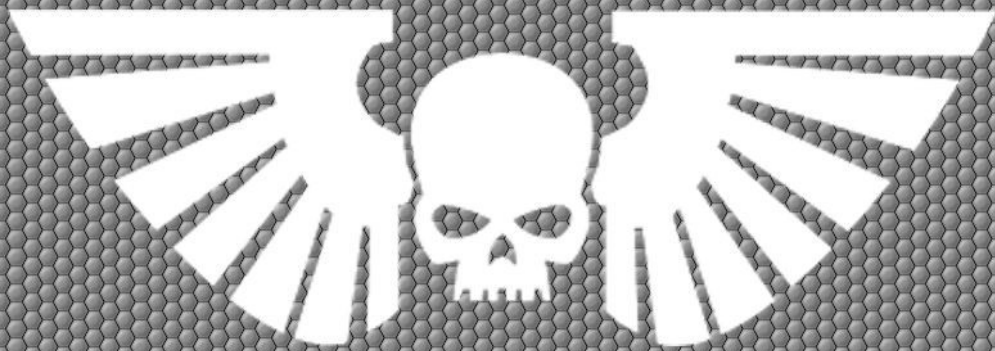


# THE DROP



BY STEPHEN J DUTTON

# **THE DROP**

**By Stephen J Dutton BSc (hons) BEng (hons)**

When an Imperial Guard force is sent to secure a rebellious planet it finds the rebels better prepared for them than expected. With their drop ship destroyed, a small band of survivors find themselves trapped behind enemy lines and attempting to return to friendly territory and having to deal with a Ministorum priest who is obsessed with finding a mysterious 'Man in black.'

Further Warhammer 40,000 fan fiction is available at:  
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# 1.

The dropship shuddered as it passed through the atmosphere and many of the guardsmen it carried grabbed the arms of the seats they were strapped into tightly.

"Is that normal?" the young guardsman beside Crane asked. Lukis was his name Crane remembered, only just taken from one of the company's squads of fresh recruits, "The shuddering I mean."

"How should I know?" Crane replied, "This is my first time in one of these things."

"First time? But I thought you'd been in the guard for five years."

"He spent four of those in punishment details lad." Sergeant Dern interrupted from opposite them, "Just remember that when you ask him for advice about anything. I wouldn't trouble yourself though, there's always a bit of rocking. It's the flak."

"Flak? You mean we're being shot at?"

"Yeah sarge," another guardsman called out sarcastically, "you mean the enemy isn't just going to let us land and form up to engage them?"

"I guess they don't like you." Dern responded.

"Must have heard him playing the harmonica." someone else shouted, "Every time I do I feel like shooting him myself."

"Knock it off." the company's senior sergeant major ordered, "This isn't a pleasure cruise. You're guardsmen, remember that."

"Rejoice!" another vice called out from near the back of the cabin. This did not belong to one of the two hundred or so guardsmen packed tightly into the cramped space, but instead to a man wearing the robes of a missionary priest, "The enemy fears us for we bring the light of the Emperor with us!" This particular priest was more muscular than most, his physique being larger than many of the guardsmen in the company. But his fiery attitude fit the profile perfectly.

"Shouldn't he be up in the cockpit with the officers?" Lukis asked Sergeant Dern.

"You really think that the Navy fly boys and our officers want him up there shouting his crap at them?" Crane replied before the sergeant could draw in breath. Dern reached out and slapped Crane.

"You show some respect." He said sternly, "I'm sure the officers would rather have him with them but they realise he can do more good back here."

Then the dropship lurched even more violently and somewhere there was the sound of someone vomiting.

"That was a big one." The pilot commented as a shell burst a few hundred meters ahead and he banked the dropship as hard as he could without tearing it apart. The craft was designed to deliver troops from an orbiting starship to the surface as rapidly as possible rather than to give its passengers the smoothest ride possible, "I hope you boys have strong stomachs back there."

"Oh we're just fine." The commissar replied and he glanced at the two guard platoon commanders sat beside in the cockpit. In front of them the two navy pilots struggled with the controls of their craft. Though the vessel had been designed to give its crew some control over its course, it was not an especially agile craft and the anti aircraft fire that the rebels were putting up was getting increasingly closer as they got the range of the ship. "Still," he went on, "I'm sure we'll all be happier when we're on the gr-

He was cut off suddenly by a dull thump and the dropship rocked violently. The cockpit was filled with the sound of alarms.

"We're hit!" the co-pilot bellowed, "Starboard engine's on fire. Extinguishers not responding."

"Can we still land?" one of the guard officers shouted.

"I don't know." The pilot replied, "She's listing badly. It's all I can do to stop her going into a spin."

His co-pilot looked at him.

"Ejection system active." He said, flipping up the cover of a button between them. As soon as the cover was lifted the button beneath lit up.

"Do it." The pilot replied.

The co-pilot pressed the button a split second before the next shell smashed through the canopy and killed everyone in the cockpit.

In the rear of the dropship a klaxon sounded and signs labelled 'EVACUATE' lit up all around the guardsmen.

"Brace!" one of the Naval hands present shouted and he leant back in his seat.

Startled, the guardsmen did not know how to react and there were cries of panic as moments later the roof of the dropship was blown away and they found themselves looking up at the sky above them, the wind rushing over them at several hundred miles per hour. From the front of the ship smoke and flames were being carried overhead too. Then, in a sequence calculate to ensure that the passengers did not strike one another as they left the dropship, the chairs in which they were secured were explosively propelled upwards, prompting

more cries of alarm.

"Oh-." Crane had time to say just before his own ejection seat fired and he found himself being propelled through a narrow hatch that opened up above him into the sky. All around he saw more of his fellow guardsmen still strapped into their seats as their brief ascent came to a halt and they started to fall towards the ground still many thousands of metres below them.

