

Blood On The Stars

A Captain Blazeward Novella

By Matthew Gill

Abridged Sample:

**Captain B30 and Demicaptain B31 Become
Captain Blazeward and Captain Flamewrath**

Chapter 4

When the last of his soldiers left the chamber, B30 dropped his helmet on the floor and slumped against the wall. Finally alone, the dam shattered. Tears suppressed for two days broke free at last, a surging flood that could no longer be held back.

It was not just the scale of destruction he'd witnessed, but what was to come. If they failed to stop The Destroyers at the Great Western Hall, they'd enter the civilian districts... he didn't want to imagine it. The nuclear fire over Port Carrimor had been terrifying, the destruction horrific, the loss of life unimaginable. But at least it had been quick.

The attack on The Warren was worse. A slow and steady defeat, falling back again and again, losing more kin with each retreat. It was death by a thousand cuts, backed to a precipice, until they had no place to go but over the edge.

The hopelessness was crushing, like the weight of an entire mountain bearing down upon them. Yet they fought on, knowing that the moment they fell or gave in, their entire species would be finished.

His cohort was crumbling around him, but through it all, he had led them, kept giving them orders, rallying them, sending them to their deaths one by one.

It had all happened so fast. Mere days ago he'd had no idea there were other sentient beings in the universe. The discovery that they weren't alone should have been a momentous occasion, one of celebration and wonder. Now everyone he knew would be dead within days. He wanted to scream, to grab one of the monsters and demand to know why—why were they doing this?

B62 had just graduated from basic when they first crossed paths, full of vigour and the eagerness so typical of fresh officers. He'd been a perfectly carved stone, one

that slotted neatly into the cohort. It had been his strength and determination that held them together over the last couple of days. Fresh tears sprang forth.

B30 slammed his balled handpaw into the wall. That pained cry, the sight of the soldier lying there wounded, desperate. It would haunt him until the end. His geminus' outrage and look of betrayal cut nearly as deep as the courage B62 had displayed, risking his life without hesitation.

Another sob shook him.

He had to pull himself together, get back to his soldiers in the Great Western Hall, and *do something*.

"Captain?"

B30's head snapped up. B734 stood in the doorway, a look of concern painted across his white-furred features. *No point hiding it*. B734 knew him properly; he'd seen behind the mask of command that captaincy forced him to wear. B30 pulled a glove off and dabbed at his eyes.

B734 said nothing, just walked over and placed a handpaw on his shoulder.

"It's not your fault." B734's voice was barely above a whisper, but the words carried weight.

"I let them die. I should've—"

"Don't." B734 gripped B30's other shoulder and pressed his forehead against B30's own, their ears interlocking in the age-old Din-no display of solidarity and companionship.

B30 returned the embrace, resting his weight on B734's pauldrons. Slowly, his trembling ceased, the sobs that wracked him settling like tremors after an earthquake. They left devastation in their wake, but the immediate calamity had

ended. Instead, he felt the warmth of B734's forehead against his, the slight twitching of his ears.

Besides his geminus, B734 was the last Din-no alive to have served with him from the start. If B31 was his heart, and B62 a dependable pillar, then B734 was a lodestone, always pointing true.

B30 didn't move, silently letting the tension seep out of him. For a short while, time stood still.

B734 pulled away first, but kept his handpaws about B30's shoulders. "Now listen to me."

B734 fixed him in place with a green-eyed gaze. "It's an absolute cave-in out there. But we're not giving up, you hear me? You've led this cohort for over a decade, and you didn't get your captaincy by mistake."

B30 struggled to keep his eyes locked on B734's.

"Remember the Delton Uprising?" B734 asked. "That was one hot mess—a clifftop stroll compared to this, I know, but nobody else would've gotten us through it alive. Your geminus is a hothead, but he's right. If we've nothing left to us but limbo, we'll go out fighting to the last breath. Won't we?"

B30 didn't respond.

A blow snapped his head sideways. Stinging heat flared in his cheek, his whiskers sparking. B30 staggered, not from pain, but disbelief.

His adjutant grabbed him by the shoulder again. "Won't. We?"

B30 struggled to speak.

B734 shook him.

"We—we will," B30 replied, voice hoarse.

