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ATTACK OF THE **NECRON**

CAVAN SCOTT

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An extract from

WARPED GALAXIES

ATTACK OF THE

NECRON

WARHAMMER
ADVENTURES

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CAVAN SCOTT

For James.

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The Imperium of the Far Future

Life in the 41st millennium is hard. Ruled by the Emperor of Mankind from his Golden Throne on Terra, humans have spread across the galaxy, inhabiting millions of planets. They have achieved so much, from space travel to robotics, and yet billions live in fear. The universe seems a dangerous place, teeming with alien horrors and dark powers. But it is also a place bristling with adventure and wonder, where battles are won and heroes are forged.

CHAPTER ONE

Intruders

Zelia Lor awoke to the sound of buzzing in her cabin. She groaned. What time was it? Her bunk creaked as she turned over, pulling her thick woollen blanket with her. Surely that couldn't be the alarm already? The shrill drone continued, flitting to and fro near the ceiling. Zelia pulled the blanket over her head, but the noise persisted. Throwing back the covers, she peered up into the gloom.

That was no alarm. There was something up there, darting back and forth.

'Hello?' Zelia called out, her voice

croaking from lack of sleep. She'd been up late last night, helping her mum catalogue artefacts in the ship's cargo bay.

A series of high-pitched chirps and whistles came from somewhere near the ceiling. Zelia reached out, feeling for the luminator switch next to her bunk. Glow-globes flickered into life, the tiny invader squealing in surprise as it was bathed in sudden light.

Zelia frowned as her eyes focused on her flighty visitor. It was a servo-sprite, one of the small winged robots that her mother used on board their planet-hopper, the *Scriptor*. The whimsical little things had been created by her mother's assistant, Mekki. They had tiny bronze bodies and spindly limbs, with probes and data-connectors for fingers and toes. Their heads were long, with wide optical-beads for eyes that gave the little automata a constant look of surprise. Mesh wings whirred on the robot's back, producing the strident

buzz that had woken Zelia.

‘What are you doing up there?’ Zelia asked, rubbing sleep from her eyes.

The servo-sprite chattered nervously at itself. If Zelia didn’t know better she would have thought the thing was agitated, but like all the robots her mother used on their expeditions servo-sprites were just machines. Elise Lor was an explorer, a scholar who travelled the length and breadth of the Imperium excavating technology from years gone by, and who often dreamed of digging up artefacts from the Dark Age of Technology, that period thousands of years ago when machines thought for themselves. Those days were long gone. Like so many things in the 41st millennium, artificial intelligence was a heresy, prohibited by order of the Eternal Emperor himself. While Mekki’s creations sometimes acted as if they were alive, they were just following their programming. They were tools, nothing more. However, something must

have spooked the little automaton for it to squeeze through the gap beneath her cabin door. Gooseflesh crawled over Zelia's skin. Why would a servo-sprite hide? Something was wrong.

Swinging her legs off the bunk, Zelia gasped as her bare feet touched the cold metal deck. The floors of the *Scriptor* were supposed to be heated, but like most of the systems on the ramshackle spaceship, the heating hadn't worked properly for months. The planet-hopper was old – very old – and its systems often failed faster than Mekki could fix them. But for all its glitches, the *Scriptor* had been Zelia's home since she was born. She knew every creak of the hull, every bleep of the central cogitator. The low thrum of the engines lulled her to sleep every night. They were a comfort, especially during long journeys across the Imperium, rocketing from one dig to another. It was an odd, topsy-turvy life, helping her mum uncover crashed

spaceships or ancient machines on distant worlds all across the galaxy, but Zelia wouldn't have it any other way.

But now, the *Scriptor* didn't feel comforting. It felt uneasy, and Zelia had no idea why. Pulling on her jacket and bandolier, Zelia tapped the vox stitched into her sleeve. The communicator beeped, opening a channel to the flight deck.

'Mum? Are you there?'

There was no reply, neither from mum, nor Lexmechanic Erasmus, her mother's archaeological partner and an expert in galactic languages, both ancient and alien. There was no point trying to contact Mekki. Her mum's young assistant was a whizz with technology, but hardly ever spoke to Zelia, even though they were around the same age. At twelve, she was a full year older than Mekki was, but they were largely strangers, the Martian boy preferring the company of his machines.

Zelia didn't mind. If she was honest, Mekki made her a little uncomfortable. He was so intense, with his pale skin and cold grey eyes.

Still, he would know what to do with a flustered servo-sprite.

The robot bumbled around her head as she opened the cabin door. She swatted it away, but it stayed close as she stepped out into the corridor. The passageway was quiet, electro-candles spluttering along the creaky walls.

The door to her mum's cabin was ajar, and Zelia could see it was empty. For a woman who spent her life cataloguing artefacts, Elise Lor was incredibly untidy. Curios from her travels were crammed into nooks and crannies, while towers of textbooks and battered data-slates teetered on every available surface. Elise's library was spread throughout the ship, piled high along the narrow gantries. How mum ever found anything was a mystery, and yet she always seemed to be able to put

her finger on any text at a moment's notice.

But where was she now? Zelia crept down the corridor, checking Erasmus's cabin, but the elderly scholar was nowhere to be seen. He wasn't in his room or on the mess deck where the *Scriptor's* crew gathered to eat. Zelia checked the chrono-display on her vox. It was early, barely sunrise. Had mum and Erasmus gone to the dig already?

Zelia jumped at a noise from the back of the ship. Something heavy had been dropped, the deep clang echoing around the planet-hopper. That had to have come from the cargo bay, where Elise stored their most valuable discoveries. They had been on this planet, a remote hive world called Targian, for three months now, and the hold was brimming with ancient tech. Of course, the noise could just have been Mekki, checking through the previous day's finds, but somehow, she knew it wasn't. Mekki was a lot of things, but clumsy

wasn't one of them. He would never drop something if he could help it. As the servo-sprite fussed around her head, Zelia picked up a heavy-looking ladle that Elise had used to slop grox stew into their bowls the night before. It wasn't much of a defence, but it would have to do.

Zelia inched towards the cargo bay, praying that she'd find Mekki on the other side of the hold's heavy doors. She paused, listening through the thick metal. There was a flurry of movement on the other side of the door, the scrape of leather against deck-plates, and then silence. Trying to ignore the increasingly frantic buzzing of the servo-sprite, Zelia stepped forwards and the doors wheezed open.

'Hello? Mekki, are you in here?'

There was no answer. The cargo bay was silent, the lights kept permanently low to protect the more valuable artefacts. She crept through the collection, tall cabinets on either side.

