

BRINGERS OF DEATH

An action-packed Warhammer 40,000 anthology

AS IF REALISING that it was being watched, the figure turned. Its mask-like face bore a pair of red, glowering eyes, reminding Brael of the bloody malevolence in the invaders' gaze. On its chest was displayed a pair of spread wings that Brael had seen before: on the wall-hanging in the Sanctum of the Temple of the Holy Varks. With a shock that almost unmanned him, Brael realised that he was standing before a star god. –
from Xenocide by Simon Jowett



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from EVEN UNTO DEATH

THE WOLF SCOUTS flew like spectres down the dark, tangled paths of the forest, their heightened senses keen as a razor's edge. Red moonlight shone along the edges of their blades, and death followed in their wake.

Guttural howls and roaring bursts of gunfire rent the night air all around them, echoing off the boles of the huge trees. The orks were everywhere, boiling up from hidden tunnels like a swarm of ants and crashing through the undergrowth in search of the Space Wolves. With every passing moment the cacophony of noise seemed to draw more tightly around the small pack of Space Marines, like a shrinking noose. Skaflock Sightblinder tightened his grip on his power sword and led the Wolf Scouts onward, racing for the landing zone some fifteen kilometres to the east.

Ork raiders had been terrorizing the worlds of the Volturna sector since the end of the Second Battle of Armageddon, slaughtering tens of thousands of the Emperor's faithful and putting entire continents to the torch. Their leader, a warlord known as Skargutz the Render, was as cunning as he was cruel. He never lingered too long on any world, pulling back his forces and retreating into the void before help could arrive. The Imperial Navy was left to chase shadows, and with every successful raid the warlord's reputation – and his warband – grew in stature. When the orks struck three systems in as many years, the sector governor appealed to the Space Wolves for aid. A rapid strike team was assembled and slipped stealthily into the sector. Fast escorts patrolled likely targets, waiting for the call to action. Skaflock and his men had been on one such frigate, the *Blood Eagle*, when astropaths on the forge world of Cambion reported that they were under attack. They and nearly a dozen other small packs of scouts had been unleashed

onto the world via drop pods, to pinpoint enemy positions for the lightning assault to come. The scouts had slipped close to scores of landing sites and ork firebases, leaving behind remote-activated designator beacons that would allow the fleet to unleash a devastating initial bombardment within moments of arrival.

The operation had gone according to plan, right up to the point the fleet reached orbit and the initial assault wave began its drop. Then everything went to hell.

The night air trembled beneath the roar of huge turbojets as a Thunderhawk gunship made a low-altitude pass over the forest, but the assault craft held its fire, unable to tell friend from foe in the darkness below. Skaflock bit back a savage curse and tried his vox-caster again, but every channel was blanketed in a searing screech of manufactured noise. He had little doubt that the fleet couldn't pick up the designator beacons through the intense vox jamming, it was even possible that their surveyors were blind as well. He couldn't reach the fleet, much less the assault force his team was supposed to link up with; everyone had been cut off. Instead of catching the ork raiders unawares, they had stepped into a trap.

How, Skaflock's thoughts raged? How could we have been so blind?

The game trail the Wolf Scouts were following angled downwards into a narrow, twisting gully split by a shallow stream. With the wind at their backs and the thunder of the gunship passing overhead, the Space Wolves had no warning as they leapt into the gully and found themselves in the midst of an ork hunting party.

For a moment the orks didn't realize who had fallen in amongst them in the darkness. The hesitation was fatal. Skaflock's nerves sang with bloodlust and adrenaline – to him and the rest of the Wolves it was as though the greenskin raiders were moving in slow motion. Without breaking his stride the Space Wolf decapitated two orks with a single sweep of his blade and buried his armoured shoulder into the chest of a third with bone-crushing force. The air was filled with startled cries and shrieks of pain as the rest of the pack joined

the fray, and suddenly the panicked orks were shooting and chopping at anything that moved.

Two heavy ork rounds flattened against Skaflock's power armour. As a member of the great company's Wolf Guard he was better protected than the scouts under his command, and the impacts barely fazed him. Blood sizzled off the power sword's energy field as he leapt at a cluster of orks further down the gully. The first of the greenskins raised a crude axe, aiming a blow at Skaflock's head, but the Space Marine ducked beneath the swing and cut the raider in two. Before the body had hit the ground Skaflock was upon the second ork, smashing his bolt pistol across the raider's knobbly skull and stabbing it through the chest. The ork pitched forward with a moan – doubling up on the searing blade and trapping it with its death throes.

Skaflock leant against the ork, trying to push it off the blade and narrowly avoided the third greenskin's swing. The crude axe glanced off his right shoulder plate and opened a long, ragged cut on the back of his unprotected neck. A second blow bit into his side, driving the axe's chisel point through the breastplate and into the flesh beneath. Baring his teeth at the pain, Skaflock spun on his heel, tearing his sword free and bringing the blade around in a glowing arc that separated the ork's head from its shoulders. For a few heartbeats the body remained upright, steam rising from the cauterized stump of its neck, then the axe tumbled from nerveless fingers and the corpse pitched over onto the ground.

