



NIGHTBRINGER

AN ULTRAMARINES NOVEL BY
GRAHAM McNEILL

NEWLY PROMOTED Ultramarines Captain Uriel Ventris is assigned to investigate Pavonis, an Imperial planet plagued by civil disorder and renegade eldar raiders. But nothing is as straightforward as it appears, and Uriel and his allies are forced into a deadly race against time to destroy their shadowy enemy – or the whole planet must be sacrificed for the good of humanity.

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RAIN FELL IN an ever-increasing deluge as the mud-caked Thunderhawk passed low over the roofs of the destroyed township of Morten's Reach. The screaming engines threw up huge sprays of muddy water as the aerial transport touched down in the central square of the settlement, steam hissing from the hot exhausts.

Barely had the landing skids touched down before the engines rumbled throatily and the armoured doors slid back on oiled runners. Three squads of Ultramarines efficiently debarked and fanned out through the town. Two sprinted to the settlement's perimeter as the third, led by Uriel, moved towards the burnt out shell of a building that had obviously once been a temple.

Uriel swept his boltgun left and right. The rain cut visibility dramatically and even his power armour's auto-senses were having a hard time penetrating the greyness.

He could discern no movement or signs of life in the settlement and the evidence of his own sense told him that there had been nothing living in this place for many weeks.

'Sector Prime, clear!' came a shout over the vox-net.

'Sector Secundus, clear!'

'Sector Tertiarus, clear!'

Uriel lowered his weapon and slid it into the restraining clip on his thigh.

'All squad sergeants converge on me. Keep perimeters secure,' he ordered.

Seconds later, Uriel's sergeants, Venasus, Dardino and

Pasanius, his flamer sputtering in the falling rain, gathered at the foot of the temple stairs.

'I want this place searched from end to end, house-to-house. Assume all locations are hostile and report in the moment you find anything.'

'What are we looking for, captain? Survivors or victims?' asked Venasus.

'Anything out of the ordinary. There may be some clue as to what the eldar are doing in this system. If there is, I want it found.'

Uriel indicated the weapon impacts on the blackened walls of the temple behind him. 'Servants of the Emperor died here and I want to know why.'

URIEL REMOVED HIS helmet and tipped his head back, allowing the rain to flow across his face, then spat a mouthful of water into the mud. He slicked his short, black hair back as examined the splintered remains of the temple doors, running his free hand across the burnt timber and impacts of small arms fire.

He slid out his combat knife and dug the point of the weapon into a small impact crater and worked the tip back and forth.

Something dropped from the wood into his hand and he lifted it closer to his face. His cupped palm swam with rainwater, but Uriel could clearly see a long splinter of jagged violet crystal. There were scores of these embedded in the wall and, from their grouping, Uriel could tell they had come from one shot.

The tactical briefings he had digested on the eldar had told that they favoured weaponry that fired a hail of monomolecular, razor-edged discs of metal. But there had been other weapons, described as belonging to a darker sub-sect of these aliens, which fired just this kind of ammunition.

Some texts codified this sub-sect as a divergent split of the eldar race, but to Uriel they were all the same: vile aliens that required cleansing in the holy fire of his bolter.

He levered aside the doors and entered the temple, fighting down his rising fury at such desecration. The stench of scorched human fat still clung to the burnt timbers and Uriel pushed his way through to the front of the church where a blackened statue of the divine Master of Mankind lay half buried under a smashed pew. He pulled the statue clear and, though it was heavy, lifted it from the rubble.

At the open rear of the temple he saw a muddy hillside with a number of simple grave markers hammered into the ground at its base. He splashed down from the temple, still carrying the statue, sinking calf deep in the mud. Uriel was saddened at the sheer number of graves. The people who had discovered and cared for Gedrik must have dug them for the people of Morten's Reach.

'Pasanius,' called Uriel over the vox-net. 'I am behind the temple. Bring me the boy's body from the gunship. He should be buried here with his people.'

'Acknowledged,' hissed the voice of the veteran sergeant.

Uriel rested the rescued statue before him and awaited Pasanius's arrival silently in the rain.

