

The Shadow

By Mel Roddis

Shipmaster Olson stared in horror as the great pale structures disgorged thousands of splinters into the void. As the auspex adepts tried and failed to track them, he saw that each one was a miniature of its parent ship, insect-like and utterly alien. Plates of dark, boney material were held together with sinuous stretches of pale muscle fibre and sheets of flesh, beneath which pulsed pink organs of which Olson feared to guess the purpose. They weaved through the lances of Imperial fire with unnatural ease.

'Brace!' he cried, as a dozen of the splinters that had evaded the *Horizon's* guns breached the ship's perimeter sensors, causing klaxons to wail and lights to flash across the control deck. A moment later, the *Horizon* shuddered violently as the creature-ships impacted the hull. Crewmen were thrown across their terminals as gouts of fire erupted from damaged bulkheads.

The lumens failed, plunging them into total darkness for a second, then the red illumination of the emergency electroscences lit the scene of chaos. Olson surveyed the damage. Wounded crewmen lay strewn across the room, some screaming, others deathly quiet. Lieutenant Madden was hosing down a fire with suppressant from an auto-font.

Olson looked down at his hands, gripping the rail in front of him. His knuckles were white, but he knew that if he let go he would not be able to control the shaking. The tremors had been getting worse ever since they found the Navigator peeling the skin from his own fingers three days ago. They hadn't known what had caused the wretch's madness then, but they knew now.

The two pale parent ships filled the viewing portal and Olson felt a malevolent mind staring back, probing him.

'We've been boarded!'

The shout cut through his unwilling reverie. From the vox-panel he could hear broken reports of creatures in the corridors, each message cut short in a violent scream. Before he could act, the doors to the bridge were violently torn open, as if they were nothing more than sheets of gauze. Olson could not tell if the terrible screeching had come from the metal as it buckled or from the wretched creature itself.

It spilled into the room, eight feet tall at least, its face split with a mouth of needle-sharp teeth and its head crowned with a tall horned carapace. In one of its three pairs of limbs it held something that resembled a gun, a weapon that seemed to be formed of the same organic material as the creature itself. The black claws that tipped its articulate upper limbs gleamed cruelly in the red light.

'Throne...?' Olson breathed.



For a split second, no one moved. The surviving bridge crew stared at the creature as if it had just manifested from their nightmares, then Lieutenant Madden shouted something incoherent and opened fire with his laspistol. Those who were able to shook themselves free of their awe and followed his lead.

Olson let go of the rail and shakily pulled his gun from its holster. He released a barrage at the creature, which stood at the centre of the concentrated fire as if basking in it. Then it moved, apparently undamaged, sweeping sideways with surprising grace to unleash its own weapon.

Olson fought his nausea as he watched his crew cut down, writhing in some kind of organic fluid that melted clothing and flesh alike. He fired at it again, but it was on the move now, darting up walls and scything through the debris to evade his onslaught.

The shipmaster looked breathlessly around the room, taking stock of the dead and dying. Madden was still alive, crouching behind a terminal with his gun still firing, though there was a nasty burn on his leg where his fatigues had dissolved. The creature was now skirting the fore of the bridge near the viewing port, leaving the ruined doors to the rest of the ship clear. The bridge armoury was a short run away.

'Hold it here!' Olson yelled at Madden over the scream of weapons fire, before stepping through the rent doors and dashing into the corridor.

The emergency lumen were pulsing, making it look like the scene before him was playing out in stop-motion. The corridor was filled with bodies, some still, others writhing as if on fire. The dead were

not all Human; among them a few smaller xenos lay motionless, and that gave him hope that the Emperor was still with them. The crewmen that had survived the initial onslaught were using the corpses as cover while they fired at the oncoming horrors.

A dozen or more creatures wove in and out of pools of shadow, the undulating lights catching gnashing teeth, polished claws, lashing tongues and pale, rib-like abdomens. These creatures were all smaller than the beast that had invaded the bridge, but they were numerous and moved almost faster than the eye could follow.

Olson took a position alongside a crewman who was crouching behind a chitinous corpse and added his pistol to the firestorm.

'What's your name, crewman?' he shouted over the din.

The crewman looked round in surprise to see her shipmaster suddenly beside her.

'Sims, sir,' she yelled back.

Olson gestured behind him towards the bridge.

'Don't go that way,' he said. 'We need some heavier firepower. I'm going for the small armour shrine. Cover me!'