Also below the falling guardsmen but no where near as far was what remained of the dropship, now burning as it veered away trailing smoke and debris. There were other such vessels in the sky as well, all rushing towards their intended landing zone and because of this the rebel anti-aircraft weapons continued firing. A second dropship was badly hit but its crew had no chance to escape as the craft just exploded and the air was filled with debris as well.

At the same time as the dropship exploded the seats of the guardsman now in free fall fell away to allow the parachutes they contained to deploy. A handful of these failed to function and even over the sound of rushing air and ground fire the screams of the men who found themselves plummeting to their dooms could be heard. Other parachutes deployed correctly but either they or the guardsmen relying on them were struck by debris from the exploding dropship and more men found themselves falling uncontrollably or became nothing but bloodied corpses dangling beneath parachutes as they floated gently through the air.

As the dropships continued on their way the ground fire followed them and the parachuting guardsmen could now only wait to reach the ground. The terrain below them was heavily wooded, as much of the rebellious planet was outside its major population centres and from directly above it looked like a solid layer of dark green. But the forest canopy was not enough to support the weight of a guardsman and his equipment and instead the survivors crashed right through.

Crane cursed loudly as he penetrated the canopy and continued to drop towards the ground beneath. But he came to a sudden halt just over a metre above the forest floor as the lines of his parachute became tangled in the branches above him.

"Oh that's just great." he muttered as he slammed his hand against the harness release on his chest only to find that it was jammed somehow. Reaching for his knife, Crane drew the blade and began to saw at the parachute lines above his head, slicing through them one by one until all of a sudden the remaining one snapped and he dropped the rest of the way to the ground, the sudden impact releasing his harness.

Snarling at the poor timing he returned his knife to his scabbard and instead hurried to the equipment bag that had landed with him and opened it up as rapidly as he could, removing the standard issue lasgun and inserting a charge pack into it before looking around to try and assess his situation.

As far as he could see no other guardsmen had landed anywhere near him and he smiled. As far as he was concerned he was now free. No-one could say for certain whether he had survived bailing out of the dropship and it was likely that the division's senior officers had already written off the entire company. All Crane needed to do was stay out of the way and he would never need to take another order again.

Taking the rest of his equipment from the drop bag and putting it on his back, Crane then began to walk calmly through the forest, looking for a good place to start his new life of independence. He continued walking for just a short time before he froze suddenly at the sight of another guardsman standing in the forest ahead of him. Dropping to his knees, Crane raised his lasgun and considered shooting this possible witness to his own survival before he noticed how the figure was standing with its arms dangling uselessly by its side and its head bent forwards. It was obvious that the figure was a corpse and looking up Crane saw that it was being held upright only because like his parachute, the one that had carried this guardsman to the ground had become caught in the trees above. Taking another look around just in case anyone else had landed nearby Crane then ran towards the dead guardsman.

The first thing he did upon reaching the corpse was release it from its parachute harness and let it fall to the ground. Then he crouched down beside it and began to rummage through the pockets of its uniform. Crane knew that the nearby drop bag would contain all of the dead guardsman's issued kit but he also knew that many guardsmen carried personal effects with them in their pockets and it was these that interested him more right now. Crane's first find was a small liquid fuelled lighter than he tested to confirm was working before stuffing it in his own pocket. Then he quickly found what he expected the moment he had come across the lighter, a packet of lho sticks. He had some of his own but he had no idea when or even if he would be able to procure any more so he eagerly took this packet as well. Then he reached into another pocket and a smile spread across his face. Withdrawing his hand he opened it up and looked at the small bundle of Munitorum pay vouchers he now held. But before he could start to count any of the money he felt the muzzle of a weapon pressed against the side of his head.

"Looting the dead is a serious offence Guardsman Crane." Sergeant Dern said, "A capital one if you fail to notice someone sneaking up behind you with a gun while you're too busy stealing from your comrades."

"Sergeant Dern." Crane said as he got to his feet slowly and turned around while Dern stepped back, keeping his las pistol trained on Crane, "You survived." and he tilted his head slightly to look at the man in the Navy uniform standing several metres behind Dern. Crane recognised him as the deck hand from the

dropship who had warned the guardsmen to brace themselves prior to being ejected.

“Cavo here and I came down in a clearing by a stream.” Dern said, “Looks like whatever's left of the company is spread all over the place and lucky us you're the first one we've found.”

“Alive that is.” Cavo said, looking at the body of the dead guardsman, “We've found more bodies.”

“But none with their kit intact.” Dern said and he glanced at Cavo, “Open up that bag fly boy and grab everything that's inside. Then we'll take the armour from this poor soul and you'll look almost like a real soldier of the Emperor. You know how to use a lasgun.”

“Sure.” Cavo replied as he opened the drop bag and started removing the contents, “Though it's been a while since I last did.”

“Looting the dead sergeant?” Crane said and before he could duck Dern punched him in the face.

“If it was up to me you'd be up against a wall in front of a firing squad.” he hissed, “But right now I need you. So hand over that money you were in the middle of stealing and I'll see to it that it gets to our deceased friend's next of kin.”

“Of course sergeant.” Crane said, passing Dern the pay vouchers while he wiped blood from his nose. Then all of a sudden the three men heard a cry in the distance.

“Help! Somebody help me!”

“Forget the armour.” Dern told Cavo, “We don't have time for it. Someone obviously needs us.” and he started running towards the source of the cry, Cavo following close behind him while Crane just watched,

“You too Crane.” Dern called out and Crane snarled as he wiped his face again before lighting up a lho stick and following the other two men.

## 2.

They found Lukis hanging from another tree, his parachute harness was open but the cords themselves had become wrapped around him and he was struggling to free himself from the mess. Like Crane he had attempted to use his knife but had dropped it and now the blade lay on the ground beneath him beside the drop bag holding the rest of his kit, just out of his reach.

"Sergeant Dern! Sergeant Dern I'm stuck." he called out when he saw Dern and Cavo hurrying towards him, Crane moving at a more leisurely pace behind them.