Sergeant Pasanius marched slowly around the temple carrying the bandage-swathed body of Gedrik, the green plaid of Caernus IV wrapped around his waist and his sword laid across his chest. An honour guard of Ultramarines followed the massive sergeant as he approached the mass grave.

Uriel nodded to his friend and turned to the warriors who stood behind him.

'Find a grave marked with the name Maeren. We will bury him with his woman.'

The Ultramarines fanned out through the rain, scanning the names on the wooden cross pieces on the grave markers and, after a few minutes' searching, found the grave of Gedrik's wife and child. An honour guard dug in the muddy earth until the body of the young man was finally laid to rest in the soil of his home.

Uriel marched through the graves to where the ground began to rise, intending to plant the statue of the Emperor into the soft earth to watch over His departed flock. He lifted the statue high above his head and rammed it down into the earth, where there was a dull, mud-deadened clang of stone on metal.

Uriel pulled the statue clear, laying it to one side as he dropped to his knees and scraped away the mud at his feet.

Perhaps half a metre down, the ground changed from soft, sucking mud to a wet, flaked metal. He cleared more of the mud away, revealing a rust pocked plate of metal.

'Sergeant!' he shouted. 'Get over here and bring your squad with you. I think we may have found the Hill of the Metal the boy spoke of.'

HALF AN HOUR later, the Ultramarines had cleared a vast swathe of the hillside of mud, and Uriel was amazed at the scale of what lay beneath. A strata of rusted metal lay beneath the hillside, its translucent depths awash with the same evil brown tendrils that had infested Gedrik's sword.

'Guilliman's blood!' swore Dardino when the hillside was revealed. 'What is it?'

'I have no idea,' answered Uriel. 'But whatever it is, the eldar obviously thought it was worth dying for.'

Uriel and Pasanus clambered up the slope towards a triangular depression in the centre of the otherwise flat surface of the metal. Metal crumbled beneath their armoured boots and each footfall was accompanied by squealing groans. The corrosion was converging upon the central point and Uriel knew that soon there would be nothing left. He and Pasanus squatted by the depression in the metal's surface.

The interior of the depression was lined with sockets and hanging wires that trailed into the depths of the metal.

The exact purpose of the niche was a mystery, but it had obviously contained something roughly cylindrical, which had been removed. Was this what had caused the metal to die? Ancient script surrounded the niche and Uriel traced the outline of the strange alien letters with his finger.

'Can you read it?' asked Pasanus.

'No, nor would I want to. These sigils are obviously alien in origin and their blasphemous meaning is best left undisclosed. But we should record them for those whose purpose is to delve into such mysteries.'

Uriel wiped the rusted metal and mud from his armour. 'Get a sample of this and we'll take it back to the *Vae Victus* with us. Perhaps the techs will be able to identify this substance and decipher this script.'

Uriel scooped a handful of mud and metal up in his hands, letting the ooze drip slowly from his fingers. 'I don't like it, Pasanus. Whenever xenos start acting out of character it worries me.'

'What do you mean? Out of character?'

'Well, look at this place. Every body is in its grave, perhaps two hundred people, enough to populate a settlement of this size, agreed?'

'Agreed.'

'And you checked the remains of the dwellings, was anything taken?'

'Hard to tell, but no, I don't think so. It looks like everything was burned to the ground rather than plundered.'

'Exactly my point. Why didn't they take prisoners? Have you ever known eldar raiders leave people behind when they could be taken for torture and slavery? No, these aliens came to this place for one thing only – whatever was in that metal.'

'And what do you think that was? A weapon of some kind? Maybe something of holy significance to them?'

'That's what worries me, old friend. I don't know and I can't even begin to guess either. I'm beginning to think that we may have more to deal with than a simple case of alien pirates.'

They returned to the foot of the hill and marched to the centre of the destroyed township. Rain fell in drenching sheets and Uriel welcomed it, allowing its cold bite to cleanse his skin of the evil sensation he had felt while standing at the hillside.

