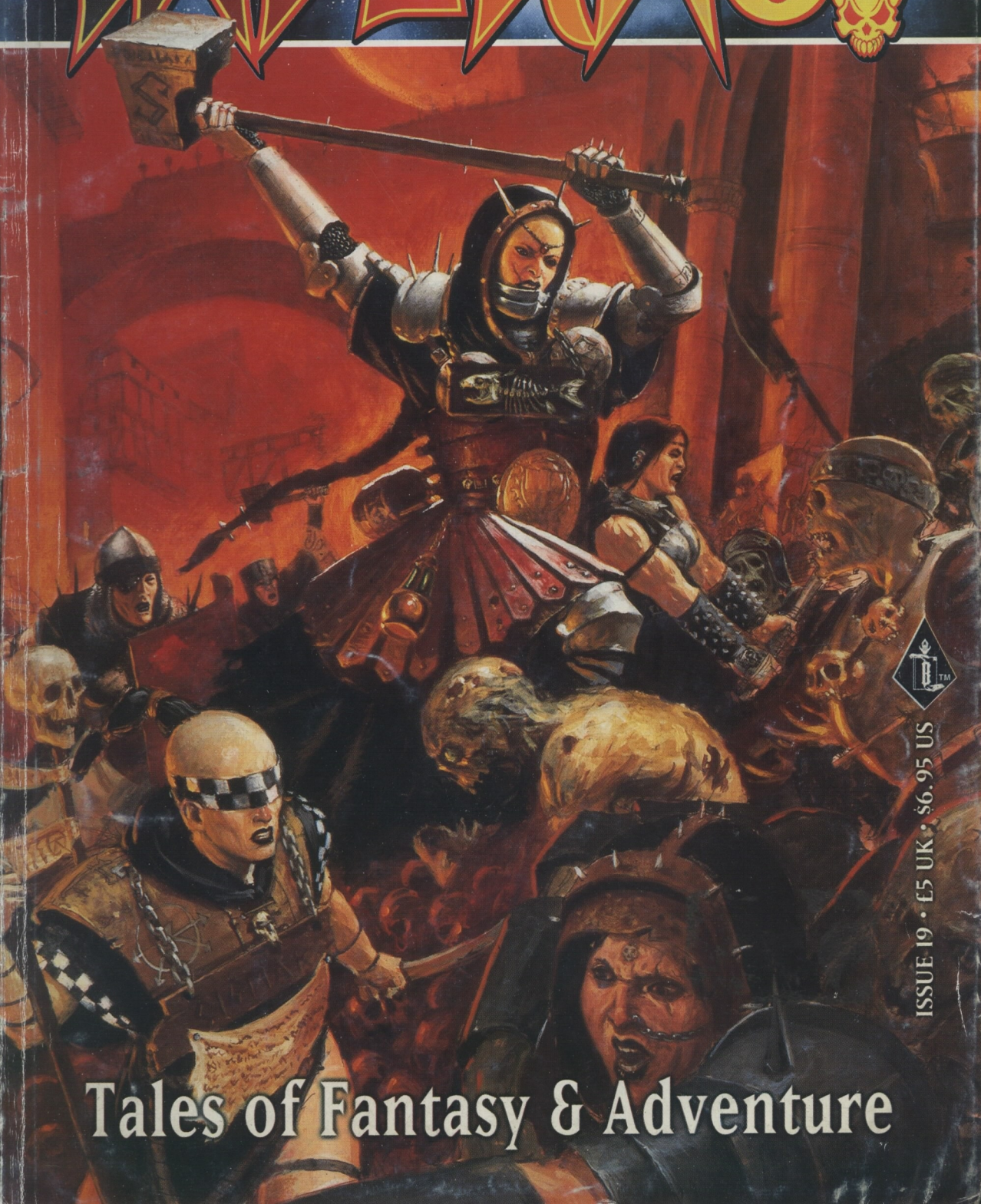


INFERNO!

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Tales of Fantasy & Adventure

INFERNO!

I 'VE BEEN thinking a bit recently, about "heroes". Here at the Black Library, our job is all about creating heroes – well, okay, heroes and their fiendish counterparts, all those wickedly cool villains. However you define them, though, it is these individual characters, whether good or evil, who are the focus of pretty much all of our attention.

Think about it. We're producing top quality, all-action adventures set in the dark and gothic worlds of Warhammer and Warhammer 40,000. But how could you write, for example, "a 40K novel"? How could you squeeze the entirety of that vast, rich background into one book? It would have to be tens of thousands of pages long – or possibly worse be a hotch-potch of ill-assembled parts, with each aspect of the game world crammed in, almost so the reader could tick them off, one by one, as they popped up.

The way we portray our fabulously detailed worlds is actually by adding to them: we create a new

hero, or occasionally take an existing one, and set them in new situations. Through their eyes, we can portray new or familiar aspects of the richly detailed Warhammer world. This means that, rather than reading a mere travelogue or battle report, we're pretty much right there with them, enjoying their adventures.

Now, putting a new hero into the existing Warhammer or 40K universe is fraught with traps. These worlds are already detailed in a great series of game rulebooks, chiefly the army books and codices. If our hero is to do something amazing, we must ensure that it is not something that involves a part of the world which has already been detailed – because otherwise, it would have already been mentioned in the appropriate codex! If it has not, it therefore did not take place... and that's why we reject some of the stories we get sent!

Dealing with already existing heroes and villains from the game is just as troublesome. Certain

characters, typically folk of the stature of a Sigmar, Orion, Abaddon or Mephiston, can sometimes make an appearance in a "supporting role", as they call it in Hollywood. Our new hero may need to consult with them (as in the start of the Bloodquest comic strip, for example, where Leonatos is exiled by his Blood Angel masters, Dante and Mephiston). But again, Leonatos cannot kill Dante, or blow up Baal, or even return from his Bloodquest as the "most famous hero the Blood Angels ever had" – because we already know that that isn't the case.

This might all sound tricky – but with a certain amount of skill, Inferno and Warhammer Monthly's writers have managed to create dozens of memorable new heroes (and villains). So successfully, in fact, that there's even talk of a Bloodquest movie! Now that's a result!

Marc Gasecigne
Editor

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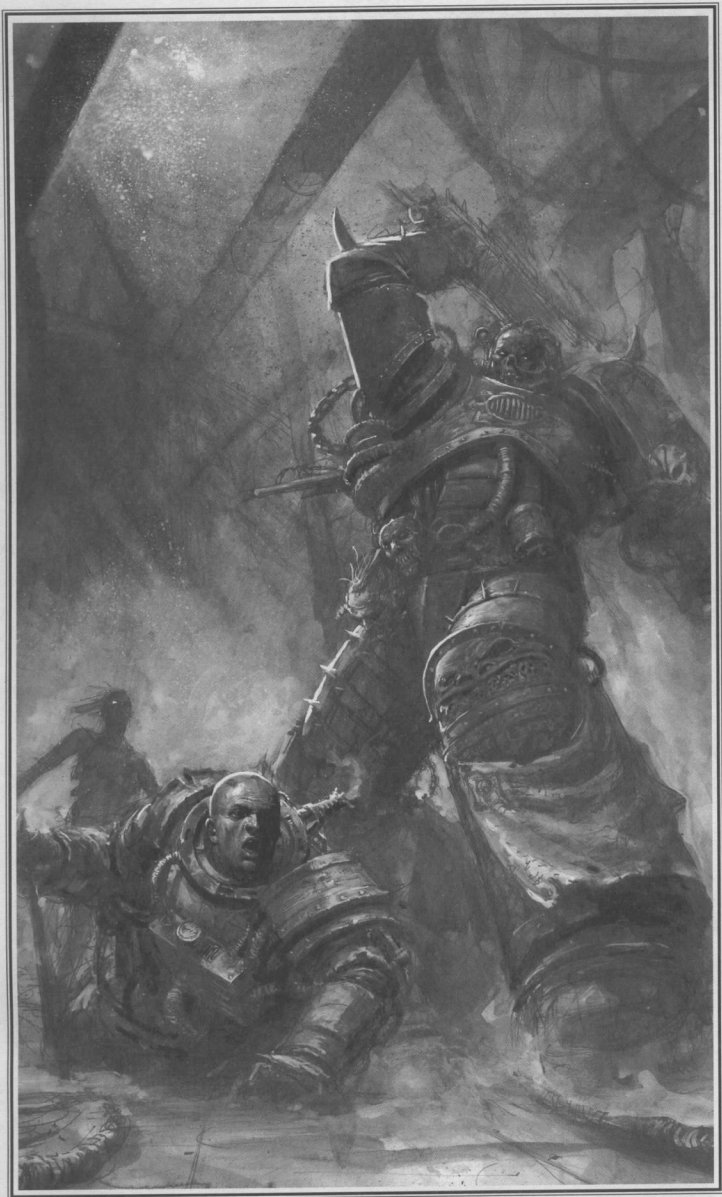
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Ancient History

by ANDY CHAMBERS

*Cross the Stars and fight for glory
But 'ware the heaven's wrath
Take yer salt and hear a shipmen's story
Listen to tales of the gulf
Of stars that sing and worlds what lie
Beyond the ghosts of the rim
But remember lads, there ain't no words
for every void-born thing.*

— Shipmen's labour-chant, Gothic Sector, Segmentum Obscurus.

NATHAN RAN down the stinking alley, panting and sweating. He could hear shouts and a scuffle behind him as they pounced on Kendrikson. His mind raced faster than his feet across the cracked slabs. *Poor old Kendrikson. Still – better him than me.* He leapt over a prostrate body almost invisible in the darkness as the irony of the situation struck home. *At least that's the last time he'll try to get me killed.*

At the corner he risked a glance back. A lone streetlume cast a pool of yellow illumination over a scene which looked suspiciously like one from some Ministerium morality play. Four burly, shaven headed men in dun-coloured coveralls were hauling Kendrikson to his feet. He seemed unduly surprised, nay stunned, to be cast in the starring role of the eponymous incautious reveller laid low by local ruffians, cultists or worse – surely a punishment from the God-Emperor for his

carelessness and self-indulgence.

The image was shattered when the officer stepped out from the shadows to congratulate the men on their catch. Nathan had never seen an Imperial Naval officer before but he had no doubt that he was looking at one now. Tall, poised, immaculately dressed in tailored uniform coat and a pair of glossy black boots which had probably never trodden the dust of a planet for more than a few hours. He would surely be a junior officer to be in charge of a gang like that, trawling through the back alleys of Juniptown to fill out some labour team aboard his ship. Junior or not, he radiated the absolute assuredness that only generations of breeding and a lifetime of training engenders.

Nathan started to back away as his mind raced on. There were rumours that Imperial ships would come from Port Maw to Lethe, but everyone said that sort of thing when there was a war among the stars. Half the people hoped the fleet would come and save them from Sanctus-knows-what, while the other half were afraid that the fleet would bring the war to their doorstep. Nobody had ever thought that the Navy would come to steal a tithe of men and take them away on ships. Men who, if only half the stories were true, would never be seen again.

Kendrikson was off for a cruise and there was nothing Nathan could do about it. He certainly didn't intend take on a pressgang single-handed.

'Well, well' said a finely cultured voice from behind him 'It looks like Young Rae missed one - get him lads!'

A blow struck his head, bright stars flashed before his eyes and he fell into waiting arms which bore him off even as his consciousness slipped away.

NATHAN WOKE to the sound of a voice speaking. It sounded deep, resonant and faintly amused. He was amongst a crowd, being propped up by a stranger. The voice rolled on through his confused awakening like martial music: proud and insistent.

'...I could take this ship twice around the galaxy and wander the void for a hundred years if the Emperor wished it. One thing would bring me back to the hallowed worlds of humanity before we'd been out for more than a year! Crew! You lucky fellows have won the chance to serve aboard one of the Sector's finest ships, the *Retribution*. Remember that name with pride and affection and all else should come naturally.'

Nathan must have looked confused because the stranger, a thin, dark man with tired eyes, whispered to him 'It's the captain. 'Ere to welcome us aboard - sez it'll likely be the first and last time we see's 'im'.

Nathan blinked and gazed about him.

A vast, curving wall disappeared out of sight above them. It was pierced by arches showing a night sky speckled with stars. Halfway up it a buttressed gallery swelled outwards and it was from there that the captain spoke. His voice must have been amplified somehow, because a normal man's voice would have been drowned by a distant rumble which seemed to radiate from the worn stone floor they stood upon. A jolt of panic shot through Nathan as he realised they must be aboard some ship. No, an Imperial warship, he corrected himself. Even as he watched the stars in the

windows were sliding across it almost imperceptibly. They were already underway.

NATHAN WAS inducted into a gun crew: number six gun of the port deck, known to its crew as Balthasar. Him, Kendrikson, the tired eyed man - who introduced himself as Fetchin - and five others were beaten, stripped, shaved, deloused, tattooed with their serial numbers and issued with dun-coloured coveralls, apparently tailored so that their one size would fit no one. The gun officer for Balthasar, a Lieutenant Gabriel, seemed decent enough and didn't revel in their humiliation. He and his enforcers, his Armsmen, simply crushed their individuality and made it clear that they were to obey orders and cause no trouble. He was even good enough to explain to them that men were a commodity on a warship, like food or fuel or ammunition. When the ship ran out, it came to a world to resupply. Simple as that. Even Before the lieutenant had finished his little speech, Nathan had hardened his resolve to escape at the first opportunity.

They were set to work in a gunroom, a cavernous, hangar-like space which reeked of grease and ozone. It was part-filled by cranes and gantries but dominated by the breach of Balthasar, apparently some sort of gigantic cannon as big as a house and nested at the centre of an insane web of power coils, chains, coolant pipes, wiring, hydraulic rams and less easily identified attachments. By the unspoken rule which applies to all new recruits, the old hands set them to work on the most mundane, laborious and unwelcome tasks in the gunroom. In this case that meant long, hard work-shifts scraping off corrosion - which an old hand named Kron helpfully pointed out bloomed like a weed in the moist, oxygen-rich air inside the ship - or chipping away frozen coolant from the branches of piping. They ate on the gundeck too, with their food arriving on square metal trays through an aperture in the wall.

Food-breaks were accompanied by the arrival of the crewmen the old hands referred to as Armsmen. They came through one of the two heavy pressure doors which led into the gunroom, from the direction which Nathan had nominated as 'south'. The Armsmen wore leather harnesses over their coveralls and carried long clubs and stubby pistols or shotguns. They kept a respectful distance while the guncrew ate, but their attitude spoke of a readiness to do harm if necessary. Once the food was consumed and the trays returned to their slot, the Armsmen left through the north door, presumably to perform the same, apparently pointless function in the next gunroom.

Again, it was Kron who explained the purpose of the Armsmen's vigil to the new recruits. 'They're here to make sure everyone gets their own share, lads'. Kron told them. 'An' that nobody takes what isn't theirs'.

Fetchin seemed shocked. 'So yer can't even keep a crumb for later? Or swap some w' yer mate'.

Kron's answering grin was an ugly sight, particularly because he, like many of the old hands, had been patched with steel over old injuries. In Kron's case the tech-priests had left him with a half-skull of polished metal and set with a red-glowing eye. 'Not unless you want a few extra lumps to nurse, no,' he chortled.

Seeing disbelief still written on their faces he added more quietly:

'Was a time, years ago, when we had a... bad captain. He didn't keep a watch, boys. Was alright at first, the bully boys didn't take too much and no one starved. But then we were caught in a storm 'tween Esperance and the K-star for months, the ether was tore apart by cross-chasers and remnants so much that it was all the Navigators could do to keep us from being lost. Pretty soon men's hunger made 'em desperate, an' desperate men'll do terrible things'.

Kron closed his real eye, blocking out bad memories.

Nathan had seen plenty of desperate men around Juniptown in Wet season, when work was scarce or non-existent.

'I've seen floors swimming with blood after fights over a husk of bread. The captain's right to keep a watch,' he said.

Kron looked at him curiously for a moment and then nodded. 'That's right, lad. Better to be harsh now than deadly later'.

Food was palmed and traded and fought over anyway, but in a quiet, cautious fashion which Nathan suspected the Armsmen chose to overlook. Several times he tried to speak with Kendrickson but each time his old rival ignored him or, if Nathan pressed him harder, fled away from him. The old hands brooked no fighting so Nathan took it no further. He judged that the old hands were right; punishments for fighting were liable to be swift and brutal.

At the end of each workshift the crew slept in a low bunkroom beneath the gundeck. Armsmen arrived to drive them below, although they needed little persuasion to drop their tools and find their way down into the gloomy, red-lit chamber. There were no exits from the bunkroom saving the hatch which led back up to the gunroom. Cleansing and purging was undertaken in ridiculously small metal cubicles off the bunkroom. Nathan watched and waited but opportunities for escape never presented themselves. Soon work-shifts and sleep-shifts rolled relentlessly past until all sense of time was lost, until there was only toil and rest from toil, and then toil renewed.



IT WAS ONLY after the ship had left the Lethe system and passed into warp space that Nathan began to understand why men were a commodity. The warp made everything different somehow. Even the cavernous gundeck felt claustrophobic and oppressive, as if immense pressures existed just beyond the hull. Then the dreams had started, nightmares which left the mind dark and full of half-formed images upon waking. Some men screamed and wept in their sleep without knowing why, and others just grew more and more introverted and silent. Fetchin was one of these and Nathan had seen a weird light

The scream came again, but it was tinny and distant, carried along by the conduits from another bunkroom. Pity the poor devils in there, thought Nathan, every one of them wide awake and praying the screamer didn't go berserk and start clawing and biting at them. That he didn't turn into a wild beast like Fetchin had.

Nathan lay back in the narrow bunk and tried to recapture sleep. He tried to imagine all the other shipmen doing the same. Start with this gundeck. Kron had told him there were forty guns with forty crews each, that's sixteen hundred, another gundeck on the other side for three thousand two hundred. Then there were the lance turrets, port and starboard, nobody seemed to know just how big the crews for those beasts were, call it another sixteen hundred a piece. This was working well, his eyelids were drooping. That was six and a half thousand souls (give or take). The torps probably had a crew much bigger than a single gun but less than a whole deck – maybe a thousand. That made seven and a half... engines must be at least two or three thousand more...

A rasping cough snapped him back to full wakefulness. A bittersweet cloud of smoke was drifting down from the bunk above. Nathan sighed. Kron, it was always Kron. 'Ain't sleeping too good?'

'Nah. Bad dreams,' Nathan replied. Kron was the oldest hand on the gundeck. Even Lieutenant Gabriel listened to him, sometimes, so it often paid to listen too.

'Really? Not like Fetchin, I hope,' Kron wheezed. It was a statement – or a cruel joke – not a question.

Nathan decided to take it as a joke and chuckled quietly. 'No, not like Fetchin,' he said. 'Just more dreams of the ship.'

Kron harrumphed quietly and another cloud of smoke wafted downwards, the feeble breath of the recyclers apparently insufficient to even pull it up and away. 'It's lucky to dream of the ship,' Kron said, his voice sounded a little wistful to Nathan, as though Kron were talking to himself. 'I used to dream of it a lot when I was young.'

Nathan wouldn't like to have to guess Kron's years. Apparent age varied so much from one world to another that it was a long shot at best. Take into account all the varp-time Kron must have had and

Nathan would be naming a figure somewhere between sixty and three hundred. In the time it took him to think that, a slithering sound came from above and suddenly Kron was there, pipe in hand, right beside Nathan's bunk. The red light turned his polished skull, with its sharp nose and glowing eye into a gargoyle's head. His living eye twinkled.

'Come walk with me, young Nathan. Let's go up on deck.'

