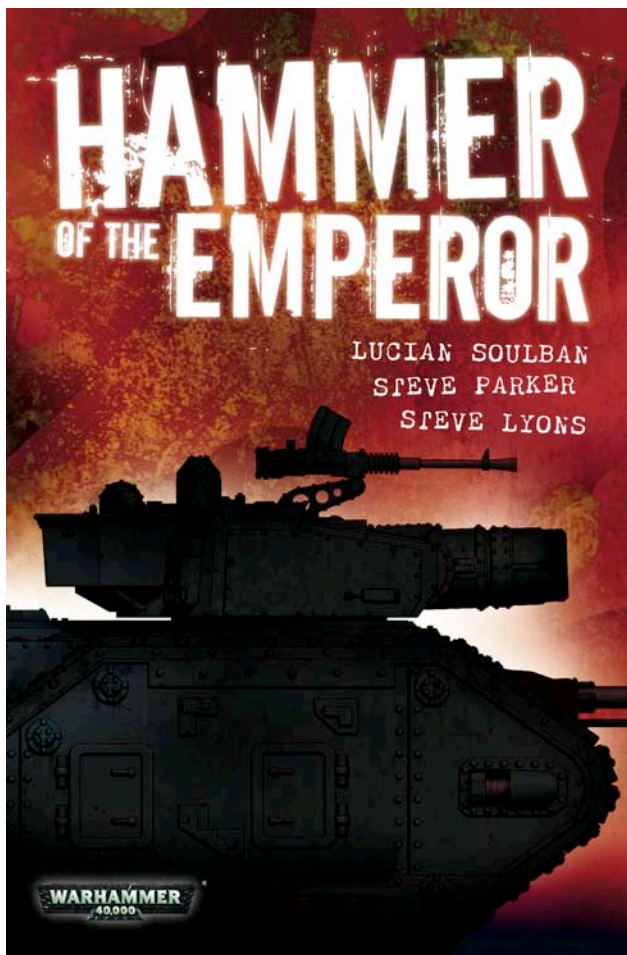




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Taken from *Mercy Run*:

THERE WERE HUNDREDS of them.

Wulfe's heart was pounding in his chest as he watched them spill out onto the canyon floor. 'Close ranks,' he ordered on the mission channel. 'Form up on Steelhearted. Defensive pattern theta!'

Metzger gunned Last Rites into action. Champion of Cerbera and the black Chimera leapt forward a second later, speeding towards Sergeant Strieber's crippled tank.

Steelhearted lay utterly immobilised, track-links scattered around her in a forty-metre radius. Her left sponson was still burning. The shrivelled, blackened body of its occupant, Private Kolmann, hung from its twisted hatch. The other vehicles reached her side now, slid to a halt, and spun on their treads to face outward in a defensive, four-pointed star.

'Stinking greenskins,' spat Wulfe. 'It's a wonder we didn't smell them.'

Among the myriad enemies of mankind, it was the old foe he hated most. An image flashed through his mind; the blazing red eyes of one particular ork he'd

encountered on Phaegos II. The scar on his throat was a memento of that day – the day he'd almost bled to death.

'Holy Throne!' voxed Kohl. 'How many of them are there?'

Wulfe wasn't about to count. Buggies and bikes of every possible description roared into the canyon. They were gaudy things, painted red, with fat black tyres that churned up the dirt. Many were decorated with crude skull motifs or images of tusked deities. Some boasted far grislier forms of decoration – strings of severed human heads and banners of flayed skin. But the ugliness of the machines themselves was nothing compared to that of their riders and passengers. The orks were hideous, malformed brutes that waved oversized blades and pistols. Their bodies were twisted and hunched with overgrown muscle. Their eyes and noses were miniscule, but their mouths were wide and full of massive, jutting yellow teeth.

The throaty roar of each engine merged into a cacophony that filled the air. Thick black fumes spewed from exhaust pipes as the orks raced over the sun-baked land, kicking up clouds of dust behind them. But they weren't surging forward. Not yet. They surrounded the Imperial tanks and began circling them at range, moving anti-clockwise.

'What the hell are they doing?' voxed Strieber.

The answer came all too quickly. From random points in the massive circle, small groups of ork vehicles suddenly broke formation and sped inward towards their prey.

The hull of Last Rites rattled under a heavy barrage of stubber rounds.

'Damn,' shouted Viess.

‘They’re trying to confuse us,’ Wulfe voxed to the other tanks. ‘If we can’t predict their angles of attack, there’s a chance they can close the gap. We have to start thinning them out, now! Siegler, high explosives!’

‘Aye, sir!’ With thick, powerful arms, the loader hefted a shell from the magazine on his right, slammed it into the cannon’s breech, and yanked the locking lever.

The loading light turned red. ‘She’s lit, sir!’

