

An extract from *Straken* by Toby Frost

The box was dented and battered. Shiny new metal winked through chips in the green paint. Across the lid some servitor a billion kilometres away had stencilled the words ‘Departamento Munitorum XX Shotgun Shells’.

Straken held his gun in his left hand, and his steel right arm loaded the shotgun with a soft, hydraulic whirr. Each shell was only a few centimetres long. Strange how victory could come down to something so small, he thought. Like the twenty-two metres between this dugout and the last few tyranids on Signis VIII.

Captain Corris ran down into the dugout, stooping under the lintel. Like most Catachans, he was heavily muscled, and he only just fitted through the doorway. ‘Colonel Straken?’

Straken looked up. From far away, artillery roared, a low rumble that ran through the dugout like a growl.

‘Colonel, we’ve received a call from the Sixth Gordarian Artillery. They want to bombard the hill, sir. To wipe out the xenos once and for all.’

‘To hell with that,’ Straken growled. He got up and walked to the door. ‘Tell them to hold fire. We can take care of this.’

‘Yes, sir,’ Corris replied. ‘I’ll let them know.’ He followed Straken out the door.

The men waited in a loose half-circle. Their wargear was stripped down and modified, their uniforms torn, repaired and striped with dirt, but they still wore the red bandana of Catachan, the symbol that marked out the nine hundred remaining men as having the skill and toughness to survive one of the worst death worlds in the Imperium. In the centre, Corporal Thule hunched over the vox-rig, nodding as he relayed Corris’s order. To the west, a Chimera rolled forwards, its tracks grumbling and squeaking as they turned. Tinny marching music blared out of speakers welded to its side. Behind it walked men with motion detectors, sensorium rigs, even the odd psi-tracker. The tyranids in this region might be dead, but they were quite capable of sowing the ground with dormant young.

It had taken three months to clear the planet out. Against an enemy like the tyranids, Straken thought, that was almost nothing. It had been tough going – it was never anything else, not against the tyranids – but the Navy had caught the infestation early. Then the Catachans had landed, among them the glorious Second, Straken’s regiment, their mission firstly to scout, then to contain, and finally to eradicate. On the horizon, Straken could see the

vast organic ruins of a bio-titan; they looked like dragon bones, slowly slipping into the mud. The job was almost done.

‘Gentlemen,’ Straken said, and nearly a thousand hard faces looked back at him. ‘Over that ridge is one of the last psychic beacons holding the tyranids together. Kill it, and there’ll be nothing more than animals left to fight – tough animals, but nothing meaner than you’d find back home. Whatever’s over the ridge, it’ll be big and angry.’

‘So am I,’ one of the men called, and there was a ripple of laughter.

Explosions rippled across the horizon, throwing black clouds into the air like soot across a painted landscape. Vendetta gunships swung in through the murk, lascannons slicing the sky. This might be the final great push against the tyranids, but the enemy would fight to the last.

‘The Gordarian armour want to shell the hill. I’ve told them to belay that order. This started off as a Catachan job, and I mean to finish it that way.’ Straken raised his shotgun. ‘In a minute, I’m going to head out there and nail the last of these things. If anyone wants to stay here, they’re welcome. You’ve done enough already, Emperor knows that. But if any of you layabouts want to give me a hand out there, and help take that tyranid’s head for Catachan – well, sometimes I get tired of having to do all the hard work round here.’

It was about the mildest speech he had ever made, but his men deserved it. It would be wrong to order them to risk themselves when one allied barrage could finish things once and for all. But then, there was the honour of Catachan to consider.

His soldiers rose. Halda, the colour sergeant, grabbed the edge of the regimental standard and clenched his fist for a moment. Sergeant Pharranis cleaned the lens of his bionic eye on a rag, then folded it and screwed a fresh hydrogen flask into his plasma gun. Further down the line, a tough sergeant named Dhoi was testing the edge of his fang-knife, smiling grimly at the blade. Straken waited, hearing that familiar clatter of troops readying themselves to fight: fresh power packs clacking into lasguns; boots on mud; battered armour being checked; low voices murmuring prayers, praising weapons and cursing the danger to come. Corris caught Straken’s eye and gave him a quick, curt nod. Straken felt at once at home and ready for war. He took a deep breath.