Something moved ahead. Her grip tightened on the ladle.

‘Mekki? Seriously, this isn’t funny.’

A boot crunched behind her. Zelia whirled around, swinging the ladle.

‘You need to be careful,’ a gruff voice said. ‘You could hurt someone with that!’

Zelia cried out as thick fingers caught her wrist. They squeezed, and the metal spoon clattered to the floor.

‘That’s better.’

A stranger loomed over her, muscles bunched beneath a scruffy vest festooned with brightly coloured patches. His hair was styled into a lurid green mohawk, a tattoo of a large red cat leaping over his left ear. It was a Runak – a ferocious scavenger native to Targian with jagged scales instead of fur. Zelia had only seen the creatures out on the plains, but imagined they smelled better than the thug who was threatening her in her own home.

‘Let go of me,’ Zelia cried out, trying to pull away.

‘I don’t think so, ladle-girl,’ the tattooed thug leered, before calling over his shoulder. ‘You can come out. It’s only a little brat.’

Brat? The thug must only have been a year or two older than Zelia. He was strong though. There was no way of breaking his grip. More strangers slipped out of the shadow – two boys, and a girl with spiked purple hair and a glowing eye-implant. They all wore similar patches on their jackets, obviously members of the same gang.

‘What do you want?’ Zelia squeaked, and her captor smiled, showing uneven, stained teeth.

‘That’s a good question.’ The thug glanced around, his small, cruel eyes scanning the rusting relics on the shelves. ‘We thought this place would be full of treasure, didn’t we, Talen?’

The ganger behind him nodded. This one wasn’t as big, but still looked like he could handle himself in a fight. His blond hair was cropped short at the

sides and a small scar ran through one of his thick, dark eyebrows. He held no weapons in his gloved hands, but Zelia couldn't help but notice the snub-nosed beamer hanging next to the leather pouch on his belt.

'That's what you told us, Rizz, but it looks like a load of old junk to me.'

'Yeah, old junk,' Rizz parroted, pulling Zelia closer. 'Where's the real booty? Where've you stashed it?'

'This is all we have,' Zelia told him, glancing down at the hefty weapon Rizz held in his free hand. The ganger had fashioned a mace out of a long girder topped with a blunt slab of corroded metal.

'You like my spud-jacker?' Rizz said, brandishing the makeshift weapon. 'I call her Splitter. Do you want to know why?'

'I think I can guess,' Zelia replied.

'Cos, I split skulls with her,' he said anyway, as if she were the idiot, not him. 'Ain't that right, Talen?'



The blond-haired juve shifted uncomfortably, glancing nervously at the cargo bay doors. ‘We should go, Rizz. There’s nothing here.’

Rizz glared at the younger kid. ‘Oi. I give the orders. Not you.’

‘Then order us to get out of here. We’re wasting our time.’

Rizz swung around, nearly pulling Zelia off her feet.

‘I’ll waste you in a minute,’

he growled, brandishing Splitter menacingly.

Zelia saw her chance and took it. She lashed out with her foot, kicking Rizz's shin.

'Ow!' he yelped, spinning her around so she crashed into the nearest cabinet, cogs and gears tumbling all around her. Zelia snatched a length of metal piping from the floor, but a swipe of the spud-jacker sent it flying across the cargo bay.

'Nice try,' Rizz sneered above her. 'But I'm not going to ask you again. Where's the valuable stuff? Where are you hiding it?'

'I told you,' she shouted back, gripping her aching fingers. 'This is all there is.'

'Liar,' Rizz bellowed, raising the spud-jacker high above his head. 'Splitter hates liars, and so do I.'

With a feral roar, he brought the mace crashing down.

CHAPTER TWO

The Runak Warriors

‘No!’ Talen yelled, barging into Rizz and throwing off the larger ganger’s aim. Splitter smashed harmlessly into the deck.

‘What do you think you’re doing?’ Rizz thundered, swinging the spud-jacker at Talen. The blond-haired boy leapt back, the club narrowly missing him. The next time he wasn’t so lucky. Rizz lashed out again with the mace, catching Talen in the side. The boy crashed into a cabinet, the air knocked out of him.

‘Leave him alone,’ Zelia yelled.

‘Stay out of this, girl,’ Rizz sneered, as

the rest of the gang stepped back, too scared to interfere. 'He's gone too far this time.' He loomed over Talen, the spud-jacker held high.

Zelia looked up. The servo-sprite was still buzzing around the ceiling. She tapped the vox on her sleeve, activating a channel to the ship's central cogitator.

'Danger in cargo bay,' she shouted. 'Protect the artefacts!'

'Eh?' Rizz said, his spud-jacker frozen in mid-air. 'What's that supposed to mean?'

'You'll see,' said Zelia with a smile, as every servo-sprite Mekki had ever constructed swarmed on the cargo and descended on the gangers.

'Aaaargh!' Rizz screamed as dozens of tiny robots jabbed at him with needle-sharp data-connectors. 'Get them off me!' He tried to swat them away with Splitter but only lost his balance, crashing to the floor.

The other gangers ran into each other as they were mobbed by the

servo-swarm. Even Talen was forced to throw up his arms to protect himself, but Zelia saw him grin at her before yelling at the others: 'Let's get out of here!'

They all ran, Rizz included, still swiping at the servo-sprites that yanked painfully at his mohawk.

Zelia jumped to her feet as soon as they were gone. She ran to the cogitator terminal next to the doors, activating the ship's pict-feed. Images scrolled over the display, displaying pict-casts from every corner of the ship. She scrolled through to the external feeds and watched the gang-members charge down the *Scriptor's* ramp, servo-sprites dive-bombing the would-be raiders like fire-wasps. As soon as they were clear, she pressed a button and the ramp swung up to slam shut.

Suddenly exhausted, Zelia slumped forward, leaning heavily against the terminal. Her legs were like jelly, her breath ragged.

She tapped her vox.

‘Mum? Are you there? Mum?’

Elise still didn’t answer. That settled it. If her mum wasn’t on the ship, and wasn’t answering her vox, then there was only one place she could be.

‘Ouch!’ cried Talen as one of the small flying robots jabbed the back of his neck. ‘You wanted us off the ship. We’re off the ship.’

The automaton chattered angrily in return, and Talen couldn’t help but smile. Ladle Girl had done good. It took a lot to take on the Runak Warriors, but she had sent them packing.

Their job done, the servo-sprites flocked back to the funny little ship, disappearing into a porthole.

‘Let’s get back underground,’ Talen shouted, but Rizz wasn’t happy.