“And we’re going to take down as many Destroyers as we can, fighting like cornered salkra. And *you* are going to lead us,” B734 insisted.

“I am,” he said, finding his voice.

“We’re going to bleed and die, not because we don’t have a choice, but because *this* is our choice—because these rat-tails *dared* assault our home. You hear me?”

“I hear you.”

“You’re one heck of an intelligent leader, far more imaginative than any Din-no should be. That’s why we’re still alive. I know we don’t have orders, but if anyone’s going to figure out how to hold the Destroyers back, it’s going to be *you*.”

B734’s voice softened. “I miss B62. I miss all those gone to limbo. But they died so that we might live, and we’re not wasting their sacrifice. So dust your tail off, shake your ears, and get back in this. The dead can’t have you yet. The living need their captain.”

When he looked back up, fire burned in B30’s eyes. “I’m with you,” he said, steel in his voice once more.

“Then I’m with you, Captain. Lead us, to victory or limbo.”

Chapter 5

The Great Western Hall lived up to its name. It stretched out before him, the size of a trio of hardball pitches stitched together, illuminated by gigantic floodlights. Rows of pillars marched in perfect order across the width of the capacious space, their tops blending into a vaulted ceiling. To his right lay a rail station, while a vehicle service depot sprawled to his left.

The floor was carved with sweeping geometric channels, each a couple of finger-widths across. From here, the design blurred into abstraction, but he knew what it showed. The settling of West Mount, the first Golden Age, the deeds of the Primogenitor: P1 Himself. It was an unusually artistic display for his kin, but someone had decided to celebrate the Hall's grandeur, and they had done well.

B30's gaze swept the chamber, not to study its architecture, but to assess its occupants. There were a hundred or so other survivors, in addition to those from his cohort. Relief flickered through him.

The variety of armour styles caught his eye. There was Coalition plate, the yellow markings of the Southern Colonies, even a couple of Din-nos from the Drakerock Kingdom, whom he had bled against in a vicious civil war when serving his first years as a soldier. It was ironic indeed that the Destroyers had done what no treaty could.

He didn't relax, but the pressure eased from his shoulders. With this many soldiers present, there would surely be a senior officer somewhere among them. He would report to them and, while the burden of leadership would remain, he could at least defer to another.

His cohort was milling around the inner circle of defences; he and B734 moved to join them. As they drew nearer, he spotted Din-nos in colours other than red and blue. Civilians. A moment later, his nose told him why. Food.

“Attenti—” B800 began to bellow.

“At ease!” B30 interrupted, not wanting his presence to disturb the soldiers from their much-needed nourishment.

“What’s the situation?” he asked, reaching the short and stocky form of his caller.

“Your geminus told everyone to get a breather while we wait for orders,” B800 replied. “These kind lads brought us some chow.” His caller had never been one for formality, but B30 liked him, so he had a habit of letting his poor manners slide.

“Who’s in charge?” B30 asked, looking around for the tell-tale black shoulder stripes of a Major.

“Dunno, Captain,” B800 replied.

B30’s stomach dropped, like the floor was falling out from beneath him. “Who’s my geminus speaking to?” B30 asked, pointing to a Din-no in battered red armour. The soldier was gesticulating wildly with a flanged mace.

“Not sure, Captain. Some Red Division nut job. Heard he’s a survivor from the Southern Colonies. Sounds like he’s a few screws short of a toolbox, if you catch my drift.”

B30 was surprised, and quietly proud, that there weren’t more Din-nos in such a state. Still, for a Din-no to have survived the orbital attack on the Southern Colonies... he must have been one of only a pawful. It also meant he owed no formal loyalty to The Warren. But he still here—still fighting.

“Not a major?” The plank of hope he stood upon was becoming more rickety by the second.

“Nope. Don’t think he’s even a squad leader. Those Red Division Din-nos seem to be following him because he makes the loudest noises.”

B30 appreciated the irony, given who he was talking to. Such subtleties were most certainly lost on his caller, who was famous for the volume of his commands, not his comprehension of them.

“They don’t have a leader of their own. Oh, a thousand cave-ins,” B30 muttered.

“What’s that?”

“Nothing,” B30 said, waving a handpaw. It was essential he keep the facade up. “Take a break. Get some food. The Destroyers will dig through in a few hours. I can’t have you all fighting on empty stomachs.”