Nathan sat up and warily eased himself out of the bunk. 'What about the Armsmen?' Nathan asked. Kron just snorted and started to pick his way, soft as a cat, to the hatch.

The gunroom was dark, its spars and columns rearing up with cathedral-like splendour into a gloom broken only by the jewel-like gleam of ready-lights and power indicators. They edged around to the far side of Balthasar over snaking cables, Kron sure-footed and Nathan trailing behind. As they rounded one of the pillars Nathan froze as he heard a squeak of oiled leather, Kron stepped on and virtually walked into an Armsman.

The Armsman brought up a torch and snapped it on, a little too quickly and awkwardly to have been lying in wait for them. Nathan slipped back round the pillar and out of sight so he didn't hear what was said, but after a few muttered words the Armsmen swung away, whistling a little ditty and heading for the far end of the gunroom.

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'Not while others're about, but come sleepshift they'll talk and trade like anyone else – they're crew just like us, jest trusted enough to bear arms all th' time.' Kron seated himself on a stanchion and gestured expansively to another. Nathan took a last glance round before warily sitting also.

Kron gazed at him steadily while he got out his pipe again. 'So what's your story, young Nathan?' he asked.

'I don't have a story,' Nathan replied carefully. 'If this is about Kendrikson, my business is with him alone and I'll thank you not to intrude.' That earned an arched

eyebrow and Nathan suddenly felt he was mistaken, Kron hadn't brought him up here to find out what was going on between him and Kendrikson.

'No,' Kron said, 'I mean, tell a story. That's how it's done among Shipmen. When we want to really talk we tells a story, that way we can tell our secrets without saying them right out so others might hear.' When Kron said that, he looked meaningfully at the outer hull plates, which Nathan could see from here were covered with writings, layered one over the other, marching lines of faded gothic script which continued up and out of sight towards the ceiling.

A sudden chill crept down Nathan's spine. He was sure he heard a vague creak of metal up at the north end of the gunroom. 'What do you mean? What "others"?' he hissed.

Kron raised a hand to stop him 'That's jest what I mean. Let me tell you a story about how mankind got among the stars: a tale of ancient times.'

Kron began to speak clearly and surely, without the customary drawls and breaks in his speech. It was almost as if he were reading from a book, or reciting a tale told many, many times before.

ONCE, LONG ago, Man lived on just one island. The broad oceans surrounded him and he believed himself alone. In time, Man's stature grew and he caught sight of other isles far off across the deep ocean. Since he had seen everything on his island, climbed every peak and looked under every stone, he became curious about the other islands and tried to reach them. He soon found the oceans too deep and cold for him to get far, not nearly a hundredth of the way to the next island. So Man returned and put his hand to other things for an Age.

'But in time food and water and air ran short on Man's island and he looked to the far islands again. Because he could not bear the cold of the ocean deeps, he fashioned Men of Stone to go in his place, and the Stone Men fashioned Men of Steel to

become their hands and eyes. And the Stone Men went forth with their servants and swam in the deep oceans. They found many strange things on the far islands, but none as strange or as wicked as the things that swam in the depths between them; ancient, hungry things older than Man himself.

'But these beasts of the deep hungered for the true life of Man, not the half-life of Stone, so the Stone Men swam unmolested. At first all was well and the Men of Stone planted Man's Seed on many islands, and in time Man learned to travel the oceans himself, hiding in Stone ships to keep out the cold and the hunger of the beasts. All was well and Men spread to many islands far across the ocean, such that some even forgot how they came to be there and that they ever came from just one island at all.'

Kron's tale wound on, telling of how the Stone Men became estranged from humanity by their journeys through the void. This led to a time of strife when the Men of Steel turned against their stone masters and mankind was riven asunder by wars. A thousand worlds were scoured by the ancient, terrible weapons of those days before the Men of Stone were overthrown, and a million more burned as flesh fought against steel. Worst of all, the beasts arose and were worshipped as gods by the survivors. Once proud and mighty, Man was reduced to a rabble of grovelling slaves. Finally one came who freed Man from his shackles and showed him a new way to reach for the stars. This path was forged from neither stone nor steel but simple faith. Faith guarded Man from the beasts of the void as steel or stone could never do.

NATHAN CAME to himself with a start. Kron's sonorous voice had lulled him into a strange, half-dreaming state. He looked back at the wall and its inscrutable scripture. *Faith*. Faith kept the beasts at bay. Beasts that turned men into creatures like Fetchin. Each line of script covering the wall was a prayer to the God-Emperor for protection. Centuries of devotion layered

The scream came again, but it was tinny and distant, carried along by the conduits from another bunkroom. Pity the poor devils in there, thought Nathan, every one of them wide awake and praying the screamer didn't go berserk and start clawing and biting at them. That he didn't turn into a wild beast like Fetchin had.

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like stratified rock to keep whatever was out there... out there. He could feel Kron's expectant gaze upon him, the red eye burning like a ruddy star in the gloom. Nathan uncomfortably tried to ignore the scratching noises he thought he heard coming from the gloom. Just nerves, he told himself, or rats, of course. Still, no harm in watching the shadows.

'I don't know many tales,' Nathan hedged, trying to recall one about the Emperor or the Great Crusade. He felt Kron's tale must be a parable of ancient times, set before the Crusades. They were spoken of only through the preachings of the Ecclesiarchy. In the Lethe system, a legendary time of righteousness and purity recalled in the Ministerum's most reverential sermons, usually as a comparison to the immorality and irreverence of modern times.

'Tell us about you and yon Kendrickson then,' Kron prompted.

Inwardly Nathan cringed, but he sensed that Kron could be a big help to his chances of survival, let alone escape, and he had told a tale first. Warily, Nathan began.

'Me and Kendrickson don't go back far, but in the short time I've known him I've decided that I need to kill him. My youthful prospects were not exceptionally good, truthfully they were much given over to petty crime and associating with undesirables. However, thanks to Kendrickson I'm now an unwilling recruit in the Emperor's Navy. That appears to mean lifetime incarceration in a steel cube twenty paces across until death by insane shipmate, starvation, disease or enemy action intercedes: This wasn't my first choice in life.'

Nathan stood suddenly - there was no doubt about it now, someone or something was creeping towards them as stealthily as it - or they - could manage. He gently lifted a steel hookbar from the deck and held it ready. Kron, seeing his look and actions, similarly armed himself with a long spanner. All the while Nathan kept talking, so as not to alert their stalkers. He told Kron about how he and Kendrickson had both served on the *Pandora*, an ageing lugger hauling ore and oxygen between the outer mines of Lethe. He even told him about how they had both actually been in the pay

of a businessman dedicated to transporting goods of a rare, valuable and illegal nature with no questions asked.

Nathan had just got to their last voyage on the *Pandora*, and how Kendrickson had sold him out to the pirates when their skulking stalkers attacked. They came out of the shadows in a rush, three pale shapes and one dun coloured one. Nathan made a two-handed swing at the first to reach him. The steel hookbar caught it on the side of the head with a meaty crack and it dropped as if poleaxed.

It was a man. Pale, near naked with a matted beard and bloodied shock of hair. A second leapt forward, jagged blade swinging, while Nathan was still recovering from his initial blow. He managed an awkward parry with the hookbar and the man pulled his blade back for another hack. Nathan followed through with his block and crashed the end of the hookbar into the wildman's elbow, making him yell and drop his blade. The third dove in between them and drove Nathan back with a flurry of blows.

He blocked a few strikes with the ungainly bar, but gave ground and almost stumbled on a trailing pipe. In desperation he ducked under a cable conduit as his assailant made an overhead cut. The blade sliced into the choc-lines with a shower of fat sparks. The man convulsed and his face clamped into a rictus grin of agony as current flowed remorselessly between blade and deck through him. As Nathan dashed past him he was starting to smoulder, the blade glowing orange in his deathgrip.

The second man had retrieved his blade and made as if to strike as Nathan ran up, but the superior reach of the hookbar finally paid off. Nathan slammed it bodily into his ribs. The momentum of his charge skewered the man on its cruel head, splintering ribs and ripping open a gouting wound. Nathan abandoned the wedged bar and plucked the blade out of the man's fingers, giving thanks that his enemies seemed disorientated and slow, as if they were half-starved or dim-witted.

Nathan sprang forward towards the last foe, a figure in shipman's coveralls bending over the prone body of Kron. Nathan's nape hairs prickled as the figure lurched

up. Blue wych-fires writhed about his limbs like angry snakes and sparks poured from its fingertips. By some reflex Nathan ducked away from a hissing bolt of energy which lashed out from an outstretched hand. It still caught him across the left shoulder and sent fiery needles of agony lancing into his very bones.

If he could have shouted in agony he would have, but his lips only parted in a soundless gasp as a wave of numbness washed through him. Nathan fell to his knees on the deck and fought his unresponding body as it dragged him down, down. The figure stepped closer. Through blurring eyes Nathan could see the complex weaving of tattoos beneath his skin, glowing through it with lightning-brightness. Even the coveralls were rendered translucent by that glare, and bones stood out coal-black as he raised a spectral hand in a gesture full of menace.

With his final ounces of strength he struck back at his foe the only way he could, hurling the blade stiff-armed as he slid to the deck. Before he blacked out he felt a thunderclap of pressure and a wave of heat before blackness closed over him.



NATHAN'S EYES flickered open. He pulled himself up to a sitting position and retched. Only moments had passed. Smoke was still rising from the corpse beside him and the sweet stench of cooked flesh hung in the air. The thrown blade protruded from the corpse's larynx, and Nathan knew he should never gamble again after fluking that shot. But, despite the blade, the massive burns across the body looked like they had been just as fatal. Vagrant flickers of static still trailed along rigor-stretched limbs. Nathan mustered his courage and stared into the blackened face. It was Kendrickson, patently no mere smuggler after all. He stepped well clear of the corpse as he staggered groggily to where Kron lay.

Faint breath sighed from Kron's lips and the burns on his body didn't look fatal. Nathan paused at this, his head throbbing and mouth dry with fear, and considered

how he might be able to judge such a thing given his lack of experience. Regardless, he could not simply leave Kron lying insensible so he decided to follow his instincts and attempt to revive him somehow. By shaking him and calling Kron's name, Nathan was soon rewarded with a moaning and stirring. Seconds later Kron's real eye flickered open; his red-gem eye remained dim.

'Wh-wh-what?. Wh-where am I?' he whispered with trembling lips.

'On the gundeck,' Nathan replied. 'There was a fight...'

He broke off. Kron had raised his hands and was touching his metal half skull and dim jewel-eye. 'It's still on me!' he suddenly yelled. 'Get it off before it can crash-start!'

Nathan stood in shock. Kron's voice was different and he was starting to thrash around in a most un-Kron-like fashion. Nathan snatched for his wrists in fear that he might injure himself and the strange voice grew shrill with panic. 'No! Don't let it take me... don't let it...'. Kron's new voice trailed away and his body slackened in Nathan's grip. As Nathan lowered him gently to the deck he noticed Kron's jewel-eye was flickering back to life.

'Ai, Nathan,' Kron said, his voice normal. 'Lost my way there for a sec. Ye were about to tell me how ye escaped from the pirates?'

Nathan stared at him. Kron seemed to have no recollection of the fight or his bizarre behaviour. Nathan squatted down, watching Kron carefully as he slowly looked about, taking in the carnage around him.

'There was a fight,' Nathan explained again. 'Kendrikson and some new friends tried to kill us, well, perhaps just kill me and capture you.'

Kron stood with no apparent signs of pain or weakness, and walked over to Kendrickson's corpse, where he bent down and retrieved a half-melted spanner. 'I struck him with this,' he told Nathan. 'I didn't realise he was a Luminen.' Kron fell silent, staring down at Nathan with that red, cyclopean eye for a long, long minute.

Nathan had a greasy feeling of fear in his stomach as he gazed back. Kron was obviously not entirely whole or sane. He

had called Kendrikson a Luminen, a word which stirred disturbing memories in Nathan's mind. It might be best not to remind Kron of his equally disturbing words and actions. Better now to find out about the Luminen Kendrikson and his allies. Kron was holding Kendrikson's scorched head in his hands now.

'Why do ye think they were out to catch poor Kron?' the old man asked. Kron turned away to hide the act, but his hands still made an ugly cracking noise as they crushed Kendrikson's skull.

'I have absolutely no idea who they were,' Nathan snapped, 'let alone what they wanted with you! Kendrikson was... was... I don't know, possessed? What is a Luminen?'

Kron clicked his tongue a few times, a curiously mechanical sound like that of the *Pandora's* clattering old logic engine. Before he could reply there was a flicker of lights at the south end of the gunroom; echoing shouts followed. Kron turned and scurried towards the north end without a word. After a second's indecision, Nathan followed, struggling to keep sight of Kron's disappearing back while not tripping on a cable or cracking his head on a stanchion.

He caught up with Kron as he bent over a thick pipe in a shadowed corner beside the script-marked outer wall. The pipe was made of many rings of metal half the height of a man. Kron pulled apart two of the rings and slipped inside, turning to hold the rings apart and jerking his head for Nathan to follow. He ducked within, realising as the rings creaked back into place that he had heard the same noise before Kendrikson and his allies had attacked.

They belly-crawled along the pipe in silence, the way lit only by Kron's cyclopean eye. Bundles of wires ran along the bottom of the pipe, most filthy and blackened but some more recent, their bright colours encarmined by Kron's unflinching gaze. Dozens of dog-eared labels clung precariously to the different bundles. Many were torn off or unreadable, others bore legends such as *Lwr diff, aaz/3180* or *Ar.ctrl 126.13kw* in careful Gothic script.

The pipe gave out in to a black crack, chasm-deep with cabling spilling off into its depths like a frozen waterfall. Kron led

Nathan on to a short bridge of pipes that crossed to the other wall which was splotted with bright blobs of enormous silver like soldering marks. At the far side Nathan stopped, unnerved by Kron's continuing silence and the cold, lightless spaces he was being led into. Time for some answers.

'Kron,' he whispered, 'where are we? And where do you think you're taking me?'

Kron turned to face him before replying. 'She's an old ship, lad. She fought and sailed the void for nigh eighteen centuries in the Emperor's fleet, an' before that she slept in a hulk for another twenty. That's where I...' Kron clamped his mouth shut and his eye blazed. He gazed round warily before speaking again. 'We're between the hull plates here. Yon weld marks are from when she took a salvo in the flank during the assault on Tricentia.'

'And where are we going?'

'Somewhere that's safe, where we can hide 'til the Armsmen finish their search, hide an' talk in peace.'

'Won't the Armsmen follow us down here?'

'Nay lad, wi'out a fully armed servitor crew an' a tech-priest they couldn'a use their guns for fear of cracking somethin', Kron said.

'And where is this sanctuary of yours?'

'Not ten strides yonder.' Kron pointed.

Nathan took a long, hard look at the narrow ledge of rotting cables that ran along the wall from the end of the pipe bridge. His burnt and aching body already throbbled from the efforts he had forced it through after the fight. Now, as the flush of adrenaline left him and the icy chill in the air replaced it, he doubted his arms and legs could carry him on such a precarious path. He hesitated and swayed involuntarily on the bridge, which suddenly seemed rather precarious in itself now he came to think about it.

'Kron, I don't think...'

Too late, the old man was swinging off along the ledge with the agility of a monkey. With him, the wan red light that served as the only illumination was vanishing fast.

Nathan hesitated only a moment before a hot flush of anger drove him forward onto the ledge. He'd be damned if he would let this walking enigma disguised as an old man abandon him to the dark and potentially more of Kendrikson's feral allies. He grasped a shoulder-high seam of wiring and pulled himself firmly over to get a foot on the cabling, trusting his weight to it as he pulled his other foot into place. Bloody-minded determination hauled him along three paces of the ledge. He made two more with his heart in his mouth and fingers fumbling blindly for purchase on the wires before his foot slipped off the cables.

His body swung out alarmingly, and only his recently gained handholds on the wiring-seam stopped him pitching off the treacherous ledge. He desperately scabbled to get his foot back on it. His hands were as weak as water and his heart was thumping so hard his arms quivered. After a few seconds of naked terror he got his foot back on and hugged himself to the wall, teetering as his legs shook. He couldn't let go of the wiring now, his legs were too weak to trust and his hands couldn't hold his weight for much longer. He couldn't go forward, he couldn't go back; every iota of his strength was necessary just to hold him where he was, with the blackness below sucking at his remaining scraps of vigour.

Nathan clutched closer still to the wall and plucked up his courage, carefully shuffling one foot along the cabling. He shifted some weight to it and shakily drew the other foot closer. With a supreme effort of will he unhooked one hand from the wires and reached out to grasp them further along. Then he rested and sweated before shuffling his foot forward again. So he went for the remaining five paces: slide, grip, shuffle, rest, slide, grip, shuffle, rest, slide, grip...



NATHAN almost fell into the opening when he came to it. The horrible sensation that he might fall off just as he pulled himself to safety was almost

overwhelming. Once inside the opening he sat trembling for only a moment, before summoning the energy to crawl further away from the edge.

The interior of the narrow space looked like the choir stall of some Ministerium chapel. Narrow seats crammed along either wall beneath Gothic arches of tubular metal. At the far end a porthole of stained glass was lit fitfully from behind by swirling colours. Kron stood silhouetted against the glass. He turned to face Nathan and pressure doors rolled shut behind him, shutting the dank breath of the crevasse outside. 'Well done, lad, I was thinking ye weren't goin' to make it.' His voice sounded as smooth and calming as the raspy little goblin could make it.

'What the hell did you leave me alone out there for?' Nathan demanded.

'To see if you're as tough as I'm thinking ye are.'

'Oh really, and do I pass muster?'

'I'll be needing to hear the end of your story to know that.'

'That's got nothing to do with this!'

'Come, lad, I can tell by the look in yer eyes that you don't think that's true. "Coincidence" is just a name that fools use for events they don't understand.'

Nathan blinked at Kron and gave a mental shrug. What harm could it do to finish the story if it gave Kron one less thing to be evasive about? 'All right, but then you better give me some answers or I'll crawl right back out of here and tell it to the Armsmen.'

'As I said, I opened the inner hatch to the cargo bay. Once it was open I overrode the outer hatch controls and hung on tight. I knew the drums in the bay were badly secured because me and Kendrikson had been too busy watching each other to make a decent job of it. The outer hatch blowing was enough to break them free and dump them into the void between the *Pandora* and the pirates. I was almost crushed by the stampede of metal cylinders but by the Emperor's grace and a strong grip I was able to keep a hold and stayed on the ship instead of being flung out among the cartwheeling drums outside.'

A few seconds later the first drum connected with the docking thrusters of the pirate ship. I'd been playing for time,

just hoping to upset their approach, but the drums were filled with liquid oxygen. The touch of the thrusters was enough to make them explode like bombs. Dozens of the cylinders exploded in slow, slow motion, the tendrils of fire reaching back further into the cloud and detonating the rest. The escalation scared me badly and I hauled myself within the inner hatch and closed it an instant before the expanding bubble of flames washed across the *Pandora*. The deck bucked and the handful of drums which had not escaped with their fellows rolled around and clashed angrily.

In a second the shock wave had passed and I looked out the hatch to see the pirate ship spiralling off, fires clinging to it and debris leaking from it like a blood-trail. I went forward and up to the bridge where that slob Captain Lage was defecating in his britches. Lage claimed that Kendrikson had held him at gunpoint and forced him to cut the engines and wait for the other ship. Minutes before the explosion Kendrikson had taken a raft and left the ship. Naturally he had taken all of the archaeotech we had been smuggling with him.

'I was surprised when I heard Kendrikson had been seen in Juniptown on Leath. I'd thought he was dead or long gone. I knew I could pick up a bounty for his head so I went hunting for him in the back alleys, which is home turf for me. But both me and Kendrikson were seized by men from the *Retribution*. And that is how I began my new career in the Imperial Navy...'