‘You don’t tell me what to do, Talen. Not now, not ever. We’re going back onto that ship to teach that runt a lesson she’ll never forget.’

The others didn't move, looking from Rizz to Talen, not sure who to follow. Talen's hand dropped down to his beamer.

Rizz snorted. 'You going to blast me, Talen? Is that it? It's funny – in all the years you've had that clipped to your belt, I've never seen you use it. You haven't got the guts. You're a coward, Guard Boy, always have been, always will be.'

Talen didn't have a chance to respond to the jibe.

A cry echoed across the vast landing-bay and he turned to see a soldier of the Astra Militarum making straight for them through the clustered space cruisers. He was wearing the Imperial Guard's standard khaki-green uniform, a long shock-stick gripped in his gloved hand, capable of delivering a charge that could stop a full-grown grox in its tracks.

'Hey!' the Guardsman shouted. 'What are you tunnel-rats doing up here?'

Rizz cursed, shooting one last venomous look at the planet-hopper before yelling: ‘Scatter!’

The Warriors did as they were told, Talen included. He ducked behind a stack of crates, heading for a bolthole at the far end of the space port. He didn’t bother looking back for the others. At times like this, it was every ganger for themselves, especially where Rizz was concerned.

Talen dropped to the ground at the first sound of las-fire, sliding towards a service hatch. He lifted the heavy lid to reveal a ladder. It led down to a tunnel, part of the ventilation system that pumped recycled air around the hive. He started clambering down, glancing up to see Essa lying on the floor. The purple-haired girl was out cold, stunned by the Guardsman’s shock-stick. Talen swore beneath his breath. This wouldn’t go well for them back at camp... and all for a planet-hopper filled with old junk. Typical Rizz.

He started to climb down, stopping only at the sound of a spluttering grav-bike. It was the girl from the planet-hopper, weaving in and out of the other ships in the space port.

‘Where are you going?’ he wondered aloud, before a fresh barrage of las-fire sent him hurrying down the ladder.

The Runak Warriors were just one of the many gangs that inhabited the tunnels and sewers beneath Rhal Rata, the largest of Targian’s many hive-cities. They operated out of a long-forgotten storm drain, their camp in little danger of being flooded on a planet that hadn’t seen a single drop of rain for decades.

The gang had been Talen’s surrogate family ever since he’d run away from home three years ago. They were an untrustworthy bunch of thieves and cut-throats but had taken him in when he needed it most. That didn’t mean he was going to cover himself in ganger-tattoos like Rizz. He wasn’t

stupid. Talen wore a Runak patch on his vest to show his allegiance, and that was good enough for him. Something about tattoos made his skin crawl. He remembered his brother proudly showing off his aquila tattoo the day he'd joined the Imperial Guard.

'What do you think, Tally?' Karl had asked. The skin around the official sigil of the Imperium was red raw, the two-headed eagle forever branded into his brother's arm.

'Looks great,' he'd lied, even though it made him feel sick, and Karl had ruffled his hair.

'You'll have one of your own, one day,' Karl promised him.

Not likely, Talen had thought. Everyone was so sure that Talen was going to follow in Karl's footsteps. It was a family tradition, after all. Their father, Tyrian Stormweaver, had trained generations of Imperial Guardsmen. It was only natural that his sons would go into the service.

‘It’s your duty, boy,’ he would growl at his younger son. ‘It’ll make a man of you. Throne knows, something has to...’

Talen wondered what his dad would think of him now. His son, the tunnel-rat...

The Runak camp was unnaturally quiet when Talen clambered into the drain. He sighed. This could only mean one thing. Everyone had already gathered in Onak’s Great Hall. Rizz would have already taken centre stage, telling their leader what had happened... or at least, his side of the story. What was the betting that Talen was getting blamed for Essa’s capture?

In reality, the so-called Great Hall was a burned-out troop carrier. Talen had no idea how it had got down here. Legend said that Onak’s father had stripped the transport down piece by piece and floated it through the sewers. It had been rebuilt in pride of place at the centre of the drain, the other shacks and tents clustered around

its blackened hull. By all accounts, Onak's father had been a force to be reckoned with, a legacy his daughter traded on to this day. She was as lazy as he had been brave, but the rest of the gang worshipped the ground she slouched on, especially when she had a stubcannon in hand. She was playing with the weapon now as she lounged on her throne, another relic of her father's reign, fashioned from a gunship ejector seat. The rest of the Warriors huddled around the walls listening to Rizz, who was gesturing wildly with his spud-jacker in the middle of the Great Hall.

'It's all Talen's fault,' he claimed. 'You should have seen the treasures inside that ship. They were worth a fortune, but Talen attacked me before I could take what was rightfully mine.'

"Mine"?" Onak drawled, raising a pierced eyebrow.

Rizz bowed low to cover his mistake. '*Yours*, leader.'

‘He’s a liar!’ Every face turned to watch Talen as he strode into the assembly. ‘There was nothing worth stealing on that crate, just a load of broken machines.’

‘Then why did you attack me?’ Rizz spat back.

‘A good question,’ Onak agreed from her throne.

‘Because our brave Champion was about to flatten an unarmed girl.’

Rizz growled. ‘She deserved it.’

‘Why? Because she kicked you in the shin?’ Talen stuck out his bottom lip.

‘Poor baby.’

‘Is that what happened, Champion?’ Onak asked, barely disguising the disdain in her voice.

Rizz whirled around to face the throne. ‘She had robots,’ he lied, desperate to save face. ‘Huge, hulking robots, armed to their metallic teeth.’

Talen laughed out loud. ‘You’re kidding. Is that really what you’re going with?’ Talen turned to address

their leader. ‘Oh, Rizz is a champion all right – a champion of barefaced lies. There *were* robots, but they were barely bigger than my hand.’

Rizz’s face had gone as red as his tattoo. ‘There were hundreds of them!’

‘Three, maybe four dozen,’ Talen countered. ‘They were annoying, but hardly dangerous.’

‘Says the one who told us to run!’

‘Only because we were wasting our time. You said there was treasure on the ship, but it was a load of rubbish, just like you.’

‘What?’ Rizz bellowed.

‘And now Essa is in the Guardhouse... because of Rizz, not me...’ Talen jutted out his jaw. ‘He doesn’t deserve to be our Champion.’

‘Take that back,’ Rizz spat, brandishing his spud-jacker, ‘or I’ll show you how Splitter got her name!’

Talen held his ground. ‘I’d like to see you try.’