“You should have some too. It’s proper decent stew,” B800 said, not wasting a moment, bowl and spoon already back in his handpaws.

“I will, I will,” B30 replied, already scanning the rest of those gathered in the hall. There had to be someone else. Surely *someone* was in charge.

Small clusters of kin sat nursing stew. Others leaned on barricades or slumped at their bases, while teams of Din-nos hauled fresh defences into position or dragged abandoned vehicles aside.

He turned slowly at first, then faster, scanning every archway and side passage as though a major or general might step out from the shadows. There were no black stripes. The flimsy plank of hope broke.

A firm handpaw found his wrist.

“B30.” It was B734.

“There’s no one else, is there?” B30 said under his breath.

B734’s grip tightened. “There’s you.”

B30 nodded and rolled his shoulders, straightening himself.

“Unto limbo, my friend,” B734 said.

“Unto limbo,” he replied, clasping B734’s wrist.

He could not choose the hand, but he would play the cards he was dealt.

Chapter 6

“Are you sure this’ll work, Captain?” B734 asked as they watched the preparations.

Even his geminus had expressed doubts, but the idea of going out in a literal blaze of glory had put a smile on his face. Now B31 was shouting orders at a team of Din-nos who were busy hauling canisters of combustane from the vehicle depot to the far end of the hall. There, they began pouring the fuel into the channels in the floor.

“No, I’m not. There are too many unpredictable factors,” B30 replied, twirling his whiskers. He wouldn’t voice his concerns in front of the rest of the cohort, but B734 deserved his honesty. “But I have no better idea.”

If he was going to draw a line on the stone and die here, he’d do so taking a gamble.

“Won’t the Destroyers realise what we’ve done and stay out of the hall?” B734 asked.

“Combustane has a high boiling point. It’s essentially odourless,” B30 said.

“But their helmets... They can see through smoke, spot our explosives, our security lenses, and who knows what else.”

“Hence the gamble. We’ll kill the lights and fling as much lead at them as we can. Keep their shields sparking and their eyes up, all attention on us until they’re well into the hall,” B30 replied. “Then light a match, and let our wrath burn.”

“And, ah... are you sure this isn’t going to turn the entire hall into one giant bomb?” B734 asked, eyes flicking between the fuel and the vehicle depot.

“I’m no Yellow Division scientist, but I’m pretty sure fuels with high boiling points burn, rather than making explosive vapour clouds. That’s why we use combustane, right? Safer than petrol.”

“True. But I’ve never seen anyone light so much combustane in such a small area... At least if you’re wrong, we won’t have a chance to worry about it,” B734 chuckled bleakly.

“We don’t have a chance to worry about it now,” B30 remarked. Every time he checked the timer on his datatablet it seemed to have dropped by more than he’d expected. It was showing just under an hour. The Destroyers would be here soon.

“You’re right. I better see how our new demicapain is doing.” B734 saluted and returned to the control suite of the rail station.

The rail station had been repurposed as an impromptu nerve centre for the defence. B30’s command team worked from within, busy coordinating their efforts while trying to locate and rally any remaining survivors. The search was nearing its end; soon, the remaining tunnels would be sealed.

B30 began a circuit of their defences. Soldiers were making ready for the end. They knew the stakes, knew their orders, and that knowledge brought with it a range of reactions. Some Din-nos busied themselves filling bottles and canisters with combustane, making impromptu incendiaries. Others were sharpening blades or preparing makeshift cudgels.

A pawful sat, staring into nothing, or mechanically eating food, eyes wet or glazed over. Some spoke in rushed, hushed voices into the downlink, saying farewell to young protégés or leaving heartfelt messages for their own preceptors or close friends. There was even one game of halftrick going on, the Din-nos placing cards and bets with reckless abandon.

More soldiers had trickled into the hall over the past hour, falling back from outlying chambers and redoubts. Their reports were identical: overrun, hideous casualties with a lucky kill here and there, disorderly retreat, tunnels collapsed behind

them, left uncertain, leaderless. B30 became increasingly frustrated with each additional report. Nobody knew the broader picture, and Low Command hadn't deigned to answer or contact him again.