'Ye never actually knew Kendrikson?' Kron asked softly.

'No, I knew of him, worked with him, but he avoided me and most people from what I heard, he was a guy so weird he didn't even have a nickname. He was just "Kendrikson", and that said it all. Alright, I've told you my tale now it's time for you to give me some answers. No stories, just tell me the truth. Who were those men with Kendrikson?' Nathan glared at Kron, daring him not to answer, to push him over the edge into screaming fury.

'Them's muties, shipmen that's spent too long sailin' the void an' lost their faith. The beast song's in their heart now and they live like lice on the innards o' the Ship;

sometimes they'll even grab compartments and feast on the poor shipboys if they can. Once in a century the captain'll put the ship into port and flush her guts with poison to clear 'em out but 'tween times there's always muties in the crossways and trunks. Seein' as we're in a big war right now there's more than ever, and they'll be lookin' to call the beasts aboard all the time, invite 'em in as it were. Out there's whole squadrons who've succumbed to the beasts in men's hearts in past times, one's I reckon we'll be fightin' soon enough. Kendrikson probably pretended he were possessed to scare 'em into obeying him. The pirates' ship ye saw, did it have a mark on it? A rune or sigil?'

'Yes it did, most do. I don't see-'

'Did ye see it well enough to know it again?'

'Yes, but I'm asking the questions now.' Nathan had recovered enough energy to stand and hauled himself up to face Kron. 'What's a Luminen? I asked you before and you didn't answer but now you're going to tell me. What made Kendrikson a Luminen and how did that give him lightning in his veins and the power to melt steel like wax?' Nathan took a step closer, looming over Kron in the narrow space. 'Tell me!'

Kron grinned up at him before turning and pointing at the stained glass. 'I bet the pirates' symbol looked like that.'

Nathan gaped. The intricate, geometric designs of the window centred around a central icon. A halo of gold with rays so short and square that they looked like crenellations on a castle wall. In the centre was a grinning skull, picked out in loving detail with strands of platinum wire and swirls of crushed diamond. He snapped his gaze back to Kron. 'What does it mean?'

'It answers both your questions, lad. Kendrikson and yon pirates came from the same place. They made him a Luminen, took him an' made crystal stacks of his bones an' electro grafts of his brain, gave 'im skinplants and electros so's he could summon lightning an' channel it an' much more. He was a war-child of the Machine God, what the uninitiated call an electro-priest, though not one in a hundred can hide his power an' look like a normal man like he did.'

'The Machine God - you mean the tech-priests of Mars don't you, the Adeptus Mechanicus?'

Kron nodded solemnly and Nathan suffered a painful insight into the awesome power that organisation wielded within the all-powerful Imperium. Tech-priests ministered to machines and engines on every civilised world, every interstellar ship. The Navy might man its ships but the tech-priests ran them. Their prayers and runes brought life to cold, dead metal and their Forge worlds produced weapons in their billions for the Emperor's eternal war against aliens, heretics and traitors. In theory at least killing Kendrickson made him one of the latter. A sobering thought indeed.

'All right then, what's this place. Those look like shuttle controls am I right in presuming that it's an escape pod of some sort?'

'Aye lad, a cutter. Good for a planetary hop if ye don't mind the waiting as she's a mite slow.'

'Given what I've just heard I'd jump ship now if we weren't in the warp.'

'Death by fulguration if they catch ye,' Kron muttered with an honest-looking shudder.

'Well we can't go back. If they find out who Kendrickson was and who killed him I'd wager they'll come up with something even more unpleasant.'

'Nay lad, if anyone knew who Kendrickson was he wouldnae have been in the gunrooms. Tech-priests only come to repair battle damage and such.'

'So Kendrickson was originally out to get back the archaeotech for the tech-priests and got pressganged accidentally, but why didn't he tell the Navy who he was? They would have let him go for sure.'

'Many times servants o' the Emperor bury their real selves behind false memgrams and such, makes 'em hard to ferret out even wi' soul-seers. Their real purposes run in the background, watching the puppet show through the eyes and ears until they're in position to accomplish their mission. Then they become a whole different person. The Luminen part was just standing by for orders, but it must have decided that you needed killin' to keep its past buried.' Kron let that sink in for a few

seconds before passing judgement on the matter.

'No one'll know we did for 'im if we get back before roll call, 'cept Leopold mebbe and he ain't going to say for fear o' bein' called derelict.'

Nathan was safe as long as Kron didn't rat on him, but he had a feeling that Kron was happy to keep their secret for the time being. They were partners in crime. 'I'm willing to bet that there's another way back into the crew quarters without crossing the gunroom.'

Kron grinned.



Hajj. Isiah. Kendrickson.' The sergeant-at-arms leant over and whispered something to Lieutenant Gabriel, who paused over the great ledger he had open before him. Nathan swallowed hard, this was where Kron's theory came to the crunch. Getting back from the cutter had been easier than he had hoped. A narrow culvert led back from the crevasse into the cubicles by the bunkroom. Nathan had carefully memorised every twist of the trunking and was determined to go back and familiarise himself further with it in the very next sleep shift. But for now he must see whether the Angel of Retribution was at Kendrickson's side or not.

Lieutenant Gabriel gazed at the assembled company, eyes blinking as if he were struggling to recall Kendrickson's face. He turned and murmured a question to the sergeant, who shook his head curtly in response. Gabriel made a small mark in the ledger and continued.

'Krait.

'Komoth.'

Roll call held an additional pleasant surprise: when Lieutenant Gabriel assigned the duty roster Nathan found himself placed on the Opticon crew. His momentary puzzlement was soon answered when it became clear that he was to be Kron's apprentice. He stole a look at the old man, who looked blandly innocent of course, and made a mental note of the

apparent influence he could wield. Nathan wondered what the role of apprentice entailed, and for that matter what the Opticon was. A dim memory floated forward that the Opticon was involved in observation outside the ship. He certainly knew that the Opticon crew usually worked high up on the main gantries above Balthasar's breech on what amounted to an extra half-deck a good twelve metres up spiral steps of skeletal ironwork.

Whatever the duties, they could scarcely be as onerous and repetitive as the labours he was tasked with at present. As he ascended he could see other members of the guncrew moving to repair the damage he and Kron had caused in their desperate fight. The bodies were gone but charred cabling and slashed conduits were visible. Nathan wondered grimly how often they had repaired such damage without knowing its cause. The adage that 'ignorance is bliss' seemed to dominate shipboard life, but with good cause if what Kron had said about the muties was true. The grim pressures of warp travel became all the more nightmarish with the thought that there were malevolent entities clustered beyond the hull. Beasts that thirsted for human lives and souls, whose subconscious call drove men mad. Nathan suddenly stopped climbing the steps as the thought struck him that he was going to help Kron observe those beasts and the Empyrean, the alternate dimension that they swam in.

The curses of the men behind made him move on, accompanied by a perverse desire to see the sinister beasts. He had mixed feelings when he reached the raised deck and saw a row of five shuttered arches lining the hull wall. There were ten in the Opticon crew and the burly rating named Isiah placed two men at each shutter. At first Nathan and Kron busied themselves greasing the shutter runners and cogs at its head and foot. After a quarter watch or so Isiah received a message from the comm-box he carried and relayed an order to raise the shutters. Kron smartly threw a lever and the shutter rose smoothly up to reveal an expanse of black glass which rose higher than his head and as wide as his outstretched arms. As Nathan glanced around at the other crews he noted a sense

of nervous anticipation behind their actions, as if raising the shutters was an act of hidden significance.

Nathan was still gazing expectantly at the black glass when the scream of a siren shocked him rigid. The titanic blast of noise seemed to make the very deck plates tremble and was followed by a booming voice which rang like the word of the God-Emperor: 'ALERT STATUS ALL STATIONS!'

Kron turned and ran for a set of lockers at the side of the Opticon chamber, hotly pursued by the rest of the crew. The men started pulling on pressure suits which Kron dragged from the lockers. The significance of the situation was becoming readily apparent to Nathan by now. They were going into battle, very soon. Those ridiculously cumbersome-looking, heavy, rubberised pressure suits and thick-bowled helmets could be all that stood between them and the void.

To his surprise, Nathan managed to finish clamping himself into a suit before anyone else.

The helmet locked down onto a broad ring across the shoulders of the suit but had a visor made up of different layers, the last of which was little more than a slit in armour plate. He slid back all the layers and saw Kron had done the same. Nathan felt relieved that he wouldn't have to breathe the stale, sweaty air inside the suit just yet. 'How long does this oxygen last?' he asked Kron, tapping the dented brass cylinder plumbed into the side of the suit's chest.

'A watch or so for somun' as big as ye.'

'Just eight hours? They don't want us to get any ideas about wandering off, do they?'

'Ye can always get more air on the ship and if ye... part company wi the ship an' ye're not picked up they wouldnae be able to find ye anyway. Ye'd be drifted too far into the void.'

'Alright, what do-'

The deck lurched beneath their feet and there was a sickening sensation of falling for a second. Isiah shouted at them to get to their stations. Nathan noted that the rating now bore a pistol and what looked suspiciously like a shock-maul and sprang to his post as best as the suit's heavy boots would allow.

The monolithic siren blasted twice. A commanding voice spoke: 'BATTLE STATIONS. BRACE FOR IMPACT!'

The deck shuddered and dropped again. This time the falling was longer. Nathan slid the visor down, grabbed a stanchion and braced his legs. He felt sick and hollow. The suit was stifling, he fought an urge to tear the helmet off and scream his lungs out. An insistent, intellectual part of his brain kept telling him to be calm and that the ship was simply preparing itself and surging majestically into battle. But the animal instincts of his body felt every jar and shake as an infernal choir of death screams.

The ship lurched and fell again. This time Nathan actually felt his feet leave the floor. He felt as though part of him was being torn away, all the roiling emotion in his body began coalescing into a tearing sense of dislocation. A tangible shock rang along the length of the ship and Nathan realised they had left warp space.

The black glass of the Opticon flashed white and then cleared to show a scene of awesome beauty. A night-sky bisected by titanic thunderheads of cloud reared above a fiery sunset. Static lightning cobwebbed the depths and climbed up to blush the clouds with purple. Stars stood out sharp and clear, their own fires made to seem cold by their distance.

'The void never looked so beautiful or terrible before,' Nathan whispered, his fear drained away by the majesty of it all. Kron's voice crackled in his eardrums.

'That's right lad, 'cause through this glass ye see as the ship does; heat, light, magnetism, radiants and etherics are all clear to her.' Kron slid out a large circular lens which was attached to the window frame by a system of brass rods and runners. The thick frame of the lens held two number counters and two raised icons. Kron expertly tracked it across the surface of the window. The numbered wheels of the counters span in response, one horizontal, one vertical.

The ship shuddered again, and Nathan swayed against the window, his helmet ringing off the unyielding surface alarmingly. The sensation of almost being pitched out into the void was enough to make his palms sweat inside the cursedly

thick gloves. As he straightened up, Isiah was barking orders to the crews to search different co-ordinates. Kron slid the lens across until the metricators showed 238.00 by 141.00, their search area. At that spot the lens resolved a dark area which had shown occasional vagrant twinklings into an asteroid field, rolling mountains of stone lit by the star's fiery light.

'What are we looking for, Kron, just rocks?' Nathan asked with shaky levity. The old man was tracking the lens back and forth across the field with deft, economical movements. Each time he reached its periphery he depressed one of the runes, and the tumbling stones shown in the lens were outlined in red with strings of numbers showing speed and distance which remained in the glass after the lens slid away.

'Anythin' that might show us where the foe's a lurkin; a glint here, or a bloom o' heat there.' Kron never took his eye from the lens as he spoke, Nathan slid back his topmost, armoured visor so that he could see better.

'You mean engine heat trails like those?' he stated, pointing to a set of needle-thin arcs which shimmered near the edge of the field.

'CONTACT! MARK-TWO-FOUR-ZERO BY ONE-THREE-SEVEN!' Kron roared, Isiah shouting it back, word for word, over the crackling comm.

The lens now showed broad, vaporous trails of red which curved back around the furthest asteroids. There seemed looked to be four to Nathan, although they were already merging and dissipating.

'They're closing in, lad, I can smell it.'

Kron tracked the lens along the trails and cursed as they disappeared behind a glowing streamer of dust. Moments later an incandescent spearhead of heat blossomed out of the cloud, dust and lightning rolled off it in plumes as the lens starkly announced it in *Enemy vessel [class; Unknown]. 51,000l. Closing.*

A burst of activity on the deck below drew Nathan's attention. Through the grilled floor he could see Balthasar's breech had been swung open and the gunners were hauling flat plates covered in short spikes into the open maw. Even through his thick suit he could hear the gunners'

cheers as they slammed the sub-munitions home. On the lens light and shadow now etched out the enemy, showed the silhouette of crenallated battlements and barbed buttresses as the spearhead rolled abeam on the white-hot stabs of myriad thrusters. *Grand cruiser*, the display read, *Repulsive class*.

A ripple of serried flames geysered from the *Repulsive's* flank as she completed the turn, and a storm of black specks arrowed towards them. Nathan gasped in horror as a heartbeat later the specks started to explode in gouts of flame. At first they looked distant, small puffs of colour against the void, but the projectiles kept coming, surging forward through the fiery chains to detonate in turn. In moments their view of the enemy was obscured by a firestorm which was rippling ever closer. The flames filled every window in the Opticon by the time Nathan slammed his visor fully shut.

The *Repulsive's* salvo crashed down on the ship itself with hurricane force. Nathan staggered as the deck rolled beneath him and a mighty, rushing wind roared beyond the hull. A lash of dazzling purple light blazed through the glass, cutting the incendiary cloud like elemental lightning. It was gone in an instant before it returned in a retina-burning sweep which slammed into the ship with bone-jarring impact. Nathan's spine crawled with the sensation of unseen energies straining and crackling before a rush of scorching heat washed over him.

At last he was glad of the suit's cumbersome protection, though even with it he felt as though he had been suddenly cast into a great oven. The heat was a palpable thing, pushing down on him like a great hand and burning his throat as he tried to breathe. Nathan saw several of the Opticon crew collapse into pathetic heaps, one with flames licking about him. After what seemed like hours but could only have been seconds of heart-stopping fear the burning suddenly stopped, leaving a horrible tang of smouldering rubber inside his helmet. Sirens blasted and an almighty voice boomed over the chaos: 'PORT WEAPONS PREPARE TO LOCK-ON. TARGET MARK-TWO-SIX-NINE BY ONE-SIX-ZERO.'

Iron discipline drove the shipmen to their tasks, that and the grim instinct that to live they must fight and win. The ship had been wounded but it could still fight back. Fires were doused, the dead and injured dragged away. The firestorm was lessening and a moment later the decks ceased to rattle as the ship finally burst clear of the enemies' salvo pattern. Kron's breath rasped in Nathan's earpiece as they slid the lens back over the grand cruiser contact. The *Retribution* was coming across the enemies' bow, and the metriculator's count showed the enemy as closing.

'LOCK ON.'

Kron activated the second rune on the lens frame. A stylised cog superimposed by the Imperial eagle sprang into existence within the lens but the runners seemed to be jammed and Nathan had to help him drag the device over the target contact. The lens showed the ornate spearhead foreshortening into a shark-finned ziggurat of bronze as they pulled across the front of her. Where the icon rested the hull of the grand cruiser was illuminated as if by a ghostly radiance which played over shimmering walls of force.

'FIRE MAIN BATTERIES!'

The lights dimmed for a moment as capacitors charged and then the ship resounded with the clamour of the guns. Nathan felt the pressure of unseen forces hit him like a slap as forty guns hurled their payloads across the void. A moment later he saw the spreading cloud of projectiles cleaving towards the enemy. No spreading storms of fire this time, the munitions detonated right beneath the enemy's prow. Invisible walls fell beneath the onslaught and a rain of destruction crashed across the battlements of the ziggurat-fortress. Debris haloes puffed from it like smoke rings.

'FIRE MAIN LANCE ARRAYS.'

Ravering white spears of pure power stabbed at the foe, tearing red-glowing gouges across its hull, globs of molten metal spun away and flames leapt from the wounds. The grand cruiser lurched visibly under the impacts, and began to twist away from the salvo. Even as it did so, two heat trails appeared from behind the grand cruiser, coming up fast to slash at its rear with a spiralling net of laser bolts. Nathan felt a flush of relief. The other two ships

must be allies, and now their mutual enemy was caught between two fires. Below, the gunners were rushing to reload Balthasar for another shot, while a small team struggled to pin a whipping power line which sparked furiously. He looked back at the lens in time to see a swarm of bright flares pulling away from the enemy cruiser's prow. Ominously the tiny heat trails curved to alter course towards them and it soon became apparent that although these new weapons were not as fast as the projectiles fired before, they were considerably bigger. Sirens blared.

'ALL STATIONS PREPARE TO REPEL BOARDERS.'

The relief Nathan had felt rapidly evaporated. The enemy must have launched boarding torpedoes, simple attack craft packed with the troops, bombs, incendiaries, corrosives, nerve agents and other hellish weapons necessary to wreak havoc if they got aboard. It was bad enough to be caught up in the titanic duel between warships but now the enemy was coming to strike at them face to face, all the time with the prospect of being crushed like an insect by the pulverising contest going on outside. Isiah rapidly passed out weapons from an arms-locker: blades, shock mauls, stubby autopistols and chunky shotguns. Nathan found himself equipped with a worn-looking pump gun and a clip of shells. He risked a glance at the windows as he was fumbling to slot the shot-filled cylinders into the breech of the gun. They now showed finger-long missiles with beaked prows powering, as it seemed, straight for him on harsh coronas of light. The sirens blared a repeating four-tone alarm.

'PORT TURRET STATIONS: OPEN FIRE!'

Nathan cursed as he dropped a shell onto the grating, his fingers felt like sausages in the thick suit gloves. Outside lasers sketched livid tracers across the void as the short-range turrets laid down their barrage, shells and missiles exploded in gouts of orange incandescence as the *Retribution's* barbettes joined in. The first rank of the beaked projectiles were consumed or broken open and tiny, struggling figures spilled into the void as they spiralled away. But still more torpedoes surged through the barrage and

angled in, cutting their flaring drives on a final approach.

Nathan slammed the last shell into place and carefully pumped the action to chamber a round. At the last instant before impact the torpedoes appeared to swell enormously, becoming as big as shuttles before they disappeared from view. A ringing impact threw Nathan to the quivering deck and an endless cacophony of screaming, tearing metal followed. It was so loud it made him quail at the bone-crushing violence of it, of the sheer force that was ripping through the metres of armour plate and breach the hull.

Finally the tearing slowed and stopped until only the screams of injured gunners and the hiss of escaping air penetrated Nathan's helmet. The Opticon deck had twisted and now part of it sagged away towards the lower deck. Nathan crawled to the edge and saw there was terrible carnage below. A great crocodile-snout of steel and brass projected through the hull plates near Balthasar's breach. Deckplates were twisted back; stanchions and pipes had been bent into an insane ironwork jungle with flowers of steam and spraying fluids. The surviving gunners were taking up defensive positions, aiming their assortment of shotguns and pistols at the invader.

As they did so, cannons coughed into life around the crocodile's snout. Gunflashes strobed as the autoweapons hammered explosive rounds across the interior of the gunroom. Men were blasted asunder where the brass struck and hot shrapnel whickered around the metal walls injuring others. The snout was grinding open now and a horde of nightmarish figures spilled out of it to add their fire to the fight. At first they appeared like men in the flickering light, but their insane glee marked them apart. They capered as the gunners' pitifully few weapons tore into them, filling that crocodile maw with twitching bodies. They roared with mad laughter as they blazed back with their own guns and threw devilish bombs which burst into pools of hungry, incandescent flame wherever they landed.