‘You’re not the only one,’ Onak said,

licking her lips as she sat up in her chair. ‘Your honour has been questioned, Champion. What are you going to do about it?’

‘I’ll kill ’im!’ Rizz roared, charging at Talen. A cheer went up from the assembled throng, the Warriors always ready to watch a good scrap, but Talen was ready for his opponent. He snatched his beamer from its holster and aimed it straight at Rizz. The Champion swung Splitter in an arc, easily knocking the beamer from Talen’s grip... just as he’d been expecting.

Talen shoulder-barged Rizz, knocking the Champion off his feet. Rizz landed on his face, Splitter thudding to the floor.

Talen dropped on his rival, fists flying. The reason Rizz had never seen Talen using the beamer was that it didn’t work. Talen had stolen it from his dad’s barracks on the day he’d run away from home. It was a family heirloom, an antique passed down from

one generation to the next. It had always been for show, unlike his fists. Talen was a brawler, whereas Rizz was nothing more than a bully. The so-called Champion had managed to fool Onak for years, but not any more. Talen would show the entire gang how much of a coward their Champion actually was.

He pummelled Rizz, but the Champion managed to kick up with his boot, catching Talen in the chest. Talen stumbled into the baying crowd and was immediately shoved back towards Rizz by at least three overexcited onlookers. That was exactly what he wanted. He pretended to tumble forward, dropping into a roll that led him straight to Splitter. He jumped up, the spud-jacker now in his hands, and swiped at Rizz. The Champion threw himself out of the way to avoid getting clobbered by his own weapon, and lost balance, landing awkwardly at Onak's feet. Talen brought the spud-jacker

down, inches from Rizz's head. A gasp went up around the Great Hall, but Talen had no intention of striking the Champion. He just wanted Rizz to beg for his life, anything to show his true colours.

‘Do you submit?’ he yelled at the Champion as he brought the spud-jacker down on the other side of Rizz's head. ‘Do you give in?’

He lifted the weapon for a third and final strike, and Rizz looked up, grinning horribly.

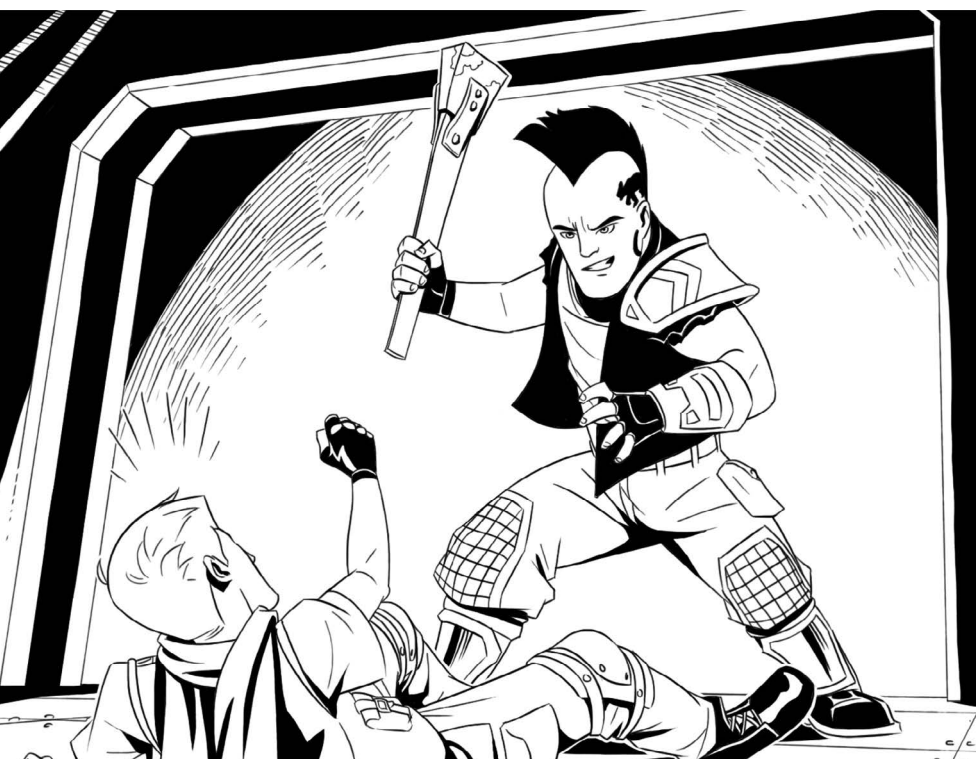
‘Backlash!’ the Champion shouted.

Electricity crackled from a powercell hidden in the spud-jacker's shaft. The energy surged into Talen's body, every muscle cramping. With a strangled cry, he crumpled to the floor, dropping the weapon.

All around them, the Warriors were chanting Rizz's name, urging their Champion to finish the job. Grinning with triumph, Rizz recovered his spud-jacker and held it high above

his head like a trophy, bellowing in triumph. With his name ringing in everyone's ears, he turned to Talen and lifted the bulky weapon for the final time, ready to deliver a killer blow.

'And this,' Rizz snarled, spit flying from his lips, 'is why I am Champion, and you are *nothing*!'



CHAPTER THREE

The Siren

A siren blared through the Great Hall. Even Rizz looked around in surprise, forgetting that he was about to flatten his rival once and for all.

‘What’s that?’ he asked, as Onak rose to her feet.

‘I don’t believe it,’ the leader said. ‘It can’t be.’

‘Can’t be what?’ Talen stammered, still barely able to move. He’d heard plenty of alarms in his time, mainly from breaking into the hive’s many manufactoria and foundries, but nothing like this. If the other alerts were like the annoying buzzing of flies, this one

was like the roar of a lion. So loud. So urgent.

‘Onak?’ Rizz said, turning to their leader.

The colour had drained beneath the tattoos that smothered her face.

‘I haven’t heard that noise for years,’ she stammered in reply, ‘and even then, it was a false alarm.’

‘But what does it mean?’ Talen asked, struggling back to his feet.

Onak met his confused gaze, and Talen saw real fear in her eyes.

‘Invasion,’ she said bluntly. ‘The hive is under attack.’

Zelia loved getting out of the hive. She had never been one for cities, especially the gigantic towers of the hive worlds, rising like jagged spikes from blighted landscapes all across the Imperium. Nothing about them was natural, from the rich living in luxury in the cloud-drenched spires to the poor scraping an unbearable existence in the

squalid depths of the undercity.

She hated the stink of recycled air, and never feeling the heat of the sun against her skin. She had spent so much of her life outdoors, braving the elements on dozens of worlds across the Imperium. Out here, she felt alive. Out here, she felt free.