Sims nodded grimly and resumed her fire as Olson vaulted over the corpse barrier and ran low and fast down the corridor, picking off creatures with snapshots from his pistol as he went. These were definitely lesser bioforms, able to take only a few rounds before they went down. All the same, more and more were pouring into the corridor from ingress points further down, and it was only the constant fire of the crew that was keeping them from swarming the deck entirely.

Olson had the door to the armoury in his sights when something crashed into him from the right, hurling him against the bulkhead. He was pinned in place and could feel the cold, hard bone of the creature pressing against him. It was gnashing at him with its bared teeth, and it took all of Olson's strength to keep its head inches from his own. He gagged at the smell as it tore at his chest with its claws. It was the stench of something truly alien, of another place, another world so distant and strange he could not imagine it.

Then its head exploded in a cloud of ichor and it fell twitching to the floor. Sims stood above it, her shotgun smoking.

The shipmaster nodded his thanks dumbly.

'Sir, you're injured.' Sims pointed to his chest.

His dress shirt was in ribbons and the flesh beneath it scored with deep lacerations.

'I'll be alright,' he said, pressing a hand against the wounds. 'Keep them back.'

Sims turned, dropping to one knee behind her latest conquest to despatch another ravaging beast as it loped up the corridor.

Olson entered his keycode and the armoury door slid open. It was a subsidiary locker, only big enough for one person to stand inside, but it held a small collection of heavy weaponry. He selected a flamer. Checking that the fuel canister was full and muttering a quick prayer of arming, he turned back to the corridor and unleashed a sheet of fire over a clutch of xenos that was about to overwhelm the crew's beachhead. The creatures screeched as they were wreathed in flame, and ran in disarray into the waiting guns of the crew.

After a few seconds of frenzied fire, the crew let their weapons fall silent. Nothing stirred in the corridor. All was still but the motes of dust that drifted down from the ceiling.

Then there was a piercing cry from behind them.

Olson turned to see Madden looming out of the haze. He seemed to be floating for a moment, but then the shipmaster saw, to his horror, that the lieutenant was impaled on the footlong claw of the monstrous creature, which was holding him aloft like a gruesome trophy. Madden was dead, his death mask a picture of pure terror.

'Filthy xenos scum,' Olson growled, burying his guilt beneath a wave of anger. He raced up the corridor towards his foe, letting the flamer pour forth its vengeance. He could feel the weapon's machine spirit raging and he did not attempt to soothe it. The creature squealed at an unnatural pitch, wrapped in holy fire. It staggered forwards a few feet, and for a moment Olson feared it would reach him, but then it folded forwards,

falling to the ground in a heap of blackened chitin and scorched flesh. Olson spat on its sizzling corpse as he stepped over it on his way back to the bridge.

The battle was over. Of the twenty Imperial frigates that had formed the fleet, only two remained intact. The others were smoldering wrecks, void-flooded and listing, but they had been victorious. The two xenos bio-ships were in fragments, their foul cargo delivered unceremoniously to the void. Olson, his wounds hastily bandaged, gazed through the viewport as the remnants of the skirmish hung silently in the blackness.

'I am receiving a missive from the *Atlas*, shipmaster,' the new vox adept announced. His predecessor was among the hundreds of Human and xenos corpses being collected in the cargo bay.

Olson nodded and took over.

'*Atlas*, this is Shipmaster Olson on the *Horizon*. What is your status?'

'Midshipman Huber here, sir,' the voice came through with a crackle. Olson could hear the waver in it. 'I must report that Admiral Winters is dead, sir, as are all the senior officers. We've taken heavy damage, but the Tech-Magi have reconsecrated the major systems, Emperor be praised. Casualties... too many to count.'

'Understood, midshipman. We're in a similar situation over here. With the death of Admiral Winters, I'll be taking charge of... what's left of the fleet. I want an hourly report on all repairs and—'

'Shipmaster,' the auspex adept interrupted, her voice low but her tone grave enough to cut him short.

'What is it?'

'Shipmaster,' she said again, as if struggling for the next word. She was leaning over the auspex, staring in disbelief.

'Adept, report.'

'A massive shadow on the auspex, sir. Hundreds of signals. All coming this way...'

 She fell silent.

He went to her station and looked for himself. She was right. A huge mass of xenos ships was inbound.

'It was just the vanguard,' he whispered. For a moment he could only stare out at the void, and in response he could feel their presence somehow, a vast alien intelligence questing out to find him. He shook himself and reopened the vox.

'Huber, we've got more xenos incoming, can you confirm?'

There was a pause, then, in a shaky voice, 'Confirmed, shipmaster.'

'We have to warn command,' Olson said. 'They're going to overrun the whole system.'