"Shush. Quiet down trooper." Dern ordered, "You're making enough noise that every heretic on the planet will hear you."

"Sorry sergeant." Lukis replied, "I didn't know what to do."

"To start with hold still while I cut you down." Dern told him and he drew his knife before starting to cut through the parachute cords holding Lukis while Cavo kept watch and Crane just leant against a nearby tree smoking. When enough of the cords were cut that Lukis could get free he dropped to the ground and picked himself up again right away, "Now get your gear trooper. We can't hang around here all day."

"Yeah." Crane commented, "The Emperor expects and all that."

"Careful with that attitude trooper." Dern said, "anyone would think you didn't want to be a guardsman."

"I didn't. But when the arbiters tell you it's the guard or the gallows your choice is limited." Crane replied but before Dern could scold him further there was a sharp 'snap' from nearby.

"Sergeant what's-" Lukis began.

"Shut up!" Crane hissed as he dropped into a crouching position, grinding his lho stick under his foot and readying his lasgun.

"It's coming from over there I think." Cavo whispered, pointing through the trees.

"Safeties off." Dern said, levelling his las pistol, "But nobody fire until you're sure of your target. Maybe Lukis here attracted more survivors from the dropship."

"Or maybe he attracted a rebel patrol." Crane hissed.

From between the trees the four men heard the sound of footsteps as debris on the forest floor was crushed underfoot by someone walking towards them. But the footfalls were heavier than they ought to have been if made by any ordinary man and as they grew louder there was a deep growling as well.

"I don't like this." Crane said, "We should get out of here."

"Stay right where you are. That's an order trooper." Dern said right before a massive muscular figure that stood more than three metres tall came lumbering into view. The figure's head was covered by a cloth hood while the rest of it was clothed in crude animal hide and in its hands it held what looked like a large hammer that had blood on its head.

Staring straight at the four men the figure raised its weapon and roared before charging right at them.

"Ogryn!" Dern yelled as he fired his las pistol and the others rapidly opened fire as well.

Their fire was accurate enough and most of their shots struck the massive abhuman's body but the ogryn was sufficiently resilient that all any of them managed was to inflict painful surface wounds on it that made it roar with defiance as it charged right up to Cavo.

"Him on Earth!" the Naval deck hand exclaimed as he dived out of the way of the hammer swing that would have killed him outright had it not been stopped when it struck a nearby tree instead.

"Get out of the way." Dern shouted at Cavo as he fired one shot after another at the ogryn, placing them in a group between the abhuman's shoulder blades. But all he achieved was to attract the ogryn's attention and it turned towards him before charging towards him with its hammer raised high. Dern backed away until he bumped into a tree behind him and it was at that moment that the ogryn swung its hammer downwards. But again its swing was blocked by a tree, only this time the head of the hammer embedded itself in the trunk and as the ogryn struggled to free its weapon Dern darted out of the way.

"In the Emperor's name!" a voice yelled from somewhere close by, "Death to heretics!" and the Ministerum priest who had been aboard the dropship came charging out of nowhere with his chainsword held high. Screaming, he ran straight at the ogryn and thrust the tip of his chainsword forwards. But unlike the other four men had done with their las weapons he did not target the ogryn's body, instead he aimed his weapon at the back of one of the ogryn's knees and the abhuman howled in agony as the blade cut in deep and forced it to drop to one knee as its leg gave way under it. Letting go of the hammer the ogryn lashed out at the priest but the man moved quickly enough that he was not only able to avoid the blow but also place his chainsword in the path of the ogryn's fist and there was another spray of blood as its hand was severed at the wrist.

The ogryn then pulled its arm away and as it did so it struck the priest with enough force that he was lifted off his feet and sent flying through the air, landing some distance away. Seeing the injured ogryn thrashing around on the ground and the chainsword lying where it had fallen after the priest dropped it Dern

rushed towards the weapon, picking it up and reactivating the motor. Then he advanced cautiously towards the ogryn, taking care to avoid its flailing arms as he lined himself up on its head and then brought down the chainsword, pressing down as the blade cut through the abhuman's skull before it was finally quiet and still. "What's an ogryn doing here?" Lukis asked as he, Cavo and Crane advanced towards Dern to gather around the dead abhuman.

"The locals use them to work the mines." Dern replied, "But they're supposed to be unswervingly loyal to the Emperor. What the locals could have done to make them rebel as well is beyond me."

"So there could be more of these things around." Crane said and he looked around, half expecting more abhumans to burst out of the undergrowth.

"What about him?" Cavo said, turning towards the priest.

"Beats me." Dern said and all four men started to walk towards the priest, "I've never seen him before today. He just got on the dropship with the company before we left."

"Is he dead?" Lukis asked.

"One way to find out." Cavo replied and he crouched down beside the priest and pressed a hand to the man's chest, "He's breathing and there's a heartbeat." he added and then he frowned, "That's odd." he commented.

"What's odd?" Crane said, "I've had enough odd for one day with that monster back there." and he pointed a thumb towards the dead ogryn."

"I think our priest has had some work done. Got himself upgraded with a bionic heart in addition to his own." Cavo explained as he move his hand around the priest's chest. Then he used his fingers to carefully pry open the priest's eyes one at a time, "The left eye is augmentic as well."

"Expensive work." Crane commented, "I never knew Emperor bothering paid so well."

All of a sudden the priest opened his eyes on his own and looked up at Cavo before mouthing something.

"What's he saying?" Dern said as he leant in closer.

"I think it's a name." Cavo replied, "Leon or something. Is he called Leon?"

"I don't know." Dern said. Then as the priest muttered something again he added, "That's not Leon. It sounds like 'lion'."

"Who's Lion?" Crane said.

"Lion's not a who, it's a what." Dern answered, "It's like a big cat. You do know what a cat is don't you?"

"Sure. My old man used to shoot them all the time when I was a kid. Right nuisance."