Zelia glanced back at Rhal Rata, rising high into the sky behind her. A siren blared out of the hive. What *was* that?

It took twenty minutes or so to reach the dig, her grav-bike spluttering as it skimmed over the wasteland. Her mum had set up camp in the shadow of ancient dust-blasted ruins. Dome-shaped tents huddled together, surrounded by crates ready to be transported back to the *Scriptor*.

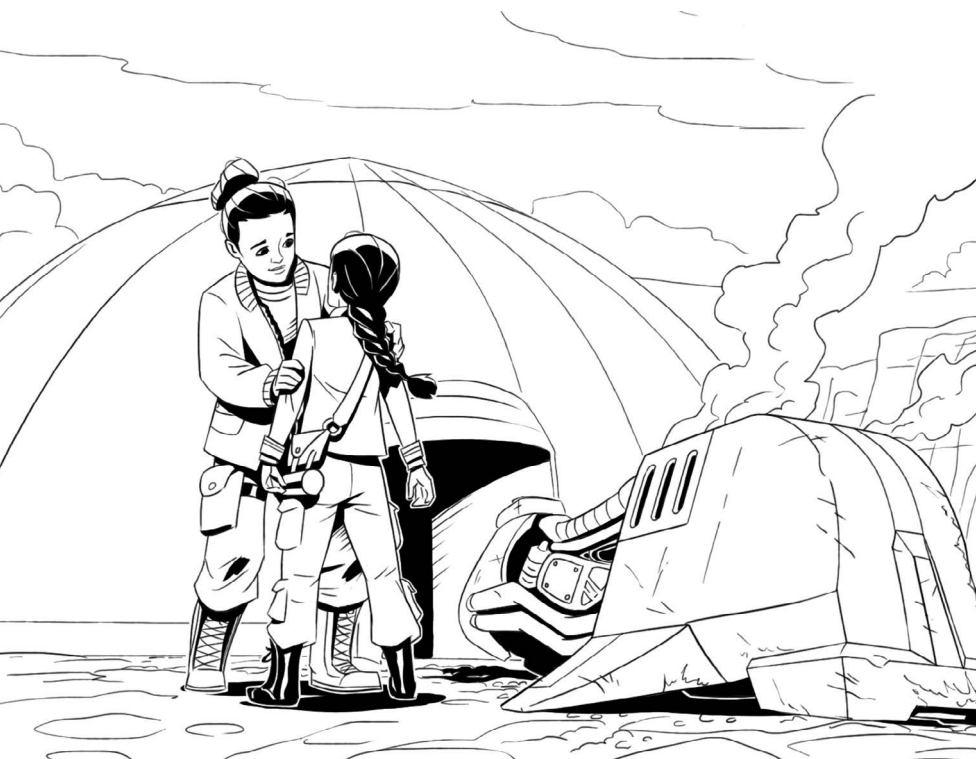
Her mum's skimmer sat near the largest tent, but there was no sign of Elise and the others. Zelia pulled on her brakes, expecting the bike to slow. Instead, its decrepit anti-grav generator

backfired, smoke billowing from the suspensors. Zelia cried out as the bike dipped, its nose striking the ground. She was thrown from her seat as the bike pinwheeled through the air. Bike and rider crashed into the dirt at the same time, sending up a plume of dust.

‘Zelia?’

Elise Lor raced from the main tent, making straight for her daughter. ‘Are you all right?’

There was no mistaking that Zelia



and Elise were related. They had the same dark skin and mops of unmanageable black hair piled high on their heads.

A pale-skinned boy barrelled out of the tent behind Elise.

‘What have you done?’ he demanded as he raced over to the smoking grav-bike.

‘No, that’s fine, Mekki,’ Zelia muttered as Elise helped her up. ‘You just worry about the bike. It’s not like I nearly broke my neck, or anything.’

Elise’s assistant was already examining the downed vehicle, completely oblivious to Zelia’s sarcasm. He was tall and lanky, his long limbs draped in the flowing red robes of his people. Like all Martians he had a natural affinity for machines and was always tinkering with the archeotech unearthed by Elise’s digs. According to Lexmechanic Erasmus, the people of Mars worshipped technology itself, and communicated with the spirits they believed inhabited all machines.

Zelia wasn't sure if she believed in the existence of machine-spirits herself but knew that Mekki preferred the company of gadgets and gizmos to other humans. He even looked a bit like a machine, thanks to the exo-frame that helped him move his withered right arm. Mekki had apparently built the bionic cuff himself when he was only three years old.

As she watched, he pulled open a panel to access the bike's engine and flicked down a number of the magnifying lenses he wore on a band around his head. He went straight to work, assisted by a pair of servo-sprites that fetched tools for him from the large pack he wore on his back.

'Are you here because of the siren?' Elise asked, checking her daughter for injuries.

'No,' Zelia said, wincing as her mum brushed a graze on her cheek. 'Although, that *is* freaky.'

'Then what are you doing out of bed?

I thought you deserved a lie-in after working so hard last night.'

Zelia told her about the break-in and the gangers in the hold and Elise's eyes went wide.

'What?'

She turned and stomped into the main dome, Zelia limping slightly as she tried to keep up. A silver-haired man was hunched over an antique vox in the corner of the tent, twisting knobs on the side of the dented unit as he tried to find a signal.

'Erasmus,' Elise began, her anger barely in check, 'did you lock the hatch when we left this morning?'

The man looked up in puzzlement. 'Hatch?'

'On the *Scriptor*. Zelia was attacked by gangers in our own cargo bay.'

Erasmus got up from the vox and hurried over. 'By the Emperor... Are you all right, my dear?'

'She's fine,' Elise snapped, answering for Zelia. 'But you have to be more

careful. You know how dangerous the hive can be.'

The lexmechanic scratched his cheek, stubble rasping against his fingers. 'I truly am sorry. I... I just wanted to get to the dig.'

He looked up, distracted by the siren that was still wailing across the wastelands.

'I don't like that,' he stammered, pointing in the direction of the hive. 'Not one bit.'

He scuttled back to the vox and grabbed a headset, pressing a vox-caster to his ear. 'I'm trying to find out what's happening back there, but there's a lot of chatter.'

His face suddenly went as white as his thinning hair.

'Erasmus?' Elise asked.

He leapt up from the vox without explaining. 'We need to get everything back to the *Scriptor*... now.'

'Why?' Elise asked, following Erasmus outside.

‘Oh no,’ he whimpered. ‘It’s already begun.’