Through the vision blocks, Wulfe spotted a knot of large, open-topped half-tracks among the smaller, faster ork vehicles. They were filled to overflowing with monstrous green savages. ‘Viess,’ said Wulfe. ‘Traverse left. Ork half-tracks. Four hundred metres.’

Squinting through his scope, Viess spotted them easily. The ork passengers were howling with insane laughter and excitement. Their blades glinted in the sun. He hit the traverse control pedals, and the turret swung around. Electric motors hummed as he adjusted the angle of elevation. ‘Targets marked!’ he called out.

Wulfe braced himself in his seat. ‘Fire main gun!’

Last Rites rocked backwards with the massive pressure of exploding propellant. Her hull shuddered with the thunderous signature boom of her awesome main gun. The turret basket filled with the coppery smell of burnt fyceline.

Through the vision blocks, Wulfe saw the leading ork half-track vanish in a great mushroom of fire and dirt. The vehicles nearby were blasted into the air, spinning end over end. They smashed hard to the ground, spilling some of their foul passengers, crushing and mangling the rest. Shrapnel scythed out from the blast, eviscerating scores more.

It was a fine shot.

Bikes and buggies began swerving to avoid the burning wreckage, and the ork circle tightened. The enemy swerved inwards with increasing frequency to pepper the tanks with stubber-fire, but Last Rites boasted front armour 150mm thick, slanted to deflect solid rounds. The greenskins' armament didn't pack enough penetrating power to pose an immediate threat.

The real danger was in letting them engage at close quarters.

A regular drumbeat of deep, sonorous booms told Wulfe that the other tanks were firing round after round into the ork horde. Every impact threw shattered vehicles and torn green bodies into the air. Alien blood splashed on the canyon floor, mixing thickly with the sand. In only the first few minutes of the battle, hundreds of greenskins were blasted apart by the legendary firepower of the Lemman Russ's main battle-cannon.

Like her sister tanks, Last Rites boasted a powerful hull-mounted weapon, too. Wulfe ordered Metzger to fire the lascannon at will. Seconds later, blazing beams of light lanced out to strafe the ork horde. The scorching las-blasts cut straight through light armour, igniting fuel tanks and sending bikes and buggies spinning into the air on great fountains of orange flame.

A trio of ork bikes swerved just in time to avoid destruction and came screaming towards Last Rites. Bolter-fire from the sponsons shredded two of them, but the last veered from side to side, racing unharmed through the hail of shells. Wulfe saw the hideous rider grin and lob a grenade towards his tank.

'Brace!' he shouted, and prayed that the blast wouldn't wreck their treads.

There was a dull boom and the tank shook. Lights flickered in the turret basket. Wulfe's diagnostics board

reported trouble with the right sponson. He ordered the crew to sound off.

Garver didn't answer.

Wulfe ordered Garver to respond.

Nothing.

'Damn it all,' Wulfe shouted. 'We've lost the right sponson. Garver's gone!'

'No!' yelled Holtz over the vox. 'Those bastards!'

In his periscopic sight, Wulfe watched the ork bike accelerating away. As it passed the black Chimera, it was blasted apart by a searing spray of multilaser fire. Someone was manning the transport's turret-mounted weapon. The multilaser turned quickly to target an ork truck and fired again, charring wide horizontal slashes in flesh and metal alike. Slaughtered orks tumbled from the back of the truck in limp, lifeless pieces.

Wulfe wondered if Dessembra herself was dispensing the Emperor's judgement. Or was it one of her acolytes? Whoever it was had avenged Garver. He'd have to thank them later.

'They're getting closer,' voxed Metzger. 'They're using smoke from the wrecks to bridge the distance.'

'Stay calm, you dirty fetcher,' snapped Holtz. 'Keep firing. The sarge won't let them get on top of us.'

'You bet I won't,' added Wulfe, but he saw how quickly the gap was closing. There were just too damned many of them. Sooner or later, they'd get close enough to tag the tanks with high-explosives, or some monster with a flamethrower would press the nozzle of his weapon to a ventilation slit and cook them all alive.

We can't keep this up, thought Wulfe. Strieber, you idiot. If you hadn't hamstrung yourself....

But Strieber's tank was hamstrung, and Wulfe was quickly realising that this battle couldn't be won. The

mission clock kept ticking. There just wasn't time to fight this one out. And Strieber couldn't hope to re-tread his tank under fire. Last Rites, Champion of Cerbera and the black Chimera had to break through now.

They had to leave Steelhearted behind.

Wulfe saw another armoured half-track, overloaded with roaring ork infantry, break from the circle and make straight towards his tank. Metzger fired a blast from the lascannon, but the truck's thick front armour soaked it up. Wulfe called out to Viess and the gunner swung the turret around with no time to spare.

'She's lit,' shouted Siegler.

Viess didn't hesitate. His left foot stamped on the firing pedal. Last Rites bounced on her suspension as her battle-cannon spat its deadly payload straight into the driver's cab of the enemy machine.