A piece of a puzzle lay before him, yet he could not fathom its meaning. The eldar obviously had good reason to risk Imperial retribution by attacking one of the Emperor's worlds, and he knew that these aliens would never undertake such action without good reason.

Before he could ponder the matter further, he was interrupted by a burst of static from the vox-net connection to the *Vae Victus*, and Uriel heard the excited tones of Lord Admiral Tiberius.

'Captain Ventris, return to the ship immediately. Repeat, return to the ship immediately.'

'Lord admiral, what is the matter? Has something happened?'

'Indeed it has. I have just received word that system defence ships encountered a vessel with an anomalous engine signature around the eighth planet some two hours ago and fired on it.'

'Somebody obviously listened to our warning then. Did they destroy the alien vessel?'

'No, I do not believe they actually hit her, but they have driven it in our direction. We are almost directly in its flight path, captain. The alien vessel cannot know we are here. We can spring our own ambush on these bastards.'

Uriel smiled, hearing the admiral's anticipation even over the distortion of a ship-to-shore vox-caster.

'How long before you can get back here, Uriel?'

'We can be ready to depart in less than a minute, Lord Admiral. Transmit the surveyor data to the Thunderhawk's avionics logister.'

'Hurry, Uriel. They are moving fast and we might not get another shot at this.'

'We shall be seeing you shortly. Ventris out.'

Uriel replaced his helmet and faced his warriors.

'The foe we have come to fight approach our position and we have a chance to avenge those who fell to their traitorous attack. Honour demands that we accept this challenge.'

Uriel drew his power sword and shouted, 'Are you ready for battle?'

As one, the warriors of Fourth Company roared their affirmation.

ARIO BARZANO RECLINED on his bed, sipping a glass of uskavar and scanning through a sheaf of papers delivered to his chambers by a grim-faced Sergeant Learchus. Barzano had endured the full wrath of the sergeant when he and Jenna Sharben had returned to the palace chambers after their excursion into the manufactorum districts of the city.

The pair had hit a few beerhalls and alehouses, but had learned nothing much more than the fact that there was whispered talk of a mass demonstration planned. Most of the talk had been aimed simply at deriding the planetary rulers and the general miserable lot of the workers. After three fruitless hours, they had decided to cut their losses and return to the palace.

The situation on Pavonis was in many ways more serious than he had imagined. There was more going on here than simple piracy and population unrest.

He put down the papers and swung his legs out onto the floor, rubbing the bridge of his nose and sighing deeply. He pushed himself to his feet and shuffled towards the table where a system map had been spread out over the detritus of his evening meal. Dimly he could hear the persistent scratching of quills and the low prayers of his retinue of scribes. Lortuen Perjed was with them, directing their researches and collating their scriverings, and Barzano felt a smile touch his lips at the thought of the old man. He had been stalwart support these last few weeks and Barzano doubted he could have come this far

without his help.

He returned his attention to the map and set his glass down on a curling corner.

A line of blue ink recorded the course of the *Vae Victus* and Barzano wondered if this one ship would be enough. He quickly dismissed the thought. If they could not prevent the Bringer of Darkness from returning then the entire Ultima Segmentum battlefleet would not make a difference.

The prospect depressed him and he refilled his glass.

'Shouldn't you go easy on that?' asked Lortuen Perjed, appearing from the shadows. 'It's quite strong, you know.'

'I know, but it is rather good,' replied Barzano, pouring another glass.

Perjed accepted the drink and sat on the edge of the bed. He sipped the drink, his eyes widening at its potency.

'Yes, quite strong,' he confirmed, taking another swallow. Barzano slumped into the chair before his display terminal and retrieved his glass from the map.

'So what are you still doing up anyway, Lortuen?'

The old adept shrugged. 'Not much else to do at the moment.'

'True,' agreed Barzano. 'I dislike playing a waiting game.'

'You used to enjoy it. Waiting until your prey made a mistake and played right into your hands.'

'Did I? I don't remember.'

'Yes, in the old days you were quite the patient hunter.'

'The old days,' snorted Barzano. 'How long ago were they?'

'Oh, a good few decades ago.'