Zelia shielded her eyes against the sun. There were dots on the horizon, moving in quickly. Frowning, she pulled her omniscope from her bandolier and peered through the lens.

‘They’re ships,’ she said, as the dots swam into focus.

‘What kind of ships?’ Elise asked.

‘I don’t know. I’ve never seen anything like them.’



That was true enough. The ships were shaped like crescents, their dark green wings curling forward like the jaws of a nighthawk beetle. Strange sigils glowed green along the ships' sides, as did the cannons that jutted out beneath the cockpits. They were moving at speed, the unnatural howl of their engines competing with the blare of the siren.

Zelia tried to zoom in on the nearest fighter. It looked like there was a pilot sitting in the open cockpit but she couldn't quite make it out.

'Identification?' she asked out loud.

'Unknown,' the scope's inbuilt cogitator replied in a clipped version of her mum's voice.

'Let me see,' Erasmus said, snatching the scope from her hands.

'Hey! Careful!' The omniscopes had been a present from Elise. Her mum had dug it up on Mannia-4, and had Mekki fix the ancient cogitator, using her own voice print as a joke.

'You can finally order me around,

Zelia... if you dare.'

No one was laughing now. Erasmus let out a whimper as he adjusted the scope, seeing the bizarre craft for himself.

'What are they, Erasmus?' Elise asked.

'Don't you recognise the sound?' he said, shoving the scope into Elise's hands and rushing back into the tent.

'No,' Elise said, shaking her head as she looked through the device. That's not possible. They're extinct.'

'Extinct?' Zelia asked.

'That's what we thought,' Erasmus shouted from inside the dome. 'But what if we were wrong?'

'Mum?' Zelia asked, her voice wavering. 'What are they?'

Elise crouched down in front of Zelia and gave her the scope.

'You'll need to be brave, sweetheart. Really brave. We all will.'

'You're scaring me, mum.'

'I'm scared too, baby, and for good reason.'

Behind her, the first wave of fighters

had already reached the hive. How had they moved so fast? The strange craft opened fire, their cannons spitting bolts of emerald energy.

‘They’re called the Necrons,’ Elise said, ‘and they won’t rest until they’ve destroyed every living thing on this planet.’

CHAPTER FOUR

The Necrons

The strange green energy punched deep into the hive, fire blossoming wherever it struck. It was more like lightning than las-fire, crackling from the Necron cannons. But the invaders weren't just targeting the city. More of the emerald beams were carving deep canyons into the ground beyond the hive, a fog of dust and rubble clouding the horizon.

'Grab as much as you can,' Elise said, making for the tent. 'Mekki, how's that grav-bike looking?'

The Martian boy shook his head. 'The motivators are fused. It is going to take time to repair.'

‘We haven’t time,’ Erasmus said, charging out of the tent, his arms brimming with artefacts.

Elise grabbed one of the containers stacked beside the dome. ‘We can use my skimmer. Zelia, take this.’

She passed the heavy container to Zelia, who struggled over to the hover-sled. Before long the skimmer was piled high with artefacts.

‘We won’t be able to take much more, mum,’ Zelia said as Elise appeared with even more relics.

‘We should go,’ Erasmus agreed, slinging a leather satchel over his shoulder.

Elise hesitated, looking back at the containers still scattered around the camp. ‘You’re probably right, but the specimens...’

‘There will be other digs, Elise,’ the lexmechanic told her, clambering into the skimmer. ‘We’ve already waited too long.’

The ground shook, and Zelia stumbled.

That had been the third earth tremor in as many minutes.

Elise leapt onto the skimmer. ‘Zelia... Mekki... get on.’

Zelia was about to follow her mum onto the craft when she spotted something in the distance. The ground between them and the hive was changing colour, a dark stain sweeping out across the plain.

She opened the scope and zoomed in, letting out a gasp. A vast swarm of metallic insects was scurrying towards them on sharp, multijointed legs.

“And lo, the Necron scarabs thronged,” an ashen-faced Erasmus muttered from the back of the skimmer, “devouring everything in sight.”

‘Not helpful, Erasmus,’ Elise said, reaching a hand down to help Zelia onto the hover-sled.

‘What’s he talking about?’ Zelia asked, climbing on board.

‘It’s nothing,’ Elise said, but Zelia

could tell she was lying. ‘Just a fragment of text from the Rakosan Scrolls...’ Her eyes went wide. ‘Oh, no.’ ‘What?’

Elise jumped from the skimmer and ran back to the main dome. ‘I forgot my data-slate. It has all my notes. Start her up, Zelia.’

Zelia shuffled over to the driver’s seat and started the engine. The skimmer’s anti-grav generators whirred and the hover-sled rose unsteadily into the air to hang a metre from the ground.

‘Mum, come on!’ she yelled across the camp.

‘What is that?’ Mekki asked, pointing from where he had positioned himself among the tech.

Zelia followed his gaze to see hover-chariots racing towards them. Each looked like a floating green throne, armed to the teeth with powerful cannons. Metallic figures were hunched over the controls, looking for all the world like mechanical skeletons.

‘Are those robots?’ Zelia asked.

‘No,’ Erasmus replied. ‘Those are the Necrons. They’re alive... in a manner of speaking.’

‘But artificial intelligence is prohibited,’ Mekki said, sounding appalled.

‘There’s nothing artificial about it,’ the lexmechanic replied, before glancing back at the tent. ‘Where *is* Elise?’

Zelia’s mum darted out of the dome, a data-slate clasped in her hand. ‘Sorry. I couldn’t leave this behind. It–’

The nearest Necron fired, green lightning lancing across the camp to slam into the ancient ruin. Fragments of rock flew everywhere, the shock wave knocking Elise from her feet.

‘Mum!’

Elise scrambled up and vaulted into the seat beside Zelia.

‘I’m all right. Go, go!’

Zelia opened the throttle, expecting the skimmer to shoot forwards.