Nathan sighted on a twisted figure as it pulled back its arm to throw. The pump gun crashed and the figure fell into a burning pool of its own making. The flames

spread, engulfed the crocodile snout and the next two who tried to rush through it were eaten alive by the incendiary. Even so a group of the attackers were out in the gunroom now, dashing through the wreckage to hurl themselves on the gunners. Vicious hand-to-hand combats broke out all across the deck, the foes' hooks and crooked blades clashing against the gunner's pry bars and line gaffes.

The pump gun was useless now the melee had reduced all ordered fighting to a shambles.

'We've got to help them!' Nathan shouted to Kron.

Kron's helm nodded ponderously back and they both slid themselves down the twisted Opticon deck to drop down onto the gundeck. Isiah and two other survivors of the Opticon crew followed and they waded into the brawl in a loose knot. Nathan used his gun as a club, smashing the skull of a black-clad figure who was about to gut a fallen gunner. He winced as the gun crunched into its misshapen head, fearing the ageing weapon would fall apart in his hands.

He pumped the action to chamber a round to reassure himself it still could, just as two figures leapt at him out of the smoke. Their mad eyes glared from behind leather hoods, looking so like Fetchin's that Nathan almost hesitated before he blasted one in the midriff with the shotgun. He pumped the slide to chamber another round but it jammed halfway. Cursing, he swung the gun up to block a saw-bladed knife as the other foe slashed at him but he was borne back as his attacker leapt bodily onto him, pinning the useless gun between their bodies. Panic stole Nathan's strength as he struggled against its maniacal attack. Drool spilled across his face as the creature tore away his helmet with its free hand and pushed him to the deck.

Nathan dropped his gun and scrambled to keep a grip on the knife-hand as his foe leaned his weight against it, pushing it inexorably towards his exposed neck. For a long second Nathan saw every detail of the thing astride him with horrible clarity. Flames billowed behind a head made jagged by the short horns thrusting out through its leather mask. Cartilage-textured tubes twisted in and out of its flesh

like parasitic worms. It was either naked or covered in human hides marked with brands and stigmata. It stank like a week-old corpse and it muttered mad, excited prayers as it bent to the task of murdering him. If what he had been told was true this thing must have been human once. Every shred of its humanity was gone now, eaten up by insane gods that had reduced it to living offal that worshipped its own butcher.

Sickness lent Nathan an awful strength, a burning desire to wipe out these horrors that had been unleashed on them. With a supreme effort born of revulsion Nathan shoved the creature back. Suddenly it convulsed, then slumped and its dead weight bore him back down again.

Nathan rolled free to see Kron pulling an axe from the abomination's neck. Isiah and the others had disappeared into smoke. Only corpses surrounded Nathan and Kron. Nathan's helmet visor had been smashed, rendering it useless. Without it he realised how thin the air was becoming. The flames all around were turning ghostly as they hungrily ate at what remained. Even the screams and sounds of combat were becoming subtly muffled.

'We have to stop more of them getting aboard!' Kron shouted to him through his own damnably intact helmet.

Nathan nodded his understanding and grabbed up some firebombs from the corpse and found a short halberd from among the fallen before heading for the heart of the inferno. He felt filled with a kind of righteous fury at the turn of events, like things couldn't get any worse and it was time for some payback. Somebody had to pay for him landing up in a situation as dire as this, and with Kendrikson already dead it was going to have to be their insane, murderous enemy.

The snout stood open as before. The flames were dying away in its maw and Nathan could see more twisted figures gathering to rush through. He fumbled to find an activation stud on the rune-etched bomb before giving up and simply lobbing it as the figures started to run forward. Then another, and a third from Kron, turning the entryway into a sea of corrosive fire as the bombs burst on impact. Nathan turned to shout to Kron an instant before

Kron squatted down beside him as the ship shook, as if from some internal explosion. Nathan could see the chest of Kron's suit was shredded and bloody, a death-shot surely. Wreckage dislodged by the shockwave crashed down nearby with horrible clangour. Kron didn't even flinch as he calmly removed his helmet. As the helmet came away, Kron's eye blazed as never before. It was glowing with the fierce light of furnace. Nathan tried to blot out the horrible intensity of that glare in his dimmed world but couldn't. It bored into him, so that it seemed like Kron the man was shrunk to nothing more than a wraith, that the crimson brilliance trailed behind it like smoke.

Kron's lips moved, but Nathan had to strain to hear their faint whisper through the rarefied air.

'Don't you worry, shipmate, Kron'll see to ye.'

'L-Luminen!' Nathan gasped.

'No,' Kron whispered.

Nathan's body was trembling uncontrollably as shock set in. His vision had almost dimmed completely, apart from a harsh, red light floating nearby.

'Not that at all.'

A helmet clamped down over Nathan's head, dimming the light and bringing a welcome darkness.



NATHAN awoke on the floor of the hidden cutter. His arm was in a sling and a bandage covered one of his eyes but he otherwise felt rested and healthy. Kron was sitting in one of the narrow pews, watching him.

'How de ye feel?' he inquired with genuine concern.

'Good,' Nathan grunted as he sat up. 'How long was I out?'

'Five hours. I took time to fix ye up, an' me too, and rest some 'fore we go back up to the gunroom.'

Nathan felt a sense of relief. He had feared Kron would ask him if he wanted to jump ship. The aftermath of a battle offered the best chance Nathan would likely get for

an escape to go unnoticed. But somehow the prospect seemed a lot less appealing now he had seen what was out there waiting for mutineers and faithless men to fall into its clutches. In fact Nathan was feeling an unfamiliar amount of regard for the God-Emperor after his experiences, a craving for the protection the Ecclesiarchs promised could be gained from the blessings of the Holy Master of Mankind.

But that left him in here with Kron, Not-a-Luminen Kron who could defeat a champion of the mad gods with his own lightning. No ordinary gunner, for sure. A servant of the Emperor? Somehow Nathan didn't think so. If anything he really did look like a gargoyle in this setting, a red-eyed piece of malevolence that had detached itself from the stonework and come down to blaspheme among it. Perhaps someone hiding out then, disguised among a faceless mass yet always moving from one world to another. It would be a superb cover. Unremarkable, beneath attention and yet guarded by the awesome might of an Imperial warship. Ultimately, whatever other misgivings Nathan might have, Kron had saved his life and that put him firmly in Kron's debt. He began to say so but Kron waved his thanks away.


'Don't be too thankful, lad. I had to fix your eye with what was to hand down here. I'm 'fraid I might have made a terrible job out of it. Take the bandage off. Tell me if ye can see.'

Nathan knew what was coming even before his fingers brushed cold steel around his eye. The lens of it was hard and slightly curved to the touch. He bore the metal-sealed scars of his first engagement as part of the Emperor's Navy, but his vision was perfect. Nathan shuddered as he recalled Kron's unnerving personality shift after the fight with Kendrikson, when he had seemed like a slave desperate to escape his inactive bionic eye.

'Kron?' Nathan began tentatively. 'Who are you really?'

Kron chortled. 'A princeling who was stolen by gypsies.'

'Don't start that again.'

'Very well, I'll put it this way, lad... *Cross the stars and fight for glory...*' 

TALES FROM THE TEN-TAILED CAT

THE TEN-TAILED CAT IN TALABHEIM, KNOWN THROUGHOUT THE CITY AS A GATHERING PLACE FOR RACONTEURS AND THE TELLERS OF TALL TALES.

THEY COME TO THE TEN-TAILED CAT FOR MANY REASONS, SOME TO BOAST OF THEIR EXPLOITS, SOME TO AMUSE AND ENTERTAIN, OTHERS TO UNBURDEN THEIR SOULS OR PASS ON DIRE WARNINGS...

• The Dwarf's Tale •

SCRIPT: GORDON RENNIE • PENCILS: KARL KOPINSKI
INKS: ADRIAN SMITH • LETTERS: FIONA STEPHENSON

WHAT WOULD YOU KNOW OF THE EXQUISITE TASTE OF *FRONGOL BREW*, FERMENTED FROM ONLY THE FINEST CAVE MUSHROOMS?

HOW COULD I EXPLAIN TO YOU THE WONDERS OF DWARF CUISINE? THE RARE DELICACIES OF DISHES SUCH AS *DRAGON'S EEL DRAGON STEW*, OR THE SECRETS OF THE ANCIENT ART OF TROLL-COOKING?

LET ME TELL YOU A TALE, MANLING. A TALE OF BRAVERY AND SACRIFICE, AND OF A DWARF'S LOVE FOR THE FINER THINGS IN LIFE...

TWELVE OF US HAD SET OUT ACROSS THE BADLANDS TO FIND OUR CLAN'S LOST STRONGHOLD, BUT ONLY THREE OF US SURVIVED TO STAND BEFORE ITS BROKEN GATES.

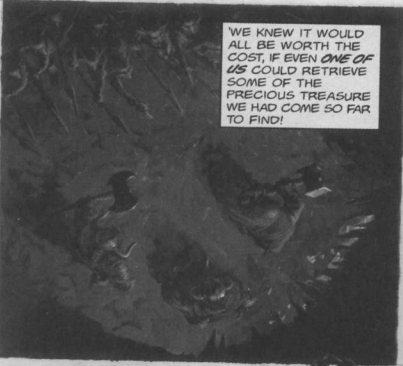
AND SOME... SOME JUST COME TO *COMPLAIN*.

GAASH!
CALL THIS 'ALE'? I'VE SUCKED PUS OUT OF SEPTIC BATTLE WOUNDS THAT TASTED BETTER THAN THIS SWILL...!

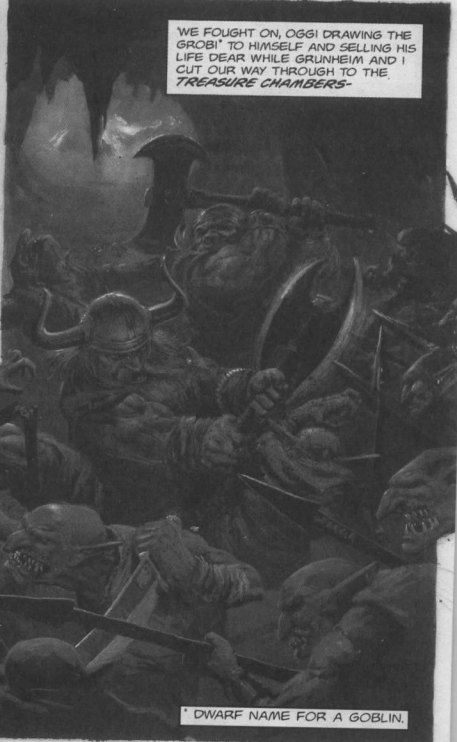
A *PUS CONNOISSEUR*, NEVER HAD ONE OF THOSE IN HERE BEFORE. THIRSTY WORK, IS IT?

IMPUDENT MANLING, WHAT COULD ANY OF YOUR RACE KNOW OF THE *FINER THINGS* IN LIFE?






WE KNEW IT WOULD ALL BE WORTH THE COST, IF EVEN *ONE OF US* COULD RETRIEVE SOME OF THE PRECIOUS TREASURE WE HAD COME SO FAR TO FIND!




WE FOUGHT ON, OGGI DRAWING THE GROBI* TO HIMSELF AND SELLING HIS LIFE DEAR WHILE GRUNHEIM AND I CUT OUR WAY THROUGH TO THE *TREASURE CHAMBERS-*

* DWARF NAME FOR A GOBLIN.




THE TREASURE CHAMBERS, ONCE FILLED WITH THE STRONGHOLD'S WEALTH, BUT LONG AGO PICKED CLEAN BY THIEVES AND SCAVENGERS.

STILL, OUR PRIZE LAY ELSEWHERE BEYOND THESE NOW BARREN HALLS...

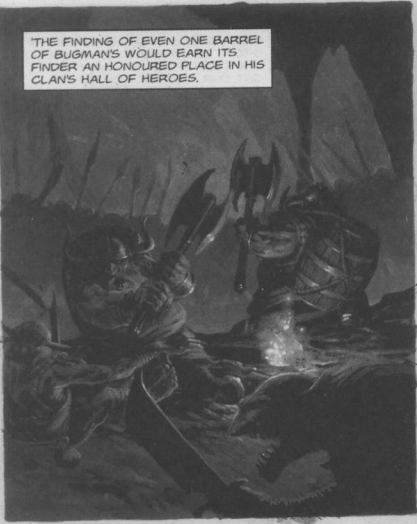


THE STRONGHOLD'S BREWERY STORAGE, ITS HIDDEN LOCATION A SECRET-PASSED DOWN THROUGH GENERATIONS OF DWARFS AND CONTAINING SOMETHING *FAR MORE PRECIOUS THAN GOLD OR JEWELS-*

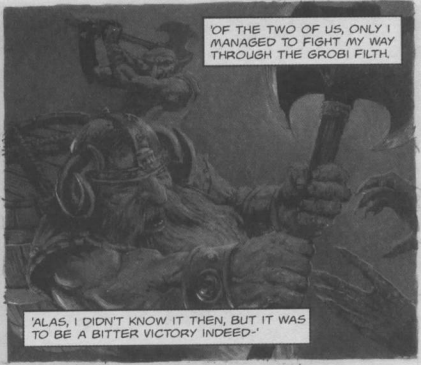


BUSMAN'S ALE, GOLD IN LIQUID FORM. ONE BARREL EACH WAS ALL WE COULD TAKE AWAY WITH US, BUT THAT WOULD BE *MORE THAN ENOUGH-*


THE LAST KNOWN SUPPLY OF JOSEF BUSMAN'S LEGENDARY TROLL BREW.



THE FINDING OF EVEN ONE BARREL OF BUGMAN'S WOULD EARN ITS FINDER AN HONOURED PLACE IN HIS CLAN'S HALL OF HEROES.




OF THE TWO OF US, ONLY I MANAGED TO FIGHT MY WAY THROUGH THE GROBI FILTH.




'ALAS, I DIDN'T KNOW IT THEN, BUT IT WAS TO BE A BITTER VICTORY INDEED.'




KUNCH



THERE WAS *BARELY A MOUTHFUL* LEFT, BUT I STILL REMEMBER ITS TASTE - SWEET AS A DWARF MAIDEN'S SINGING VOICE, BUT WITH AN EDGE TO IT SHARP AS THE BLADE OF A RUNE-AXE.

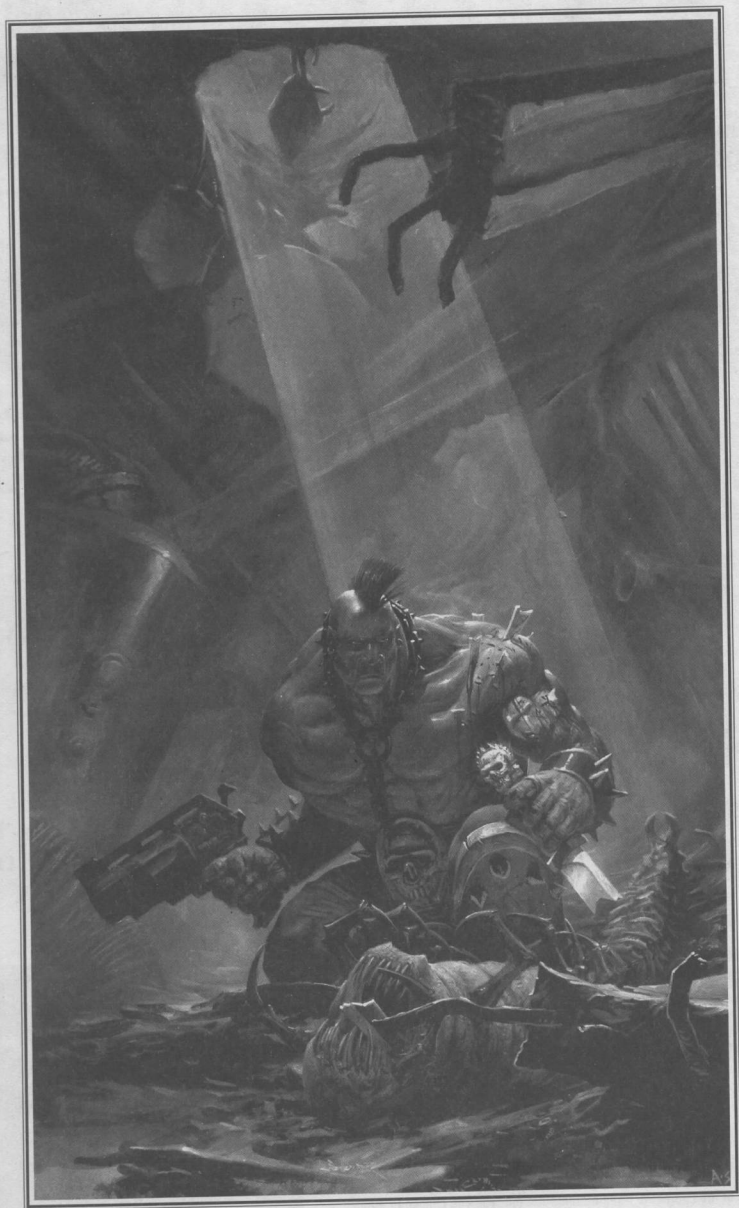


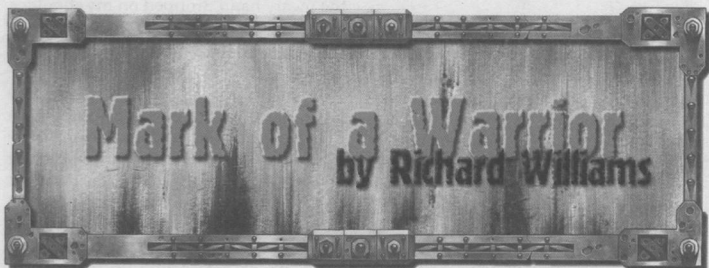
TRUST ME, MANLING, ONE TASTE OF BUGMAN'S AND NO OTHER BREW SEEMS WORTHY OF THE WORD 'ALE'. TRY AS YOU MIGHT, YOU'LL NEVER FIND ANYTHING TO EVER MATCH IT.



I SHOULD KNOW, I'VE BEEN LOOKING THESE LAST TWO CENTURIES...

THE END





I COULD SEE THEM both from where I sat, the two dark figures crouching in the shadows. They had stalked one another for an hour now, round and round the mining settlement, sneaking quietly between buildings, senses alert, each waiting for a stray sound or smell to betray the position of the other. Now, it seemed, the end was at hand. One of them was huddled down on the ground, peering between two battered yellow cargo containers. He was scanning the open space barely visible through the crack, hoping to catch a glimpse of his quarry, but there was nothing. I saw him shift his weight and edge sideways a fraction, so he could scope the rest of the buildings. As he did a stud on his belt grazed the hard metal surface of the crate, and his enemy, a few paces behind him, took the opportunity to ease himself a little farther around the corner.

The huddled one looked down at the stud. A wire-thin strip of yellow paint twirled away from its point. The silver line of fresh metal glinted back in the darkness. Then he realised, I don't know how, the danger he was in. I saw his body clench as he strained his ears for the softest brush of skin on cloth, of someone else's breathing suppressed to almost nothing. His eyes slid sideways in their sockets and he gripped his gun tighter.

There it was, the swipe of skin on skin, of an arm bringing a gun up to firing position. All pretence aside, he dropped forwards, boots kicking up dust, and rolled to his back. He whipped his arm around until he was staring down the barrel straight into his enemy's eyes.