‘Then let’s move! Who’s with me here? Are you going to nail these alien scum, or do I have to do everything myself?’ He turned to Halda. ‘Colour sergeant, get that banner up. Now then!’ Straken raised his metal fist. ‘In the name of the Emperor – with me!’

Bellowing, he rushed into the open. A bugle blared and his men cried out behind him, as if their voices alone would speed them towards the enemy. They raced up the slope, boots

pounding, roaring like beasts. As they reached the top, a lithe, blood-coloured alien leaped into view.

Straken saw it first: a mass of fangs, armour and spindly limbs ending in claws the size of scythe-blades. He glimpsed bestial eyes glaring with something more than just hunger – and then it sprang at them. ‘Kill it!’ he called, and half a dozen lasguns cracked. The tyranid fell backwards, ichor pouring from several wounds, and Straken suddenly saw the edge of the pit from which the xenos had emerged. The hole was almost ninety metres across, and deep: an ideal nesting place. A second tyranid loped from the bottom of the pit, hissing and snarling. It stood almost twice man-size, its uppermost pair of arms fused into a pulsing mass from which a bone tube protruded. *Deathspitter*, Straken thought. The beast’s gun fired once, and a goblet of whirling sludge shot over Straken’s head. Then the rest of the enemy burst from their hiding places and attacked.

A monster with serrated blades instead of hands leaped onto Private Carne, one of the demolitions men. He fell down, flailing, and for a second Straken thought the man was finished. The next moment Carne was on top, stabbing down with his long knife as the alien thrashed beneath him.

Movement came from the left, and Straken whirled and fired. The shotgun kicked against his ribs, and a second leaper twisted in mid-air and fell dead. The tyranids poured out of the crater and were met with a vicious wall of lasgun fire. A Guardsman on Straken’s right took a direct hit from a deathspitter and stumbled aside, his screams drowned out by the terrible hissing sound of disintegrating flesh. In three seconds he had melted to nothing. A grenade flew overhead and hit a pack of slithering brutes as they rushed from their burrow. The explosion threw sinuous bodies into the air, dropped them thrashing into the dirt.

Sergeant Pharranis unloaded his plasma gun into one of the monsters, and it collapsed in a sizzling, bubbling heap. On the right a corporal called Balt hacked at a wounded tyranid, sawing at its neck for a trophy-kill. He yanked the head away from the still-twitching body, a row of skulls already gleaming on his belt. Something exploded behind Straken – he couldn’t tell whether it was a weapon or see the beast that fired it – and he glanced round. Where six men had stood, there was now carbon and reeking smoke.

Fire burst on the horizon. The crater rang with the crack of lasguns and the roars and yelps of the horde. Scythe-armed beasts leaped up from the ground as if hurled by catapults, sailing up to land among the Catachans. One trooper was eviscerated with a single swipe, beheaded by a second. Guardsmen drew long knives and swords, and waded in. Through the

chaos, Straken heard a chainsword rev into life. Lieutenant Trask, always quick with a joke, staggered away, his right arm clutching his left.

A tyranid sprang down on Straken like a swooping hawk. He dropped to one knee and blew it in half, pumped the shotgun as he rose and finished it before it could crawl towards him. On his right, a hunter-slayer knocked a private to the ground and leaped on him, snarling like an attack dog. The man tried to push the alien's head back with his left hand and it bit off half his hand.

Straken cursed and raised his shotgun to blast the creature, but Corris grabbed the tyranid before he could fire, yanked its chin up and drove his knife through the side of its neck. He sliced down, cutting the beast's throat, and heaved it away. Straken blasted a second hunter-slayer as it aimed its bio-gun at him, and glanced back to see Corris dragging the wounded soldier to his feet.

'Nice work,' Straken said.

'One for the knife,' Corris replied, and Straken saw a dozen deep notches on the blade. 'Medic!'

The xenos fought wildly, but they were losing. The Guardsmen killed the aliens quickly, and now they had the advantage of numbers, there was nothing the tyranids could do except die. The last few hunter-slayers were shot down, or wrestled to the ground and stabbed. Men cheered – some cut trophies, others took the chance to reload.