A flash. A boom. An earthshaking explosion at point-blank range. Metallic clattering sounded on the roof of the tank as a shower of burning junk and body parts rained down.

'Good shot,' voxed Metzger with obvious relief.

'Great shot,' Viess corrected.

Wulfe was more concerned with the dense cloud of black smoke that was rolling over them from the blazing frame of the ruined enemy vehicle. 'We can't see a blasted thing now. They'll be coming straight for us. Sponson gunners, stay sharp!'

He used the plural out of habit, and the loss of Garver suddenly stung him. They hadn't been particularly close, not like he and Borscht, but the sponson gunner had been crew. Love them or hate them, crew was family.

Dessembra's voice sounded in Wulfe's ears. 'We can't stay here. Move out, now!'

‘We must thin them out more,’ Wulfe voxed back. Adrenaline was surging through him, making his blood sing. ‘At least enough to give Strieber a fighting chance.’

‘Priorities, sergeant,’ hissed Dessebra. ‘There’s nothing you can do for him. Look to your rear. We have to go at once!’

Wulfe checked the rear-facing vision blocks and felt his battle-rush bleed off in an instant. It was obvious now. The bikes and buggies were just a diversion, intended to harry the tanks and slow them down while the real firepower closed off the canyon at either end. Grinding its way south-east along the road was a loose formation of ork war machines – massive, heavily armoured and bristling with fat-barrelled cannon.

Wulfe was filled with rage as he looked at them – at least half of the enemy armour had been built from the looted carcasses of fallen Imperial machines. The foul xenos had mutilated and desecrated them.

Under thick plates of armour bolted on at all angles, he saw the familiar forms of a Basilisk mobile-artillery platform, three Chimera transports, and a disfigured Leman Russ. Other vehicles in the formation seemed entirely built from scratch to some maniacal alien design.

‘By the blasted Eye!’ he spat. Demonstrating impressive aptitude for their kind, the orks had managed to outflank him.

The canyon shook with a ripple of ork cannon fire. ‘Incoming!’ shouted Wulfe. Explosive shells rained down on the highway. The resulting detonations sent up great clouds of dirt and debris, but little else. The ork cannonade was falling far short of its target, but that wouldn’t be the case for much longer.

‘Emperor above!’ voxed Sergeant Kohl. ‘They’re fielding heavy artillery!’

‘We break through now,’ voxed Wulfe, ‘or we’re dead men.’

Strieber was almost screaming over the vox. ‘You can’t be serious, Wulfe. You can’t possibly leave us here. You can’t!’

Wulfe felt sick to his stomach as he answered. ‘I’m sorry, Strieber. We’re out of options.’

‘My tank, my crew – we’re Gunheads, damn you! Don’t you run from this fight. Don’t you turn away from us, you rotten bastard!’

There was another rumble of thunder from the ork cannons. The impact blasts were much closer this time. Last Rites was showered with dirt. The enemy armour continued to zero in.

Wulfe spoke through clenched teeth. ‘Lead us out, Metzger. Full ahead. Keep her off the highway. There’ll be other mines there. Siegler, load her up. Armour-piercing. Viess, get ready to break a hole in them. They’ll not stop us here!’

‘Throne blast you, Wulfe!’ screeched Strieber.

‘I’m sorry, Strieber. I truly am. But you must see that there’s no other way. Keep firing. Keep fighting. Help us break through, and I promise the regiment will remember and honour your sacrifice. It’s all I can offer you now.’

Last Rites lurched into motion just before another volley of heavy shells shook the canyon floor. With a sudden convulsion of dirt and rock, a great shell-crater appeared where she’d stood only a moment before. The ork armour was now in range, and still the bikes and buggies raced forward with insane abandon, uselessly spraying the Imperial tanks with volleys of stubber-fire.

In subdued tones, Strieber voxed, ‘Good luck then, Wulfe. We’ll fight on for as long as we can. I... I hope you make it back to Banphry.’

Viess shouted ‘Brace!’ and fired the tank’s main gun. Three hundred metres away, a bastardized ork Chimera was violently peeled apart. Beside Siegler, the cannon’s breech slid back, dumping the empty shell-casing in the brass-catcher on the floor. With servitor-like efficiency, the loader slid a fresh armour-piercing shell into the breech, yanked the lever, and shouted, ‘Lit!’

Metzger shifted the tank up into third gear, accelerating out past the crippled Steelhearted. Viess swung the turret left, zeroing in on a bulky ork battlewagon. He adjusted for elevation, compensated for the tank’s forward motion, prayed to the Emperor for a clean kill, and fired. Last Rites skewed to the right with the force of the cannon’s recoil, but didn’t slow. The round slashed brightly through the air, then buried itself deep in the body of the ork machine. It must have pierced the battlewagon’s fuel tanks, because the vehicle was blown so high it flipped onto its roof. Flaming wreckage and charred bodies littered the land and roaring fires blazed from its twisted metal carcass.