A demicaptain had joined them half an hour ago with a few battered squads. B30 saw the relief in the Din-no's eyes when the exhausted officer realised he could pass the burden on. Part of him was envious. He was to that Din-no what he himself had wished for when he first walked into the hall. Yet, as he saw Din-no after Din-no put their own fears aside and take up arms for what might be the final time, something hardened in him. Like an avalanche that started from a single pebble, the feeling grew. He had his doubts when it came to the plan, but the bravery of his men was without question. He would be a leader worthy of their valor. He would make his ancestors proud.

"Get everyone's attention," B30 ordered his caller.

"Alright, you bunch of floppy-eared sops, the Captain wants a word!" B800 bellowed. It still surprised B30 quite how loud he could be, even without an amplifier.

Heads turned, and Din-nos made their way over to the section of the defences before the sealed gates to West Mount.

B30 leaped up onto one of the barricades and surveyed the growing crowd of mismatched soldiers and lucky survivors. He knew he'd never see many of them again, even if, by some miracle, his plan succeeded. Din-nos who had fought and bled for him stood shoulder to shoulder with those who had lost their original captains. Disaster and fate had brought them together; it was his job to forge them into a fearsome force that would make their final stand count.

"My kin," he began. "There are no words that fit this day. These Destroyers, these horrors from the stars, they've taken much from us. We've lost more comrades

than we can count.” So many faces were missing from the crowd, ones he had known for suncycles, and he felt his chest tighten. He thought of their visages in limbo, brought their faces to mind, their hearts blazing even to the very end, defending his people. Defending him. They had not died for nothing. He would make sure of it.

“Grief, fear... these will not break us. We cannot, *will not*, give up. This is The Warren. It belongs to our kin. It belongs to the countless fallen. And today, most of all,” he raised his voice, digging deep for those last reservoirs of strength, “it belongs to us!”

His kin responded with a barrage of thumps and shouts, handpaws striking chest plates.

“Across The Warren our comrades fight on, but West Mount needs us now. The civilian divisions look to us to shield them. It’s our duty, as Din-nos of the Red and Blue Divisions, to be that ward between terror and the tears in the eyes of those who raised us, those who smelted the strength of steel in our hearts and minds. Your bravery is without question, and I... I am honoured to lead you.” As he spoke the words, he found that he meant them.

He gazed from soldier to soldier as the thumping of chest plates increased, particularly from R910 and the red armoured linebreakers on either side of him.

“I don’t know if any of us will see another day. But we will fight, we will kill, and, if duty demands it of us, we will die. But we will give our kin and the enemy something to remember; this hall will run red with the blood of the Destroyers. It will echo to their screams, and we will build a pyre from their corpses! No Din-no will go cold tonight. Let the wrath of our race burn, bright as the fire in our hearts!”

The thumping of handpaws intensified, and his whiskers vibrated. Blood thundered in his ears as he took his own words in. He would right his failings. He would avenge his comrades.

“We’ll fight like the Pioneers of old. Let this battle become legend. Let P1 Himself hear the tale of our bravery and acknowledge our deeds!”

Shouts and roars met his words, the chorus of battle fever rising to a crescendo. Din-nos would die, and still, he gave the order.

“To your positions, my kin. Fight, not for yourselves, but for the future, and for vengeance! For the honour of dying a true Din-no—” his geminus caught his eye and nodded as he slammed a handpaw against his chest plate, “we fight... unto limbo!”

“Unto limbo!” the Din-nos roared back at him.

Chapter 7

A flare of light washed out B30's vision, and a thundering explosion drowned out the chant. Fragments of the hall's gates flew across the chamber, crashing down like miniature meteorites. They were here. It had begun.

B30 stayed low, back to the barricade, rifle in his lap, his geminus beside him. A hundred muzzles flared and flashed before him as his kin shouted their defiance. Within moments, red blasts of wicked energy were snapping back across the hall.

The Destroyers walked straight into the hail of lead, their shields contemptuously absorbing the barrage his soldiers were unleashing. They spread out and advanced into the hall as if the roaring of a hundred guns was nought but a light spring rain. The same was not true in reverse. The first bang of displaced air sounded.

His soldiers had to hold their nerve.

Adrenaline roared through his system once more, purging the fatigue and preparing him for fight or flight. But there would be no flight. Every reflex drilled into him demanded he join the fight, protect his kin, and open fire. He suppressed the urge; it would only give away their position.