'A lot's changed since then, Lortuen. I'm hardly the same man any more.'

'My, you are in a sour mood tonight, Ario. Was it not Saint Josmane who said that any service of the Emperor should be rejoiced in?'

'Yes, but I'll bet he never had to do the things we've had to.'

'No,' admitted Perjed, 'but then he was a martyr and got himself killed, Emperor rest his holy soul.'

'True,' laughed Barzano, 'a fate I'd be happy to avoid if I can.'

'That goes for me too,' agreed Perjed, raising his glass.

Barzano rubbed the heel of his palm against his temple and squeezed his eyes shut.

He reached over the desk and picked up a small glass jar of white capsules.

'Are the headaches bad?'

Barzano nodded without replying, swallowing two of the capsules with a mouthful of uskavar. He shook his head and stuck out his tongue at their vile taste.

'It is worse than before. I have felt it ever since we landed, something vast and older than time, pressing in on my skull.'

'Then perhaps you should go easy on the uskavar. It can't help.'

'On the contrary, my dear old friend, it is the only thing that helps. To blot everything out in a haze of alcohol is one of the few pleasures I have left to me.'

'No, that's not the Ario Barzano I have served for thirty years speaking.'

'And just who is that anyway? For I no longer know. The adept, the hive ganger, the courtier, the rogue trader? Who is the Ario Barzano you have served for all those years?'

'The servant of the Emperor who has never once faltered in his duty. Maybe you no longer remember who you are, but I do, and it pains me to see you do this to yourself.'

Barzano nodded and put down his glass with exaggerated care.

'I am sorry, my friend. You are correct of course. The sooner we are done here the better.'

'There is no need to apologise, Ario. I have served many masters in my time and almost all were harder work than you. But to change the subject, has there been any more contact with the *Vae Victus* and Captain Ventris?'

'Not since they arrived at Caernus IV, no.'

'Do you expect them to be able to stop the eldar?'

'I think if anyone can, it will be Uriel. I do not believe he is a man who gives up easily. He was a protégé of Captain Idaeus, you know?'

'Yes, I remember reading the report from Thracia. Was that why you picked him?'

'Partly, but he has something to prove and that's the kind of man I want on my side when it all comes down to the final scrap.'

'And you are hoping that some of Idaeus's unconventional thinking may have rubbed off on Uriel?'

'Hoping?' laughed Barzano. 'My dear Lortuen. I am counting on it.'

URIEL WATCHED THE blips indicating the incoming eldar ship and the *Vae Victus* on the Thunderhawk's augury panel and the ghostly green lines that connected their approach vectors. It was going to be close; the alien vessel was approaching at high speed and they had still to return to the *Vae Victus* to refuel. The question was: did they have time?

He pointed towards the glowing panel and said, 'How long until we can rendezvous with the *Victus*?'

The pilot checked the augury panel. 'Twenty-six minutes, captain.'

Twenty-six minutes. Add another fifteen to refuel, eight if they refuelled hot, with the engines still turning over in the launch bay. The Codex Astartes strictly forbade such a dangerous practice, but time was of the essence here and he could not afford to waste it. But then the *Victus* only had this one operable Thunderhawk and if it blew up in the launch bay...

'Can we reach the eldar ship without refuelling?'

'No, sir.'

Uriel swore. They were unlikely to get a better shot at the eldar than this, but they were hamstrung by distance and logistical necessity.

If only the eldar could be made to turn towards them.

'Quickly, patch me through to the lord admiral!'

The co-pilot opened a channel to the *Vae Victus*.

'Admiral, this is Captain Ventris, I do not believe we have time to reach you and refuel before the eldar will be beyond our reach.'

'What are you talking about?' stormed the voice of Lord Admiral Tiberius from the command bridge. 'You have to refuel, you don't have enough to reach the eldar if you don't.'

'I know that, Admiral, but if we return to the *Vae Victus* we will miss our chance to take the fight to them on their own ship. You can retrieve us when we're done.'

The vox link crackled as Tiberius considered Uriel's proposal. The admiral's tone was cautious when he finally answered.

