

SHADOW POINT

A WARHAMMER 40,000 NOVEL
BY GORDON RENNIE



THE GOTHIC SECTOR is torn apart once more as psychotic Warmaster Abaddon the Despoiler launches a savage Black Crusade. With the help of his mysterious allies, Abaddon's goal is to capture the Blackstone Fortresses – ancient weapons of immeasurable power. In a desperate response, the Imperial warship **Macharius**, commanded by Captain Leoten Semper, is despatched to form its own alliance with the enigmatic eldar. But the fragile pacts formed by both sides look set to crumble when it becomes clear that the ultimate prize is at stake – the entire galaxy.

SHADOW POINT

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Gordon Rennie is the writer of *Missionary Man* and *Glimmer Rats* for 2000AD, *Bloodquest* and *Kal Jerico* for Warhammer Monthly, and other stories for *Inferno!* His career has included winning a Most Promising New Writer award and being threatened with a lawsuit by the Elvis Presley estate.

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'FULL AHEAD, BATTLE speed. Helm – engage port-side manoeuvring thrusters and bring us around one point to starboard, on my mark. Maintain formation position and keep us within three unit distances of our wing vessels. Stand by, all stations. Mister Nyder, be ready to fire torpedoes at my command.'

Leoten Semper stood in his customary position on the bridge, mindful of the newly-gleaming commodore rank bars on the epaulettes of his tunic; mindful too that, in the unspoken opinion of some under his command, including, most probably, some here on his own command deck, he had yet to prove his right to wear the new rank insignia. His promotion to the brevet rank of commodore-captain had been a battlefield necessity, made during the third Battle of the Moons of Pergamum several weeks earlier, when a lucky lance strike had struck the bridge of the battle-cruiser *Lord Huascar*, killing its captain. Commodore Haruna had been the commander of the battle-squadron, and Semper, named in the mortally-injured man's dying words, had assumed command of the Imperial forces and driven the opportunistic Chaos raid back out towards the system's outer fringes. Battlefleet Command had allowed the temporary promotion to stand, but Semper was all too aware that his sudden elevation had been at the expense of several other ship's captains within the battle-squadron, all of whom had greater seniority than him in terms of years of service.

If any of this troubled him, he never allowed it to show externally. He stood there, the calm and steady centre of the vortex of activity which filled the command deck of His Divine Majesty's Ship, the *Lord Solar Macharius*. Brightly-robed tech-priests communed together, whispering secret Machine God words to the machine-mind spirit within the ship's mighty logic engines, assuring it of its survival in the battle just about to begin. Choirs of servitors droned in chaotic unison, relaying the streams of

information flooding in from all sections of the ship, and from the other vessels in the battle group. Gunnery officers bustled amongst themselves, checking and rechecking likely target patterns and firing solutions. Ensigns and junior officers received reports from duty stations on every deck of the ship, and relayed them to senior officers who, in turn, reported in to Lieutenant Hito Ulanti.

The ship's second-in-command digested the information and communicated its summary to his captain with a single nod, and a few brief words.

'All stations standing by and ready to commence battle.'

Semper nodded in acknowledgement, and looked out through the command deck's front viewing bay. Through the metre-thick armoured glasteel, and still thousands of kilometres distant, but magnified by the viewing bay's in-built augur systems, he saw the wide scattering of targets ahead.

At a casual glance, it looked like a field of large asteroids, but a closer inspection of the magnified augur screen images and the telemetry data being gathered by the ship's surveyor showed that several of the asteroids were firing huge and crude thruster rockets in an attempt to manoeuvre into position, while the upwards-fluctuating energy signals surrounding many others showed them preparing to do likewise.