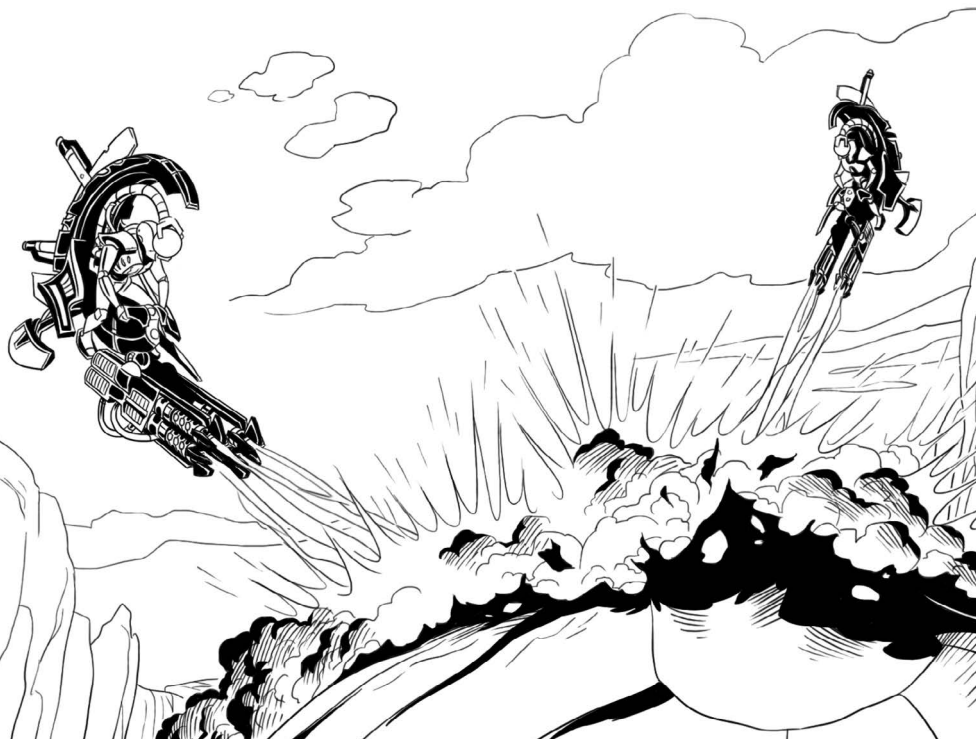
It didn’t move. She stamped on the accelerator, but it still didn’t respond.

‘Mekki,’ Elise yelled. ‘What’s wrong with it?’

The Martian leapt from the skimmer and peered into the engine, lenses flicking down in front of his eyes. ‘There is no power to the forward thrusters,’ he reported, his voice unwavering. ‘I can fix it.’

‘Then make it quick,’ Erasmus snapped.

A blast of Necron energy atomised the main tent. Fragments of canvas settled



all around like burning flakes of snow.

The Necrons were almost upon them. Their faces were like steel skulls, green eyes glowing malevolently beneath scowling brows.

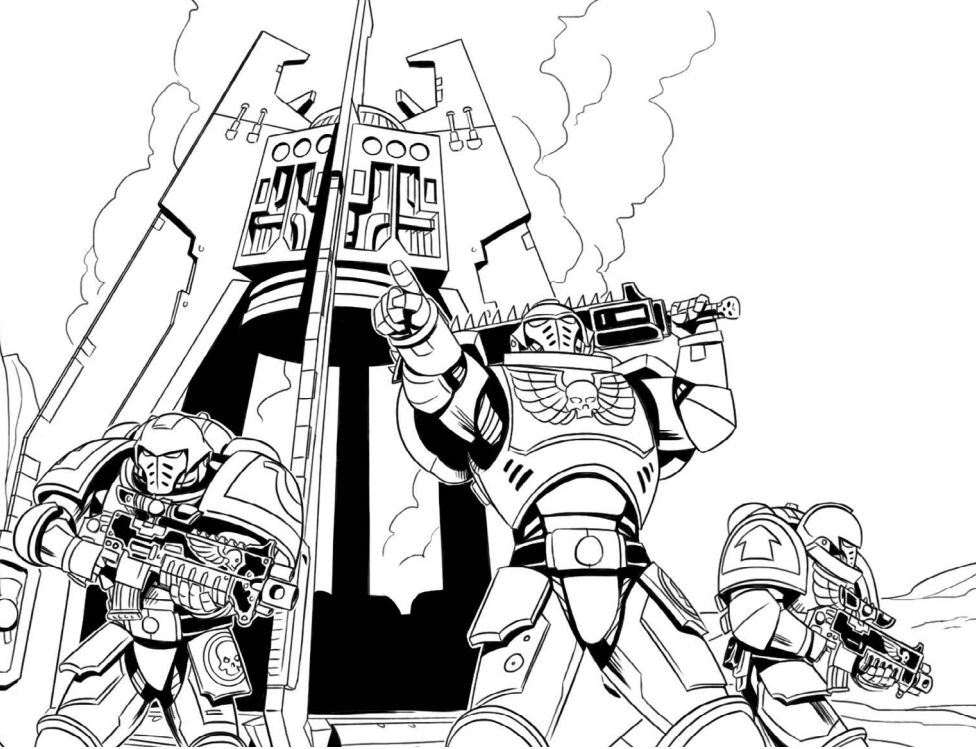
Another bolt of luminous energy crackled towards them, heading straight for the skimmer.

‘Everyone out,’ Zelia screamed, but it was already too late.

CHAPTER FIVE

Space Marines

The lightning never found its target. A huge teardrop-shaped pod crashed down in front of them, blocking the Necron energy with its riveted metal sides. Heavy ramps slammed down, sending up a fresh cloud of dust. Zelia coughed, unable to see, but there was no mistaking the heavy stomp of boots or the clanking of battle-ravaged armour. Zelia had never seen one up close but knew exactly who the arrivals were. Everyone did. They were living legends, sworn protectors of humanity against the horrors of the universe. They were war made flesh.



They were Space Marines.

The dust settled and Zelia found herself looking up at an armoured giant almost three times her height, its imposing helm staring right at her.

‘Get away from here,’ the Space Marine rumbled in a voice so deep that she could feel it in her bones. ‘Now!’

She could barely move, let alone respond. She had seen pictures of the Ultramarines, the blue armour familiar

from hundreds of tattered tapestries and stained-glass viewports, but to see one face-to-face? That was both an honour and a curse. Those who found themselves on the battlegrounds of the Adeptus Astartes very rarely survived to tell the tale.

As she gaped, the Space Marine joined his brothers, charging into battle, his whirring chainsword held high. He brought the mighty weapon down, slicing straight through the nearest Necron battle-skimmer. The alien's cannon exploded in a blaze of green light. By the time the glare faded, the Space Marine had already moved on to its next target, along with the rest of his squad.

'Mekki?' Elise yelled down at the Martian. 'Any time soon would be good!'

'Working on it,' the Martian boy said, up to his elbows in cables.

Zelia looked to where the scarabs had reached her abandoned anti-grav bike. The metal insects scuttled over its

chassis, jaws chattering. One minute the grav-bike was there, and the next it had gone. The scarabs had dismantled it in seconds, devouring every single part. Now she understood what the old scroll had meant. Worst of all, they'd be next if they didn't get the skimmer moving.