Straken felt fierce pride, and then checked himself. Where was the node-creature, the big one they had come here to kill? The aliens that lay dead and dying around him were just the small tyranids, the foot soldiers. They were the things that the hive sent in to scout, or to use up the ammunition of its enemies. Something was wrong. Straken didn't know much about tyranids beyond how best to kill them, but every soldier in the Imperial Guard knew to shoot the big ones first.

He stopped and looked back. One man sat on the edge of the crater, his teeth gritted and his arm held across his chest. The unit medic crouched beside him, spraying the wound with anti-toxin. Tyranid creatures dripped with poisons worse even than those on the Catachan home world.

'That all of them, boss?' Halda called.

'Not yet,' Straken replied. 'Stay ready.'

They fanned out around him, instinctively forming a loose circle in the centre of the great crater. Straken felt exposed here, and knew his men would too. After fifteen years on

Catachan, and nearly three more decades in the most vicious guerrilla wars that the Imperium could provide, he was as used to having cover as he was to the sound of lasgun fire.

Captain Corris said, 'It's a big one, right? Not like this.' He prodded one of the hunter-slayers with his gun barrel.

'That's what they said,' Straken replied.

The crater wall exploded in front of him. He turned aside and debris bounced off the metal side of his torso. A trooper shrieked and fell, clutching his face, and two men pulled him away.

Something huge burst through the cloud of dust. Multi-limbed, covered in armoured plates and over twice Straken's height, it opened a mouth crowded with fangs as long as fingers and roared at the sky.

'Bring it down!' Straken yelled, and he fired his shotgun, racked the slide and fired again.

The beast rushed forward on massive hooves, agile for its size, and Straken saw a pair of two-metre blades in its hands. Men yelled. Lasgun fire pattered off the monster's armoured hide.

Captain Corris leaped forward as he stabbed, but he was too slow. The alien's sabre swung down like a great pendulum, almost lazily, and buzzed as it sliced off Corris's arm and half his head.

The tyranid stood over the captain's body and bellowed at the Guardsmen. The adepts back in the rear echelon said that tyranids didn't have a language, that they didn't need to speak, but Straken knew what that roar was: a challenge.

He glanced over his shoulder. 'Demo!' he yelled, and a soldier sprinted over, shrugging his pack off as he ran. Straken snatched a thick, thirty centimetre-wide disc and clocked the dial to four seconds.

'Everyone clear!' he shouted, and as the Catachans drew back, still firing, he ran in and threw the charge as hard as his metal arm would allow, sending it skimming across the dirt.

It hit the tyranid's leg. The monster twisted round, saw it, and reared away. *It knows*, Straken realised. *The damned thing knows...* Then the charge went off.

The explosion threw him onto his back. For a moment he felt nothing, heard nothing and wanted just to lie there in the quiet. Then the world burst back into his senses, and Straken hauled himself to his feet.

'Get up!' he yelled at the men around him. 'Any wounded? No? Then follow me!'

They advanced, legs bent and guns ready. The smoke of the explosion was starting to clear. Within the crater, a fresh hole marked the place where the localised charge had gone off.

The beast lay on its side. Its two left arms were completely destroyed and both legs were twisted awkwardly. As Straken approached, he saw that his men had not missed either, for the massive body was pitted with las-burns.

Somehow, it raised its smoking, shattered head and snarled at him. Straken looked at it. *You're not so much*, he thought. *I've killed bigger things than you back on Catachan.*

He turned and looked back at his men. 'This is the smart one,' he called out, 'the one we've been looking for. Not looking so clever now, is he?'

'Can't be smart to mess with us!' someone shouted.

With its last strength, the tyranid lunged at him. 'Sir!' a voice cried. Straken whipped aside, and the creature's fangs slammed shut on the air in front of his chest. His hand shot out, caught the alien's smouldering neck, and his fingers closed.

Straken drew his long knife, the traditional weapon of a warrior of Catachan. Even with the added strength of his bionics, it took four hard blows to sever the alien's head.

'This is for Corris!' he cried, and he threw the smoking head onto the ground.

Tired as they were, the soldiers cheered. The crater was theirs, and now the war – this war at least – was over. The Catachan II had achieved their last objective, and Signis could be left to the local defence regiments and the cleanup teams.