"Shame they were the only nuisance he shot." Dern muttered and then he turned back to the priest, "Okay, let's get you back up." he said and then he and Cavo assisted the priest to his feet before giving him back his chainsword.

"How do you feel?" Cavo asked the priest.

"The man in black." the priest replied, "I must find the man in black."

"Any ideas?" Cavo said to Dern but the sergeant shook his head.

"I've no idea what he's talking about. We need to find a way back to our regiment." he responded, "My guess is that most of the company's dead. We could be the only ones left."

"So how do we call for help?" Lukis said, "Do you have a microbead sergeant?"

"Of course I do. But its range is too limited to reach the drop zone or any of the fleet in orbit." Dern said, "But the problem's more serious than that."

"Here we go." Crane muttered before Dern continued.

"We're way into rebel held territory here. Nobody's coming in just to get the five of us back. If we're going to get out of here then we need to find our own way back."

"Maybe not." Cavo said and the trio of guardsmen looked at him, "Look, I work in the hangars right? So I get to see all of the shuttles that come and go and a couple of hours before the drop we had a ship land that wasn't Navy."

"Civilian?" Dern asked, frowning, "No way would a civilian ship be operating in a war zone."

"It was Astartes." Cavo replied, "A Thunderhawk. At least three marines got off it and were taken straight to see the captain. I spoke to some of the other guys and they'd heard that a Strike Cruiser had joined the fleet just after we left the warp."

"Space marines?" Lukis said, his eyes widening. Every member of the Imperial Guard and Navy knew of the Emperor's elite warriors but very few ever got to see one, "You saw them?"

"With my own eyes, yes." Cavo said, "They were like giants in dark green powered armour. I'm telling you, I knew they were on our side but they still scared me."

"Astartes will operate behind enemy lines." Crane said, "But would they stop to pick us up?"

"Why not?" Dern asked, "But we'd need a way of communicating with them first. We need to find a working vox set."

"Maybe one made it down intact." Lukis said, "But where do we start looking?"

"The man in black." the priest said suddenly, "I must find the man in black." and then he suddenly started to

walk away from the others.

“Think he hit his head just a bit too hard?” Crane said.

“Never mind that. Let's just get after him.” Dern replied, “That way is as good as any to start looking.”



### 3.

The priest moved relatively quickly through the woods, making the three guardsmen nervous. Their training had emphasised the need to maintain a certain degree of stealth when operating in territory that could have an enemy presence in it but the priest ignored any suggestion that he should slow down. Whenever anyone asked him if he knew where he was going all he would answer with was some statement about a 'man in black' that he needed to find.

Darkness began to fall in the forest and in the distance there was the sound of artillery.

"Ours or theirs?" Crane said.

"Theirs probably." Dern replied, "But still a long way off."

"Shouldn't we try and do something about it?" Lukis asked.

"There's four of us." Crane answered, "Five if you count his holiness up ahead. Without a vox to call in support we can't do anything about an artillery battery."

Then all of a sudden the priest halted and crouched down, reaching to the holster on his belt and drawing his las pistol.

"He's spotted something." Cavo said and the four men hurried forwards to join the priest.

"What do you see?" Dern asked, looking ahead but seeing nothing.

"Fire." the priest replied, "The fires of the damned."

"Okay, he's gone crazy." Crane said.

"Maybe not." Dern said and he reached into his webbing and took out a set of magnoculars, "If he's got an augmentic eye then maybe it's set up to see into the infra-red spectrum." and as he adjusted his magnoculars Dern smiled.

"What is it sergeant?" Lukis said, "Can you see anyone?"

"No, but when I switch these to their low light mode there's a glow coming from over that rise there. Could be a camp fire."

"Could it be more survivors?" Cavo suggested.

"I'll have them flogged when we get out of here if it is." Dern said, "Lighting a fire in the middle of enemy territory and giving themselves away like that. Let's move in closer and see exactly what we're dealing with. But stay low." and he looked at the priest, "Do you understand that?"

"The man in black waits for me. I must lay eyes on him."

"Maybe if that man in black is over there he can tell us what this crazy fool is going on about." Crane muttered.

Without replying to Crane, Dern moved forwards, keeping his las pistol aimed towards the rise he headed for and behind him the others followed. Whatever had driven the priest to this place did not cloud his judgement so much that he just continued to blunder forwards though. Instead he moved in the same cautious manner as the three guardsmen while Cavo just did his best to copy them as he brought up the rear. Nearing the rise the light cast by the fire beyond it became noticeable and there was a strange sound. It sounded as if a large number of people were talking softly at the same time, all uttering the same words though they sounded like no words in either High or Low Gothic. As he came close to the top of the rise Dern lay flat on his stomach and dragged himself along the ground before peering over the top.

It was all he could to prevent himself from crying out loud at what he saw on the other side.

He was looking down into a clearing and as expected a fire dominated the centre of this. Around the fire wooden stakes had been driven vertically into the ground and impaled on the top of each of these was a human head still wearing the same type of flak helmet as Dern and the other two guardsmen with him did. Regardless of whether the guardsmen whose heads were on display around the fire had died before they landed or been killed on the ground, it infuriated Dern to see them treated in this manner. But there was worse yet to come.

Gathered around the fire and the gruesome trophies on display was a crowd of men, all wearing the uniforms of the local planetary defence force. But since their world had revolted against Imperial rule they had modified these, ripping away any insignia that identified them as having any loyalty to the Master of Mankind and strange new symbols had been daubed over much of their equipment. From the colour of it Dern thought it likely that it could be blood. The men were all knelt down and looking towards another man who was stripped to the waist to expose a heavily scarred torso that also looked to have been daubed in blood and as he spoke in the unidentifiable language the men knelt in worship chanted with him.

From behind him Dern then heard the sound of the other approaching.

"So what's going on over there?" Crane whispered before peering over the top of the rise for himself,

"Throne." he hissed.

"Heresy." the priest added, snarling, "We must put them to the sword."

"But there are so many of them." Lukis pointed out.