Within moments, the battle was over. The six Wolf Scouts under Skaflock's command were veterans of more than a dozen campaigns, as skilled with sword and axe as they were with stealth and guile. Nearly two dozen orks lay dead or dying in the gully, staining the stream with their blood. As Skaflock watched, Gunnar Dragonbane, a giant of a man even by Space Marine standards, sent the last of the orks sprawling with a mighty sweep of his axe.

The greenskin landed in a heap, then rolled over onto its back, a grenade clenched in each bloodstained hand. Without thinking, Gunnar brought up his bolt pistol and shot the ork through the head.

Skaflock snarled as the distinctive *crack* of the bolt pistol echoed through the trees. 'I said no shooting!' he cried. As if in answer, the forest erupted in eager cries as the orks sought out the source of the gunshot.

Gunnar let out a rumbling growl, spitting a pair of shiny black pits into the crimson-tinged stream. The huge scout had a habit of chewing lich-berries; how he kept himself supplied on the long missions off Fenris was a mystery to everyone in the pack. A single berry was poisonous enough to kill a normal human in ten agony-filled seconds. Gunnar claimed the taste improved his disposition. 'Let them come,' he snarled, hefting his axe. 'We've plenty of cover and darkness on our side. We should be hunting *them*, not the other way around.'

'We're not here to hunt orks, Gunnar!' Skaflock snapped. 'We've got to link up with the assault team and guide them off the landing zone to a more defensible position – provided we aren't overrun by ork patrols in the meantime. Now, move out.' Without waiting for an answer, the Wolf Guard leader broke into a run, leaving the scouts to fall in as he sped on.

The orks were right on their heels. Skaflock heard the greenskins stumble into the gully moments behind them, and then the chase was on. Bursts of wild gunfire tore through the forest around them, kicking up plumes of dirt or blowing branches apart in showers of splinters. The Wolf Guard increased his speed, pushing his augmented muscles to the limit. Only his enhanced eyesight and agility allowed him to dodge the treacherous roots and low-hanging branches that lay in his path. Slowly but surely, the Wolf Scouts began to pull away from their pursuers, melting into the darkness like shadows.

THE SOUNDS OF battle called to the Space Wolves like a siren song, growing in intensity. Every few moments Skaflock closed his eyes and focused all of his concentration on the maelstrom of noise, picking out the distinctive notes of different weapons with a practiced ear: storm bolters, boltguns, plasma weapons and the distinctive hammering of crude ork guns.

After fifteen minutes the sounds of the Imperial weapons began to falter; Skaflock bared his fangs in a soundless snarl and drove himself on. Two minutes later he could no longer

hear any plasma weapons being fired. Four minutes after that all he could hear were bolters pounding in rapid-fire mode. Then slowly, minute by minute, the bolter fire dwindled away to nothing.

Not long afterwards the wind shifted, blowing from the north-east, and they could smell the blood on the air. The woods had grown silent. Skaflock abandoned all pretence of stealth for the last two kilometres, breaking into a sprint and praying to Russ that his senses had somehow deceived him.

The Wolf Scouts charged headlong into the broad meadow they'd designated as the assault team's drop zone. The gently sloping, grassy field was now a wasteland of mud, ravaged flesh and spilled blood. The black silhouettes of the drop pods reared like tilted gravestones in the crimson moonlight, wreathed in plumes of greasy smoke from the blazing hulls of ork battlewagons.

The dead lay everywhere. Skaflock's mind reeled at the slaughter. The orks had struck from three sides, charging right into the exhaust flames of the drop pods as they settled to the ground. The Space Wolf packs had been cut off from one another even before the drop ramps opened.

The rest of the pack gathered around their leader, staring bleakly at the scene of carnage. Hogun stepped forward, shaking his head mournfully. 'It's a disaster,' he whispered, his voice bleak.

'It's a defeat,' Skaflock said flatly. 'The orks have turned the tables on us for now, but that's the way of war. We've seen worse, Hogun. All of us have.'

'Skaflock's right,' Gunnar said. The expression on his face was bitter, but he nodded solemnly. 'We've been through harder scrapes than this one and won out in the end. We'll just fade back to the mountains and wait for the rest of the company—'

Before the Wolf Guard could finish, the night air trembled with a distant howl of rage and pain that echoed among the derelict drop pods.

As one, the veteran scouts looked to their leader. Skaflock flashed a rapid set of hand signals and the pack fanned out into skirmish order, sweeping silently towards the source of the noise.

The howl came from the far side of the drop zone. As the scouts

crept closer, Skaflock caught sight of a dozen Space Wolves – Blood Claws, judging by their youthful features and the markings on their bloodstained armour. They stumbled and staggered through the piled corpses, flinging green-skinned bodies left and right as they searched frantically among the dead. Many of the young Marines had removed their helmets, and their faces were twisted with grief.