B30's eyes flicked between his datatableView and the violence playing out above his head. The barrage of energy blasts intensified as more of their foes entered the hall. There were at least fifty now. They weren't hurrying, but neither were they offering any respite.

The first of the Destroyers reached the combustible-filled channels.

He held his breath.

The lead soldiers marched on, sighting down their rifles and letting off short bursts at the Din-no defenders.

B30's grip tightened.

The Destroyers' slow and steady advance continued.

"Don't stop shooting! Keep their attention on you," B30 ordered over the downlink. Bullets continued to whistle overhead, doing nothing more than splash off of the red bubbles. In return, more bangs of displacing air, more Din-nos gone to limbo.

The gunfire slackened. His kin were struggling to shoot back. The Destroyers were now laying down heat with vicious precision, targeting anyone who poked rifle or head past a barricade.

"They need to keep it up," B31 hissed from beside him.

At least twenty of the Destroyers were in the hot zone now, but the vanguard was still fifty metres from the first ring of barricades. They needed their enemy closer.

His soldiers redoubled their efforts, ducking behind their barricades before popping shots off from the other end, attempting not to shoot from the same place twice. Every moment he waited, more Din-nos would die. But every second his kin bought increased the chances of his plan working.

B30 gritted his teeth. It was a horrible balance. Trigger the trap too soon, and the Destroyers would back out, too far away to engage. Trigger the trap too late, and the cost in lives would be intolerable. It was every captain's worst nightmare.

His eyes stayed glued to the datatablet.

Thirty metres.

The hall echoed to the roar of gunfire. The Destroyers were so close he could hear the alien crackle of their weapons discharging. More bangs.

"We're taking heavy losses," his freshly promoted demicapitain warned.

B30 shoved the deaths of his kin to the back of his mind. He couldn't do anything for them now, except save those they'd died to protect.

"Assault team, make ready," B30 ordered, doing his best to keep his voice steady. He crouched, powerful legs bunched, and grasped the wrench that was to serve as his makeshift mace. Placing the datatablet down, he took the incendiary grenade from his belt.

Twenty metres.

There were close to a hundred Destroyers in the chamber now. Not all of them were in the hot zone, but the majority were, and the closest were nearly upon them.

"Crush it!" B734 cursed in his ear. "Demicaptain down!"

The words made B30 snap his head to the right, reacting faster than thought. His geminus was untouched. B31 crouched next to him, 'L' shaped hackblade at the ready, grenade in the other handpaw. The sudden pressure that had seized his chest vanished, then a moment later, his stomach sank. Second Squad had lost their leader.

They had waited long enough.

"On my mark." He clicked his visor back to standard vision and primed the grenade. "Three, two, one, *grenades!*"

Time reduced to a crawl. He wound up, turned, and threw the grenade over the barricade. Aim didn't matter, only distance. A score of incendiaries sailed over the heads of the advancing Destroyers. There was a moment of quiet, seconds hanging in the air, preceding the storm.

The grenades detonated. Combustane gel ignited and flew. The fuel in the etched channels caught light.

The floor was set ablaze.

With a roar that drowned out gunfire, the Great Western Hall burned, flames rolling out from the grenade detonations, spreading and consuming the front half of the chamber. It was like the very ground itself had split open and the furious core of the planet poured forth, a wound opened in the heart of the mountain, its blood the fire and smoke spewing upward.

The wrath of the Din-nos was unleashed.

Howls and screams rent the air, cries that climbed in pitch as the fire rose.

“Kill them!” B31 yelled, leaping up, waving his hackblade in the air. “For The Warren!”

B30 did not hold him back, but surged to his footpaws, rushing around the barricade and charging into the teeth of the inferno. The heat hit him like a physical blow, the smell a second later. Thick black smoke choked the hall, reaching him even through his helmet’s filter. Beneath it was the sickly sweet smell of charring flesh, melting plastic, and roasting meat.

Shapes flailed amid the smoke, the flash of red shields and their screaming occupants appearing for a heartbeat before vanishing beneath the next rolling wave of fire. Whatever part of him might once have recoiled at the sight stayed silent.