'Mekki...'

'Yes,' the Martian snapped back. 'I know.'

Zelia peered over the side. Mekki's right hand was pressed against a circuit board, the tiny haptic implants on his fingertips plugging into the skimmer's cogitator. His eyes were closed, his lips moving as if in prayer as the strange metal strips he called his 'electoos' glowed eerily on his arms and head. With a rattle, the skimmer shook. Mekki disengaged his fingers and opened his eyes, looking straight at her.

'Try it now, Zelia Lor.'

She revved the engine and the skimmer jolted forwards.

‘You did it,’ Elise cheered, helping Mekki onto the back of the skimmer.

‘Of course,’ he said plainly, his servo-sprites dropping onto his shoulders. There was no arrogance in his voice. It was merely a statement of fact.

Zelia opened the throttle and the skimmer shot forwards. She weaved the craft through the battling Space Marines, avoiding both Necron lightning and Space Marine artillery.

‘Get us back to the *Scriptor*,’ Elise shouted. ‘We’re getting off this planet.’

By the look of it, they weren’t the only ones. The hive was still under attack, much of the gigantic spike ablaze, and ships of all sizes were blasting off from the space port located halfway up the towering structure. The evacuation of Targian had begun.

A Necron scarab leapt up onto the front of the skimmer and sank its pointed teeth into the metal.

‘Oh no you don’t,’ cried Elise, grabbing

an ancient generator coil from a crate of artefacts. She lobbed the artefact at the scarab, knocking the one-eyed bug from the skimmer. The paint had blistered where it had plunged its fangs into the metalwork, smoke curling from two perfectly round holes.

Another scarab appeared beside Zelia. She cried out in alarm and knocked it from the side of the skimmer before it could take a bite. The hover-sled lurched to the right as she took her



eyes from the controls. She straightened up but could hear the scamper of tiny legs on the bottom of the chassis.

‘We’re going to be smothered by those things in a minute,’ she yelled.

Mekki tapped the screen he kept cuffed to his left wrist. ‘Go up,’ he told her.

‘What do you mean?’

‘What I said. Fly.’

She twisted in her seat. ‘Mekki – what are you talking about? This is a skimmer, not an aircraft.’

The ghost of a smile played over his pale lips. ‘Not any more. I gave the anti-grav generator ideas above its station. Look.’

Leaning across her, he grabbed the controls.

‘Hey!’

Mekki pulled back sharply on the steering wheel, and the skimmer soared into the sky. Unwilling to give up on their prize, some of the scarabs took to the air, razor-sharp wings sprouting

from their glistening exoskeletons, but the skimmer was moving too fast, even for them.

Zelia laughed out loud. Mekki was a bit weird, but he was also brilliant.

‘We will not be able to stay up here for long,’ he told her gravely, ‘but the powercell should last until we get back to the *Scriptor*.’

The skimmer suddenly dipped, dropping like a stone before levelling out again.

‘You sure about that?’ she gasped.

‘It’s not the skimmer,’ Erasmus cried out as a Necron crawled onto the back of the hover-sled. The gruesome skeleton grabbed Erasmus’s satchel strap and pulled, trying to yank the lexmechanic out of the skimmer. ‘Help me!’

Mekki leant over, attempting to pry the alien’s fingers from the bag, while the servo-sprites dive-bombed the skull-faced attacker.

‘It won’t let go!’ Erasmus wailed.

‘Hang on!’ Zelia said. She had problems of her own. One of the crescent-shaped fighters had spotted them and was swooping down to intercept. Zelia swerved as the gunship fired, the crackling energy missing them by inches.

The Necron fighter threw itself into a tight turn, coming around for a fresh attack. Zelia gunned the engine but would never be able to outrun the alien ship. Its Necron pilot locked on to her and prepared to fire...

Before exploding into a ball of flaming shrapnel.

Zelia looked up to see an aquila shining bright on the nose of a thundering blue aircraft. Bristling with missile launchers and plasma cannons, the heavily armoured fighter was chunky and compact. It looked far too heavy for its hooked wings, each emblazoned with the silver U-shaped insignia that the Ultramarines wore on their shoulder pads. And yet, despite its

obvious heft, the gunship turned and twisted in the air with ease, the Space Marine at the controls already targeting another Necron ship.

Behind her, Erasmus screamed. The Necron nearly had him out of the skimmer.

‘Just let go of the bag,’ Elise shouted.

‘No,’ Erasmus said. ‘I can’t.’

Zelia looked up and saw the Space Marine throw his gunship into a barrel roll, corkscrewing through the air.

Suddenly, she knew what to do.

‘Hold on to something,’ she barked.

‘Why?’ Elise asked.

‘Just do it!’

Zelia jerked the controls to the right. The skimmer went into a spin, its cargo of ancient artefacts spraying out like sparks from the whirling firecrackers that her mother launched each and every Ascension Day. The relics tumbled to the ground, where they were instantly devoured by the sea of scarabs below. Mekki grabbed hold

of Erasmus as the Necron lost its grip and plunged to the ground with them.

Wrestling with the controls, Zelia levelled out the now empty skimmer.

‘Is everyone all right?’

‘Yes,’ Erasmus stammered. ‘Thanks to you.’

‘Sorry about your artefacts, mum.’

Elise squeezed her daughter’s arm.

‘Are you kidding? That was *incredible!*’

‘All thanks to Mekki’s tinkering,’ she said, glancing back at the Martian.

He was sitting looking straight ahead. Were those tears in his eyes? Then

she realised why. Only one of the servo-sprites was clinging to his robes.

The other must have gone down with the Necron.

Zelia faced front, staring through the skimmer’s plastek windscreen. There wasn’t time to grieve for a robot, no matter how attached Mekki was to his creations. They needed to get back to the *Scriptor* before another Necron tried to bring them down. She had only just

managed to pull off that manoeuvre without losing control. Next time she might not be so lucky.

TO BE CONTINUED...

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Cavan Scott has written for such popular franchises as *Star Wars*, *Doctor Who*, *Judge Dredd*, *LEGO DC Super Heroes*, *Penguins of Madagascar*, *Adventure Time* and many, many more. The writer of a number of novellas and short stories set within the *Warhammer 40,000* universe, including the *Warhammer Adventures: Warped Galaxies* series, Cavan became a UK number one bestseller with his 2016 World Book Day title, *Star Wars: Adventures in Wild Space – The Escape*. Find him online at www.cavanscott.com.