'I do not consider this wise, Captain Ventris. You may be correct, but it goes against everything in the Codex Astartes regarding ship operations.'

'I know that, but it is the best chance we have to cripple them. If we can get on the bridge we can do some serious damage. If you can drive them towards us with some well aimed battery

fire, we can manoeuvre more effectively to get a better breaching position.'

'Very well, Captain Ventris, but I shall be noting in my log that I disapprove of your flagrant disregard for the words of the Blessed Primarch.'

'That is your right and privilege, admiral, but we can discuss this at a later date. The enemy approaches.'

ARCHON KESHARQ CRADLED his axe, its blade sticky with the blood of the deck officer responsible for the maintenance of the holofields and ground his teeth in anticipation. The raid on the last site indicated by the *kyerzak* had been absurdly easy. The stupid mon-keigh had thrown themselves on his mercy, not realising that he had none to give. He had ripped their souls screaming from their bodies and stolen that which they had removed from the asteroid.

It was unfortunate that some of the lumbering ships of the mon-keigh had been so close, but Kesharq had not been worried. They were no match for the *Stormrider* and he had arrogantly steered a course through them, trusting to his holofields to confound their primitive weapons. And so they had until damage suffered during their engagement with the Astartes vessel had caused the holofields to fail. He knew he could stay and fight. The *Stormrider* could easily defeat these vessels, but they carried the final piece of the key now and its worth was far greater than a few moments of hollow glory. The crewman responsible for the failure of the holofields had been executed and his replacement was working to repair them even now.

Thinking of the prize that lay in his hold, Kesharq pictured the form of Asdrubael Vect, weeping and begging for his life before he destroyed him.

He could taste his vengeance on Vect in the blood that coated his teeth and knew that this was the most critical time. The *kyerzak* would try and rob him of his prize, but his continued existence was only due to Kesharq allowing the Surgeon to practise his art upon his flesh. Kesharq knew that this alone would not be enough of a threat to prevent him from trying. He already knew that the *kyerzak's* electro-priest they carried had made several attempts to distil an antidote to the toxin that daily ravaged his master's body.

Kesharq knew he would not be successful. Before his disgrace

by association, the Surgeon had been known as one of the finest Venomists of the Kabal and the threat of his lethal creations was the bane of every Archon's food table.

No, the *kyerzak* would not be successful and soon he would allow the Surgeon to torture the pitiful figure to death over the course of the coming months.

He glanced up at the viewing screen, calculating how long it would take to reach Pavonis.

Not long. Not long at all.

'DO YOU HAVE him, Philotas?' whispered Lord Admiral Tiberius, as though shouting would somehow alert the alien vessel that sat in the centre of his viewscreen.

'Yes, lord admiral, the alien ship appears to be without its disruption shields. Broadside batteries are establishing a firing solution now.'

'Excellent.'

Tiberius drummed his fingers on the wood panelling of his pulpit and chewed his bottom lip. He did not like Uriel's method of war. Despite the sense of it, it railed against everything he had learned after centuries of combat in space. Everything the Blessed Guilliman had set down in the holy tome, the Codex Astartes, avowed that ships should go into battle with their full complement of craft and no ship should launch boarding actions without first having disabled close-in batteries.

He did not like it, but he could see that Uriel was right. To return to the *Vae Victus* would mean their best chance at destroying the alien vessel would slip away. To launch an assault against an enemy's bridge was the dream of every boarding party and, if successful, would usually mean the capture or death of the enemy captain.

He did not like it, but he would go along with it.

'Broadside battery commanders report they have a firing solution. Target vessel has entered weapons' range.'

Firing at a vessel at this range would be unlikely to inflict many hits, but then that was not the plan. Were he to wait much longer, the alien craft would in all likelihood detect them and evade. All he had to do was spook the alien captain and drive him towards Uriel's approaching Thunderhawk, its engine

emissions masked by the close proximity of the planet's atmosphere.

'On my command, order battery gunners to open fire. Then engage engines in full reverse and fire starboard manoeuvring thrusters. I want him driven over the polar-regions and into Captain Ventris's path.'