"I'm not so sure about the sword preacher." Dern said, "But I have an alternative idea." and from his webbing he plucked a fragmentation grenade.

"Nice." Crane added, doing the same and then Lukis and Cavo also took out grenades.

"You know the Navy doesn't issue these very often." Cavo commented, "Do they work like stumm gas?"

"Exactly the same." Crane replied, "Only a bit louder and holding your breath's no good."

"What about you?" Dern asked, looking at the priest and holding out another grenade towards him.

"I know what to do." the priest replied, accepting the grenade and removing the pin. The other four men removed the pins from their grenades as well and turned their attention to the traitors around the fire.

"Let's spread these out." Dern said softly, "Crane to the left, Cavo to the right. Lukis you land one on the near side and I'll put mine on the other side of that fire. Preacher, you just take your pick. Now on three. One. Two. Three!"

All five grenades were thrown at once and they landed all around the fire. In the handful of seconds before they exploded the chanting soldiers panicked and hurled themselves as far away from them as they could while the five men beyond the rise ducked down. The sound of the explosions merged into one almighty 'Boom!' and as soon as it was done both Dern and Crane leapt up, aiming their weapons over the rise to take advantage of the destruction already wrought by the grenades.

The clouds of flying shrapnel had cut more than a dozen of the traitors apart, while yet more were badly injured and unable to fight. But some, including the bare chested leader had escaped and it was these that the two guardsmen targeted. Dern fired individual shots towards the leader while Crane set his lasgun to automatic and held the trigger down as he sprayed as many shots as he could around the area.

"What are you three waiting for?" Crane yelled when he realised that only the two of them were shooting, "There's still enough for everyone."

The other three men joined in the shooting, all of them firing individual shots at selected targets who were trying to get to their own weapons. Caught entirely by surprise it took some time for them to recover properly and by that time about half were dead. But the remaining forces still outnumbered the five men attacking them and their leader gave a shout in Low Gothic that was easy for everyone to understand.

"Blood for the Blood God!"

The traitors were armed with a mix of weapons. Many of them had lasguns that appeared to have been taken from some of the butchered Imperial Guardsmen but there were still some armed with the autoguns that were standard issue for the planetary defence force and so it was a mix of las and projectile fire that was directed back towards the five men beyond the rise and the sheer number of shots forced all of them to duck for cover, crawling backwards out of the line of fire.

"Well I think we got their attention." Dern said.

"But now what do we do about it?" Crane asked as there was the sound of shouting and footfalls as the remaining traitors charged straight towards them.

"We fall back." Dern said, "No lights and conserve your ammo. Maybe we can lose them in the darkness."

"We cannot just run and hide." the priest protested.

"Oh yes we can." Crane replied, "Now move it or meet the Emperor in person." and he reached down to pull the priest to his feet.

As the traitors were coming over the top of the rise the five men were already vanishing into the darkness and their pursuers slowed down.

"Crane, Lukis." Dern said, trying to keep his voice low enough that the enemy would not hear him though his men would, "Alternate cover. Only fire if the enemy sees you. Twenty count. Crane first."

"Oh thanks sarge." Crane hissed as he took cover behind a tree and pointed his rifle back towards the traitors while the rest of the group kept on running. Watching the traitors, Crane saw them start to spread out and not worried about being seen they activated lamp packs, shining them into the darkness. Individually Crane and Lukis both counted as Crane covered the withdrawal and when each man reached twenty he swapped his role. Lukis was slightly faster and he too took cover behind a tree while Crane came running back towards him. Then as Crane ran past Lukis both started counting again. However, before Lukis had even reached ten he heard a cry from his side and turning his head he was just in time to have the beam of a lamp pack shone in his face.

"They've seen me!" he called out, firing his lasgun towards the source of the light until he heard a scream and he started to run.

"Keep moving!" Dern ordered and he fired his las pistol through the trees at the light being cast by another lamp pack.

Knowing the general location of the five Imperial troops, the traitors now began to converge on them, yelling curses and threats of how they intended to make the men suffer before they died but they still remained just out of sight. Then there was a burst of fire from an autogun that put several shots into a tree close to Cavo and the deck hand stumbled as he ducked. Dern slowed down to help him back to his feet but just as Cavo was standing up again there was a shot from a lasgun that struck him in the throat and he collapsed.

"Cover!" Den yelled, letting go of Cavo's body and throwing himself to the ground while shots flew above him. Cavo's lasgun was just within reach and rather than use his las pistol Dern reached out to grab hold of the weapon and switched it to fully automatic. Then he sprayed short bursts of shots into the darkness, hoping to at least dissuade the enemy from charging straight at him.

At the same time Lukis fell back to join Crane and they positioned themselves back-to-back, firing at the lamp packs they could see bobbing about.

"This way's blocked." Crane shouted.

"Same here." Dern replied, "And Cavo's down."

"Damned fly boy. Should have kept his head low." Crane muttered.

Meanwhile the priest had just pressed himself up against the trunk of one of the larger trees, holding his las pistol in one hand and chainsword in the other. He waited silently in the dark until a group of men ran right past him and before they even knew he was there he shot two of them in the back of their heads.

"In the Emperor's name I smite thee!" he bellowed, "I know no fear!" and he charged at the surprised traitors, slashing one across his back with the chainsword and shooting another as he tried to turn towards the priest. As the charge pack in Cavo's lasgun ran dry Dern was about to try and find another in Cavo's webbing but as he turned he saw the priest now battling a number of traitors alone. The priest was clearly holding his own, making impressive use of both his las pistol and chainsword to engage multiple targets at once. For a large man the priest appeared to be surprisingly agile and in all his years in the Imperial Guard Dern had seen only a handful of veteran troops who could manage such a feat. But the priest's own success was drawing more traitors towards him. Fortunately despite having turned their backs on the Emperor they still retained enough sense to avoid shooting at the priest for fear of hitting their own men and so the only way for them to attack was to get in close and risk his wrath. Dern knew that this could not go on forever though, sooner or later the priest would tire or a traitor would get in a lucky blow while his back was turned. Knowing that Crane and Lukis were supporting one another Dern leapt up, swapped the lasgun for his las pistol and ran to help the priest.