The pawful of bewildered soldiers at the front of the Destroyers’ forces were caught between the raging inferno and the charging Din-nos. B30’s face twisted into a vicious cry of vengeance. They had come to his world with nothing but hate; he answered in kind.

There was nothing more he could do but run forward—no clever strategy, no defensive ploy. He’d be shot dead, or he’d reach his target and wreak vengeance upon them.

He heard the crackle of the Destroyers' guns as they found their wits, then the bangs of displacing air. But he did not see the carnage; his vision narrowed until all he saw was the Destroyer in front of him. He was a scant few metres away, back to him, staring at the blaze.

The Destroyer turned. His rifle rose. B30's legs pumped. Then, in a blur, his geminus was upon them, passing through the red shield. B31's hackblade struck out, knocking the gun aside. The rifle discharged harmlessly. B31 reversed the blow and swung hard at the terrified soldier's neck.

Time snapped back to normal, the headless body fell to the ground, and B31 howled an ululation of triumph.

B30 skidded to a halt beside his geminus, eyes flicking left. One of the linebreakers collapsed beneath a barrage of energy blasts before R910 leaped upon the Destroyer responsible, flanged mace swinging. To his right, a Destroyer hauled one of their comrades out of the fire, only to be immediately set upon by a trio of Din-nos. Both Destroyers succumbed to blade and blaze.

Red blasts spat through the smoke with no apparent pattern. The conflagration was a sea of fire from wall to wall, tongues of flame leaping high and lighting the hall with fury. It would not last forever. The fuel in the channels was limited. This close, the heat was immense. His ears were doing their best to control his temperature, but there was only so much they could do trapped inside his helmet.

A Destroyer stumbled out of the inferno, frantically beating at his burning legs. B30 was moving before he could truly think. The Destroyers' rifle hung from a strap, but their shield was still up. He would finish them.

It was all he wanted. Kill this monster. Take revenge. Enter limbo with a kill to his designator.

The Destroyers' screech of pain was high-pitched and almost nauseating. As soon as he cleared the burning floor, he dropped his rifle and tried to roll, the bulky gear on his back hindering him.

B30's powerful limbs carried him over to the wounded soldier in seconds, wrench raised. He passed inside the red shield, feeling only the slightest tingle as he entered.

The Destroyer looked up with a start and grabbed for the pistol at his belt. B30 swung in a vicious arc. The pistol fired. The shot seared past, grazing his helmet. The lower half burst apart in a spray of fragments that lanced white-hot pain across his face. His wrench slammed into the prone soldier's helmet with a resounding crack. The impact jarred his wrist, but the Destroyers' helmet crumpled. The soldier's gun arm fell.

B30 gasped in pain and tore the remains of the searing hot helmet from his head, the smell of singed fur clogging his nose. Blood gushed from a deep cut across his lip, and shards of shattered casing had embedded themselves in his cheek. Spitting blood, he forced himself upright, locking the pain behind clenched teeth.

He wrenched the unfamiliar pistol from the Destroyers' limp hand. The grip was all wrong and the trigger was too small, but a gun was a gun, even an alien one. He levelled the barrel at the soldier's broken visor and squeezed the trigger. Pure red energy spat from the barrel, crossing the short gap between gun and head. The result was not pretty... but it was satisfying.

Chapter 10

“Fall back.” B30 gave the order with a heart heavy as tungsten.

He did not want to look, but forced himself to. His soldiers, his kin, threw the last of their grenades and makeshift incendiaries. Flames once more lit the hall. The Destroyers were distracted, but nothing more. They would not be caught out a second time.

As one, the bulk of his troops leaped up and bolted for the third ring of barricades, clustered around those few who still had working shields. Simultaneously B31 began his attack. Next to him, R800 leaped up, firing backward and shouting for all he was worth.

Moments later, the killing began. The Destroyers unleashed a fearsome barrage and, at such close range, it was nearly impossible to miss. Even through the crack of gunfire, stolen shields broke, and a symphony of bangs sounded, a drumbeat of pain and sorrow. Guilt knifed into his chest.

B800’s shield flickered and flared under repeated hits, actinic light skittering across its surface. More Din-nos fell. The knife drove deeper.

Further shots struck his caller’s shield, and it flickered wildly. B30 could not look away.

B800 twisted and threw himself down, rolling and scrabbling the last few metres into cover.