Champion of Cerbera and the black Chimera followed close behind Last Rites. Wulfe saw a tongue of fire flash out from Kohl’s battle-cannon. The ork-modified Leman Russ on the far left rolled to a stop, smoke billowing from a large hole in its turret armour. A moment later, flames erupted from inside. Burning alien bodies began tumbling out of the vehicle’s hatches, but it was too late for them. The roasted greenskin crew twitched, then lay still on the sand.

‘Keep firing,’ ordered Wulfe. ‘We’re almost through.’

They roared past the chugging ork tanks, narrowly dodging a fusillade of high-explosive shells and rockets. Viess fired directly into the nearest, blowing the entire front section up into the air in a fiery spin. Kohl’s tank

spat again and crippled another with a shot that shredded its right track-assembly. The black Chimera was firing constantly, but her multilaser could do little damage to the enemy's heavy armour. Instead, Dessembra targeted a large, open-topped truck and managed to slaughter a score of ork infantry.

Then they were through. The canyon lay behind them and open lands stretched out ahead.

The heavy ork machines turned to follow, but they were far slower than the well-oiled Imperial tanks. Only the surviving bikes and buggies had the speed to give chase. They charged forward in pursuit, many of them forgetting the mines that their own warband had laid on the highway surface. Those that weren't blown to pieces closed the gap quickly, but their weapons were inadequate. As Last Rites, Champion of Cerbera and the black Chimera sped away, Wulfe ordered Viess to turn the turret and pick off their lightly armoured pursuers with the co-axial autocannon.

Wulfe noticed a blinking light on his vox-board. It was Kohl. He was calling on a closed channel. Whatever he had to say, it wasn't for Dessembra's ears.

Wulfe opened the link. 'What is it, sergeant?'

'I'm going back,' said Kohl.

'You're what?'

'Think about it, Wulfe. The orks will chase us all the way to Ghotenz unless they have a fight to hold them here.' There was a pause. 'Besides, I've got blinking lights all over the place. We took a big one on the rear decking. The cooling system's almost out and so is the extractor. We can break down halfway to the objective, or we can turn back and buy you some time. I'd rather go out fighting, if it's all the same to you. Maybe we can help Strieber and his crew go out in style.'

Wulfe didn't know how to respond. He felt hollow.

'Get those damned women to Ghotenz,' Kohl voxed. 'Complete the mission for the honour of the regiment, if nothing else. You can still make it off-world if you don't mess about.'

Wulfe wished he could believe it. He'd stopped looking at his chronometer. It only offered bad news. The orks had cost them so much, and not just in terms of time. A voice in his head told him to follow Kohl's example, to die honourably alongside his fellow Gunheads. But another told him that the honour of the regiment had to come first. He had to see the mission through.

'What do I tell Dessembra?' he asked Kohl.

'The truth. I'll give those green bastards plenty to do, by the Throne. They won't be missing you.'

Honour and sacrifice. Wulfe saw that he'd been misjudging Kohl for years, blinded to the man's nobility by his icy manner. Whatever Kohl's flaws, he was a true soldier and a man of uncompromising bravery.

If I survive this mess, Wulfe promised himself, I'll make sure van Droï puts Kohl and Strieber up for the Medallion Crimson. It's not much, but it's something.

Kohl didn't wait for any kind of approval. Through the rear vision-blocks, Wulfe saw Champion of Cerbera peel off and swing back around towards the canyon. Soon, she was lost in her own dust cloud.

Last Rites and the black Chimera raced on in the other direction. Dessembra was hailing Wulfe on the mission channel and, reluctantly, he opened the link.

'I demand to know what's going on! Why won't Sergeant Kohl answer me?'

Wulfe didn't bother to keep the tiredness and frustration from his voice as he replied, 'Sergeant Kohl

is ensuring our escape. His tank is badly damaged. He has decided to give his life and the lives of his crew for the success of this mission.'

Dessembra paused. 'That's... acceptable,' she said. 'Let's take advantage of it.'

Wulfe couldn't contain his contempt any longer. 'Listen to me, Sororitas,' he hissed over the vox. 'Whoever we're supposed to rescue at Ghotenz had better be a bloody saint reborn, because you and your damned superiors have a hell of a lot to answer for. Do you hear me?'

He cut the connection before she could respond.

Taken from *Ice Guard*:

THIS WAS THE way a world died.

Chaos forces, the Lost and the Damned, had penetrated Alpha Hive, breaking down its walls. Hundreds of thousands of Guardsmen had given their lives to hold them back, to contain them in the outer zones at least, but the advance was relentless.

It was when the generators had blown, when production had ground to a halt, that the evacuation order had been signed. The civilians had been lifted out first, those few who could still be reached and who hadn't been slaughtered or turned traitor. Now it was the turn of the Imperial Guardsmen on the ground.