Their gazes flashed across one another for an instant before they both inhaled savagely, gasping for every last bit of air, 'BANG! BANG! BANG! BANG! BANG! BANG! BANG!'

The pieces of piping jerked in their hands as the vocal bullets spat forth. Once again, their chests heaved as they cried in perfect unison, 'GOT YOU FIRST!'

Another game of 'Outlaws and Watchmen' ends, the same way they always do. The kid standing had dived at the one on his back and they were wrestling on the ground. Their 'guns', pieces of scrap, had been forgotten, as the two settled their argument in a far more physical manner. When I looked back at them, one nearly had the other pinned, who, in turn, grabbed the tuft of hair on the other kid's head and slammed it down. Young skull met hard dirt with a thud and the struggle continued,

'You're DEAD!'

'You MISSED!'

'Did NOT!'

'GET OFF!'

I didn't know their names, but I knew who they were. I'd been the same a few years ago; creeping through settlements, hunting my friends. We thought we were just like the gangers who came through town everyday, either trading at the post or lounging in the bar, and every single one with a gun strapped to their hip or slung over their back. The mark of a warrior, that set them above all the rest of us.

They all knew that no one makes it in the Underhive without one thing.

Respect.

To get respect, you have to fight.

To fight, you need a gun.

Even we Goliaths know that. The biggest, the strongest of us would never go into a fight without packing something. It was kind of comforting to me when I was a kid, my little rebellious thought whenever some seven-foot, man-mountain of a ganger ordered me to fetch this or carry that. You may be larger than me, you may be louder, but without that piece of metal stuck in your belt, that piece of metal that looks so ridiculous when your oversized fingers are crammed around it, you would be nothing.

I remember the feel of having a gun in my hand, even a make-believe one. To only have to point, to kill as if I were the Emperor himself. Now it was going to happen. Today was the beginning. I ran a hand over my shaven head. Already I could feel stubble, the tops of stiff hairs poking through the skin. I wanted to look my best, nose stud polished up, my thin strip of hair freshly dyed. Trying to look like the warrior that I would become, if the gang judged me worthy. There was only one thing missing: on my belt hung a knife and a holster, an empty holster.

I tried to relax, tried to calm down, waiting for them to get started with whatever. After all, I couldn't look too wired, they might think I was scared. I dropped my head back on the pile of iron slag I lay against, staring up at the far away ceiling. Then again, it would be worse if I looked like I was snoozing or daydreaming. I shifted onto my side and propped myself up on my elbow. I squirmed to try and find a comfortable position among those sharp little rocks. A flash of pain stabbed through my side. I looked down. My braces had got twisted, the studs that lined them were digging into my flesh. Clambering to my knees I began adjusting the few clothes I was wearing, making sure everything sharp pointed outwards and looked keen, rather than pointing inwards and being ... inconvenient. Distracted, I didn't notice the shadow fall across me. I sure noticed

the meaty hand dropped on my shoulder, though.

I didn't shoot up, that would have been the worse thing to do. I knew who it was. The harsh metallic grating of respirated breathing and the edge of Second Best mingled with stale sweat in the air left me in no doubt. It was the ganger sent to test me. First impressions matter. He'd caught me off guard and if he saw me jump out of my skin he'd know I wasn't up to it, might even refuse to let me try. I didn't know whether he could do that or not, but I wasn't taking any chances. So, instead, I let him wait a second, like I knew he was there all along, and then I turned my head, slowly.

His hand gave him away; he was old. It's always the hands that show it most. He must have been nearly forty. Long past his best, still just a ganger with no hope of ever becoming anything more. He had become everything a young man dreaded. No wonder he reeked of cheap Second Best. I got up off my knees and his hoary limb fell away. I swung around to him. His head was shaven and the respirator covered most of his face. No, his head wasn't bare by choice, he didn't have any hair at all. I tried to stop staring at his gleaming dome. He didn't flinch. His scarred and hairy body still looked powerful, the two pistols hung at his belt and the studs and spikes and the ammo chains on his clothes would have made him an impressive figure indeed. As it was, though, I couldn't help but feel embarrassed to see such a man.

His hands rose to his face and his thick fingers undid the straps on his respirator with practised ease. He pulled it to the side of his face, revealing a gold ring through his nose and an old, faded tattoo on his cheek. His lips twisted and words emerged in his low, damaged voice: 'You ready?'



W E HADN'T WALKED far from the mining town before he stopped in front of me.

'This is it.'

What was it? The place was deserted, nothing apart from a pile of planks dumped nearby. What was the test supposed to be, single combat? Fine by me, I guess, I would just have to be careful not to kill the old man. He glanced back at me and must have mistaken my confusion for fear.

'You better not be wasting my time, juve. You still wanna do this?'

'Yes, sir,' I snapped back instinctively and hated myself for giving him the respect he didn't deserve.

'Cos it's easy by me if you wanna quit. Save me waiting around for you.'

I held my mouth in check. I didn't trust what would come out. He finally turned away and padded over to the planks. He crouched down and fumbled for his respirator. After a drag he took a hold on the top piece and heaved. Nothing moved. I couldn't believe it, even a piece of recyc-plastic was too much for this guy. No one could be that puny, yet there he was, he wasn't grunting or anything but I could see the strain through his body, his muscles rippling along his back and the trembling of his head. Suddenly an almighty crack resounded around the plain and the old man shot up. He stood back and I peered at what he had left behind. The plastic plank had snapped in two, and this wasn't cheap package plastic either, but the reinforced kind. It had been bolted to the stone in the floor. I was stunned. Looking back on it, he could have weakened it before he collected me, or maybe it had already been damaged. But that didn't stop me reconsidering my opinion of him. He took another breath through his respirator, then let it hang to the side as he wiped away a bead of sweat that had formed on his brow. If he noticed the change in my expression, he didn't show it.

'This,' he announced, pointing at the planks, 'is what you're gonna do.'

Suddenly, for the first time, I wasn't

sure whether I would make it, whether I could match such a feat.

'This leads straight into one of the mine shafts.'

Now the broken plank had shifted I could see that it had covered a small hole beneath. It looked like it dropped straight down but in this light, I couldn't see more than a few feet.

'This shaft used to be worked, along with the others. But it got infested and the rock-worms inside started to come out for dinner. The main entrance was buried by the locals, and when they found that some of the nasties had burrowed out through this hole, they boarded it up and hoped nature would take its course, that everything inside would eat each other. If you want in, you go down there, you scrag one of the worms and you drag yourself back here with proof, something it couldn't live without. Get it?'

'Yes, sir.'

My mind raced, digesting the information. A mine infested with milliasaurs, kill one and bring back a trophy. Simple and straightforward, just like us Goliaths, but was I only going to have my knife? In answer to my unspoken question the ganger pulled one of the pistols, a stub gun, from his belt and offered it to me. My breath caught with anticipation.

'Here. Take this.'

I did so, with a careful reverence.

'But remember, we do not need such things. We are Goliath. Where others are weak, we are strong. Where others rely, we merely use.'

His grotesque voice carried on with its dogma. I'd heard it often enough. I concentrated instead on the magnificent object I held in my hand. A G40K revolver-style stub gun, a standard product of the Goliath heavy industries. Cheap, hard to break, easy to repair, there were thousand of weapons identical to this one in Hive Primus alone and countless millions of variants on the design across the planet. But as my fingers curled around the moulded plastic grip and brushed against the trigger I knew this one was unique, because it was the

only one of that multitude that was in my hand. I hefted it and felt its comforting weight. I slid it into my holster and it fit perfectly. I let my hand rest on my hip, tensed in anticipation of the quick draw. My hand leapt forward, the pistol in its grasp nothing more than a streak of silver. I aimed it, clenched one eye and looked straight down the barrel. I felt the power, the power of life and death for whoever crossed those sights.

A red shape blocked my vision. Suddenly I was hauled from the ground. I dangled from my bracers which were sandwiched between the gnarled fists of the ganger. His eyes displayed his lack of amusement.

'Get it?' he demanded

'Yes. Yes, sir,' I stammered in response, my feet struggling in the air.

He snorted and released his grip. I felt the drop jar all the way up my body and collapsed to my knees in front of him, coughing in the dirt.

'You will.'



FELL THE LAST few feet or, at least, I would have done if my belt hadn't caught on a small metal spur poking out of the tunnel wall. The moment I spent hanging in mid-air, suspended by my trousers, screwed up my timing and so, when the inevitable happened, I clattered to the ground, landing one limb at a time.

I'd shot to my feet, whipped the pistol from its holster and was scanning my surroundings for danger before my brain kicked in. I have to admit, after the wave of adrenaline had broken over me and my pulse settled down, that I felt pretty smug about that recovery. Yeah, I'd looked a fool but that happens sometimes and all the smooth moves after, pure instinct. After years of playing, it felt so natural to be doing the real thing.

A spark flashed across my eyes, jolting me from my self-congratulation and

illuminating the dimly lit area. The sharp odour of ozone briefly overwhelmed the underlying smell of dank stone and rusting metal. It was a storage room, if the crates and barrels were anything to go by. The main support column in the centre of the room had collapsed, more than that, it had been virtually felled by the explosion that had destroyed the tunnel entrance. As a result most of the other end had caved in. The sparks flared again. Something had been ripped off the wall, leaving circuitry exposed.

There was only one way out, apart from the hole above my head of course, and as I put my gloved hand on the frame to look through, I discovered what this exit had been, a window. It crunched and I felt, not pain exactly, just the threat of imminent pain if I gripped any tighter. Ever so gently I peeled my hand away and brushed off the pieces of glass embedded in my glove. Keeping well clear of the jagged edges, I leaned forward and peered down. It was quite a drop but, luckily for me, there were stacks of containers that would make the descent easier. I eased myself through the gap and moved onto the topmost box. It moved with me. With ponderous inevitability the stack gently began to topple away from the wall. Quickly I jammed my other foot back to steady the pile and rocked it back. Regaining my balance, I grudgingly tucked the pistol back into its holster and used both hands to lower myself cautiously down.

Damn, I assumed the crates would be full, it never occurred that the miners would have emptied everything before they left, just as they had stripped whatever had been of use from the last room. Feet now firmly on the floor, pistol and knife in hand, my eyes searched. Nothing. Nothing but the piles of boxes and a big hole in the ground in front of me. A ladder was attached to the lip, leading down into the darkness. I slowly edged round the circumference of the opening, stub gun trained on the shadows. Nothing again, except this time there was the faint whiff of an effluent stream.

Once I'd got down there I had to follow the smell to find the source. Buried in the shadows in the corner there was a tiny crawlspace. As I leaned down into it I was hit by the reek of the sewage. It was dark, damp and a perfect place for milliasurs. Now, you couldn't survive in the Underhive if you were claustrophobic. Everyone has his limits; and having to squeeze through a passage only big enough for a child, full of the stench of liquid garbage, to hunt monstrous worms who'd paralyse you and then drag you home for a slow digestion, is getting close to mine. Still I had no choice, and I had my gun. That was enough.

I dropped to my hands and knees, then to my belly. I coughed with the extra weight on my lungs. There would be barely be enough room for me to lift my head to see where I was going. I pushed my knife-sheath and holster around my belt until they were beside my hips, I couldn't have them dig into my waist as I pushed myself along. Steeling myself, I entered, nudging my pistol and knife in front of me. With my shoulders pressed against the sides, I put arm in front of arm, then swung a hip forwards and dragged my legs along behind me.

I struggled onwards. My chest scraped along the bottom, my hair was flattened against the top and it brushed dust down into my eyes, making me blink. When I finally had the full length of my body inside, I realised exactly how narrow the shaft was. My only way out would be to push myself backwards, completely blind. If something got behind me there was no room to turn around. Nothing I could do. What use would even a meltagun be if something bit me in the leg? And if it was a milliasaur, one bite would be all it needed for its poison to cripple me.

My breathing quickened, I couldn't fill my lungs and I was gasping for air. My body heat reflected off the surfaces that covered me; it was hot, and the smell, I might as well have been drowning in it. I knew I was panicking, and that made it worse. My head was beginning to feel light. Deep breath, the thought sprung suddenly into my mind, that's what I

need, a good deep breath. I stopped gasping for a second, closed my eyes and gripped the butt of my gun. Whoosh; the dust-laden, stink-ridden air was blown into my lungs until my chest had expanded so much that my back was driven into the roof of the tunnel. Then I let it flow out, until I felt quite deflated. I felt at peace for only a moment, then my nose began to itch, my head sprung back and a sneeze exploded from my face. My forehead bounced off the floor and the back of my head ricocheted into the top of the shaft. My hair softened the impact but my temple throbbed. After taking a moment to recover I wiped my nose on my hand and dragged myself on.



THE POOL OF filth gurgled and lapped against its metal banks in a hideous mockery of water. Pressed to the ground as I was, my nose was unpleasantly close to it. There was no way across so I spun round on my belly and made my way back. The tunnel had opened out into the crawlspace proper. In fact the ceiling in the corner had fallen in so I clambered out, up into the room above. Another storage room. A column had collapsed across it, or it could have been a beam which had fallen from the roof; whatever, it had smashed the stairs, forcing me to climb along its length until I could drop off onto the floor above. I was confronted with a lift, twisted at an angle that gave no doubt as to its state of repair. I carried on, this time through a hole in the wall which led onto the rock face.

Pleased as I was that I hadn't encountered anything down in that crawlspace, I couldn't kick the feeling of... having been cheated. There should have been something there, even if not a milliasaur, there should have been at least rats or spiders – or even a face-eater. I shuddered at the thought of bumbling across such a monster unexpectedly. Still,

it was odd I hadn't seen signs of any activity at all. Perhaps, after the mine was collapsed, the milliasaurs had retreated deeper. Maybe the locals had been right and the creatures had turned on each other once their ready supply of food had been cut off. Maybe there'd never been anything and the gang had put me down here because they'd already rejected me, to go and scrag something that didn't exist. No, they wouldn't have spared the effort to tell me to get lost. I'd show them. I'd show them I was worthy of their gang, hell, I could lead their gang, given a chance.

Even as I ventured on in my hunt, my mind was miles above as I sketched out my glorious career.

It wouldn't take much. After I'd passed this stupid initiation and shoved a half dozen rock-worm trophies down the old man's throat, we'd be hired to guard a Guildler trade caravan. The gang leader would have set the route, I'd have warned him that it took us too close to a fortified tower in Scavvy territory but none of them would've listened to me because I was so new. I would be ready when the first shots of the ambush rang out and would have sprung forwards, rushing the Scavvy raiders.

I jumped up on top of a crate to simulate climbing the tower.

They'd be surprised by how quickly I reacted and I would slaughter their leader's mutant bodyguards and put a gun to his head, demanding the rest of his ramshackle band give themselves up. As soon as they had, I would kick him off the top level - I booted the air for emphasis - and the rest of my gang would slaughter the rest of the degenerates. Our only casualty would be our foolish leader, cut down in the first few seconds. The Guilders would shower me with goods and cash and I would become the new gang boss.

Getting down from the crate, I continued on.

Would I be content then? With a female in one hand and a bottle of Wild Snake in the other? Hardly. I would purchase from the Van Saar techs two of their finest bolt

pistols, for an exorbitant fee. They'd try to double-cross me, of course. Insist I come alone and then try to leave with both their weapons and my corpse. I would be too quick for them.

Two imaginary pistols leapt into my outstretched hands.

The Van Saars in the room would fall in seconds, before any of them had time to draw. The rest of the gang would burst in and meet the same fate.

I crouched behind a barrel, picking off phantom enemies with my stub gun.

Another victory, and then on and up, until I rested on a throne in the Hive City itself.

Spectral smoke coiled up from the barrel. I drew it up to my lips and gently blew it away.

High above me, a shape detached itself from the darkness and dropped. It clubbed me over the back of the head. My jaw smashed into the muzzle. My teeth howled in pain and blood spurted into my mouth. I was knocked down, hard. The stub gun tumbled away.

I was stunned for a critical second, not knowing what had happened. I thought the roof was caving in. Then I looked over my shoulder into the gaping mouth of the milliasaur, and I moved. Its first poisonous bite went wild as I spun onto my back. It shot back as fast as a snake, rearing to strike again. Its tiny legs stood out like horns running down the side of its rocky carapace. I saw the next strike coming and flattened myself against the ground as its incredibly powerful muscles rocketed it through the air.

It didn't even bother to draw back before it struck again. It lunged forwards clumsily but there was no more ground I could give. The fangs bore down and I threw my other arm up for what little protection it could provide. The monster, seeing something shoot into its mouth, crunched down early. The knife I'd held was shattered between its teeth and it flinched away. I struggled up and scrambled into the corner, scooped up the pistol and whirled around. I planted my back foot, one arm steadying the other, looking straight down the sights. A stance

perfect for the first time I would feel the power, the first time I would unleash the cold fury of this most deadly, most beautiful of weapons.

The milliasaur sprang. This was it. Point-blank. Point. Kill.

Click.

Misfire.

That was the last thought to scurry through my brain before the monster punched into my shoulder and slammed me back against a wall. I went down. Its writhing body fell on top. I had no escape. Its spasms pummelled me, its rock-shard hide crushed my body and pierced my skin and its steaming hiss assaulted my ears. I protected myself as best I could. Screwed into a ball, battered by its throes, I cowered. Then, an unseen lightning-fast blow, my face exploded. My head bounced off a stone and I was plunged into oblivion.



LAY THERE. The weight of the milliasaur's corpse pressed down on me. I don't know how long it was, I'd lost track of time. To begin with I didn't even know it was dead, that my broken knife blade had torn open its throat as it had tried to swallow the pieces. I was just grateful that it had stopped, I didn't care why. I was lucky it hadn't collapsed on my chest or I wouldn't have been able to breathe. Instead it had finished up lying over my entire right side, literally pinning me to the ground with the sharp edges of its hide. I was bleeding underneath it, but the weight of the creature cut off my blood supply, like a tourniquet. First I felt the warm fluid cooling, then, as the minutes crawled by, it began to scrape away in clots on my fingers. The gritty residue got under my nails.

I had to move. Even if I wasn't too badly hurt, I needed a drink. My raging thirst had been made worse by the acid taste of the blood I'd swallowed. An image

resurfaced in my mind, of me, with a beautiful woman in one arm and a bottle of Wild Snake in the other. Well, there was no booze and the only thing in my arms was... well. My half-hearted laugh turned into a splutter, which devolved into a coughing fit, a painful coughing fit as every movement pulled at my limbs and dug the milliasaur's hide in a little more. I had to move. I figured what with a worm being basically one big cylinder it would be easiest to roll it off. Slowly I brought my free left leg up and around to get my foot against the corpse's side and squirmed my body to brace my shoulder against the wall, then I tried to move it. It was easier than I thought it would be. It had been its speed and power that had done the damage, not its weight. There wasn't much pain to begin with; everything was too numb. But when it rolled off my shoulder and thigh and flattened my hand I screamed myself hoarse as the rocks on its hide dug into healthy flesh. A swift kick fuelled by agony drove it off me completely as I yanked my injured hand clear. The limp tube flopped away.

You can't cut off the circulation to a limb without expecting some payback. I knew what was coming. With the arteries clear, the blood flooded back through my system. I rolled in torment on the rocky floor. I felt angry, angry that I had won. I had won, and all I got was pain and more pain. I knew this would pass, though. My real fear was that the scabs over my wounds would burst under the pressure and I'd start bleeding again. When it finally passed I struggled up against the wall, the wall that had kept me trapped against the dying milliasaur, so I was sitting upright. My arm was a mess; the dried blood had been scraped off in some places, leaving streaks of brown, alternating with skin either rubbed raw or bruised blue. My shoulder and elbow were sore, but I flexed my fingers fine. I couldn't see my leg through my trousers, but I guessed it looked pretty much the same.