Nearly half of them had perished.

A horrible sound echoed from the other side of the barricade he crouched behind; a cheer or a taunt, he wasn’t sure which.

My orders. Blood on my handpaws.

“They’re coming,” B734 whispered over the downlink, voice choked with emotion.

B30 tensed. If the Destroyers threw grenades over the barricades again, it would all be over. He and all those he’d sacrificed would die for nothing, and West Mount would fall. The only consolation was that he’d only have a split second to recognize his failure.

The roar continued, building in volume, rising into a war cry as the Destroyers surged over their own barricades. B30 drew his stolen pistol, clenching his combat knife in the other handpaw.

No grenade fell to obliterate him.

“They’ll be at your position in three, two—” B734 counted down.

The Destroyers had smelled victory too soon.

“For The Warren!” B30 roared, the cry taken up by all those still sheltering behind the second ring of defences. He vaulted over the barricade, screaming his anger, fire and fury in his veins.

“For our fallen kin and by the blessed deeprocks. We do not fear the embrace of limbo. Wipe this stain from our world!” R910 roared.

The final charge began.

Three Destroyers were rushing up to B30’s barricade from the other side. He took them by surprise, passing through a red shield and crashing straight into the first Destroyer. Slamming down with his knife, he punched it into the soldier’s neck with a spray of arterial blood. The body pitched into him, momentum carrying it forward. Grabbing it before it could fall, he discharged his pistol at point-blank range toward the soldier on his right, his outstretched arm already within his shield. The red blast struck him in the chest, and he crumpled.

The third Destroyer began firing wildly from the hip, attempting to skid to a halt. B30 flinched as the blasts struck the shield still projected around him.

“Die, you rat-tail!” he roared, charging the Destroyer, holding the dead soldier out before him, arms straining with the effort.

He heaved the body at his foe, who desperately tried to backpedal. The soldier tripped, his comrade’s body sending him to the ground. B30 followed it down with a roar of fury, landing atop the terrified soldier. His knife was still lodged in the corpse. He didn’t need it. He thundered his gauntleted fist into the Destroyers’ helmeted head. The visor cracked. He pounded down again. The Destroyer tried to free his gun, scrabbling at B30’s armour with the other arm.

“Die!” B30 howled, raining blows upon him. The visor shattered, and his fist crashed into a tanned brown face, smashing shards of plastic into it. The nose broke, and blood splattered. He drove his fist down again, screaming an incoherent and wordless cry, venting days’ worth of suffering and loss. Cartilage crunched. Bone broke. The Destroyer went limp.

Panting hard, B30 sat up, fists dripping red and numb, limbs shaking, pulse roaring in his ears, head ringing. Similar scenes played out up and down the hall. Crimson-armoured Din-nos struck red uniformed Destroyers like thunderbolts of fury. R910 was a terrifying tempest, his mace already dripping red. In close quarters, the tables turned. Now, it was the Destroyers’ turn to die, their blood matching the crimson armour of their foes.

With monumental effort, he refocused, seeing the battlefield through the eyes of a captain, rather than a broken and wrathful soul. The bangs of displacing air told him it was not all going their way, but the firefight had died down, the battle

diminishing to scores of isolated struggles. A group of Destroyers had managed to back away in time and were pouring fire into the melee, trying to pick his kin off.

“Group left of centre, send them to oblivion,” B30 ordered, still panting.

More shots spat across the hall from the survivors of his cohort. Caught in the open, the Destroyers went down.

“B734, take charge. Kill the stragglers.”

“What about you, Captain?” B734 replied over the downlink.

“I started this. I will finish it.” He ripped his knife free and used it to hack a shield projector from the back of one of the bodies. There was no time to properly attach it, so he just slung it over his shoulder. Stashing his knife, he swept a rifle up and scanned for targets.

A short distance away, R910 grappled with a Destroyer. To his shock, the pair of Destroyers behind their embattled comrade opened fire, shooting straight into their fellow’s shielded back. They would sacrifice their own... but he would not. Not again. It was time to make amends.

He ran as fast as the shield would allow toward the red-armoured Din-no. R910 overcame the soldier and, with a brutal twist, snapped his neck. He held the corpse in front of him, but the shield now surrounding him flickered and flashed.