Ork roks. Asteroids taken over and colonised by the greenskin creatures and turned into crude but highly effective mobile fortresses. Twenty-eight of them counted so far in this cluster, with Emperor knows how many others scattered throughout this, the Mather system, creating a deadly obstacle to any Imperial convoys attempting to traverse this area of space. Two years ago, the last time a small Imperial force had been despatched to Mather to scour the system of any greenskin presence, just four of the asteroid fortresses had been detected and destroyed. Now, as was so typical of the creatures, they had seemingly emerged from nowhere to multiply and fester in even greater numbers than before.

'Weeds,' he murmured to himself, not realising at first that he was speaking aloud.

Ulanti, standing nearby, caught the word but not its meaning. 'Captain?'

'Weeds,' Semper repeated, gesturing at the constellation of asteroid-vessels before them. 'My grandfather was an admiral in Battlefleet Tamahl, and I remember a childhood visit to his

estate on Cypra Mundi after he had been granted permission to retire. If the crew think this particular Captain Semper is a stern taskmaster, Mister Ulanti, then he didn't know my grandfather. He was a holy terror amongst both the Emperor's enemies and his own men, and my cousins and I were terrified of the old devil.' A hint of a smile crossed Semper's face as his mind recalled the events of the past. 'I remember one time, though, when he seemed almost human to me. He took me out to the fields of his estate – after a lifetime of warfare amongst the stars, he relished the quiet tranquillity of the countryside – to help him supervise the planting of next season's crops.'

Ulanti feigned polite interest, wondering where all this was going, especially with battle imminent. Also, as a hiveworlder, even a highborn aristocratic one, he had lived most of his life in a world where the open elements promised nothing but danger and toxic death, and so Semper's talk of idyllic pastoral scenes meant almost nothing to him.

Semper sensed his second-in-command's slightly baffled impatience, and allowed himself another brief smile. 'That season, my grandfather had been having some trouble with weeds amongst his beloved rakki-fruit crops. They'd had to replant the crop three times already, and I can remember seeing him getting down on his hands and knees amongst the servitor-workers and pulling the weeds out of the earth with his own hands. "Damned greenskins!" he called them, hurling them away as far as he could. "Always watch out for them, Leoten," he told me. "Just when you think you've dug them all up, there's always more of them popping up as soon as your back's turned."

Semper glanced at Ulanti, still seeing puzzlement in the younger man's face. 'My grandfather knew all about orks, Hito. He won his admiral's spurs against the greenskins during the Cadium Campaign, and he took part in the scouring of the Achilia Reaches. I didn't know what he meant then, but I've fought those savages since, and now I know exactly what he was talking about all those years ago.'

He pointed at the asteroid cluster dead ahead of them, the details and numbers of the ork rok-fortresses there becoming more apparent the closer they drew to them. 'Weeds, Mister Ulanti. No sooner do we wipe them out, than they grow back again.'

Flashes of light from the pattern of roks signalled the commencement of hostilities. Ork munitions – massive, unwieldy

and potentially devastating – flew through the void to detonate harmlessly in space well ahead of the advancing Imperial battle-line.

‘Typical greenskins, no real command ability to speak of,’ grunted Werner Maeler, the *Macharius’s* efficient Gunnery Master. ‘We’re well out of range, and they still can’t wait to open fire. Still, at least the energy release from their weapons fire gives our gunnery surveyors an easier target to lock onto.’

Semper signalled to a communications officer. A comm-net channel opened up, linking him to the bridge of every other ship in the Imperial Navy formation.

‘Semper to battle-group. To arms, gentlemen. Let us tend to the Emperor’s garden,’ he ordered, knowing that he was about to prove once and for all his right to wear those new rank epaulettes on his shoulders.

THE *MACHARIUS* POWERED forward, its gargantuan plasma engines spilling out a fire cloud trail in its wake. To its starboard lay the Gothic class cruiser *Drachenfels*, an old and dependable comrade vessel, and the Dauntless class light cruiser *Triton*. *Triton’s* sister ship *Mannan* and the Lunar class cruiser *Graf Orlok*, an old but less dependable comrade vessel, were arrayed to the *Macharius’s* port side, while the Dominator class cruiser *Fearsome* flew within the arrow-head formation formed by the other cruisers. It was the clenched fist inside the armoured gauntlet, its deadly prow-mounted nova cannon weapon aimed at the heart of the ork forces. Accompanying it were the escort carriers *Vengeance of Belatis* and *Memory of Briniga*, merchantmen transports converted to military use and named after just two of those many Imperial worlds which had been destroyed during the war.