'Yes, lord admiral.'

URIEL SQUINTED THROUGH the pilot's canopy, but could see little other than the flaring discharges of the planet's atmosphere washing over the Thunderhawk's hull. The feed from the *Vae Victus* gave them the position of the eldar vessel and if it would just move a little closer they would have him.

Tech-marine Harkus intoned the Chant of Dissolution upon the Thunderhawk's boarding umbilical and the shaped breaching charges that would blast their way through the alien vessel's hull. Chaplain Clausel led the Ultramarines in prayer, blessing each warrior's gun and blade. Uriel had ordered chainswords issued to everyone, knowing that the fighting was sure to get close and bloody. Uriel rejoined his men and drew his power sword, bowing to receive the chaplain's blessing.

'DREAD ARCHON! I am detecting an energy build-up three hundred thousand kilometres directly in front of us!'

Kesharq hurried over to the warrior who had spoken and stared at the sensor returns in horror.

There was no mistaking the energy signature. An enemy ship was building power in its weapon batteries and preparing to fire.

'Hard to port, take us low over the planet. Lose him in the atmosphere!'

'BROADSIDE BATTERIES OPEN fire!' ordered Tiberius. 'Engage a reverse port turn!'

The enormous vessel shuddered as the entire port broadside unleashed a hail of fire upon the eldar vessel. Tiberius gripped the edge of the pulpit as the mighty war vessel began turning to face its foe and bring its prow bombardment cannon to bear.

They might not be doing this by the book, but by the Emperor, they were going to do it with their biggest guns.

EACH BROADSIDE BATTERY hurled explosive, building-sized projectiles towards their target. But at such extreme range, most flew wide of the mark, detonating hundreds of kilometres from the *Stormrider*. Some shells exploded close, but caused no real damage save peppering the hull and mainsail with spinning fragments.

The ship nimbly altered course, its needle-nosed prow sweeping left and diving hard towards the planet's atmosphere. More shots were fired and a vast explosion blossomed above the ship's position as the strike cruiser's bombardment cannon entered the fray.

The *Stormrider* was an obsidian dart, knifing through the atmosphere of Caernus IV, its superior speed and manoeuvrability carrying it from the guns of its enemy.

The *Vae Victus* tried to match the turn and follow the *Stormrider*, but she was nowhere near as nimble as her prey.

The eldar vessel slowed as it angled away from Caernus IV. At this point, a ship was effectively blind as its sensors realigned from the fiery journey through the upper atmosphere.

As the *Stormrider* cleared the atmosphere, a streak of blue flashed upwards and settled in behind the tall sails of the graceful ship. The Thunderhawk's powerful cannons stitched a path of fire across the rear quarter of the vessel, blasting off bladed fins and barbed hooks.

Before the eldar ship could react, the Thunderhawk swooped in across its curved topside. Drill clamps fired from the gunship's belly, burrowing into the wraithbone hull of the *Stormrider*, and dragging the lighter assault craft down hard onto the eldar ship.

TECH-MARINE HARKUS TRIGGERED the firing mechanism of the boarding umbilical and shouted, 'Fire in the hole!' as he detonated the shaped breaching charges at its end. Even through the armoured deck plates of the Thunderhawk, Uriel could feel the tremendous blast. He spun the locking handle and wrenched open the circular hatch that led through the umbilical towards the breach in the eldar vessel's hull.

Speed was essential now. Hit hard and hit fast.

'Ultramarines! With me!' he bellowed and dropped through the boarding umbilical.

URIEL HIT THE deck of the alien vessel and rolled aside as the next Ultramarine warrior slammed down behind him. He sprang to his feet and drew his power sword and bolt pistol in one fluid motion. He swept his pistol around the room as he took in his surroundings, a low-ceilinged room stacked with round containers.

He thumbed the activation rune on the hilt of his sword and the blade leapt with eldritch fire just as a pair of crimson-armoured warriors charged through an oval shaped doorway. Their armour was smooth and gleaming, adorned with glittering blades, and they carried long rifles with jagged bayonets.