Cressida had been a proud world once. Its mines had been bountiful, and its refineries and factories the most efficient in the sector. Its standard of living, on the highest hive levels, had been good, and even the underhives had enjoyed a far lower than normal attrition rate. Cressida's subjects had been loyal and happy, with a consequently high rate of population growth. They had been in the process of building their thirteenth hive, and Imperial Guard Command had advanced plans to raise another Guard regiment from their numbers within ten years.

It had taken less than half that time for Cressida to be invaded, overrun, lost, and finally abandoned.

COLONEL STANISLEV STEELE stood in what had been a mine overseer's office on Alpha Hive's eighty-third level. An explosion had ripped through the room recently, and two of its walls had been torn out. Its

ceiling hung precariously over him, and every few seconds the vibrations from a fresh blast below travelled far enough to make it tremble and threaten to give way.

From this uncertain vantage point he could look out over what remained of the outer zones – at the ebb and flow of battle, at fire and smoke and metal, and the bottle-green lines of his regiment, the Valhallan 319th, marking the extent of the enemy's progress through the ruins.

It made sense, of course, that a Valhallan regiment should remain on the front lines, fighting a rearguard action to buy time for the evacuees. Cressida's temperature had been dropping steadily for the past few years – some side effect of the Chaos incursion, although no one had been quite able to explain it – but the men of Steele's world were well used to the freezing cold.

The Ice Warriors, as they called themselves, were also renowned for their tenacity in defence. Fighting in close formation, they held their ground long after the men of most other worlds would have given way.

They found themselves driven back, all the same. Again and again, blossoms of fire erupted within their ranks, and their green lines were broken and then erased, to be redrawn, a little shorter than before and a little further back, but as firmly as ever.

Steele drew his armoured greatcoat tighter around his body, tucking his gloved hands into its loose sleeves. He could have sworn that the temperature had dropped another two degrees in the past day. He checked his augmetics, but they didn't respond. So, he chose to believe his own instincts.

Streaks of light scarred the overcast grey sky: the trails of spacecraft carrying more troops clear of Cressida. They, at least, would live to fight another day, albeit in a

different theatre of war, one in which they might stand a chance of winning.

Steele could hear footsteps approaching. His augmented ears filtered the soft sound from the clamour of war cries and the crump of mortars. He turned to greet Sergeant Ivon Gavotski, a tall, thoughtful man, approaching middle age, unflappable.

Gavotski threw up a crisp salute, and announced, ‘All done, sir. Orders have been sent to the eight men on our list, and to four more, in case some of the first eight are already dead or can’t be located. I filed a requisition order for a Termite with the Departamento Munitorum, and I mentioned the cardinal’s name as you suggested. I think I impressed upon the quartermaster the importance of this particular request.’

Steele nodded, and said, ‘I just hope the men we have chosen are as good as their records suggest they are. This could be the most important mission the 319th has ever undertaken, the one that will decide how we are remembered.’

He turned back to the battlefield, on which an array of Chaos-controlled tanks – Leman Russ Demolishers – had managed to gain some purchase in the rubble to advance. The Ice Warriors’ tanks were responding, moving clumsily into position, trying to draw a fresh defensive line across this new, unexpected front.

‘At any rate,’ sighed Steele, ‘it appears it may be the last.’

He wasn’t exaggerating. The war on Cressida had been long and hard, and his men, their ranks already depleted after campaigns on Dellenos IV and Tempest, had suffered heavy casualties. He had heard the whispers, heard that when all this was over the survivors of the

Valhallan 319th would be absorbed into other regiments, that their glorious history would come to an end.

It was starting to snow – but in contrast to the pure white, cleansing falls of his home world, these snowflakes were a dirty grey in colour.

Trooper Pozhar squinted down the sights of his lasgun, and scowled as a bone-biting wind whipped up a flurry of grey snow, obscuring his view of the enemy.

His trigger finger itched with the enforced delay. On the front line a man could be dead in a second, without even seeing what had hit him. Pozhar was determined to make each second count. Even so, he didn't want to waste power – not just because that would be a sin against the Emperor, but because he was down to his last pack. He had just clicked it into his gun, reciting the Litany of Loading as he did so in deference to the machine-spirits.

So, Pozhar held his fire until dark shapes began to loom through the haze, and then he thumbed his power pack setting to full auto and squeezed off fully a quarter of its charge in a deadly, low-level barrage across the rubble.

Many of the shapes crumpled, but as always there were more out there, many more. They clambered over the bodies of the fallen, bearing down on him. They were greeted by the percussion cracks of a hundred more lasguns, Pozhar's comrades following his lead, and a score of frag grenades burst and filled the air with a cloud of blood and dismembered limbs, but still they came.

Pozhar could see them now, and he felt a surge of rage at the sight of their tattered uniforms. They were the worst kind of foe: Traitor Guard. He didn't recognise

their colours. So many regiments had turned on Cressida in the past few years that he had lost track of them all.