Swarms of close-range attack craft, wide-winged Marauders and vicious little snub-nosed Thunderbolt fighters, surged forth from makeshift launch bays in the carriers’ hulls, forming up into attack formations of their own. Dual squadrons of Cobra destroyers swept out wide along the battle-group’s front, guarding its flanks and extending its firepower all across the enemy’s front.

A significant force, by any measure, but one which Semper wished with all his heart he did not now have to lead into battle here. Battlefleet Gothic’s resources were stretched to breaking point to meet the threat posed by the forces of Abaddon the Despoiler, and each one of these ships gathered here today to

deal with the orks meant a ship less elsewhere within the Imperial line of battle, where it was needed most. Semper and his fellow captains would rather be fighting the Despoiler's warfleets than these greenskin savages, and again he damned the orks to the Eye of Terror and back, and vowed to make the creatures pay for the deadly but very much secondary threat they posed to the Emperor's forces within the Gothic sector, forcing Lord Ravensburg to deploy much-needed warships away from the war's main battle fronts.

'All ships forward. Mister Nyder – range to closest target?'

'Torpedo range is good, captain, but they've put up a fighter screen in front of them. I wouldn't trade ten of those greenskin death-trap contraptions they call fighters for one of our Furies, especially with one of my pilots in the cockpit, but they've got a hell of a lot of the damnable things. Estimate they'd manage to intercept at least half our fish before they reached their targets, and that's even before the greenskins bring their defence turrets into play.'

Semper nodded. 'Very well. Bring our own fighter wave forward. We'll dangle some bait in front of their noses, and see what they do then.'

'STORM LEADER TO SQUADRON. Full thrust forward on my lead. Let's show these animals what proper flying looks like.'

Amic Kaether opened up the power-feed on his Fury's engine drives, sending the interceptor fighter hurtling towards the ork line. Around him, the other craft of Storm Squadron did likewise, forming up around their commander in a perfect and deceptively simple-looking formation. Around and behind Storm, cruising in matching formation patterns, came the craft of Hornet and Hurricane squadrons, while Arrow, the fourth of *Macharius's* Fury squadrons, remained on a tight anti-ordnance defensive orbit around the advancing cruisers, ready to intercept any enemy torpedo or bomber craft attacks on the capital ships.

Kaether grinned. Aube Terraco, his counterpart in Arrow, was neither a patient nor an understanding man, and would doubtlessly be chafing in angry frustration at the role assigned to his squadron for this coming battle.

Kaether had more than a hundred enemy kills to his credit, the highest kill count of any of the *Macharius's* fighter squadron commanders, but, in a drunken boast one night in the pilots'

mess, Terraco, with just over eighty kills to his tally, had promised to surpass Kaether's score before the ship put into port for its next scheduled refit. Today, Terraco seemed likely to find little other than some rusty and easily-destroyed greenskin torpedo passing through his Fury's weapon sights, while Kaether was flying straight into the teeth of the enemy force, and, if he survived, would doubtlessly return to the *Macharius* with his kill tally further strengthened and his title unchallenged.

Yes, he reminded himself, looking towards the wing formation on his starboard side. Highest-scoring squadron commander, but not the highest-scoring ace aboard the *Macharius*. No, that honour definitely belonged to another. Almost two hundred confirmed enemy fighter or bomber kills, and Emperor knew how many other lesser targets such as assault craft, torpedoes, mine-bombs, landing pods, orbital lighters or even life rafts.

