

The Stand of the Sabre

By Callum Davis

There was a blinding flash of light on the horizon when the *Atalat* struck the ground. Its violent crash took place so far away that Captain Meznar never saw the ancient strike cruiser plummet from orbit, but he did see the immense mushroom cloud erupt into Ceibhal's atmosphere, its choking fumes and debris darkening blue skies and blotting out the bright sun.

Another proud vessel lost, Meznar thought. The Obsidian Jaguars' Chapter fleet that was defending their home world had taken a battering. The Orks' vessels, though crude, were numberless and brutally powerful.

Within minutes, ferocious winds tore over the Sabre – the Obsidian Jaguars' towering fortress monastery – and its lower battlements, the first level of many formidable ground defences. All around him warriors braced against the shock waves. Their granite-grey armour was scratched, rent and dented from weeks of punishing battle, and they clutched weapons that had suffered equally harsh trials.

The machine spirits will never forgive us for what we have subjected them to in the name of necessity, he thought. There had been no time for rest, repair or rearmament of any kind. The warriors were drawn from a number of companies – those that just happened to be on Ceibhal when the Orks struck. Many hundreds of the Obsidian Jaguars' Space Marines waged war across the galaxy. No astropathic cry for them to return had been answered.

As the worst of the gales subsided, helots and servitors emerged from portals that led deeper into the Sabre, bearing ammunition for the Space Marines and serf soldiery that manned the walls. The Obsidian Jaguars' servants had suffered much more than the Space Marines. Meznar saw the deep rings underneath their heavily bloodshot eyes. Several bled from wounds suffered during the Orks' bombardments. Many twitched erratically, either a consequence of excessive combat-stim usage or an indication that they were on the brink of insanity – sometimes both. Their proud uniforms had been reduced to rags and their fine leather boots had been cut down to strips bound to blackened feet by discarded rope. The servitors' mechanical components screeched with every clanking step due to lack of oil, while sparks flashed from their damaged circuitry.

'They won't last much longer,' said Uetz, the Apothecary's gaze wandering over the Chapter's

support assets. The white of his armour had long since worn away, and dry blood caked both his bare metal ceramite and the surgical tools built into his left gauntlet.

'They will have to,' said Chaplain Kualka. 'The Sabre shall not fall. The xenos will be destroyed, but it will take every ounce of our strength and our resolve.' The Chaplain was a head taller than both Meznar and Uetz. He bore a look that would accept no compromise – his jaw firmly set and his eyes narrowed. The formidable Chaplain had lost his helm fighting a colossal Ork chieftain. In the same clash he had struck the beast so hard over the head with his crozius arcanum that he had shattered his own weapon. Kualka now carried a chainsword, lifted from the body of a fallen battle-brother.

'Calm, brother Chaplain,' said Meznar. 'We hold still, we will hold yet. The Sabre has never fall—'

'WAAAGH!'

The howls of the winds had fallen away, replaced by howls of another kind.

The bestial war cries filled the air, loud enough to give the helots cause to hesitate before they were rebuked by the Obsidian Jaguars, demanding ammunition.

Meznar looked out over the Plains of Karusal and into the edge of the Serpentine Jungle beyond. The greenskins were charging again. They flowed like the Arrowhead River during the Season of Downpouring – a green tide submerging the thousands of wrecked vehicles that carpeted the open plains.

The Orks were within range of the Whirlwinds, which were situated in the defence alcoves built into the higher battlements. The missile tanks weren't firing, however. Ammunition was too scarce to use until hits were guaranteed. *Morkai's Roar*, the Chapter's prized relic Arcus Strike Tank, was also silent. Awakening the millennia-old vehicle was already an act of grim desperation, the thought of its potential loss was almost too much to bear. It had been a gift from the Space Wolves after the two Chapters had fought side by side against the Heretic Astartes on Benngihl VII.

What I would do for but a score of Wolves to fight with us this day, Meznar thought. He had never seen

such potent savagery, such deadly warrior skill nor such battle fury than that of the Space Wolves. Their Chapters' combined strengths could surely turn the tide, were they here.