They were close enough for the Valhallans' cover to mean very little. The traitors raised their guns, and Pozhar's ears popped with the retorts of las-fire from both fronts. He had been crouching behind a half-demolished wall, but it had been all but chipped away by las-beams. A lucky shot penetrated the fur hat, and the head, of the trooper beside him, and Pozhar was left exposed.

It could only be a matter of minutes now. Soon, the order would come to fall back again, to surrender a little more ground to the enemy. But Pozhar was a Valhallan Ice Warrior, and until that order came, he would not give a centimetre.

The traitors swept over him, hardly seeming to notice that he was alive and still standing. Perhaps they expected him to fall and be trampled, but instead he cannoned into the stomach of the nearest of them, disarming him, sending him to the ground. Two more traitors rounded on Pozhar, but he dropped beneath their lunges and swung his gun like a club, scoring a pair of palpable hits to a chin and a forehead. Then his micro-bead earpiece crackled into life, and he heard the urgent voice of a vox-operator, instructing him to fall back and report to the platoon commander.

He could almost have laughed at the timing of it. The traitors were pressing in all around him, and he could measure the rest of his life in seconds. It didn't matter. A red mist had settled over Pozhar, and he felt as if he was standing outside of his body as instinct took over and he punched and kicked and swiped, and jammed the muzzle of his lasgun into one traitor's stomach and blew out his guts.

It was over too soon, of course. He was borne to the ground by sheer weight of numbers. He reached into his greatcoat for a frag grenade and prepared to go out in a ball of fire that would consume ten or more alongside him.

‘Do you hear me, Pozhar? Get your sorry carcass back here fast. Word is, you’re being reassigned, by order of Colonel Steele himself.’

The explosion deadened his ears, heat searing his skin, and he thought for a moment that his senses were deceiving him, because he hadn’t yet pulled out the pin.

The grenade that had gone off had not been his. It had been thrown by a comrade, evidently unaware of Pozhar’s position. Friendly fire – and friendly indeed, because, by the Emperor’s will, Pozhar had been protected from the force of the blast by the press of bodies around him. He lay on his back, drained by his unexpected escape, almost smothered by a pile of corpses. And he had been doubly blessed, because for now he was hidden from the rest of the traitors.

They were advancing past him, booted feet striking the ground near his head, more bodies falling – adding to the pile – as his Valhallan comrades retrenched and a fresh burst of las-fire scythed into their foes. The voice was still squawking in Pozhar’s ear, and he did laugh then, a near-hysterical outburst of relief and fear and defiance all mingled together.

It took him a minute to calm down, to be able to assess the situation in which he found himself. He was alone, behind the enemy’s front line, and the only way to survive in such a position was to stay where he was, to play dead. Which was out of the question – because not only would it have been a dereliction of duty, but there was also the matter of his unexpected summons to

consider, and the tantalising prospect that he had been chosen to receive some great honour.

If Colonel Steele had asked for him by name, if he had a mission that he felt only Pozhar could undertake, then Pozhar would be there. Whatever it took.

Taken from *Desert Raiders*:

THE OBSERVATION DECK of the light cruiser, *Blood Epoch*, offered an unparalleled view of the surrounding stars. The striated green and white marble of a gas giant drifted by the port lancet windows, the last planet before Khadar swung into view. Prince Turk Iban Salid, lost to private thought, was barely aware of proceedings.

Commissar Rezail stood on a rusting iron dais, coroneted by the system's distant blue sun in the window behind him. As Rezail spoke, Tyrell stood by a window near the stage and spoke softly into the micro-bead, translating Rezail's speech for those officers unfamiliar with the nuances of Gothic.

'Five weeks ago,' Rezail said, 'astropaths received a psyker distress cry... Imperial. It originated from the uninhabited desert world of Khadar.'

Turk nodded automatically and cast a sidelong glance at the other high-ranking officer in the room, the ebony-skinned Nisri Dakar. Nothing short of Turk's knife at his throat would bring Turk pleasure. Every centimetre of Nisri's two metres disgusted him: his clean-shaven head demanded to be split, his thin body broken, his wiry muscles snapped, and his dark skin deserved to glisten with his blood instead of his sweat.

'It is our glorious duty to establish a small garrison on Khadar, to investigate the source of the transmission.'

Nisri nodded, but Turk noticed that he also listened with a half-cocked smile. He was no doubt pleased with his new posting.

'Prince Iban Salid, who do you serve?'

Turk started; he almost didn't realise that Rezail was speaking directly to him in a broken Tallarn that fumbled

over the guttural consonants. Turk straightened, immediately aware that all eyes were upon him. It electrified the room and set everyone on edge. He could see it in the darting glances, and in the hands that looped their thumbs on their belts, closer to their blades.

‘I war for the Emperor! All that is left of the 82nd Shaytani of the Dust wars for the Emperor,’ Turk said.

‘Aya!’ Turk’s officers cried out.