A glance confirmed that the *Macharius's* top fighter ace was there in position on the far starboard side of the formation. It may have been Kaether's imagination, but it seemed to him that the last Fury in line was slightly further away from his nearest wingman than was customary. If so, it was typical of the attitude of the occupant of the fighter's cockpit. He never mixed with his fellow pilots. He never visited the pilots' mess. He never took part in the tight-knit and often raucous camaraderie common amongst the other Fury interceptor pilots, whose life expectancy in front line action during the Gothic War could often be measured in months, and so were granted a grudging amnesty from the generally harsh discipline requirements aboard an Imperial warship. He didn't even share quarters with the other pilots, his veteran ace status and the unspoken disquiet he caused amongst his squadron comrades allowing him private quarters of his own, away from the others.

Kaether looked again, seeing that his formation's far starboard linchpin was proceeding as ordered, flying fast and true, predictably taking no part in the nervous and excited pre-battle banter between pilots, which filled the squadron comm-net channel.

Reth Zane. 'Zealot' Zane, as they called him. Now, four years after the horrific injuries the pilot has suffered in the aftermath of the events surrounding the evacuation and subsequent destruction of the Imperial world of Belatis, he seemed even more remote and less human than ever.

'Form up,' Kaether commanded over the comm-net. 'Be ready to wheel when you hear the word.' Acknowledgment runes flashed across the instrument screen in front of him, one for each of the thirteen pilots under his command.

'Zane?' he added, trying to keep the note of distaste out of his voice. 'You're on the far starboard point, so we're depending on you to get this right.'

'Ready when you give the word, commander,' came the electronically-modulated voice over the comm-net. Little evidence of humanity remained in Zane's voice after the tech-priests and ship's surgeons had done what they could with the charred and ruin-fleshed horror that had been brought to them more dead than alive those four years ago.

The end of Zane's comm-net reply was obliterated in a heavy spray of static, overlaid with bursts of barking grunts and thick, incomprehensibly guttural voices making words and sounds which no human throat could ever produce.

Ork-talk. The voices of the enemy, broadcast on crude but powerful ship-carried transmitters and now cutting randomly into the Imperial forces' own separate comm-net channels. In the cockpit space behind him, Kaether knew his tech-adept navigator Manetho would now be altering the squadron's comm-net frequencies, setting up blocker walls to filter out the enemy interference.

That meant they were close now, Kaether realised. Close enough to have entered the enemy's own comm-net bubble. Close enough to be beginning to take incoming gunfire as the nearest rok-fortresses' defence turrets opened up at them with the first bursts of wild-aimed speculative fire.

Kaether's eyes flickered between the view through his cockpit, as the distant shapes of the ork vessels loomed ever larger before him, and the information scrolling across his instrumentation panel's surveyor screens as the closing distance to the enemy counted down in kilometres and seconds. They were even closer now, close enough to start picking out details on the thick, rocky hides of the asteroid fortresses, close enough to begin to see the bewildering array of thruster engines, weapon emplacements, airlock entrances, attack craft launch bays, observation blisters, torpedo silos and defence turrets which studded their surfaces at seemingly random points. Close enough to see the swarms of fighter-bomber craft which buzzed excitedly in the orbits of the closest roks. As he

watched, he saw more and more of them peel away from the main body of ork vessels, unable to resist the challenge of the oncoming Fury squadrons.

Typical greenskins, thought Kaether, confident now that the strategy was indeed going to work. Offer them the chance of a good scrap, and they'll trample each other into the dust to take you up on your offer.

Kaether counted the passing of several more long and drawn-out seconds, leaving the final moment until as late as he dared, balancing how many more greenskin fighters he could draw off against the likely effective range of the increasing numbers of defence turrets now being aimed in his direction.

'Storm Leader to squadron. Wheel!' ordered Kaether finally, almost shouting into his helmet comm-link. 'Zane, show us the road out of here.'