'Courage and honour!' screamed Uriel, launching himself at the eldar warriors.

He smashed his power sword down on the first alien's collarbone, shearing him from neck to groin. The other alien stabbed with its bladed rifle and Uriel spun inside its guard. He hammered his elbow into his attacker's face, pulverising its helmet visor and breaking its neck.

He spared a glance behind him as more of the Ultramarines dropped through the hull breach. Pasanius was there, the blue-hot burner of his flamer roaring and ready to incinerate the enemies of the Emperor.

Uriel raised his power sword and yelled, 'The bridge!'

He sprinted through the doorway, finding himself in a narrow, shadowed corridor, with smooth walls that tapered to a point above his head.

A strange, truly alien aroma filled his senses, but he could not identify it. Two curving passages radiated forwards, their ends disappearing from sight.

Uriel picked the left hand corridor, and charged down its length.

He shouted, 'Pasanius with me! Dardino and Venasus take the right.'

Uriel heard the beat of footsteps from up ahead and saw dozens of the armoured warriors charging to intercept him. They carried the same bladed rifles and Uriel could see a number of larger, more dangerous weapons amongst their ranks.

Raising his flamer, Pasanius shouted, 'Get down!'

Uriel dropped and felt the whoosh of superheated promethium as it washed over him down the corridor. Alien screams echoed from the glassy walls as the liquid flames cooked their

bodies within their armour and seared the flesh from their bones.

Uriel pushed himself to his feet and charged forwards, hurling the burning corpses and leaping amongst the eldar. His sword slashed left and right and where he struck, aliens died. With a wild roar, the Ultramarines followed their captain, swords hacking and cutting amongst the aliens. Screaming, chainsaw-edged blades ripped through the flexible armour plates and flesh of the aliens with ease.

Chaplain Clausel bellowed the Canticles of Faith as he smote the aliens with his deadly crozius arcanum.

Uriel felt a close range blast of splinter fire impact on his arm. He ignored it, his armour absorbed the blast. Another blast slammed into his helmet and he snarled, spinning and beheading his attacker.

The last of the eldar died; the corridor had become a stinking charnel house.

None of the Ultramarines had fallen, though several bled from minor wounds. Pasanus fired short bursts of flame along a bend further down the corridor, deterring any counterattack.

Uriel opened a vox-channel to his other squads.

‘Dardino, Venasus. What’s your status?’

Venasus answered first, his voice steady and controlled despite the sounds of fierce battle raging around him. ‘Strong resistance, captain. We have encountered what looks like a major defence point. Dardino is attempting to flank the aliens. I estimate six minutes until we overwhelm them.’

‘Make it four! Ventris out.’

Gunfire spat towards the Ultramarines, ricocheting from the walls and filling the air with whickering splinters. The same type of splinters Uriel had dug from the church wall on Caernus IV.

Pasanus was on the ground, a dark, smoking hole punched in his shoulder guard. Uriel could hear the sergeant’s cursing over the vox-net as the big man dragged himself away from the bend in the tunnel, never once releasing his grip on his flamer. Uriel could hear the sounds of more aliens moving to intercept them and thumbed a pair of frag grenades from his belt dispenser.

The weight of fire began to intensify and Uriel knew they had to keep pushing on lest the assault be halted in its tracks before it had even begun.

He rolled around the corner and fired two shots from his bolt pistol. The heavy crack-thump of bolter ammunition was reassuringly loud compared to the aliens' weaponry. A pair of aliens fell, their chests blown open by the mass-reactive shells as Uriel flipped both frags down the corridor. He fired twice more before diving back into cover as the grenades detonated simultaneously, hurling bodies through the air in the fiery blast.

Uriel leapt to his feet and dragged Pasanius upright.

'You ready for this, old friend?'

'More than ever, captain,' assured Pasanius hefting the flamer.

Uriel nodded and spun around the corridor, bolt pistol extended before him.

'For the Emperor!'

The Ultramarines followed Uriel as he pounded towards a crimson door, embossed with intricate designs of curving spikes and blades. Even from here he saw it was heavily armoured.