‘May His light bless our meagre lives,’ Turk concluded.

‘And whose hand does the Emperor guide?’ Rezaïl asked, again in broken Tallarn.

‘Yours,’ Turk responded, but Rezaïl stared at him for longer than was comfortable. He gritted his teeth against the admission, but continued, ‘and our Iban Mushira – Colonel Nisri Dakar – our new commander’s. May his bravery lead us to victory,’ and may the saints take his eyes, he concluded silently.

Colonel Nisri Dakar watched as Turk responded to the commissar. He watched how the commissar gestured to both men with his right hand.

He understands our customs, Nisri thought. He isn’t showing favour by using the left hand to signify a lesser.

Nisri despised Turk, who seemed lazy and dull with his squat body, his heavy muscles and the tan-brown touch of many suns. Turk kept his beard trimmed short, but there was cold calculating mischief in his black eyes.

Although he delighted at Turk’s forced conceit, Nisri took care not to display it. He was the regimental colonel; he had to lead by example.

‘And you, Colonel Dakar,’ Rezaïl asked, turning to Nisri. ‘Who do you serve?’

‘I serve the Aba Aba Mushira, the Emperor, in all things. I am His sword and He is my hand. All that is left

of the 351st Derv'sh Blades of the Imperium submits to his will.'

'Aya!' cried the officers of Nisri's regiment.

'And who do you greet as brothers in this room?' Rezail asked.

Dakar smiled; the commissar already possessed the small tokens of Tallarn formalities, enough to tie his hands in honour and custom.

'I share my salt with you, Commissar Rezail,' Nisri said, bowing his head, 'and I share my salt with Iban Mushira, Battalion Commander Turk Iban Salid. May I prove worthy to lead him,' and may he prove himself unworthy to be led.

Rezail nodded to his adjutant, who rushed forward and offered the commissar a worn leather pouch. Rezail opened the drawstrings and tipped the pouch. Nisri accepted the poured salt in both palms.

'We are brothers in battle and we are both sons of the Emperor,' Nisri said, slowly spilling the salt to the ground. 'Will you offer me the wisdom of your council?'

'I will,' Turk said, accepting his share of the salt from Rezail and spilling it slowly. 'Will you offer me the wisdom of your guidance?'

'Indeed,' Nisri said.

There was a slight pause; Rezail caught the translation of the exchange with Tyrell's discreet assistance over the micro-bead. 'I'll leave you to prepare your men, then,' Rezail said with a simple nod.

TURK DID NOT slow his clipped pace down the ship's corridor, but Master Gunner Nubis caught up to him in a handful of long strides. Nubis glanced back at the officers following Turk, and they immediately fell back, offering them a moment alone.

Master Gunner Nubis was a large man and he took up space in every sense of the word. His skin was the kind of deep ebony that space itself envied, while across his forehead rose the patterned scars of his tribe, made from rubbing ash into tiny cuts. Each signified a campaign won, a kill of prestige made. They were but a fraction of the scars on his back, most of them trophies belonging to the regiment's lash-officer.

'Now's not the time,' Turk said, anticipating his friend's grievance.

'When then?' Nubis whispered, half-turning to address Turk. His voice was thick with the tribal dialect of the free-spirited Nasandi tribesmen. When he spoke, his accent added spice to his words. 'When Nisri sends his men to slit our throats?'

'We shared salt. Tradition is—'

'Yes,' Nubis replied, 'you shared salt while the commissar pressed a gun to your head.'

Turk grinned. Nubis's flare for the melodramatic always brought a grin to his face. 'The commissar did not press a gun to my head. He, rightly, reminded us of our duty.'

'Did we need reminding when the orks killed half our men?'

'My men,' Turk corrected.

'Your men, my friends,' Nubis said. 'May their deaths honour the Emperor; they died doing their duty. To say we need reminding is an insult to their sacrifice.'

'Yes,' Turk said, 'but that's not the point. The 82nd's record is not in question. Our feud with the Turenag is.'

'We have a right to demand blood,' Nubis said, 'and having that Turenag dog as your superior is too much to bear!'

Turk sighed, but slowed down. He motioned for other officers to join him.

‘I haven’t forgotten the blood feud,’ Turk whispered, his voice soft against the walls, ‘but I will not disgrace us as a regiment. We serve the Emperor first. Nisri and his men are insignificant in the face of that duty. But keep a vigilant eye, and protect yourselves. If you suspect anything, see me first. Spill no blood.’

Nubis smiled, but Turk fixed him with a scowl. ‘Swear it, Nubis.’

‘What?’ Nubis replied. ‘You do not trust me?’

‘You are a stubborn goat—’ Turk said.

‘And about as ugly,’ one of the officers interjected. The others laughed.

‘I trust your word when you give it and I’ve seen you endure the lash to keep it,’ Turk said. ‘Give me your word.’

