

Astrum Xenos

by Michael J. Hollows

THE STARS WERE beautiful in the night sky, he had always liked the stars. Gazing in to their glittering depths had helped him to think. Now was a time for thinking. Now was a time for reflection. Wanting to visit them and explore their infinite mysteries was what had ultimately brought him to this place. To see the galaxy he had said, as he left his home.

Though despite all that, these stars looked different. Gone were the signs he remembered, the ever enlightening Throne, the one for the children, The Grox and the bad omen, The Tyrant. This place was not the home of his birth, every sign in the stars here was a bad omen. He had come a long way since he had left that place. No, these were the stars of another sky, another planet, far from home.

The life of an Imperial Guardsman had taken him to many alien planets, to vast plains fighting the barbarous greenskin hordes. Archipelago planets where finding the sneaky xenos Eldar filth proved more difficult than it was worth and finally to the muddy torment of the trenches fighting the hated arch-enemy.

The machinations of the Chaos cults had brought him to this world with the full glory of his regiment. A mighty force spewed forth from the bulbous dropships, larynxes screaming oaths to the Emperor, lasguns blaring in white hot heat. He had run with them all, his own lasgun adding to the crack of fire, almost a veteran now in the few years of service he had completed.

That had been the initial invasion. Soon afterwards the war had turned in to a crushing battle of attrition, each side trying to wear down the other in a constant struggle from trench to trench. Their unit had been ordered in to battle time and time again, eventually being pushed back. The massed firepower of the enemy's small calibre weapons and stubbers proving overwhelming. That was until the reinforcements were brought forward and the final push had been signalled. He had been one of the first up the trench ladder, the swill of the decking sticking to his feet threatening to drag him back down. An expert with his lasgun he had dutifully fired round after round of searing bolts to keep his enemy's heads down, while his feet pounded over the ground.

HE REACHED FOR his lasgun now, he had lost it somewhere in the confusion, but it must still lay nearby for he had not moved far. It had come all this way with him, the smoothly carved wooden stock the only physical remnant of his homeworld. Stretching the tendons in his arms, his mind sending impulses to the nerves of his muscles, he resumed the search. But no matter how hard he tried, how hard he concentrated, his limbs would not move. He attempted to cry out in frustration but the words caught in his throat. The thick brown dirty mud of the ground in no-man's land was sucking at his body, making any slight movement even harder. That was that then, his arms were useless to him. He tried to shuffle at least, using the last strength of his body to move to somewhere else, anywhere else. But the cloying dirt was robbing him of any momentum. He was stuck, suspended, staring at the heavens.

AS HE LAY there dying, left with only his thoughts, the stars reminded him of home, of her. Producing an unnaturally vivid image in his mind. He couldn't bring himself to think her name, it would only add to the pain and anguish he was experiencing. The piercing pain when he thought of her made him wish he had never left home. He remembered that day well, standing in the doorway of

his hab, his parent's eyes wet with tears, bodies wracked with sobs. He had had no choice, the Imperial tithe demanded his service.

'I will return' He had said.

He had made the same promise to her, but had vowed he would never say 'goodbye', those words were too final. At the time he could not bring himself to physically say them, it would have been as if admitting defeat. As long as they had known each other they had felt a connection they could not explain.

LIGHTS FILLED THE dark sky intermittently. The dull thump of explosions occasionally joining the display of light. The war was still raging somewhere in the distance. The massed Imperial forces would be throwing everything they had at the enemy, forcing them from this planet inch by valuable inch. With lasgun and bayonet, with the huge tracked cannons of the armoured divisions they would hurl the traitors in to the abyss. But for now this war had passed him by.

HE FELT NUMB, his body slowly losing control. His extremities growing colder by the second. Though he could no longer move his limbs from the mud, he longed for her comforting touch. All physical sensation was leaving his body and he could no longer feel his arms or legs, the pain taking over. Despite his failing strength he had the uncanny sensation of an embrace, the soft touch of a loved one accompanied by a familiar smell. He glanced around him, his eyes the last part of his body he had any control over. Apart from the corpses smoking in the cold air around him he was definitely alone. Despite the pain his body was experiencing he could feel the presence reminding him of the contours of her body. It was as if she was there with him now holding him, comforting him in the end. The touch he could always feel when he was lonely.

THE LAST THOUGHT his broken mind could manage was the terrible guilt at the pain that he would inflict on her. That unnatural connection broken at long last, he knew she would be thinking of him, and it pained him more than his defeated limbs.

His body had gone, life blood mingling with the mud that lay all around him and caked his damp fatigues. The bright, strange stars still lit up the night sky, the alien sky...

But the last sight he would see, forever burned in the retinas of his eyes, was the mental image of his beloved.