Distantly, as if to applaud them, the artillery boomed. Under the sound of cheering, quiet at first, Straken heard the first thing to genuinely frighten him on this world: the high-pitched whine of a demolisher shell, reaching the peak of its firing arc above them – and then falling...

'Emperor,' he gasped. 'Incoming – everyone down!'

Men scattered to the edges of the crater, throwing themselves onto the ground. Beside Straken, a trooper stared at the sky, astonished. 'Those Gordarian morons are shelling us!' he cried.

'Then get down, stupid,' Straken snarled. A hundred metres beyond the crater, the first shell hit the ground, hurling dirt and scraps of tyranid twenty metres into the air. Straken strode over to the vox-operator, flexing the fingers of his metal fist. By the Emperor, he'd have the balls of whoever was responsible for this.

'Comms,' he called, 'get on that link and tell those morons—'

The second shell landed twenty metres away. The world spun. Straken heard and felt clods of earth battering down on him, a storm of dirt, and then the world went black.

Straken awoke to find half the world in darkness. The left side of his vision had gone. That meant that his bionic eye had been deactivated. He tried to flex the fingers of his mechanical arm. Nothing moved.

Above him he saw a grey, vaulted roof. A red robe moved at the edge of his vision. He shut his eye and waited, knowing that even without his right arm, his left could still draw a knife.

‘Please open your eyes, Colonel Straken,’ a voice said. ‘You’re back on the *Radix Malorum*, in space. You’re perfectly safe here.’

He opened his eye. A man in a white tunic stood over him. The doctor had heavy spectacles and a goatee beard.

‘Are we in orbit?’ Straken’s voice sounded more threatening than he’d intended.

‘We’re being transported to another battleground. I’m told that Signis Eight has been successfully pacified.’ The man turned aside to check a row of dials on the wall, then looked back. ‘My name is Locuris, surgeon-superior of the *Radix Malorum*. You took a bad knock to the head, colonel. One way or another, you’ve been out for almost three days. It’s lucky you’ve got so much metal in your skull already – had that tyranid not hit your cranial plate, you’d be more than just concussed.’

‘It wasn’t a tyranid that hit me.’ Memories returned like a fire rekindling. ‘The artillery shelled us. Throne-damned Gordarians...’

‘Well, I wouldn’t know about that. At any rate, you’re fine. At least, the biological parts of you are.’

‘As are the machines.’ A new voice spoke. It was high and mechanical, not the product of vocal cords. Straken turned to look, realising the significance of the red robe he had glimpsed.

A tech-priest stood on the other side of the pallet, almost entirely hidden by its heavy garment. A metal hand, much like Straken’s own, protruded from one sleeve. The other arm ended in a ropy mass of mechadendrites, blades, drills and micro-manipulators, grafted straight into the flesh. Straken turned his head to see what was under the adept’s hood, and glimpsed wires and metal sutures pushed into pale skin suffused with something that was not quite blood.

‘The workmanship is most exquisite,’ the tech-priest said. The high, flat voice was not comfortable to hear. ‘There was some minor disruption to the servos, but all parts have been fully tested. A degree of organic matter was lodged in the gearing, polluting the mechanism.’

‘That’ll be tyrannid,’ Straken replied.

The robed head nodded. ‘The purity of function has been restored.’

‘Does that mean it works?’ The tech-priest made Straken uneasy. All adepts of the Machine-God had that effect on him. There seemed to him something subtly yet deeply wrong with a person willing to replace his or her own flesh with machinery. He had acquired his own bionics like scars, in the line of duty, each a mark of a different campaign. To have them admired by such a creature made his skin crawl.

‘Of course it works. Sublime functionality,’ the tech-priest added. It occurred to Straken that the priest was several centimetres shorter than Locuris. He wondered whether it had started out as a woman, which did not make him feel any less uncomfortable. ‘You are, albeit by chance rather than design, closer to the Machine-God than most men will ever be. You should be thankful for that.’

‘Just get my arm working,’ he replied.

The priest moved behind Straken’s head. He heard the clatter of typing. Suddenly, his field of vision widened as his bionic eye flared into life. He raised his metal arm and slowly flexed the fingers.