Nubis shook his head. ‘Fine, I will not spill a drop of their watery blood unless you ask it.’

Turk nodded. ‘Good. You’d better not, because if it comes to that, Nisri belongs to me.’

The men laughed and patted Turk on the back.

NISRI WALKED INTO the sacrarius chamber and tucked the end of the seamless white cloth into his braided waistband. The cotton cloth measured roughly four metres long and was wrapped around his body and over his shoulders in the traditional manner of the humble supplicant. Nisri’s bare feet ached at the touch of the cold metal floor, but once inside the sacrarius chamber with its wood-panelled floors, his toes unclenched.

He greeted the handful of surviving officers of his 351st Derv’sh Blades with a nod and a smile. Then, he knelt at the edge of the washing pool with its white cerite

tiles and the iron lock-box in the corner. The Trumpet of the Golden Throne was a Sword-class frigate and one of the few ships in the fleet with a Tallarn captain. As such, the good Captain Abraham had converted part of the ship's cathedrum into a sacrarius where the Tallarn could observe worship of the Emperor in their own fashion.

The officers washed their pattern-scarred arms and faces at the edge of the pool, while the hum of regurgers filtered and recycled the water; the erratic gasps of the ship's engines sent ripples across its surface.

After several minutes of prayers for absolution, strength and victory, Nisri straightened and looked to each officer.

'This is the last time we bathe together as a regiment,' Sergeant Saheen Raham said. He was deeply tanned, but his blond hair and purple eyes betrayed his Cadian heritage, a rare gene-stock on Tallarn.

'I know,' Nisri said, simply. 'After this moment the 351st exists only in Imperial records. We are the 892nd now.'

The officers exchanged glances. Nisri knew what they were thinking, but he chose to let them voice their concerns.

Sergeant Darik Ballasra cleared his throat and waited. He was the old man of the unit and a true tribesman with his leathery, brown skin. His hair and beard were white and thin, and his body lean with age but alive with strength. A delta of wrinkles splashed out from the corners of his dark eyes. Once everyone turned to face him, he spoke, his voice soft and silken. 'The 892nd cannot be a regiment. Its left and right hands are at war. Peace will only come when one hand severs the other.'

'Turk won't hesitate to kill you,' Raham said.

‘You should not have put him at your back,’ Ballasra concluded.

Nisri nodded and calmly dried his hands on the skirt of his own cloth. ‘Prince Iban Salid is at my back because I know you are at his.’

‘We will protect you,’ Raham said, ‘but—’

‘But,’ Nisri said, interrupting, ‘Prince Iban Salid is also a cunning man, give him that due. He will not easily betray his oath to the Imperium, and he won’t allow his men to do so either. He would shame his tribe after that oath he gave.’

Raham shook his head, but it was Ballasra who spoke. ‘The feud continues because of the Banna Alliance. The Commissariat said our actions were righteous.’

‘It is the Banna who ignore the Writ Nonculpis. They are the traitors. They deserve to be struck down!’ Raham said.

‘And in doing so,’ Nisri replied with a languid smile, ‘you ignore the same edict that proclaimed the Banna Nonculpis. It is a stalemate. The Commissariat left it for us to finish.’

‘Then let us finish it,’ Raham said.

‘No,’ Nisri replied. ‘I will not allow my first command to fall under disgrace. We serve the Emperor; Commissar Rezail was right to remind us of that. Prince Iban Salid also serves the Emperor, in his limited fashion.’

‘And if Turk moves against you?’

‘Then I expect you to act accordingly or to let me die a martyr’s death.’

‘What would that serve?’ Raham said, a bitter edge to his voice.

‘If I die a martyr,’ Nisri said, ‘then Turk and his men have done nothing but impale themselves on their own

blades: the commissar will put them to the slaughter. Let them be the fools, the disloyal ones. But, if you see the blade poised at my back... well, don't let it come to that, eh? I have a few more prayers left in me.'

A few smiled, but it was a hard edict for them to follow. The voice of their kinsmen was strong, and the cry for satisfaction a steady thunder overhead.

'The Emperor will reward us for our loyalty,' Nisri said. 'Our actions have remained righteous. It is the other tribes that have faltered. It is they who will fail. Nisri nodded to the iron lock-box and waited as Ballasra opened it and removed the rosewood case.

The men nodded and knelt before the sacrarius pool. Nisri entered the waters and waited with his back turned while Ballasra removed the hooked suturing needles and threads soaked in charcoal dye from the rosewood box. Ballasra gently pinched a measure of flesh along Nisri's back and pierced the skin with the needle.

Nisri inhaled softly, but refused to gasp. He would not shame himself in the eyes of his men or the Emperor. Ballasra threaded the charcoal string through Nisri's flesh, tattooing more intricate and florid patterns along his already scarred back. Occasionally, he splashed cooling water to wash away the blood, while the officers uttered the melodic cantos of submission to the God-Emperor and waited for their turn.

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