Gingerly, I tried to get to my feet. I took it slow. I drew my left leg under me, then

the right. I gasped; there was something wrong with that knee. Pushing myself up onto my hands, I tried to keep as much weight as possible off it. Then, leaning into the wall to balance myself, I got my left foot on the ground and stretched out that leg. My head swam and I fumbled for a firmer grip on the rock. Only then did I gently lower my battered right leg. It was stiff, and the knee hurt, but I figured that if I kept it straight I could make it.

I limped over to the body of the milliasaur. I needed proof that I had killed it and as sure as hell I wasn't going to drag the entire thing out of here. Something it couldn't live without, the old man had said. Now I'm no great student of worms, and I've heard stories of how you can cut them in half and make two of the monsters, but I know that in the vast majority of cases taking off the head is a pretty safe bet. It sounded simple when I thought of it. Later I realised how difficult it was to carve through a neck made of rock with a few shards of a broken knife. But that thought would wait, because I'd just seen my gun.

It was hiding underneath the body, it must have been dragged down there by the worm when I kicked it off me. I felt sick, betrayed. A misfire. I didn't want to pick it up, but I had to, if for no other reason than that it had been entrusted to me and it had to be returned. I eased myself down and grasped it with my bloody fingers. Maybe I could fix it, for the journey back. I flipped the barrel open and six empty chambers stared back at me.



When I finally heaved myself out of the pit, the breeze cooled the sweat on my body. He was standing there looking for all the world as if he hadn't moved an inch. I thought I noticed something in his eyes when he saw me, a... softening, only for a second and then

it vanished.

Bruised, battered, blooded, with the face of a milliasaur strapped on to my belt. I must have been quite a sight. I limped towards him, my broken knife in one hand, the pistol in the other. Every single step back out I'd been thinking of what I would do. Should I get mad? Should I thank him? Or maybe act like I'd never noticed? I'd done what he asked, I'd got my trophy, I should just say what I was supposed to say, what he wanted me to say, and then I'd be in. I'd be one of the gang. But part of me wanted more, wanted to demand an answer, wanted to rip his head off. It drove me mad. The choices whirled round and round in my mind until I said to myself; no more, when I got there, when I could look in his eyes I would know what to do.

Now that time had come. I let the gun slip from my grasp, it thudded in the dirt. I wrenched the dripping trophy from my belt and dropped it on top. There. My victory, my knowledge, my question were plain for him to see. I waited for a flicker of response. There was none. His aged, bloodshot eyes returned my gaze impassively.

'Get it now?'

The hard, metallic words whispered from his respirator. No praise. No apology. What little blood remained in me boiled. The fist came out of nowhere, I didn't even see it until his head slammed to the side. I couldn't believe what I'd done. I stared at my hand as if it were another's. I was shocked, but I felt good. He turned back to me, his respirator hung uselessly off the side of his face but his expression was the same. My pleasure turned to ashes. Had he even felt it? But then, there it was, a tiny drop of crimson emerged from the shadow of his nostril. It edged its way past his nose-ring and began the long journey down to his cracked lips. I smiled. I soared.

He didn't even bother to wipe it off before he picked me up and drove me into the ground. Then he hauled me on to his shoulder and started back. His laughing made it a bumpy ride, and he didn't stop for long damn time. ✱



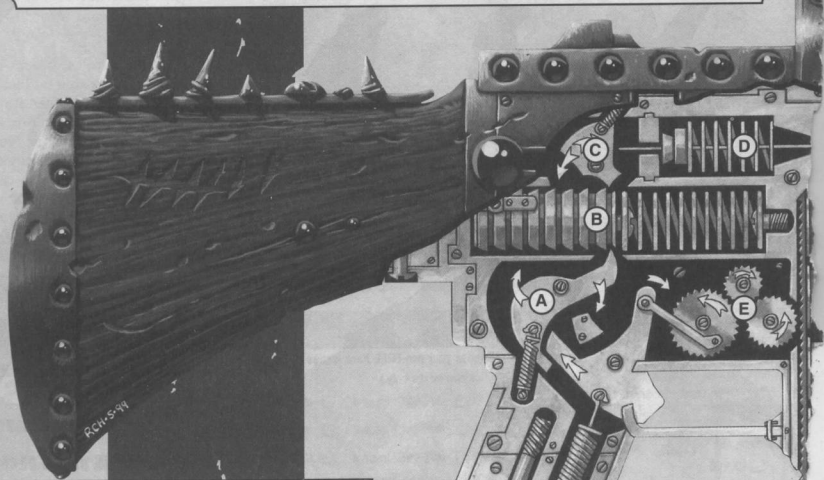
OGRYN RIPPER

STANDARD OGRYN HEAVY
MEIVCIII 'RE

OVERVIEW

This blessed tool of the Emperor's grace is a powerful short range automatic shotgun. Its construction is along pure strong lines. These serve to make the weapon dependable and robust enough to be used by Ogryn.

Special features include a reinforced barrel and a weighted stock which resist damage when the user wields the weapon as a club - which they are wont to do.



FIRING MECHANISM

Using a simple combination of trips, springs and cogs the Emperor's holy fury is unleashed upon his enemies.

The trigger releases a catch (A) allowing the auto bolt (B)* to slide forward which cocks the hammer (C) in turn hitting the firing pin (D) which triggers a shell in the chamber.

* The auto bolt is ringed with only 8 ridges. This limits the firer to a 2 second burst, a third of the drum's capacity, before the bolt must be reset. An ideal feature to curb an Ogryn's renowned over-enthusiasm.

RYN R GUN

ASSAULT SHOTGUN
DA GUN'

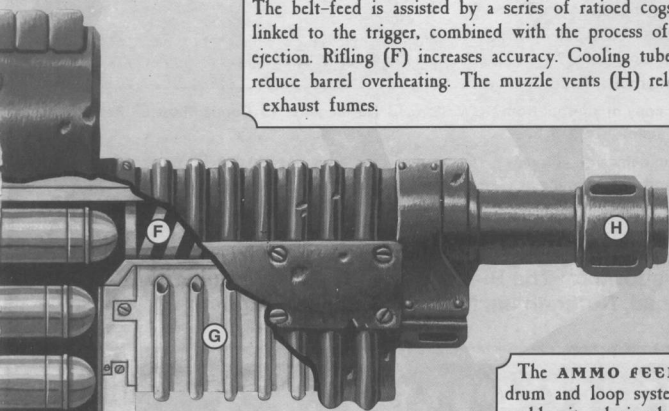


TECHNICAL DATA

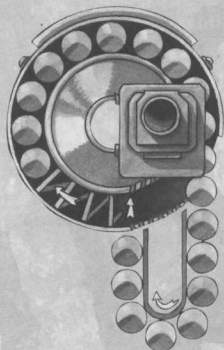
Calibre: 25"
Magazine: 15-20rd drum
Rate of Fire: . . . 240 RPM
Weight (empty): .82-105lbs
Length: 48-61"

OTHER FEATURES

The belt-feed is assisted by a series of ratioed cogs (E) linked to the trigger, combined with the process of shell ejection. Rifling (F) increases accuracy. Cooling tubes (G) reduce barrel overheating. The muzzle vents (H) release the exhaust fumes.



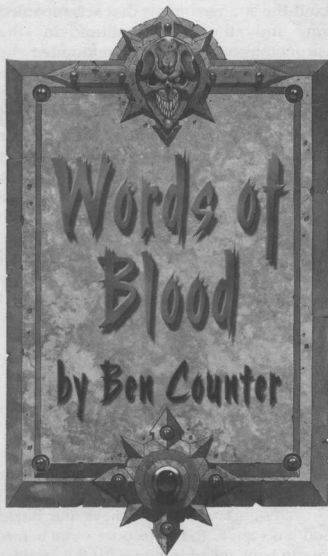
The AMMO FEED uses a drum and loop system which enables its gloriously high rate of fire. The drums central plate is easily modified to act as a pressure trigger, creating a fearsome anti-personnel mine.



ADEPTUS MECHANICUS

Illuminator R. Horsley
Schola Ediatrix K. Proudian
Edo Purificatum S. Szazell
Tabula Librarum O/R.G.4C2/83a





DAY HAD nearly broken on Empyryon IX. Commander Athellenas glanced above him at the stars fading against the light of the planet's sun. He could still just see the silver dagger hanging in orbit, the renegade ship that was waiting to drop down onto the lone spaceport and rescue the heathen horde that was stranded here.

He had thirty Marines. Thirty Marines to halt an army which never gave up, never felt pain, existed only to draw blood from the holy Imperium of man.

But Athellenas knew he must succeed. This temple on the outskirts of the planet's lone abandoned city dated back from the Great Crusade, when the people of the Imperium spontaneously elevated the Emperor to Godhood before His worship was taken over by the beauracrats of the Ecclesiarchy – and it was by the faith that had built this temple that he swore no heretic would leave this planet alive.

Sergeant Valerian scrambled over the ruined outer wall of the temple, keeping low to avoid detection. 'Commander, they are sighted. They have left their ship.'

'Damage?'

'They came down shallow. Most of them survived.'

'Numbers?'

Valerian paused, a frown passing over his old, gnarled features. 'It is better that you see for yourself, commander.'

The Devastator sergeant handed Athellenas the scope from the squad's lascannon. Athellenas made his way to the temple perimeter, from where the great smoking hulk of the crashed renegade craft could be seen, scarred and pitted, against the grey pre-dawn sky.

He looked through the scope and saw the enemy for the first time. He counted them automatically – one batch stripping the dead, another, cavalry, dragging stubborn horses from the ship's hold, a third group, the largest, surrounding the leader. They were cultists, and far gone – most of them shirtless and wearing the jackets of their uniforms tied around their waists, barefoot, their skins scarred and painted with blood, armed with whatever they had salvaged. Lasguns, knives, shards of twisted metal, a couple of heavy weapons on carriages pulled by the riders' horses. Every cultist had that same wide-eyed look, the look of rage mixed with desperation and unacknowledged fear, the emotions of treachery waiting to boil over at any second. Athellenas added up their numbers. Six thousand, give or take.

And the leader. If proof was needed that this was the work of the Blood God, he was it. Tall, not massively muscular but wiry and powerful, almost glowing with pent-up energy. Dressed only in bloodstained cloth wrapped around his waist, black straggly hair, a violent, unshaven face, his skin covered in scars and branded with heathen symbols. One arm was gone, replaced with a pair of hydraulic industrial shears so big the tips reached the ground. The blades were pitted and worn but even in the weak light the savagely sharp edge shone silver. He was talking animatedly to the heretics who surrounded him, his eyes flashing, his words so charged and evil that even though he was out of earshot, Athellenas could feel their power.

'Valerian?'

'Commander?'

'Take note. We have found the Gathalamor 24th.'

'The Manskinner? But he's—'

'He's a lot more than a rumour, Valerian. He's real, and he's here. He has the four thousand from Gathalamor and more. Probably the Guryan mutineers, and some cavalry.' Athellenas handed back the scope. 'Prepare a defensive position. The Manskinner will know we are here. He will attack with the sun.'

As Valerian gave instruction to the dug-in Devastators, and the Tactical and Assault Squads checked their weapons again for the fight that was to come, Athellenas ran over the rumours and official denials. That the famously pious planet of Gathalamor should supply the renegades for the Manskinner's army was too much for the Ecclesiarchy to admit. They had insisted the Manskinner was a rumour dreamed up by their enemies in the Administratum.

Athellenas's loyalty lay with Terra, not the Ecclesiarchy. But he, for one, would be happy to do them a favour and quell this rumour for good. And what rumours...

They said the Manskinner was nothing more than a criminal. He was being transported from a hive world – some said Necromunda, others Lastrati – when he broke out somehow. A bulkhead used to seal the brig had taken his arm off during the attempt, but the massive shock and blood loss had not killed him; he survived and fought on, and the last entries in the log of the drifting, burnt-out prison ship recorded how the plasma reactor was being tampered with and was about to go critical. The charred bodies of all those on board were recovered, save one.

It was on Gathalamor that the Manskinner turned up next and earned his name. Those officers in the regiment he infiltrated who opposed him were butchered in the night and their flayed skins run up the barracks' flag poles. Within three days of his arrival, it was said, several thousand of the planet's most trusted Guardsmen had disappeared, taking a troop transport ship from orbit as they did so, leaving a blood-soaked altar of skulls in the centre of their parade ground as if to mock those who stayed behind.

These were the tales that seemed to have substance. Others were just anecdotes and stories, about how the Manskinner could turn men to Chaos with his words alone,

about the strange omens that accompanied him and the abnormalities in the Astronomican which had confounded the spacecraft attempting to pursue his army.

Athellenas had been a commander for a long time, and a Marine for longer. He had learned that when cautious men believe nothing they have not seen, a true leader can sift the truth from lies. And there was a truth here, of the sheer monstrosity of the Manskinner, a force that corrupted the staunchest of men with horrifying ease. From foes such as him the Imperium had the most to fear – for it was built on the souls of its subjects, those same souls that the Manskinner was making his own.



BROTHERS! Sons of blood! This day, we face the final enemy. Some amongst you may believe the Blood God has seen fit to test us once more before we can truly worship him with the sacrifice of a million Macharian lives.'

The words of blood cut right into their minds, driving them to further heights of bloodlust. The Manskinner had never felt more grateful for the gift of the words – no army, no Marine, could stand before men who knew nothing but the joy of carnage.

'But the truth, sons of blood, is that such have we pleased Him that he has given us yet more skulls to take! And what skulls! The Marines, the scum of Humanity, the Imperium's blind machines, are here, to die in His name and prove His power to the weak!'

The Manskinner raised his remaining arm high and the crowd around him cheered insanely, screaming their insane joy at the battle to come. Many had died in the crash, and still more were wounded or weak – their very bloodlust would kill them. But still, they were many. They would charge across the planet's lone city and take the spaceport, and their brothers in orbit would carry them the rest of their journey to Macharia, and on that world of thirty billion souls, his army would die in an orgy of carnage in the name of the Blood God. It was impossible to imagine the

numbers that would die, the mindless hordes of the weak put to the sword before the last cultist died.

And then, such would be the pleasure of the Blood God, that he, the Manskinner, would become his chosen, an immortal champion murdering the very stars in His name.

'Brothers!' he called again over the din. 'Tend to your arms! The Imperial filth will die at the rising of the sun!'

The cultists scattered to prepare themselves, to load guns and sharpen blades, scar themselves and contemplate the glorious acts of murder to come. Recoba, once a corporal, now commanding the four thousand Gathalamor rebels, bellowed orders and cracked heads. Kireeah, who had joined the Manskinner with over two thousand men from the Planetary Defence Force on Guryan, was rather more subtle, making sure his men could see his finger on the trigger of his duelling laspistol at all times.

'Diess!' yelled the Manskinner. The rider galloped up on his jet-black horse. The beast's nostrils were flecked with foaming blood and its eyes bulged, but even this animal was infected by the power of the words of blood. Diess himself, young and breathlessly eager, sat bolt upright, cavalry sword raised in salute, still wearing his tattered officer's uniform.

'Sir! My lord Manskinner!'

'Diess, to you goes the honour of first blood. You and your men will be the first to hit the Marines' position. Hit hard. If you can take some alive, do so. They will provide sport for the rest. If not, let nothing survive.'

Even Diess smiled at this. 'Thank you, my lord! This is a glorious day for Colcha!'

'Everyone on Colcha wants you dead, Diess. This is a glorious day for the Blood God.'

'Sir, yes sir!' Diess galloped off, infused with that strange joy that only the Blood God could give a man in the moments before battle.

The Manskinner could taste his victory on the air. The dry ground of Empyryon IX would run red before the day was out.

The first rays of the sun broke around the hulk of the cultist's spacecraft. Diess' horsemen, three hundred strong, spurred

their mounts into motion as one and thundered across the plain towards the broken obsidian shell of the temple. Many of the foot troops followed them, waving their salvaged weapons and screaming with bloodlust, hoping that when they reached the temple there would be some Marines left alive for them.

Even as the first lasgun shots cut through the air, the Manskinner could feel the Blood God smiling down upon him from His throne of skulls in the warp.

Blood, keened a familiar voice in his head.

Blood for the Blood God.



'FIRE!' yelled Valerian, his old, battered face creased with rage and indignation. The Devastator squad's weapons sprouted sudden blossoms of flame and the first wave of heretic cavalry fell, some men shot off the backs of their mounts, some with their horses cut in half, all falling to the ground in clouds of dust.

But the horsemen kept on coming, their horses' hides smeared black with engine oil, beast and rider branded and scarred, the eyes both black with blood-madness. Those who had weapons which could shoot returned fire and a score of lasgun shots impacted against the black stone of the temple. Some hit the armour of the dug-in Tactical and Assault squads. None penetrated.

Athellenas flexed his hand encased in his power glove, feeling its power field leap into life around it. He raised his uncased hand, and brought it down in a swift chopping motion – at the signal, the Tactical squad's bolters spat a rain of explosive steel.

Another wave of cavalry went down but they were closer now – and their leader, an officer in a ragged, stained parody of a uniform, still lived, holding his sabre high, leading his troops into the fray.

Shots kept coming and the Assault squad Sergeant Kytellias took a hit on the arm.

'Status, Kytellias?'

'Not serious,' replied the sergeant. 'Lost a couple of fingers. Ready for your order.'

'Hold, Kytellias. Hold.'

Another volley from the Devastator and Tactical squads cut down a swathe more horsemen, but the enemy were within laspistol range now. Athellenas's auto-sense warning icons flashed against his retina as one shot rang off his shoulder pad. He aimed his bolt pistol and took revenge for the firer's presumption, the shot taking a cultist in the neck and sending him somersaulting backwards off his horse.

They were close. Their horses were foaming. The officer raised his sword, ready to bring it down on the first Marine in his path.

'Charge!' yelled Athellenas. Before the word was out of his throat, Kytellias and his men had rocketed out of their dugouts, jump packs roaring. They came down on the heads of the nearest riders and each one cut down his opposite man. Kytellias himself sought his next target without breaking stride. Ignoring the cultists whose blades and clubs were turned aside by his armour, the sergeant ran at full pelt towards the officer.

He wants revenge, thought Athellenas. Revenge for his fingers. In any other army it would be considered ill-discipline – but for the Black Templars, for all Marines, everything they did was revenge.

Athellenas led the second charge himself, charging into the now-confused horsemen with the Tactical squad. Plunging into the swirling dust and screams of the dying, he ducked the first blade and struck back with his power fist, a great pendulous blow that lifted rider and horse and threw them twenty feet in a shower of blue sparks from the power field.

'Again!' yelled the officer. 'Again! Hit them again!' But his horsemen were too scattered and confused to regroup and counter-charge. Those who still had mounts were trying to wrestle their horses back under control through the hail of bolt pistol shells and the screeching walls of chainsword blades that lanced out of the dust and cut down a cultist with every stroke.

Athellenas's auto-senses picked out Kytellias, duelling with the officer. The officer was good, using his height advantage on his horse to keep Kytellias's power sword at bay. An aristocrat, thought Athellenas, raised in the saddle just as

Athellenas and his Marines had been raised on the battlefield. He met Kytellias's every thrust, turning the blade so its power field didn't shatter his own.

Then Kytellias stopped toying with him and brought the power sword down so fast the officer didn't have time to cry out as its point came down on his shoulder and carved him open. The officer dropped his sword, convulsed as his blood flooded out onto the dry earth, then toppled to the ground. His horse bolted and took many of the surviving animals with it. Those who were without mounts still fought, but they were so consumed with madness and confusion that the Assault and Tactical Marines picked them off at will with the chainsword tooth or the bolter shell.

'Sergeant Kytellias, report,' said Athellenas over his communicator.