‘The purity of gears is the purity of motion,’ the tech-priest observed, apparently to itself.

Locuris had moved back from the pallet. ‘You can sit up,’ he said.

Straken grimaced and sat up. He felt a thin, high-pitched whine at the back of his head, as much a sensation as a sound, like a whirring drill. Probably something to do with his eye.

‘I suppose I ought to tell you that you’re very lucky,’ the surgeon said. ‘Your men brought you back almost dead.’

‘They’re good soldiers,’ Straken replied.

‘That’s not really what I meant. I meant that medically, you were fortunate not to have sustained greater injuries.’

Straken got to his feet. He was bare-chested. The long knife, almost sword-length, was still strapped to his left thigh – few people would have tried to take a Catachan’s blade – but the lucky skull was gone from his hip.

‘Your personal gear’s in your quarters, colonel,’ the surgeon-superior said.

He looked down. The dull metal of his implants spread down his side and across his chest like a parasitic plant, as if slowly consuming him. Straken pushed that thought aside, willing the tech-priest to leave. He pulled on a vest and his combat waistcoat. It was unusually light: someone had removed the grenades. Rolled up in the pocket was a simple red bandana, the symbol of the blood oath of his home world.

It was time to find his men. ‘Thanks,’ he said as he tied the bandana over the metal plate that lay flush with his scalp. Locuris smiled, and the tech-priest made a sort of tiny bow.

As he left the medical bay, Straken was struck by how quiet everywhere was. Somewhere far below, the hull of the *Radix Malorum* creaked. He realised that by now everyone from the Signis encounter must be dead, healed or comatose. It had been a long while since he had been in a medical bay and not seen someone in the process of dying from their wounds.

Growing up on a death world, your home became the place you chose to make it. After years of campaigning, the *Radix Malorum*’s holds had begun to resemble shanty towns – in fact, Straken reflected, the temporary billets were considerably more sophisticated than many of the settlements he’d helped liberate in the course of his career. The air was old and smoky, full of grease from cook shops, the odour of lho-sticks and even at times the odd forbidden whiff of low-quality obscura, smuggled in from who-knew-where. He’d have to look into that – he couldn’t allow his men to lose their sharpness. Straken walked through the first hold, a hall large enough to generate its own atmosphere, and into a second. The walls were covered in a huge frieze, executed three times life-size, depicting Lord Solar Macharius addressing pristine ranks of troops.

Compared to the figures in the frieze, the men below seemed unruly and rough. Straken saw converted uniforms, cut-down lasguns in racks, pictures that were anything but pious pinned up against partition walls. Soldiers came to life: men put down their food and stood up to salute him; some smiled. A few bold individuals greeted him by name.

But there was no celebration of Straken’s awakening – at least, none that he saw. Nobody seemed at all surprised that he had recovered, as if getting back up from a serious head injury were no more unusual for Iron Hand Straken than waking from a good night’s sleep.

Iron Hand? he thought. *They should call me Iron Head.*

At last Straken climbed narrow steps to the officers' quarters. The first two doors were marked 'Tanner' and 'Lavant'.

'Lavant, eh?' he mused. The name was familiar, but he couldn't put a face to it. Still trying to recall the man, he knocked on Tanner's door and walked in.

Captain Tanner was bulky even by Catachan standards, with a round face that continually seemed to be about to break into a wry smile. He was jovial outside battle and berserk in it, and followed Straken's policy of leading from the front. Straken remembered the last time he'd seen Tanner fight: the man had run screaming at a pack of tyranid hunter-slayers, a knife in his fist.

'Good to see you, sir,' Tanner said.

'It's good to be back,' Straken replied. 'I gather we're done with Signis.'

'Done and dusted, Emperor be praised. On to the next one.'

'Are we still with the Gordarian armour?'

'No. When they heard we had a new mission, they had to run home and change their breeches.' Tanner grinned.

'That's a damned shame. I was hoping to find the idiot who shot up my position. And then beat some sense into him.' Straken realised that he had started to flex his metal fingers, as if readying them to punch. 'What's the new mission?'

Tanner frowned. 'Orks. We're liaising with a bunch of other regiments in orbit of some place called Dulma'lin. General Greiss is heading out to take command. He'll want to know you're awake.'