'But how, sir?' Huber asked. 'We can't signal them, we're too far out. And the warp...?' He trailed off, his voice filled with horror.

'We've got no choice. We'll have to take our chances.'

'Through the warp, shipmaster?' Huber asked, incredulously. 'But the shadow... the Cicatrix Maledictum... the Navigators...?' He muttered a prayer of warding. 'There are too many dangers. We'll never make it.'

'We'll die if we stay here, and so will every other living soul in the system. What could be worse?'

Huber offered no reply, for which Olson was grateful. A great many things could be worse, but there was no merit in dwelling on the fact.

'Midshipman, prepare the *Atlas* for warp travel,' Olson ordered, regimenting his voice into the most authoritative tone he could muster. Then, to his own Tech-Magus, 'Rouse the Navigator. Calculate coordinates for the jump.'

The shipmaster took one last look at the devastation before him. He imagined it writ large across the system, entire fleets and planets brought to dust. He could feel a scratching at the back of his mind, a whisper without words, an unfathomable menace just beyond the edge of comprehension.

'Emperor guide us,' he said, as the ship's klaxons wailed and lumens began to flicker. The wailing of the Navigator over the vox was an unholy sound, and Olson made a warding sign with his hands as he took in the pale faces of his crew. Whatever horrors they had faced today were nothing compared to those that lay in the dread realm they were about to enter. But enter it they must.

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Sergeant Copeland tapped his driver on the shoulder and the vehicle shuddered to a stop.

'Over there,' Copeland said, pointing at the auspex screen. 'Something... I can't make it out. We'll change course to investigate.'

The caravan of Tauroxes filed across the white sands towards the black hulk on the horizon. As they drew nearer, Copeland peered through the viewslots. It was an Imperial frigate, mostly buried in the sand, with just one portion of its slanted bulkhead protruding from the dune. It had taken a great deal of damage, and strange bone-white husks clung to its hull like ticks in skin.

The Tauroxes drew to a halt beside the wreckage and Copeland disembarked.

'With me,' he said to the squadron of Imperial Guardsmen that piled out after him. 'Proceed with caution. Emperor watch over us.'

They fell into formation, lasguns raised, approaching the ship slowly. Behind them, the other squadrons got out of their vehicles to form a perimeter.

Copeland found an accessible hatch and wrenched it open. The ship's mechanisms were fried, the lights flickering on and off spasmodically. His men followed him into the corridor, which was on a slant due to the ship's position, forcing them to straddle wall and floor as they walked. There were no signs of life.



'We'll head to the bridge,' Copeland announced, leading the way.

As they approached, they saw that the doors to the bridge had been torn open by something. There was debris everywhere – cables hanging down, holes rent in the bulkhead, claw marks on the floor.

'What happened here?' a guardsman muttered.

'Quiet,' Copeland snapped. 'I can hear something.'

It was a voice. A Human voice, he thought. It was murmuring monotonously, though he couldn't make out the words, and it was coming from beyond the ruined doors. From the bridge.

He stepped through and paused to take in the scene. Bodies were strewn everywhere, the blood causing his boots to stick to the floor. Some lay across their terminals, others crumpled in heaps by the wall. Many were partially flayed, their peels of skin held in their own blood-soaked hands.

The shipmaster, distinguished by his tattered uniform, was sitting in the command chair with his eyes clawed out.

Copeland stared at the grim picture before him, swallowing down his bile, then leapt back as the shipmaster suddenly moved, fixing him with an eyeless stare.

'The shadow within and the shadow without, always hungry, tearing through,' the naval officer whispered. 'The first, last, greatest, oldest shadow, ancient, beyond...'

'Throne help us,' the sergeant muttered. 'How has the wretch even survived this horror?'

'The mind, the eye, always watching, always hungry...' the shipmaster droned on. 'Must relay... must tell... must warn them... words... no words... I have no words!' The last was shouted with such force it made Copeland start.

'Must warn them,' the sergeant repeated. 'Warn them of what?'

But the shipmaster seemed unaware that he was being spoken to.

'Clawing, scratching, coming through,' he whispered on. 'The mind, the eye, the shadow...'

'I fear his mind is gone,' Copeland said. 'He speaks nothing but madness. We must report this heresy to command.'

As the squadron filed off the ship and back towards their transports, Copeland felt a strange scratching at the back of his skull, like a thousand claws were forcing their way into his brain. He thought he heard the shipmaster's voice again, whispering unintelligibly, and even turned around, half expecting to see him standing in the sands behind him.

But there was nothing there but his own shadow.