'Seventy per cent enemy casualties, sir, no losses. Injuries nominal.'

Athellenas hurried forward through the clouds of dust and gunsmoke. He looked in the direction of the cultist spacecraft, auto-senses magnifying the image and picking out the sounds of the approaching horde.

The rest of the cultists were following. The Manskinner was acting true to form: the cavalry had been sent to draw out a counter-charge and break up the Marines' position, so the main body of cultists would hit a compromised Marine line.

'Valerian?'

'Sir.'

'Take your squad and fall back to the city's outskirts. Prepare another defensive position. Kytellias and I will join you there.'

Silence. Then...

'Sir, we cannot fall back. We cannot surrender this position.'

There was a quality in Valerian's voice that every commander came to know. The sound of rebellion.

'Valerian, you will fall back immediately. The enemy is too great. We cannot face them here.' Athellenas could see the Manskinner, claw swinging as he ran, the mass of cultists swarming around him.

'Sir, I cannot retreat in the face of the enemy. The Ininitate Doctoris states as much—'

'Questions of doctrine will be dealt with on Terra. For now you will follow orders.'

Again, silence.

'Yes, sir.' But this time, rebellion was clear in Valerian's voice.

Athellenas signalled to the Tactical and Assault squads, and they moved as one back through the temple towards the outskirts of the city, leaving behind them a field of two hundred dead and an enemy who would not give up.



THE MANSKINNER kicked over the worn marble icon of the Imperial eagle and watched it shatter on the ground. All around him his men were taking out their rage on the fabric of the temple, firing shots into the carved walls, defiling the altars with their own blood.

'Where are they?' yelled Recoba. 'Where are the dogs? Cowardly dogs! Too afraid to face Khorne's wrath!' An untrained eye would see Recoba as a burned-out corporal running to fat, now turned to madness with the worship of the Blood God. But the truth was that he was strong – that bulk was muscle, not fat, and he held the minds of his men in bonds of iron that the Blood God's worship had only forged tighter. He spoke for all his men, and the Manskiner knew all his men were angry.

They had run. These Marines, these defenders of humanity, who should have died a hundred times over than yield one inch of ground to the Blood God's followers: they had retreated. They had fallen back in the face of heretics. They had surrendered this place, a symbol of their Emperor's false godhood, a place that was as holy as could be.

This was wrong. This was not the way of the Imperium. They were supposed to underestimate the Blood God's power in their arrogance, and die beneath the blades of His army as it swept them aside.

And his men, they all felt the same. They had been robbed of their battle, the ultimate deceit. The bloodlust was building up in them unchecked, a destroying hunger that only violence would satisfy.

'Brothers!' The Manskiner felt the words of blood hot in his mind. He had to use them wisely now, and mould the minds of his men just as he wished. 'The enemy have shown their true face! Not merely weak, but cowardly! Deceitful! With their trickery they defy all that the Blood God has shown you! But we will not fall prey to their lies. We will wait here, in this, the very place they hold as a symbol of their weakling Emperor, and gather our strength before we strike and brand our victory against the spirit of the Imperium!'

Recoba strode forward, out of the gathered crowd. 'We cannot wait! By the Blood God's throne, the enemy are in flight! We must pursue them and run them down, not cower like children!'

The Manskiner fixed Recoba with a glare. The man was as dangerous as he was useful. He, amongst all the cultists, must be brought to heel. The Manskiner raised his claw so the steel tips hovered in front of Recoba's face.

'Recoba, my brother, you know nothing of the ways of the enemy. The Blood God has shown me the truth about the feeble ways of Man. The Marines wish to draw us out in pursuit so they can destroy one part of our force at a time, until finally there are none left to take to Macharia and begin the slaughter. They will use the commands of the Blood God against us, knowing we will become blind with bloodlust. Even now, when you wish to pursue, Kireeah's forces and half of your men have yet to arrive here. You would take on the Marines with a third, with a quarter, or your forces, only to let them run once more when the rest come to avenge them?'

The Manskiner turned once more to the rest of the cultists, who listened to his every word as if they were those of the Blood God himself. 'But we will not let them, my brothers! We will all strike as one, so they will not break the back of this army before we reach the spaceport! Blood for the Blood God!'

But even now, the Manskiner could see a cohort of Gathalamor men gathering around Recoba, the old corporal's face twisted further with hate. He would break off, and lead them right into the Marines' trap.

Well, let him die, thought the Manskiner. Maybe his men would inflict some suffering on the Marines before the rest of the horde could reach them. It was for the good. To stop Recoba would be to fight him and his men, and he could not afford to have his army fall apart now. Let the Marines think their plan is working, that they will eliminate the Blood God's army piece by piece.

It will be all the more joyous when their skulls litter that ground of Empyryon IX and the army is on its way to begin the holy slaughter.

Let him die.



THE MIDDAY sun cast few shadows through the outskirts of the deserted town. Empyryon IX's only settlement had been abandoned, along with the rest of the planet, when it was realised that its mineral deposits were far scarcer than the Adeptus Mechanicus Geologis had thought. And so it had stayed, for hundreds of years, until today, when the fates had chosen it for the conflict that would decide the fate of a billion lives.

Athellanas had chosen to set up the second Marine line in a string of decrepit residential blocks, ugly grey blank plasticrete. His squad were in the upper floors of one block, with the Devastators in the neighbouring building. Below them, the broad streets, designed to take mining machines and trucks of ore, were empty, scattered with fallen masonry and fragments of broken glass. Everything was quiet. Even the air was still. It was only Athellenas' enhanced auto-senses that registered the scent of blood.

'They haven't actually... said anything, sir.' Kytellias, speaking to his commander face-to-face, was choosing his words carefully, for this was an area a Marine would normally never encounter. The area of rebellion. It was a dark, unfamiliar taste in the air. 'But I can tell. The way they move, their voices. They... they're not happy, sir. Not happy with you.'

Commander Athellenas looked at his Assault sergeant. Like all the Black Templars, he had been tested without his knowledge back on Terra for the risk of disobedience – and Kytellias had been designated the most likely to rebel in Athellenas' whole command. Kytellias' capacity for initiative and self-reliance that made him an ideal Assault sergeant at the same time made him headstrong and potentially dangerous. Yet he was the Marine Athellenas could most trust here.

This was not a question of a Marine being required to sell his life for the fraction of a victory. This danger was not born of cowardice or malice. Valerian, and perhaps others, were being ordered to abandon their whole system of values, to change the way in which they saw right and wrong. Retreat in the face of the enemy – in the face of Chaos – was a fundamental evil to a Marine.

He was asking his men to do wrong. What commander, even a Marine, has that right?

'You have done well to tell me this, Kytellias,' he said. 'What of your squad?'

'They are sound. But no more.'

'And your hand?'

Kytellias looked down at his wounded hand. His blood had crystallised quickly around the plasteel, where the lasgun blast had sheared off three fingers. 'I still have my trigger finger, sir. No operational concerns.'

'Good. The next wave will be poorly led but larger. We will use the streets. You will use your squad to draw the enemy in, funnel them into the street below. My squad and Valerian's will open fire on them from above. Understood?'

'Understood, sir.'

Kytellias' jump pack flared and he leapt through the wide, glassless window, across to the roof of the opposite building to enact the equipment rituals with his squad.

'Valerian?'

'Sir?' Valerian's voice was clear with suppressed anger over the communicator.

'Have your squad move into position. The second wave is here.'

'Nothing on the auspex, sir.'

'They're close. They will be hard to break at first but soon their formation will disperse. When Kytellias withdraws, you

will open fire. Kytellias will chase down enemy stragglers.'

'And then, sir? The next wave?'

'You have your orders, sergeant.'

Athellenas and his squad gathered on the fourth floor, bolters checked, ready to turn the street below into a river of fire.

The horizon shifted, turned dark, and began to spread through the outskirts towards them.

The second wave.



FOR EVERY green and sainted isle, of Gathalamor's blue sea, for the sake of every man that's lost, we'll die or we'll be free!

Recoba's spirit rose with pride. His men, his personal command within the Gathalamor army, had sided with him to a man – fully a third of the cultists in number. As they marched in time, as they had been drilled, it was like they were back on fair Gathalamor, before they had lost so many brothers and friends to the idiocy of the Guard's commanders, before they had first encountered that madman with the voice of a god who took them at their lowest hour and changed them into his own private army.

They didn't need the Imperium. But they didn't need the Manskiner either. He was just another fool who would throw away the lives of Recoba's men. Well, if they must die, they would die face-to-face with the enemy, the Marines.

Space Marines. When the Guard threw billions of men to be chewed up by whichever foe their wrath fell upon, it was the Marines who survived, who delivered the killing blow to an enemy the Guardsmen's deaths had laid open.

They would know what it was like to feel that utter despair. Recoba would see to that.

At the front of the marching formation some of them men were falling out of step, breaking into a run to get to grips with the Marines who lurked in the residential blocks around them. As they headed down the town's main road, lasguns ready, still

singing, the men were breaking off, kicking down doors, hunting for the enemy.

His men. Recoba was proud. They were still his men, even after all the Imperium and the Manskiner had put them through.

The smell came first, the burning, metallic reek of fuel. Then the white noise as they descended from the sky on their exhaust jets, dropping down right on top of the formation.

'Fire!' yelled Recoba. 'Open fire!'

But many of the men had no time to pull the triggers before the Black Templars were upon them, their black armour gleaming in the bright midday sun, black crosses on their white shoulder pads flashing, chainsword teeth tearing through the cultists, bolt pistols blazing.

Recoba saw one of the Marines, no, two, swamped by cultists who, having lost their weapons in the crash, threw themselves at the Assault squad and dragged them down under the weight of the mob. The cultists grabbed the only thing at hand that could be used as a weapon: chunks of plascrete torn from the ground by heavy weapons fire, and set to work on the Marines. Recoba himself opened fire with his bolter, even as the two Marines' plasteel armour gave way beneath the pounding of plascrete. He heard them crack open, and felt it, too, as it gave all his men the heart not to break, to stand and fight.

The Marines were used to enemies running from them. Not this time. These were Gathalamor men. Gathalamor men could never be beaten.

The rest of the Assault squad fell back towards the nearest building leaving a trail of broken bodies behind them, but ever more cultists – no, not cultists, Guardsmen once more – closed in behind them, volleys of lasgun shots sending up a wall of white-hot light around the Marines. Another fell, sparks cascading from his ruptured armour, still firing even as he died beneath the rifle butts and bare fists of the Guardsmen.

Recoba joined his men as they poured forward after the Marines, formation forgotten, some still singing, all of them eager for the fight now that blood had been tasted at last.

'ALL TROOPS, rapid fire. Target saturation pattern.' Athellenas watched as incandescent death lanced down from the upper floors of the building overlooking the street, tearing a hole through the main body of cultists. Lascannon blasts gouged furrows in the broken road surface, and frag missiles burst into clouds of fire, sweeping across the road, engulfing a dozen cultists at a time. Heavy bolter shots stitched a bloody path through the cultists, and the heavy plasma blasts fell like huge drops of liquid fire that flowed as water but melted anything they touched. The noise must have been immense, a vast roar of explosive, mechanical rage, mixed with the screams of the dying and the hiss of burning flesh. But Athellenas's auto-senses filtered out the din, leaving only the communicator channels clear.

'Kytellias here. Taking fire, three men down. Counter-attacking.' The first losses, then. Now Athellenas's tactics had cost the lives of Marines. Rebellion would be an even sterner foe now.

The bolters of Athellenas's Tactical squad added their own fire, each Marine picking a cultist target and spearing him with a bolt of screaming steel. The formation was nothing now and the streets were full of a swirling, burning mass of men, caught up in equal measures of panic and hate, scrambling over one another, howling, dying by the dozen. The cultists didn't fall back, but they were weak and broken.

'Kytellias, charge.'

Through a haze of static and battle-din, Kytellias's voice came over the communicator. 'Yes, sir! Squad, by sections! Charge!'

The blades of Kytellias's squad tasted blood once more as the Marines carved their way through the panicked cultists. A few of the heathens ran; others fought on half-blind, and died without ceremony. They stood their ground in knots of resistance but the Marines showed nothing but disgust for their broken enemies, cutting them down like reeds in a thunderstorm. Kytellias's power sword accounted for most, flashing like a harnessed bolt of lightning, every stroke taking a pagan's head.

The Marines strode across the burning, bloodstained road, killing anything that still lived, until there was nothing there but death.

'Sir?' Valerian's voice, full of hidden tension. 'What now, sir?'

'We fall back,' replied Athellenas. 'Kytellias, cover our retreat and look out for enemy stragglers. Retreat to the spaceport—'

'Sir,' said Valerian, 'I cannot follow such an order.'

'Sergeant, fall back and maintain a defensive position.'

'I can see what you are trying to do, commander. If we fall back each time and destroy the cultists a wave at a time then they would be finished. But their objective is the spaceport. We cannot absorb one wave and then fall back again, or the spaceport will be taken. We must destroy them all, at once, immediately, and that objective can only be achieved if we stand and fight.'

There was silence. Athellenas could hear the gunsmoke coiling in the air and the blood running down the walls, the last licks of flame playing over the charred bodies of the cultists.

'That is why you object?' said Athellenas carefully. 'Because you believe the tactic will fail?'

Silence.

'No, sir. That is not why I object. Perhaps we can defeat this army, commander. But if we cannot, then we must sell our lives for as many heathen souls as we can.'

Valerian was almost lost, realised Athellenas. He was trying to hide it, but his whole belief system was breaking down. Everything he had been taught, as a child, as a Marine, had told him that to retreat was to die a million deaths, to give up his honour as well as his life, to betray his Emperor, his Primarch, his very species.

'Either way, we must stand and fight, commander,' Valerian continued. 'It is both our duty and our privilege.'

'Fall back, Valerian.'

'Damnation, commander, this is madness! Does this Chapter mean nothing to you? Have you no duty to the souls of your lost brothers? Already we have lost men here, do you wish to defile their memories with your cowardice? This is madness, sir, nothing but madness! I will not retreat, not

ever, not for anyone or anything! I will not turn away from the fight, I will die by fire and by the sword, for if the only other option is to run like a child alongside you then I have no choice to make.'

This was where the battle was won. Athellenas knew he was right. He knew he would win. It was required of him. The enemy was nothing, he told himself. But his own men, they were the dangerous ones. They could break the back of this whole operation. If he ever had to be a leader of men, it was now.

'Valerian, you will fall back and maintain a defensive line at the spaceport. If you do not you will be shot and your name will be struck from the Liber Honarium. Your soul will have no mention at the Feast of the Departed. Your gene-seed will not be taken and given to a new initiate, because you will not be fit to have a Marine follow you into this Chapter. The faces of Rogal Dorn and of the eternal Emperor will be turned from you forever. You will not be in the Emperor's army at the end of time when the final battle is fought. You fear dishonour, Sergeant Valerian? If you disobey me now, if you place duty to yourself above duties to your Chapter and your Imperium, then I will show you truly what dishonour is.'

Silence again. And through the silence, Athellenas could hear the echoes of that power – the words of the Manskinner, rallying his troops. The cultists knew they had to strike as one to break through the Marine line. This wave had been a dissident group, enraged at being denied their battle. If Athellenas could only hold his own force together in the face of the enemy of dishonour, then the Templars would win. He knew it, with every part of his soul. If he could just hold them together.

'I do this under protest, sir,' came Valerian's voice. 'When we return to Terra, if we return, I shall bring a Protest Iudicarium to the Chapter Master in person. I shall see you tried and excommunicated. But for now, I retreat.'

Even as the power of the Manskinner's heresy built up in the air, Athellenas lead his Marines back through the abandoned streets of Empyrium IX, towards the spaceport. And above them hovered unseen the traitor ship, always a reminder

of what would happen if the Manskinner took the spaceport.

How many would die? Billions?

But Athellenas wiped the question from his mind. Not one Cultist would escape into orbit while a Black Templar still lived.



'RECOBA IS dead!' yelled Kireeah, his Guryan troops gathered around him. 'No more of this! The Marines may cower and deceive us but nothing can survive us! We are still four thousand strong, and they are but a handful! Now, Lord Manskinner, now we must strike!'

By the Gods, the Marine was clever, thought the Manskinner. Lying and cowardly, perhaps, but clever. The Manskinner was losing his cultists. The seeds of hatred he had sown in them with the words of blood were blossoming, and their bloodlust was drowning everything else in their minds. Without battle, deprived of the joy of facing this enemy who retreated constantly and destroyed his army piece by piece, the Manskinner's men were devolving beyond his control.

The Manskinner faced his underling. Kireeah had been dangerous even before the Manskinner had found him, a young, driven officer with a reputation for savagery amongst the rest of the Guard, who had done much of the Manskinner's work beforehand in dismantling the humanity of his men. Of all of the cultists, Kireeah would be feeling that seductive hatred most keenly.

'Kireeah,' said the Manskinner darkly, 'this foe is like no other. We cannot simply charge them without a thought, for they will take us apart piece by piece. They have shown that well enough already.'

Kireeah stepped closer. The Manskinner could see the veins standing out on the side of the Guryan officer's shaven head, flecks of spittle flying as he spoke, undiluted rage filling up the darkness behind his eyes. 'Lord Manskinner, many of us may die, but we will out! Even now they cower in the spaceport. If they retreat again we shall have won! They must stand or fall, and if

they stand they cannot but die! No matter what, we will take the spaceport, and within the hour we shall be on our way to Macharia. If we should die, then our skulls shall honour the Blood God! If we hold back, and fight with shadows and lies, like our enemy, then He will be disgusted at our weakness!

The Manskinner knew he had only one choice. He had used the words of blood many times to turn men into animals, now they had to turn animals into men. He felt their power growing within him as he spoke, his voice speaking to the very souls of Kireeah and every cultist there.

'Brothers! My brothers, this is the Blood God's final test! For we fight now not to win, or to die, but for revenge! Revenge, for Diess and Recoba and all those slain by deceit! Revenge, for the violation of the Blood God's holy rites of battle by a foe who will not face us! And revenge, like murder and massacre, is an aspect of His teaching - but unlike them, it is cold, fought by men purged of all emotion who fight not like animals thirsty for blood but as men acting as one, not charging blindly into the fray but marching side by side, a machine of destruction. This is the Blood God's way, to show us all the joys that bloodshed can bring, the sane alongside the savage, the cold-blooded along -'

Kireeah thrust his face close, his very breath like tongues of flame, teeth bared, heart pounding so strongly that a trickle of blood ran from one nostril and the vessels in one eye had burst into a crimson cloud spreading across the eyeball. 'Lies!' he screamed. 'This is not the Blood God's way! Now, when His worship needs him most, our lord has faltered! He has given way to cowardice! He is no better than the enemy, a coward who fights with lies instead of fists!'

Kireeah turned to the cultists. 'Charge with me, Brothers of the Blood God! Kill them! Kill them all!'

And as one, the cultists changed. The hateful loyalty the words of blood created was unpicked in a moment and the soul of every man belonged to Khireeah, to the bloodstained madness that was bursting across their minds.

The Manskinner didn't think, he just acted. He swung back the shears that hulked in place of his long-dead arm and brought them shrieking through the air, a hydraulic stab snapping the great blades shut around Khireeah's neck, slicing his head around his shoulders so quickly the officer's mouth still moved as it fell to the ground.

The body swayed, fountaining blood as it fell.

But it was too late. The men were already turning and breaking away, across the plain towards the city, yelling their homeworld's battle-cries or just keening like animals if they were too enraged to speak, the blood on their skin gleaming in the sun.