'I'll check in with him. These other regiments, are any of them Catachan?'

The captain shook his bald head. 'Not as far as I know. There's not been an official briefing, but from what I've heard, a lot of it is fancy armoured companies – pretty pictures painted on the sides of their tanks, that kind of stuff. Whatever they could scrape together, from the sounds of it. Command must want the orks off the planet pretty quick. Beyond that, I don't know much.'

'Orks. Hell. I can't walk a kilometer sometimes without running into the Throne-damned orks. Ah well. The less of 'em there are in the galaxy, the better.'

'My thoughts entirely.'

Straken nodded. 'Is Lavant going to be Corris's replacement?'

'That's right. The general chose him personally.' Tanner lowered his voice a little. 'He's a little... eccentric, but he's good.' He glanced at the door. 'Demolitions,' Tanner added, as if that explained everything.

‘I’ll see him now. Then I’ll find the general.’ Straken took a step towards the door, then looked back. ‘Is there a commissar on this job?’

‘Of course, sir. Man called Morrell.’

‘What’s he like?’

‘More-hell Morrell? He’s about an inch taller than the last one.’

‘You know where he’s from?’

Tanner shrugged. ‘Not from Catachan, that’s for sure.’

Straken sighed and left the room.

Lavant answered his knock so quickly Straken wondered if he had been listening in. The new captain was a big man, perhaps a little wirier than usual for a Catachan. He wore his bandana as a necktie, and sported a neat little moustache. It looked ridiculous, Straken thought, and he realised that he had seen Lavant before. He had been a lieutenant back on Signis, crafty and eager. From the looks of it, the higher brass had chosen well.

Lavant flicked up a quick, sharp salute. ‘Colonel Straken. It’s a pleasure to see you well, sir.’

‘Yeah.’ Straken walked into Lavant’s quarters. On a small table, the captain had been cleaning a plasma pistol with a bottle of blessed oil. A scrimshawing needle lay beside it. A small pile of books stood beside the desk.

‘How’re you finding being a captain, Lavant?’

‘Very good, sir.’

‘Good. Fight hard, do what I say and trust in the Emperor.’ Straken looked at the table. ‘Is that a plasma pistol you’ve got there?’

‘Yes, sir. I requisitioned it a while ago. Munitions were convinced its machine-spirit had deserted it. Personally, I think it just needs a little work.’

‘Looks like more than that. You know, I’ve seen plenty of people mess with a weapon and displease it, and then have it blow up on them for their trouble. I’d hate to think one of my own officers was taking a pistol apart without proper authorisation – badly.’

‘Sir,’ Lavant replied, ‘when you work with demolitions, you learn to take proper care.’

‘Well said. Carry on, then. And Lavant? Do something with that moustache.’

As a mark of rank, Straken had his own quarters: two tiny rooms at the end of the corridor, full of engine hum as if located in a giant beehive. Guard doctrine stated that he was supposed to have his own servant, but it had been a long time since anyone had tried to

supply him with one. After telling one quartermaster that, metal hand or not, he knew how to wash his own backside, they had left him alone.

His spare clothes hung waiting. In an alcove he found a Munitorum supply box. It contained a data-slate, a box of foul-tasting cigars that had been a gift from a Cadian major-general he'd once helped out, a machete in a grox-skin sheath, and a small vox-phonograph, together with a row of neat little cylinders, each holding one of Guttman's symphonies. Straken reached into the box, took out the data-slate and activated it at the *Libram Devotio*. He flicked it to a random page and, silently invoking the Emperor, read the first line he saw. It had been a superstition of Captain Corris, now deceased.

'And they gathered at that place, for to make a host, and took the battle unto the unholy.'

No doubt about that, Straken thought. A good omen.

On the thin pillow on the fold-down bed, someone had laid the long skull of a land shark. It was the same one that had bitten off his right arm, the one he had killed back on Miral, when he had been certain that he was about to die. He'd carried it into a dozen battles since then, tied to his belt. The skull was cumbersome, but it brought him luck. At any rate, he hadn't seen a land shark since. He tied it back in place and, feeling ready, strode out to meet the general.