Skaflock waved the scouts to a halt and stepped forward. 'Well met, wolf brothers,' he called out. 'We feared there were no survivors.'

Heads darted in Skaflock's direction. Several growled, showing their teeth. One Blood Claw in particular, who had been crouched beside a pile of corpses, rose to his feet. He was tall, and pale with rage, a still-healing gash running from high on his right temple diagonally down into his blood-matted beard. His bolt pistol was holstered, but the deactivated power fist covering his right hand clenched threateningly as he glared at Skaflock and his pack.

The Blood Claw took a step towards the Wolf Scouts. 'All too few,' he snarled, 'thanks to the likes of *you!*' The words dissolved into a bestial roar as the Space Wolf lunged at Skaflock, his eyes burning with hate. The sudden attack caught the scout leader unawares. Before he could react the Blood Claw closed the distance between them and smote Skaflock on the breastplate of his armour with a sound like a hammer against a bell. The Wolf Scout went sprawling, stunned by the impact. Had the power fist's field been active his chest would have been crushed like an egg.

The red-haired Space Wolf pounced on Skaflock in an instant, knocking him back against the ground. 'Cowards!' he roared, nearly berserk with fury.

Pinned beneath the Blood Claw's bulk, Skaflock barely rolled aside as the Marine's huge fist smashed into the mud mere centimetres from his head. 'Did you slink out of the woods to view your handiwork, or to pick over the bodies of the dead like carrion crows?'

Skaflock felt the Blood Claw's left hand close around his throat. Surprise gave way to a killing rage, rising like a black tide in his chest. Unbidden, his hand tightened on the hilt

of his power sword, thumb reaching for the activation switch.

'Remember your oaths, men of Fenris! Russ cannot abide a kinslayer, and the Emperor's eyes are upon you!'

The shout came from the shadow of one of the drop pods, ringed with the bodies of huge, armoured orks. Recognition struck Skaflock like a hammer blow, but it was the Blood Claw who spoke the name first.

'Rothgar!' The young Marine scrambled to his feet, heedless of the power sword pointed at his chest.

The great company's wolf priest stepped slowly into the moonlight. At once, Skaflock could see that the priest was very gravely injured. Rothgar's Terminator suit was rent in half a dozen places, and the jagged tip of a dead ork's power claw jutted from his chest. His face was deathly white, and drops of red glistened in his grey beard. It was a testament to the wolf priest's legendary prowess that he lived at all.

'Well met, Sightblinder,' Rothgar said, showing blood-slicked teeth. 'Late to the battlefield, thank the primarch. What is your report?'

'We've been lured into a trap,' he said simply. 'Once the assault teams began their descent the damned orks started jamming all the vox frequencies somehow.' The Wolf Scout bit back a curse. 'You and these Blood Claws look to be all that's left from the team that landed here.'

'Our pod suffered a malfunction on the way down and we landed some ten kilometres north of the drop zone,' the red-haired Blood Claw said. 'The woods were crawling with ork patrols. We had to fight every step of the way to make it here. Two of our brothers and our Wolf Guard leader were slain.'

'The orks had more time to scout the area than we did. If we could find the best drop zones in each sector, so could they,' Skaflock said. 'But I've never known a greenskin to show such patience and forethought. There's more at work here than meets the eye.'

Rothgar's eyes narrowed conspiratorially. 'This Skargutz has ambitions, I think. He's no Ghazghkull, but he's no mere warboss, either. I think he's got his sights set on uniting the ork warbands in this sector under his banner. If he can prove to

them that he can strike anywhere he wants *and* get the best of any force the Imperium can throw at him, they'll join his mob without hesitation.'

'And now that he's bloodied us, he'll pull out of Cambion with whatever plunder he's gathered and start rousing the other warbands.' It was a clever move, as much as it galled Skaflock to admit it.

Skaflock forced his anger and guilt aside and tried to find a way to salvage the situation. 'All right,' he said, addressing the wolf priest. 'The orks have us cut off for now, but our fleet isn't going to sit idle. With every pass they make over the planet their surveyors will have a clearer picture of where the ork landing sites are hidden. The orks can't keep this jamming up forever – they need the vox channels to coordinate themselves almost as much as we do. Most likely they will wait until they think the power cells on our designator beacons have run dry, then they'll begin their pullout. In the meantime, Kjarl here can watch over you at one of our campsites while my pack and I locate the main ork camp. When the jamming lifts, we can contact Lord Haldane and coordinate a counter strike before Skargutz can escape.'

Kjarl shook his head in disgust. 'Have you no idea what's happened?'

'How could he?' Rothgar said darkly. When he turned to Skaflock, his expression was even more pained than before. 'Have you ever known Haldane Ironhammer to let another lead an assault in his place? He dropped with us in the first wave, lad. Your lord lies somewhere among the fallen.'

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