As one, with Zane out on the far starboard wing leading the way, the entire fighter formation pivoted in a wide-arcing 90 degree turn to port, taking them right across the front of the enemy line. They were met by a hail of fire from the nearest rok-fortresses. Explosions filled the void around them, radioactive and more conventional fallout debris buffeting violently against the Furies' armour. Kaether's craft rocked violently, caught in the electronic squall from a nearby ork dirty-bomb explosion, and he saw amber warning runes light up across his instrumentation panel. In the rear of the cockpit, Manetho re-calibrated power-feed systems and whispered prayer-words to the fighter's guiding machine-spirit. A second later, the flashing runes on Kaether's panel returned to a solid and reassuring green. More runes lit up as the other craft in the formation reported in. Thirteen runes. All of Storm squadron had survived the potentially disastrous manoeuvre intact.

'How's the view behind us, Manetho?' he asked over the cockpit's internal comm-channel.

'Busy, commander,' came the simple, understated reply.

A glance at the rearward surveyor screen confirmed the tech-priest's succinct choice of words. Enemy fighter icons crowded across the screen, massing in chaotic and haphazard pursuit of the apparently retreating Imperial fighter wave. Kaether smiled; Manetho had successfully managed to block out the ork comm-net interference, but he could almost imagine the ork warlord commander's screams of frustrated rage as his protective fighter screen disintegrated before his very eyes, his pilots falling for

Captain Semper's ploy and chasing off in disordered pursuit of the Imperial feint attack.

He activated his comm-link to the carrier vessel's command deck. 'Storm Leader to *Macharius*. The bait has been taken. The field is yours.'

ON THE BRIDGE of the *Macharius*, communications officers confirmed the incoming signals from their sister ships.

'*Drachenfels* ready.'

'*Graf Orlok* ready.'

'Vanguard squadron ready.'

'Praetorian squadron ready.'

'*Macharius* ready.'

The last confirmation came from Remus Nyder, the *Macharius's* master of ordnance. Semper gestured in acknowledgement and raised his voice, knowing his words would be carried over the comm-net to his brother captains on the bridges of their own vessels.

'Very good, gentlemen. Fire on my mark... *Fire!*'

Seconds later, a deep shudder ran through the hull of the *Macharius*, signalling the launch of multiple torpedo missiles and the commencement of the battle in earnest.

'Torpedoes running true,' announced an ordnance officer. 'Four gone, two still in the tubes.'

'Understood. Commence ordnance reloading on tubes one to four,' ordered Semper.

The torpedoes rocketed away from the ship, the four fiery contrails of plasma gas from their full-burn engines matched on either side by an equal number of torpedo launches from the two other cruisers in the formation. Twelve torpedoes, with the Cobra destroyer squadrons on the flanks also launching six torpedoes apiece.

A total of twenty-four torpedoes, all converging on the same two targets at the centre front of the rok-cluster.

Ork fighters from what was left of the orks' defensive fighter screen scrambled to intercept the deadly missile wave. What the orks lacked in co-ordination and intelligence, they more than compensated for in terms of firepower and sheer bestial determination. Semper watched the bridge surveyor screen calmly as three of the torpedo icons winked out of existence one after the other, blown apart by the formidable weaponry of the ork craft. Moments later the surviving twenty-one torpedoes were through

the fighter screen, running the gauntlet of defensive fire from the target roks' anti-ordnance batteries.

The ork gunners, no doubt urged on by the angry roars of their brutal overseers, threw up a curtain of fire in the torpedo wave's path, destroying not only torpedoes but also more than a dozen of their own fighters which were still pursuing the missiles.

Semper watched as two more active torpedo icons disappeared from the screen, and then two more. There was a sharp intake of breath from one of the other officers on the deck as yet another icon disappeared off the screen.

Sixteen torpedoes left. Would that be enough to accomplish the desired task?