As he ran he fired his pistol on the move, hitting several of the traitors who were rushing to join in the attack on the priest. Then when he reached the melee he drew his knife and plunged it between the ribs of a traitor, twisting the blade as he withdrew it to open up the wound.

"Need some help preacher?" Dern asked as he first shot another traitor and then ducked a swung rifle butt before thrusting his knife up into his assailant's stomach.

While Dern and the priest were engaging the enemy in hand to hand combat Crane and Lukis were still doing their best to keep them at a distance. But as they continued firing they saw that the traitor soldiers were getting steadily closer before they were able to shoot them.

"We need to concentrate our fire in one direction." Crane said.

"But they'll outflank us." Lukis pointed out.

"Here, yes. But if we can find ourselves a better spot then we can do it."

"But how-" Lukis began, glancing over his shoulder and Crane held up a smoke grenade.

"Never get deployed without one kid." he said, "Now when I throw this thing you need to be ready to run. Fix your bayonet as well. If anyone gets in our way we need to make sure they regret it."

Lukis nodded and paused firing just long enough to fix his bayonet to the end of his lasgun.

"Ready." he said.

"Good. Now wait for my signal." Crane said before he too fixed his bayonet as rapidly as he could. Then he pulled the pin from the smoke grenade and tossed it into the darkness, "Move!" he snapped and both he and Lukis started to run in the other direction, keeping their lasguns high and shooting at any traitors they saw while the smoke behind them covered their retreat. The sound of running water up ahead attracted the attention of Crane and he started to run towards it, "This way." he said.

"Why?" the younger trooper asked as he followed.

"Don't you hear that water? Hopefully we can use the bank for cover." Crane replied as he continued towards the sound of running water.

The river itself was not visible as the two guardsmen rushed towards it, instead it lay at the bottom of a natural dip in the ground and Crane smiled when he saw this, knowing that its sloping banks met their needs precisely.

"Get in." he said, sliding down the bank to the water at the bottom.

The river and its banks combined to form a natural 'V' shaped trench that Crane and Lukis made use of to conceal themselves as best they could while still being able to aim their lasguns. The traitors knew that they had fled and knew the approximate direction in which they had gone. But not knowing exactly where they had gone meant that they had to spread themselves out as they hunted them down. A cluster of three traitors came into view of Crane and he brought his lasgun to bear and fired a rapid burst that took down all of them before he ducked and pulled Lukis down with him so that as the beams from lamp packs shone over their heads the two guardsmen remained undetected.

"That's how it's done." he whispered as he reloaded his lasgun, "Duck and cover. The longer it takes them to figure out we're here the longer we'll live."

"Shouldn't we try heading along the river?" Lukis suggested but Crane shook his head.

"Wading will make too much noise." he replied, "It'll give us away and make it harder for us to hear them coming." then he looked upwards at the sound of movement from above, "Like now." he added and he bobbed up over the top of the river bank just long enough to shoot the lone traitor soldier moving parallel to the river before taking cover once more.

While his men continued to search for Crane and Lukis, the leader of the traitors strode confidently towards the fighting around Dern and the priest, baring his teeth. Unlike his subordinates who were fighting with a mix of ranged weapons, he kept his shotgun slung across his back while in his hands he held only a power maul of the type used for crowd control by the Adeptus Arbites but now that the planet had declared its independence from the Imperium such weapons were being used to inflict pain for other reasons.

Flicking the activation switch of the power maul, there was a crackling sound as electricity danced over its charged head and the traitor began to hurl his own men out of the way as he picked out the priest as a target and made his way directly towards him.

"Look out!" Dern exclaimed, seeing the traitor's leader as he prepared to strike at the priest and he leapt into the traitor's path, raising his las pistol. However, before he could fire the snarling traitor swung the power maul one handed and it clipped Dern's las pistol, knocking it aside. Even this light touch of the power maul's head was enough to send a strong electrical jolt into Dern's hand and he yelped in pain as he dropped the weapon, leaving him armed with just his knife. Diving forwards he lashed out with the blade, aiming for the traitor's stomach. But the other man simply stepped back and the edge of Dern's knife barely scratched him, leaving a narrow line of blood that was barely noticeable against the marks covering his entire torso.

The traitor swung his power maul again, intending to bring it down on Dern's head but at the last moment the priest intervened and there were sparks as the blade of his chainsword struck the insulated shaft of the power maul.

"The man in black shall taste our vengeance, not our blood." his spat at the traitor and in return the traitor looked straight at him.

"You know nothing of the man in black priest of the false Emperor." he said as the pair both stepped back and separated their weapons, "And your blood will be tasted by the Blood God himself." Then another traitor lunged forwards to strike at the priest but the leader reached out and held him back, "No!" he commanded, "This one is mine." and he shoved the other man aside just at the right moment for Dern to stab him through the chest. Dern tried to move on to the traitors' leader next but before he could strike another of his followers tried to swing a rifle butt at him and he was forced back instead.

The priest struck again, swinging his chainsword at arms length and the swipe caught another of the traitor's, producing a loud scream as it cut through his arm at the elbow but failed to connect with the leader and so instead he tried to aim his las pistol at the man. But the leader leapt forwards with the power maul extended straight out ahead of him and its tip struck the priest who howled as the electricity flowed through him, causing him to drop both his weapons as he shuddered before falling to the ground face first.

Turning around the leader saw that two of his men now had Dern by his arms while a third was about to plunge a knife into his chest.

"Stop!" he shouted and the traitors all froze, "Hold him. The man in black will deal with them himself. Now spread the word, I want the others and I want them alive as well. The man in black will deal with them all."

"Listen." Crane said softly as he and Lukis waited at the river.