'Stop!' yelled the Manskinner as his entire army began to plunge towards the ruined city. 'Damn you, stop!' The words of blood shook the very air as he spoke but it seemed to have no effect. These were men whose souls had been drowned by their bloodlust, and it was to the soul that the words spoke. The Manskinner's claw lashed out and carved the nearest few cultists into pieces, but the others ignored him, clambering over one another to get out of the confines of the temple and join the mad stampede.

'Stop! The Blood God commands you!'

The Manskinner strode amongst his frenzied men, butchering any within range, taking off heads, limbs, shearing torsos in two, his skin and the metal of the shears slick with blood. It had come to this, raged his thoughts. They had abandoned him. The words had abandoned him. If he could murder every single one of them, he would, if he could bring together every single living human being and put their necks between the blades of his claw, if he could climb to the top of the Throne of Skulls itself and face the God who had betrayed him...

The army was gone now, and the Manskinner was alone in the temple, with only the bodies of the dead left under his command.

No. His men were not the ones he hated. The enemy...

The Marines. They had done this. They had hidden like children and denied his men the bloodletting they lived for. Their trickery had broken even the power of the Words, defiled the authority of the Manskinner, and of the Blood God above

him.

'Kill them!' yelled the words, speaking to him as clearly as they had to any of his men. 'Kill them all!'

Suddenly, he was running in the thick of his men, surrounded by the bare torsos and tattered uniforms of his cultists, back with the men who owed him everything. He knew now what he must do. He must strike like a thunderbolt into the Marines, tear them limb from limb, and give Him a taste of the slaughter to come.

And beyond it all, beyond the baying of his men and the thunder of their feet, the clouds of dust billowing around them and the stench of sweat and fire, drowning everything out, were the words of blood.

'Blood!' they called. 'Blood for the Blood God!'



THEY Poured through the streets, sweeping through the town like a flash flood across a plain, bringing with them the stench of sweat and blood and the din of four thousand men driven to insanity.

The cavernous, decaying spaceport loomed all around the Marines, but the vast series of half-collapsed domes offered few defensive positions amongst the debris and abandoned docking equipment. The Devastator squad had set up as best they could, shielded by a set of docking clamps corroded to lumps of rust, while Kytellias's battered Assault Marines were high up amongst the support struts of the nearest dome, looking down at the horde that charged headlong towards them. Athellenas and the Tactical squad were effectively in the open, positioned at the edge of the great open expanse of smooth plasticrete on which the cultists' ship would land if they took the spaceport.

This was the end, thought Athellenas. Even if I tried to retreat, Valerian wouldn't go, and neither would most of the others. It is by our actions here that we will be judged.

Or remembered, if we fail.

'Take aim.' Though the cultists were still out of range, the Black Templars took aim as one, ready to loose their firepower as soon as the heathens charged too close. Through the scope of his bolter, Athellenas could see the Manskinner himself, at the front of the horde, the massive industrial shears swinging heavily as he ran, eyes no longer those of a leader, but of a fanatical follower. That was the key. No one led this horde any more.

The scream grew louder as the cultists scrambled over the remains of fallen buildings and streamed down the main road towards the spaceport, blood running from thousands of abrasions caused by their headlong, heedless charge. They had no sense of pain now. They were blind and deaf to anything other than battle. They were the true children of their god, insane and self-destructive.

'Ready to go, sir,' came Valerian's voice over the communicator.

'Hold, sergeant,' replied Athellenas. 'We wait.'



BLOOD! screamed the voice, over and over again, as the Manskinner's untiring limbs carried him closer and closer to where the domes of the spaceport rose above the residential blocks. There was a savage joy on the faces of his men, and in that moment he was happy, knowing that there would be a twofold slaughter ahead: the Marines first, then across the stars to Macharia.

The Manskinner was happy at last. This was why he had been born. This was why the Blood God had picked him out. To kill, to shed blood in His name.

He was at the head of the horde as it crossed the threshold of the spaceport, roaring towards the Marine lines.

'Nothing lives!' he yelled. He could see the black-armoured figures crouching amongst the debris, trying to hide, but no one could hide from the Blood God's chosen. 'No quarter! No mercy! Blood for the Blood God!'

He could see their commander, lying in wait armed with a power fist he was too cowardly to use, trying to catch them in an ambush of fire as he had done with Recoba's men. Up above them, an Assault squad, under-strength, lurked – but they would drop down not onto confused weaklings but a boiling sea of men made godlike by rage. They would melt away. They all would. They were nothing.

His claw blades held open ready for the kill, the words of blood screaming in his ears to match the pounding of his heart. the Manskinner led the final charge towards the spaceport.

'No quarter! No mercy! Blood for the Blood God!'



HOLD, SERGEANT. They were so close that Athellenas could feel the heat coming off them even before his auto-senses registered it. A tidal wave of men was roaring towards them, a wall of incandescent hate that would destroy anything in its way, half-naked blood-stained animals of men, with a raging demon at their head around whom played a halo of dark power.

They were within range. He could order the Devastators to open fire but he did not. There were two battles here. The cultists must die, and along with them the stain of rebellion amongst his men.

'Hold your fire,' he ordered again. He could feel the agitation of his men, the urge to open fire on the horde battling with their respect for his command. That respect might not last much longer if Athellenas did not do everything right.

Then, it happened.

The first men across the spaceport perimeter began to falter, losing direction, eyes wild as their focus was taken off the waiting Marines. One swung his makeshift club wildly as if wishing an enemy to appear next to him – full of lust for battle, he could no longer wait to reach the enemy and sought out his nearest comrade. He

struck the man across the back of the head. The victim fought back with he teeth, lunging for the first man's throat, dragging him to the ground. The violence spread like a flash fire and suddenly thrashing, kicking, biting bodies were piling up on the threshold, thick dark blood running across the plasticrete, ankle-deep.

The leader tried to drag his men apart and then joined them in their carnage, his flailing shears cutting men apart, two or three at a time. The noise was awesome. None of these men felt pain any more, and they screamed not with pain but with rage at the violence done to their bodies and the wounds they inflicted with their own hands.

This army, this river of liquid fire, foundered a pistol shot away from Athellenas's Marines, its members tearing each other apart. Denied the taste of blood for so long, they sought it in the only place they could find it: in their fellow heretics.



BLOOD! BLOOD! No mercy! No quarter!' The Manskinner didn't realise he was screaming. He felt nothing any more, just the thirst at the back of his throat and in the hollow at the centre of his soul, the hollow that could only be filled with death. The payment for the Blood God's favour was that they must feel His thirst, the lust for battle, the intense and all-conquering desperation that madness brought.

His claw sheared through the press of men around him. Weaklings! he thought. Idiots! To fail when they were this close! To deny the Blood God his final honour by wasting their lives! The Marines had won, their deceit denying his men battle for so long that they would butcher one another rather than wait a moment longer.

But the part of his mind that could still think was dwarfed by the boiling cauldron of rage that made up the rest of him. The Manskinner killed and killed and killed, each man slain a drop of relief in the chasm of thirst. Even as the writhing, screaming,

bleeding bodies closed over him he killed. When the press became to close for him to breathe, he killed. When night came down across his eyes and his heart finally gave up its frenzied beating, he still killed. The instinct to murder was not dulled by death alone, and the shears still snapped at the walls of flesh around him until every last scrap of the Manskinner's energy was spent.

As the life finally bled from the Manskinner, the Blood God turned His back on His champion.



WHEN THE madness was over, there were perhaps three dozen that still lived, wandering dazed and battered between mounds of broken bodies. The Manskinner's army was nothing more than four thousand mangled corpses and a lake of blood that was slowly draining away between the cracks in the plasticrete. Flies were beginning to descend and the heat of the cultists' rage was dissipating as the bodies turned cold. The sky above began to darken as evening fell, the lumpen shadows cast by the corpses growing longer.

'Templars, advance,' ordered Athellenas. The Assault squad dropped from high up in the dome, their landings cushioned by jets from their jump packs. Chainswords flashed and surviving cultists, blind and insensible, died without a struggle. Athellenas moved forward with his Tactical squad, bolters picking off the stragglers wandering in twos and threes through the human wreckage. Athellenas levelled his bolt pistol and another heretic fell.

They didn't need the Devastators. Soon the last few survivors were dead and the Manskinner's threat was truly over.

'Why didn't you tell us, sir?' asked Valerian over the communicator. 'If you knew this would happen?'

'Because, Valerian, I do not have to explain my actions to you. As your commander my word is law. I have not

achieved this rank through chance. I have been judged by my Chapter to be the individual whose leadership is most likely to result in victory. My purpose is to lead you, and your purpose is to follow. If this breaks down, then all is lost. You will do what you are told, Valerian, and you will not argue. We are Marines. We are Black Templars.'

The Assault squad were making a sweep of the bodies, checking for survivors. Athellenas knew even now that they would not find any.

'Some of you,' he said, 'will rise to a position where you, too, will command others from this Chapter. And then you will remember the lesson you have learned here. Above everything, above procedure and mercy, and even above the honour that Valerian held so sacred, there is victory. It is only through victory that you can truly honour the Emperor and your fellow man. To fail is the greatest shame. We have retreated in the face of the enemy, but there is no shame in that, for by doing so we have defeated them. The shame belongs to the Manskinner, for throwing away his chance of victory by fighting alongside animals, not soldiers.'

The sky above was dark now, the sun of Empyryon IX dipping below the horizon. 'Kytellias, what is the ETA of our support craft?'

'Nineteen days, sir. Two of our strike cruisers. They'll destroy the heretics' ship before they know they're there.'

Nineteen days, thought Athellenas. If they had failed, no Imperial forces would have been close enough to intercept the heathen ship. How deep a wound, in lives lost and damage to the spirit of the Imperium, had they prevented from being struck here? Deep indeed.

'Then let us bury our dead,' he said, 'and prepare their wargear and geneseed for transport back to Terra. Valerian, you and your squad will set up a trophy here to mark our victory, so that none who set foot on this world will go ignorant of what happened here. You have your orders. Fall out.'

Athellenas's auto-senses switched automatically to night vision as the sun finally set on Empyryon IX. *

DEFF SKWADRON IN:

DA BIG PUSH

* THE BEST MEANS OF ATTACK IS DEFENCE, AN' THE BEST MEANS OF ATTACK IS A REALLY REALLY BIG ONE, RIGHT, WITH LOTS OF BOYS AN' DEAD BIG SHOOTY THINGS AN' WHAT HAVE YA' - LEGENDARY ORK SMARTBOY DREK DUG

WISE WORDS INDEED, AND ONES CLOSELY FOLLOWED BY **WARBOSS BATHUS** AS HE MOUNTS HIS BIG COUNTER-ATTACK ON THE FORCES OF HIS ARCH-RIVAL **WARBOSS GRIMLUG**--

SCRIPT: GORDON RENNIE
ART: PAUL JEACOCK
LETTERS: FIONA STEPHENSON



UNFORTUNATELY, UNLIKE BATHUS, GRIMLUG SEEMS TO HAVE READ MORE OF THE BOOK THAN JUST THE OPENING CHAPTER...



JOB'S A BAD UN, BOSS. THE BOYZ ARE TAKING A PASTIN' OUT THERE!

AIR SUPPORT!
WHERE'S THE FRASSIN'
AIR SUPPORT!
ORDERED...?!

BEG TO REPORT,
BOSS. BEEN A BIT OF A
FRAS-UP ON THE AIR
SUPPORT FRONT. KARNAGE
SKWADRON ACCIDENTALLY
BOMBED OUR OWN BOYZ AN'
KANNIBAL SKWADRON SENT
BACK A MESSAGE SAYIN' THEY
DIDNT WANT TO COME CAUSE
THEY WAS THINKIN' 'BOUT
GOIN' OVER TO GRIMLUG'S
SIDE INSTEAD.



DEFF SKWADRON, BOSS. MORK
KNOWS WOTS 'APPENED TO 'EM!

RIGHT, SO WHAT WAS I SAYIN'? AH
YES, THAT'S RIGHT... AIR SUPPORT. AN'
THIS TIME I BETTER BE 'EARIN'
SOMETHIN' GOOD.



WELL, STILL
ONE FIGHTA-BOMBER
SKWADRON WE AINT
'EARD BACK FROM,
BOSS.

AN'
WHO'S THAT,
THEN?



Wooooo Wooooo Wooooo

Wooooo Wooooo Wooooo




Wooooo



O!!
STOP THAT
FRASSIN'
NOISE!

DAKK
DAKK

DAKK
DAKK



FLAMIN' MORK!
CAN'T AN ORK 'AVE A FEW
QUIET MOMENTS IN THE
SQUIS DROPS WITHOUT
SOME NOISY GIT SPOILIN' HIS
CONCENTRATION?

GIMZOD!
WOT THE FRAG'S
GOIN' ON OUT
ERE...!?

THAT WAS
THE SCRAMBLE
SIREN, BOSS!
THE BIG PUSH IS
ON!

I'M SKWADRON KOMMANDA!
WHY IN MORK'S NAME DIDN'T
ANYONE TELL ME...!?

BEGGIN' THE
KOMMANDA'S FARDON,
BUT YOU SAID YOU WAS
NEVER TO BE INTERRUPTED
WHEN YOU WAS 'AVIN' A
SPELL IN THE
DROPS.

WE'LL BE 'AVIN'
A COURT OF ENQUIRY
ABOUT THIS LATER, GIMZOD,
I WARN YA, BUT RIGHT NOW
LET'S GET THE SKWADRON
SCRAMBLED UP INTO
THE-

FRAG ME!
WHAT 'APPENED TO THE
SKWADRON!?



SABOTAGE!
THAT'S WHAT IT IS!
WAIT TILL I FIND THE
TREACHEROUS GIT
WHO DID THIS!

ERM... IT
WAS YOU, BOSS,
DONT YOU
REMEMBER?

YOU ORDERED THE
MEKBOYZ TO CONDUCT A
FULL MAINTENANCE
STRIPDOWN OF ALL DA
BOMWERZ. SEEN AS 'OW YOU
SAID THERE WUZNT MUCH
'APPENENIN' AT DA FRONT
RIGHT NOW.

ARE WE
GONNA HAVE A
COURT OF ENQUIRY
'BOUT THIS TOO, B-
OOOWN!

KUF!

THERE'S A
DIFFERENCE BETWEEN
BEIN' SMARTBOY AN' BEIN'
A SMART GIT,
GIMZOD.

NO WAY THE MEKBOYZ ARE GONNA PUT
THE BOMWERZ BACK TOGETHER IN TIME,
AN' BOSS BADTHUG IS GONNA WAVE US
UP IN FRONT OF THE FIRING SQUAD
BOYZ FOR SURE IF WE DONT SHOW UP
FOR THE BIG PUSH, SO WHAT ARE
WE GONNA DO?

WHAT 'BOUT
USIN' THE SQUADRON
TRANSPORT POOL,
BOSS?



THE
TRANSPORT POOL?
WHAT ARE YOU TALKIN'
ABOUT, GIMZOD? WE'RE
FANBOYZ, NOT
BIKEBOYZ!

OOOWN!

OLD ON A
MINUTE, BOSS, WE'RE
DEFF SKWADRON,
REMEMBER, AND SINCE
WHEN AVE A FEW MISSIN'
WINGS AN' ENGINES
EVER STOPPED US DOIN'
THE BUSINESS?



BUT UP AT THE FRONT LINE, THINGS ARE GOING FROM BAD TO WORSE FOR WARBOSS BADTHUG.

DEFINITELY UN-ORLY BEHAVIOUR, BOSS. MAYBE, UNDER THE CIRCUMSTANCES WE SHOULD-

-ANG ON, WHAT'S THAT NOISE...?

SNEAKY GITZ! THEY'RE KOUNTER-ATTACKING OUR KOUNTER-ATTACK!



WARBIKES, THAT'S WHAT IT IS.

MMMMMMMM

SOUNDS MORE LIKE WARTRUKKS TO ME.

NAH, IT'S FIGHTA-BOMMERZ. ANY GIT KNOWS THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN A BOMMER AN A WARTRUKK!



GORSOS, GET UP THERE AN' AVE A LOOK.

RIGHT YOU ARE, BOSS.



IT'S REINFORCEMENTS, BOSS. COWIN' FROM OUR REAR LINES! 'OLD ON, AN' I'LL TRY AN' SEE WHAT THEY ARE...


WVROOOOOOOOOOOOM!



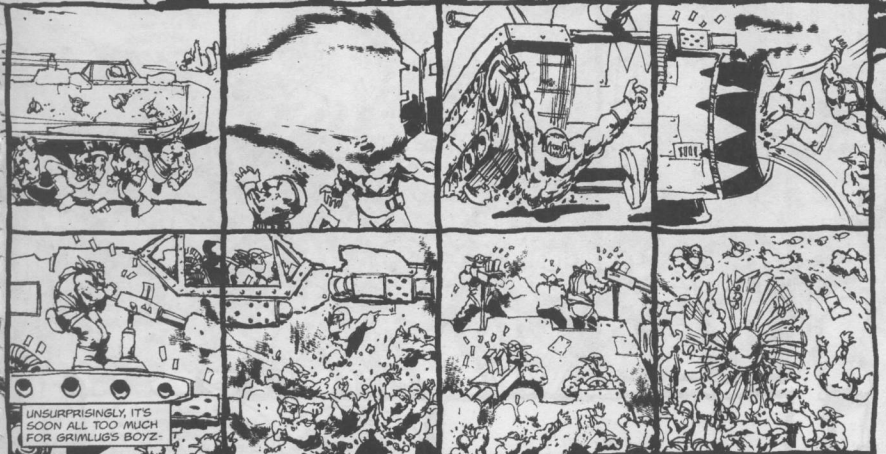
WOT THE ZOGS...!!



DEFF SKWADRON
REPORTIN' AS ORDERED,
BOSS! SORRY WE'RE
LATE, BUT WE HAD A FEW
MERANICAL DIFFICULTIES
ON THE WAY!



NOW THAT THEY'VE FINALLY ARRIVED FOR THE BATTLE, THE NEW-LOOK DEFF SKWADRON QUICKLY GET DOWN TO DOING WHAT THEY DO BEST.



UZZGQB TO DEFF SKWADRON LET EM GO BOYZ WE KILL EM ALL NOW AN' WE WONT AVE ANY OF EM LEFT TO KILL LATER.

HEH YOU AINT THE ONLY SMARTBOY 'ERE, GIMZOR.

GOOD THINKIN', BOSS.





WHO'S THAT GIT DISOBEYIN' A DIRECT ORDER, GIMZOD?

KILLBOY, BOSS.



AFRAID 'IS BOMBER WAS A BIT OF A WASHY ZOG, BOSS. THE WEKBOYZ DIDNT AVE TIME TO FIT ANY BRAKES ON IT!



HEH GOOD OL' KILLBOY. LOOK AT 'M GO!

DONT WORRY, BOSS. E'S GOT TO RUN OUT OF FUEL SOMETIME...



GOOD WORK, KOMMANDA... URRR...?

UGZOB, SIR. THANK YOU, SIR. SOON AS WE GET BACK TO BASE, WE'LL FIX THE PLANES AN' GET DEFF SKWADRON BACK UP INTO THE SKY WHERE IT BELONGS!



NOT SO HASTY, UGZOB.

UGZOB, SIR.

THAT'S WHAT I SAID NOW, UGZOB, WHAT I'M TALKIN' ABOUT HERE IS A NEW GROUND-BASED FAST ATTACK RAPID RESPONSE SKWADRON...



BUT, SIR, WE'RE FLYBOYZ, NOT GROUNDBOYZ. AN--- OOOH!!!

LIKE I WAS SAYIN', UGZOB, AIR SUPPORT IS ALL VERY WELL, BUT LIKE DREK ZOG SAID: THE FACE OF WARFARE IS EVER-CHANGIN' AN'...

THE END