One of the torpedo icons suddenly flashed red. Then another. And still another. In seconds, the screen filled with red-coloured icons. Red for impact detonation. Fourteen red icons; fourteen hits on target. Two of the icons remained unlit. Two of the torpedoes, malfunctioning or possibly with their machine-mind guidance systems damaged by enemy fire, failed to find their slow-moving, lumbering targets and continued their journey, heading into the heart of the rok cluster where it was entirely possible they still might acquire and damage other enemy targets.

The torpedo wave's target had been the two largest rok-fortresses in the enemy front line. The roks were massive, one of them easily over eight kilometres from tip to tip, and possibly as many as four kilometres across. Eight torpedoes struck it, the remaining six finding the other one. Normally, it might have taken several dozen torpedo strikes to destroy targets this large. Not today, however. Today, the Imperium warships were using new ordnance: so-called 'rock-buster torpedoes', specially designed for the task in hand.

The torpedoes struck the pitted and cratered surface of the roks, their armoured nose-cones spinning like giant drill-bits and boring into the porous rock. The missiles burrowed deep into the bodies of the asteroids, drilling through hundreds of metres of rock in seconds. When the high-speed drill motor burned itself out at the end of its short lifespan, it triggered the warhead payload. The torpedoes exploded. Their payload was not the conventional plasma-fusion warheads used in normal ship-to-ship actions, designed to melt and destroy ship's hulls and set their internal compartments ablaze. Instead, the rock-busters' warheads were packed with high explosive seismic

charges, designed to shatter and pulverise rock, setting off a chain reaction of aftershocks within the structure of their asteroid targets far in excess of the payload's explosive yield.

To those watching on the command decks of the Imperial ships, it seemed as if the two massive rok-fortresses simply burst apart from within.

The smaller one went first, the majority of it vaporised in a huge secondary explosion as something inside it – some deep-buried power source or magazine cavern full of unstable high explosive ordnance – detonated under the effects of the torpedo strike. The larger one shook and rumbled, and then, slowly, jagged fiery lines appeared all across its surface. The lines split apart, growing ever wider and revealing huge fires consuming the interior of the thing. Chunks of it broke away and were sent spinning off into space, a prelude to what was about to happen. A second later, the entire rok came apart, disintegrating in a ravenous and fiery explosion. Fragments of it, huge and deadly, hurled out with explosive force, raining meteor destruction amongst the roks nearest to it. From the safety of the bridge, Semper saw one jagged shard larger than a frigate strike another rok, piercing it like a dagger and sending it tumbling askew out of the ork formation.

'Two, or maybe even three, down, at least twenty-six more to go,' noted the laconic voice of one of the *Macharius's* senior gunnery officers.

Semper grunted in grim humour at the comment. It would indeed be a remarkable achievement if his force managed to destroy all the roks, even assuming they had enough rock-buster torpedoes to accomplish such a task. Which, as everyone on the command deck knew, was certainly not the case. The new experimental ordnance devices were rare and expensive and so far in short supply. Semper had little doubt that, assuming they actually survived the engagement, he and his fellow captains would be recommending that the rock-busters become part of the standard specialist range of torpedoes available to the forces of Battlefleet Gothic, after their first and highly successful testing here today under battlefield conditions.

'Ordnance report, Mister Nyder?' he asked. 'How many seismic torpedoes do we have left?'

'The rock-busters? Four, captain. Those shiftless Munitorium heretics were probably too busy chasing young adepts or polishing all that gold braid they give themselves to organise the

supply of more than eight per ship to those of us who actually do the fighting in this man's war.'

'No sense letting them go to waste, then, I imagine. We have a new target laid in?'

Nyder gestured towards the magnified image of one of the roks on the auspex screen before him. 'The big one here, the one with what looks like the profile of old Lord Admiral Dardania, Emperor rest his devilish old soul, staring out at us from amongst those rock formations on its starboard flank. We're doubling up our fire with *Drachenfels*. They're re-loaded and waiting for the word.'