"I don't hear anything." Lukis whispered back.

"Exactly. From the sounds of it the sarge and that Emperor botherer were beating the living daylights out of those guys. So why so quiet all of a sudden?"

"Perhaps they beat them." Lukis said excitedly, "We should go and join them." and he started to climb the river bank.

"Stay down you idiot." Crane hissed, grabbing the younger guardsman's webbing and pulling him back down, "If they'd won then Sergeant Dern would be yelling his head off for us. But he isn't so that means that the enemy is still up there."

"So what do we do?" Lukis asked and Crane paused, looking along the river and wondering whether it was worth the risk trying to wade through it.

"I need to take a look around." Crane said, "Stay here." and he crawled to the top of the bank and peered over. Seeing no-one he pulled himself up and darted to the closest tree for cover while he surveyed the area. The darkness limited his vision but the lack of any lamp pack beams gave him a sense of confidence. Then he looked back towards the river and for a moment he considered just leaving Lukis and taking his chances on his own. But now that he knew there were enemy forces in the area he also knew that his chances of

survival were increased by working with someone else, even a new recruit such as Lukis. All of a sudden a beam of light shone between the trees as someone pointed a lamp pack towards Crane and he froze. He was never fully caught in the beam but he knew that movement was still easy to spot in the darkness and he did not even raise his weapon for fear of drawing attention to himself. Then the beam moved further away and Crane scabbled back towards the river and rolled down the bank.

"What's happening?" Lukis asked.

"There's a bunch of them up there right now." Crane whispered, "Get your lasgun ready and let's do this slowly."

Bringing their lasguns to their shoulders the two guardsmen slowly raised themselves up and took aim towards the source of the light from the lamp packs. But with no visible targets they held their fire. All of a sudden a second beam of light shone from the opposite direction and both Crane and Lukis were illuminated.

"Get down!" Crane snapped, pulling Lukis back down the river bank as there was the sound of projectile fire and bullets started to whiz over their heads.

"What now?" Lukis asked in a panic.

"Okay now we try going along the river." Crane replied, "This way." and he started to walk downstream. The water was only ankle deep where he was walking but he still trod carefully, not wanting to trip and fall. However, as he and Lukis continued on their way there were shouts from further along the river.

"Okay they're down here as well." Crane said, turning around, "Back that way." but as they both turned a light shone towards them and they both realised that they were caught between two groups of traitors, "Back to back. Full auto. We'll take as many of them with us as we can." Crane said, snarling. But before either of them could act something flew over the top of the river bank and bounced down it before landing in the river with a 'splash.'

"Grenade!" Lukis yelled.

"Get out!" Crane snapped and the pair of them scrambled up the river bank before the grenade could go off. However, when it did explode it did so with more of a 'fizz' than a 'boom' and looking back Crane saw a cloud of smoke starting to fill the gully. Then numerous lights shone on the guardsmen from all around and as they both looked up they saw that they were surrounded by traitor soldiers aiming weapons at them.

"Surrender," a voice called out, "or die."

Crane smiled and slowly raised his hands.

## 4.

The four men had their hands bound behind their backs by their captors before being led off through the forest, two traitor soldiers holding each man by his arms to make sure that he could not attempt to run off. They were taken to a large clearing where several small buildings were collected together beside a cliff and set into that cliff was an opening that had a single set of railway tracks leading into it.

"So you're using the mines for shelter." Dern said as he realised that they were being taken towards the opening but the men holding him captive said nothing.

Just inside the entrance to the mine a pair of ogryns stood on guard and they stepped aside as the four prisoners were taken underground. The tracks continued into the mine but whatever vehicle was supposed to run on them was absent and so the traitors continued to walk deeper underground instead. After a short while the narrow passageway that led back up to the surface became a ledge that overlooked a large cavern and mining equipment could be seen stacked up along one wall. But the cavern had now been converted into a barracks and hundreds of former planetary defence force soldiers could be seen preparing their equipment for battle. As with the uniforms worn by the men who had captured the Imperial Guardsmen all of these troops had also defaced their equipment to remove all trace of Imperial markings. The captives were not taken down into this cavern however, instead their captors continued to take them along the path of the tracks as the passageway closed in again and sloped downwards before it ended in another smaller cavern. This chamber had obviously been converted into a command centre of sorts. Maps showing troop deployments were hung on every wall while the gaps between them were covered in posters bearing anti-Imperial slogans and markings like those the leader of the band of traitors that had captured the four Imperial prisoners had daubed on his torso. Several large tables were scattered around the chamber, on which were more maps being poured over by several groups of men in defaced uniforms and as the prisoners were led in a stern looking man wearing what had once been a defence force officer's uniform looked up from the nearest of these.

"What's going on?" he demanded, "Why have you brought those fools down here instead of just killing them on the surface?"

"This one knows of the man in black." the leader of the group said, grabbing hold of the priest by his collar and the two men holding his arms let go as their leader dragged him forwards and forced him to his knees, "I thought that he might want to question them himself. If the servants of the false Emperor know-

"Wait there." the officer interrupted, "I'll go and find him." and then he walked towards a doorway that led into another chamber.

"Get them on their knees." the traitors' leader said and the men holding the three Imperial Guardsmen forced all of them into a kneeling position.

"Sergeant, what's happening?" Lukis asked.

"Just stay quiet trooper." Dern answered, "That's an order." and Crane snorted.

"He doesn't have any more of a clue than you do." he said to Lukis. Then he looked at the priest, "I'll bet he does though. Don't you? Yeah I'm talking to you. Why don't you finally tell us who this Emperor-damned man in black you're so obsessed with is?"

"Silence!" one of the men standing behind Crane snapped and he struck the guardsman with the butt of his rifle. The blow was not hard enough to knock Crane out but it did take a few seconds for him to recover his senses and then he looked back over his shoulder and snarled at the man.

"Care to untie me and we'll see if you're so tough then?" he hissed.