B30 pumped his legs. The shield flashed one last time and broke. The next blast hit the lifeless Destroyer, and R910 staggered backward. B30 reached him, his own shield passing over and around R910 at the same instant as the next burst of shots struck.

“Pistol!” B30 snapped, thrusting the weapon into R910’s handpaws. He fumbled at the unfamiliar rifle, trying to get his handpaw back on the trigger. Every second counted. Another burst of shots hit his shield, and it flickered alarmingly.

R910 clung to him, staying as close as he could to remain within the protection of the shield. But he didn't panic; he didn't even appear shaken from his brush with death.

"Crawl back into the dark sky from whence you came, abominations!" R910 shouted, pistol spitting blasts at the Destroyer on the left.

B30 opened fire, grip tight around the gun. The little bar on the rifle's display was already alarmingly low.

They weren't going to make it. Their shield would give out first.

It was a strange feeling. He was dead, yet the moment had not yet arrived. The shield would take a few more hits, then it would break, and he would join his kin in limbo. Perhaps it was fitting. He'd led them into this, chosen this fight and its tactics. It was only just that he shared the fate of those he'd condemned.

"Death is not the end for me, but it is for you filth!" R910 cried.

Part of B30 screamed to run, to move, to get out of the way, to try and find cover. Do something, anything, to survive. But the moment he moved, R910 would die. He would not abandon him. His grip on the trigger tightened, holding it down, not caring if he broke the rifle or burned his own flesh as it overheated. If this were to be his end, he would enter limbo properly, with his head held high.

The crack of the energy rifle in his handpaws sounded distant, as though he were deep underwater. He didn't blink at the flash or hear the voices over the downlink in his ear. He'd done his part; he'd fought as hard as he could for The Warren. Now he would pay the final price.

The shield flashed one final time, strained to the point of breaking.

The cold, dark embrace of limbo reached for him.

Then light, blazing, orange and bright, lit the Destroyers from behind. An arc of fire came down upon the soldier on the left, and a burning blade cleaved into his collarbone. The blade was pulled free with a vicious roar, and the Destroyer fell forward, revealing his killer.

There, battered and blood splattered, stood B31. His hackblade dripped with burning combustane, transforming it into a blazing cleaver. The firelight transformed him into a mythical beast, one who had stepped from the pages of myth to render judgement and deal death.

The Destroyer on the right turned to face the wrathful Din-no and froze in terror. B31 showed no mercy. His fiery hackblade swept out and took the enemy in the neck. Blood and burning fuel sprayed in an arc of crimson and orange.

B30 laughed in disbelief. Behind his geminus, a squad of Din-nos advanced, a mixture of stolen guns and bloodstained weapons held at the ready.

“Let none survive!” B31 shouted, raising his flaming weapon in triumph.

B30 surveyed the hall. The last knots of Destroyers were falling. Almost all those caught in the surprise assault were dead. A few had survived and held the Din-nos off, but now they themselves were outnumbered and outgunned. With an almost euphoric glee, he turned his rifle upon the survivors.

Din-nos with salvaged guns and a debt to settle took them down one by one. B734’s voice finally registered in his ear, issuing commands and picking targets. It didn’t take long. The surviving Destroyers broke. At last, it was their turn to flee.

His rifle sang a song of retribution.

Finally, B30 let the gun fall from his handpaws and hang loose at his side. He couldn’t believe it. The battle was over.

The price had been heavy indeed, but the gates to West Mount remained unbreached. He laughed, the sound bordering on hysteria.

A handpaw gripped his shoulder, and he turned to his geminus. B31 had pulled his helmet off and doused his blade. Their purple eyes locked. B30 gripped his other shoulder, and they pressed their sweaty, blood-spattered foreheads together.

“You did it,” B30 said, still not sure he truly believed the words he spoke.

“We did it,” B31 replied.

They stayed like that for an eternity. They’d done the impossible. They had held the Great Western Hall. Desperation, fear, and horror still lingered, but slowly each gave way to relief and the sheer joy of one simple fact. They were still alive.

“We. Are. *Victorious!*” B30 roared, shouting his defiance and triumph to the soot-stained ceiling. The cheer was taken up across the hall until the chamber resounded, not to the crack of guns or battle cries, but to the roaring of his kin, bloodied, but unbroken.