Semper looked at the auspex-magnified image. Curiously, the jagged rock formation in question truly did resemble the unmistakable and craggy countenance of the former Lord Admiral, one of Battlefleet Gothic's greatest and most legendary commanders.

'I wonder, Mister Nyder, would it be a court martial offence to aim our torpedoes at the face of the good lord admiral?' asked Semper, with a half-smile.

Nyder returned the joke. 'If I recall correctly, sir, from what I can remember of the history classes at the academies on Cypra Mundi, the lord admiral was supposed to be a fearsome old ork-hater. I think he'd probably thank us for taking his face off the side of that thing.'

'I concur,' smiled Semper. 'Fire when ready, Mister Nyder. We'll dedicate this kill to the lord admiral's memory.'

FLAME WREATHED THE prows of the Imperial ships once more as they launched another torpedo wave at the target roks. They were close now, close enough to be within range of the ork batteries, and energy bursts erupted around the *Macharius* and its sister ships as the first ork fire impacted against their void shields. The ork fire was still sporadic and unco-ordinated, but would soon grow in strength.

The Imperial strategy had been to hit the orks hard and fast, stunning them into a state of helpless panic with a sudden and ferocious assault. The swift destruction of the two large rok-fortresses and the chaos and confusion it had caused amongst the greenskin line had done much to achieve this end, but now the human battle force had to ensure that they maintained the pressure of the attack and that the initiative remained on their side of the engagement.

The second and final wave of rock-busters struck home. Two more roks, considerably smaller than the first two targets, explosively fragmented apart. A third remained mostly intact, but the weapons fire from its batteries slowed to an ineffectual trickle, and it began to drift out of position, its engines and steering systems apparently knocked out of action. Minutes later, its erratic and rudderless course would bring it blundering helplessly into the field of fire of several other roks. A combined salvo of mass-reactive howitzer fire – each shell the size of a Fury interceptor fighter – and traktor beam-launched plasma meteors smashed apart the crippled rok, finishing the task begun by the Imperium torpedoes.

Three more down, twenty-three more to go.

Semper felt a strong impact shudder run through his ship as enemy fire landed its first direct hit on the *Macharius*, stripping the cruiser of one of its void shields. The deck beneath his feet lurched under the shock, and he fought the urge to lean onto his lectern for support, knowing that many eyes would be casting nervous glances at him right now. In many ways, he was a captain of the old school, and firmly believed the old naval collegium maxim: a vessel's strength lies not in its armour or its weapons, but in its captain, and the will of its captain must be stronger than the densest adamantium armour.

'A minor hit on our forward starboard side,' reported Ulant, consulting the information scrolling across his screen. 'Void shield generators are fully operational, and shield integrity is already regenerating itself.'

'I hope the greenskins can do better than that,' noted Semper. 'We came a long way for this fight, so they'd better not let us down now.'

There was the expected ripple of polite laughter from his officers, but Semper felt the atmosphere on the bridge around him relax a little, his crew reassured by their captain's modest attempt at humour. He looked out at the scene ahead of them, as the cluster of roks loomed ever closer, the tactician in him noting their clumsy attempts at formation change and the likely weaknesses in their incoming gunnery fire patterns, while the warrior in him secretly exulted at the thought of the battle to come.

Their battle plan had worked so far, he reminded himself, and the orks had obligingly taken the bait offered to them earlier on. Would they now fall for the same trick again? The bait was here

right in front of them, the *Macharius* and its sister cruisers, so would it be enough to draw out the true prize the Imperial battle-force had come here to engage and destroy?

Captain Semper and the crew of the
Macharius continue their fight for the
Emperor and mankind in
SHADOW POINT.

ALSO BY GORDON RENNIE

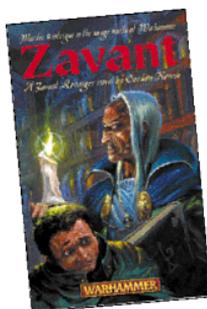
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