It was then that the officer returned.

"He's on his way." he said, "He'll be here at any moment." and then there was a deep 'thud' from beyond the doorway through which the officer had just returned, followed by another and then another and it became rapidly obvious that they were the footsteps of someone much heavier than an ordinary man.

The figure that emerged from the doorway had to stoop down in order to get through and even then only just fit through thanks to not only his own massive physique but also the suit of powered armour that he wore. Straightening up it became apparent that the man in black stood a head taller than even the tallest of the other traitors though he was not as tall as the ogryns that the Imperial prisoners had seen.

The man in black was a space marine.

The man in black's armour lacked a helmet and this allowed the prisoners to see his face. It had a stern, humourless expression on it but apart from its size it appeared perfectly normal.

"Man in black!" the priest yelled, "I see you man in black!"

"Oh great." Crane muttered, "Make him mad why don't you?"

"Quiet." Dern hissed at Crane. Then he looked at the priest again and noticed something unusual. During the fighting the priest's robes had been damaged and there was a tear in his sleeve just below his shoulder and through this tear Dern could just about make out part of a tattoo. It appeared to depict a wing that could have

easily been mistaken at first glance for the Imperial Aquila that was the symbol of the Imperium itself. But where the eagle's body and heads would have been there was something shaped more like a dagger pointing downwards. Looking back at the man in black as the space marine strode across the command centre Dern saw that the same symbol was painted in white on the background of his right shoulder pad. "He's a space marine." Lukis said, "How can a space marine be working for the enemy?" "I said keep quiet." Dern responded, "Not a word, either of you."

Halting right in front of the kneeling priest, the man in black looked down and stared at him as he stared back up, looking him in the face as if he was not afraid.

"How do you know me priest?" the man in black said.

"The Emperor knows your sins man in black." the priest shouted, "The Lion knows your sins." and the man in black stepped backwards as if recoiling from the mention of the word 'Lion'.

"Who are you?" he demanded, reaching out and grabbing hold of the priest by his throat before lifting him up off the floor. As the priest hung in the air, choking the man in black noticed the tear in his robes and ripped the sleeve away to reveal the tattoo in its entirety and confirming to Dern that it did indeed match the symbol on his own armour.

"No matter." the man in black said, "You will not be telling anyone about me." and he turned towards the leader of the group that had brought the prisoners to the command centre, "Take them away and execute them." he said.

"Yes my lord." the man replied, averting his gaze from the marine.

"It's too late man in black." the priest yelled at him, "I've seen you man in black. They've seen you man in black. That's what they told me. Find the man in black and look upon him with your new eye." and the priest began to laugh.

"What new eye priest? Let me see." the marine said, spinning back around to face the priest and leaning in close as he grabbed him once more. Looking right into the priest's eyes the man in black's enhanced vision allowed him to notice that one of them was artificial and he drew his knife before very precisely gouging it out and staring at the augmentic and the trailing wire that had been fused to the priest's optic nerve.

"Too late man in black." the priest shouted again, "I've already seen you. They've already seen you."

The man in black's eyes widened as he stood up straight suddenly.

"Everybody out!" he yelled, "Everybody get out of here now! This location is about to be targeted for-" and then there was a sudden flash of white light that filled the entire command centre along with what sounded like a clap of thunder as six armoured figures that stood even larger than the man in black appeared out of nowhere. Five of the six wore armour that was the colour of bone while the sixth was also in black except for his helmet that was patterned to look like a human skull. On their shoulders all six bore a marking of a winged dagger.

As soon as they were able to acquire targets the six terminator marines opened fire with their storm bolters, the mass reactive explosive rounds proving lethal against the unarmoured traitors staffing the command centre. They avoided shooting at the man in black, however and he drew his bolt pistol and fired at the one wearing the black armour and skull helmet. But whereas the bolt rounds were blasting the traitors apart easily the rounds that the man in black fired failed to do more than just scratch the paintwork of the terminator's armour.

One of the figures in bone armour stepped towards the man in black and swung a massive armoured fist at him. Normally powerfists such as this were surrounded by an energy field that could let them tear open even a battle tank but on this occasion the terminator had left the field shut down and so when he struck the man in black's unarmoured head he was just thrown backwards rather than being decapitated entirely. He landed several metres away and slid across the floor until he struck one of the solid stone walls and came to a halt, lying slumped unconscious against it.

The terminators then started to spread out around the room, firing on every traitor they found. One of them walked over to the doorway that the man in black had entered through and fired a burst from his storm bolter into the room beyond before turning around again while a second headed for the entrance through which the prisoners had been brought and stood watch in case anyone came to investigate the noise.

With every one of the traitors in the command centre dead two of the terminators strode towards the unconscious man in black to restrain him while two others formed up either side of the terminator in black as he moved to stand in front of the priest. Then clamping his storm bolter and the ornate weapon he held in his left hand to the legs of his armour the terminator reached up and removed his helmet.

"I did what you told me lord." the priest said as he looked up at the terminator with blood pouring from his empty eye socket, "I looked upon the man in black."

"Your task is done." the terminator replied and he lifted the priest to his feet. Then he looked towards the three Imperial Guardsmen who had watched the terminators' deployment and actions dumbfounded, "Who are they?" he asked.

"They are Imperial Guardsmen lord. They assisted me. Without them I could not have completed the mission"

you gave me.”

“Then you have done a great service to the Dark Angels.” the terminator said, addressing the three guardsmen.

“This service wouldn't earn us some sort of rewards would it?” Crane asked.

“Your names will be recorded for all time in the chapter records.” the terminator said, “You have our deepest thanks.” and he paused, “And my most sincere apology for what must now be done. The secrets of the Dark Angels must be kept.” and before any of the guardsmen could speak the terminator reached out with both hands, placing one either side of the priest's head and snapping his neck. Then the two terminators standing either side of him raised their storm bolters, pointing them towards the three Imperial Guardsmen and opened fire.