Cross-corridors bisected this one and Uriel could hear the sounds of battle from elsewhere in the ship. Red armoured figures dashed along parallel corridors and he shouted to watch the rear. With so many cross-corridors, there was a very real possibility of being outflanked and surrounded.

He slammed into the door and smashed it from its frame.

Uriel charged through the door, battle-hungry Ultramarines hard on his heels. They entered a vast, high-roofed dome and Uriel grinned with feral anticipation as he realised they must be on the command bridge at last. An ornate viewscreen dominated the far wall, with wide, hangar-like gates to either side. Iron tables with black leather restraint harnesses stood in a line, alongside racks of horrendous, multi-bladed weapons.

In the centre of the chamber, standing atop a raised command dais, was a tall, slender alien wearing an elaborately tooled suit of armour, similar to that of his warriors, but coloured a deep jade. He wore no helmet and his violet-streaked white hair spilled around his shoulders like snow. His skin was a lifeless mask, devoid of expression, and a thin line of blood ran from his lips. He carried a gigantic war axe, its blade stained red.

Dozens of aliens filled the room, heavily armoured warriors, hefting long, halberd-like weapons that pulsed with unnatural energy.

The room reeked of death and terror. How many souls had

met their end in this desolate place, wondered Uriel?

He had no time to ponder the question as the wide doors to either side of the viewscreen slid open. A horde of near naked warriors, both male and female, riding bizarre skimming blades and carrying long glaives, swept from each door.

Bolter shots felled half a dozen, but then they were amongst the Ultramarines, slashing and killing with their weapons. Uriel saw Brother Gaius fall, severed at the waist by the bladed wing of one of the flyers. His killer looped overhead as Gaius's body collapsed in a flood of gore.

Uriel put a bolt round through the whooping alien's head, watching with grim satisfaction as his limp body plummeted to the ground. The shrieking blade-skimmers spun high in the air, coming around for another pass.

Bolter rounds exploded amongst them as Dardino and Venasus led their squads into battle. Uriel shot dead another flyer as Venasus moved to stand beside him, his armour slick with alien blood.

'My apologies, captain. It took us five minutes.'

Uriel grinned fiercely beneath his helmet. 'I know you'll do better next time, sergeant.'

A skimmer exploded as Pasanus's flamer gouted a vast stream of liquid fire over its rider and fresh gunshots echoed through the dome. The vox in Uriel's helmet crackled to life as the Thunderhawk pilot patched into his personal link.

'Captain Ventris, we will have to pull back soon. The alien vessel is increasing in speed and we will not be able to maintain the umbilical for much longer. I suggest you begin falling back, before I am forced to disengage the docking clamps.'

Uriel cursed. He had no time to acknowledge the pilot's communication as he smashed a leather-harnessed warrior from his sky-board and rammed his sword through his belly. He saw the jade-armoured, albino warrior cutting a path towards him and wrenched his sword clear.

Some shapeless mass writhed around the warrior's legs, but Uriel could not discern its nature in the gloom. A trio of the skimming warriors swooped in towards Uriel. He blasted two from their boards with well-placed bolter fire and beheaded the third. The jade warrior cut down two Ultramarine battle-brothers with contemptuous ease as they tried to intercept him.

Uriel shouted at his warriors to stand fast.

‘This one is mine!’

From the icons on his helmet visor, Uriel could see that seven of his men were dead, their runic identifiers cold and black. His breathing was heavy, but his stamina was undiminished.

A space cleared around the two warriors as battle continued to rage throughout the bridge. The shapeless forms around the alien’s legs resolved into clarity and Uriel was horrified as he clearly saw the heaving mass of creatures that hissed and spat beside the alien leader. A repulsive, horrifying and piteous agglomeration of thrashing, deformed flesh, sewn together in a riot of anatomies, writhed at the alien’s feet. Each one was unique in its nauseating form, but all hissed with the same lunatic malevolence, baring yellowed fangs and jagged talons.

Uriel extended his sword, pointing the tip at the alien leader’s chest.

‘I am Uriel Ventris of the Ultramarines and I have come to kill you.’

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