Meznan observed the thundering hordes below. There were thousands in every charge, no number of dead enough to thin their ranks meaningfully.

Perhaps not, he thought, then cursed himself for his negative thinking.

'The Sabre will never fall!' he declared, for all the warriors around to hear and to strengthen his own resolve. As if the colossal fortress monastery echoed his thoughts, at last the batteries of defensive weapons opened fire, followed by the artillery tanks. Ripples of terrific explosions erupted amongst the charging Orks. He saw hundreds of greenskins writhing in agony as they were set alight by clinging incendiary chemicals. Charred green parts were thrown hundreds of feet into the air by the blasts. Meznan barely noticed when his vox clicked on, such was the enormous volume of the defensive fire and the roars of defiance from his warriors as they watched thousands of Orks die in the apocalyptic inferno.

'Sabre-master, defensive weapons ammunition is down to less than twenty-three per cent,' warned Nelq, the Chapter's Master of the Forge. 'Only ten per cent of incendiaries remain. Three in five point-defence heavy bolter and autocannon turrets are destroyed or empty. *Morkai's Roar* has fired its last. I shall set it to slumber. I recommend we cease fire. We will need the guns again against further assaults.'

'Do it, brother,' said Meznan. 'We shall cast the Orks from the battlements with bolter and blade, as we have done a score of times.'

'Hold firm, brother. This defence will be remembered in glory for the ages.'

The vox clicked out. The Orks had reached the effective firing range of the Space Marines and unaugmented soldiers on the walls. While the fires still raged, handfuls of Orks were breaking through, but each group was ruthlessly put down by the Obsidian Jaguars.

With each passing minute, however, the numbers forcing their way through were ever greater, and the

tide began to quench the flames through its sheer, suffocating mass. As Meznan turned his boltgun on the Orks, he felt a deep rumble beneath his feet. The grinding weight of the greenskins was such that the Sabre itself was beginning to shake.

Aiming soon became a pointless exercise. Every warrior and serf fired relentlessly, with the calm of one who – despite all the hardship they face – is possessed of exceptional discipline and unshakeable brotherhood. None relented because they knew none around them would. The deep booms of bolt weapon fire were punctuated by the harsh crack of lasguns discharging, while spent shell casings and exhausted power cells clattered on the granite floor of the battlements.

The Orks returned fire. Streaks of poorly aimed rockets shot overhead, exploding ineffectually on the Sabre's hundred-metre thick walls of solid volcanic rock. Others struck the battlements themselves, cracking parts of the masonry and sending flurries of shrapnel into those behind them. The Obsidian Jaguars, in their power armour, were largely unharmed. It was a different matter for the serfs. Dozens screamed in agony, clutching shattered limbs. Others gurgled as blood poured from their shredded necks. Medicae serfs ran across the length of the wall providing treatment, while stretcher bearers rushed to evacuate the wounded. The dead were shoved off the walls and into the courtyard behind. There was no time to remove them with respect.

May their spirits forgive us, thought Meznan.

They had fought bravely, and deserved better.

Orks with bulky jump packs strapped to their backs leapt from the onrushing mobs, soaring above the walls on great streams of fire.

Meznan didn't need to order his warriors to meet this threat. Squads had already been designated to air-clearance duties. Even as he fired into the advancing masses, he saw the flying Orks' jump packs exploding after being hit by bolt rifle fire, or their heads bursting as bolt rounds detonated inside them.

Meznan saw one heading straight for him, and the Captain calculated the Ork's approximate speed and trajectory. He didn't look up or cease his firing as the greenskin drew closer. Meznan simply emptied his bolter, replaced the magazine and resumed firing.

He could see the reds of the brute's eyes, but didn't move or alter his stance. When the creature was but a handful of metres away, snarling with bestial fury and ready to kill, its chest exploded in a shower of gore that splattered over Meznar's armour. Meznar had no idea who had taken the killing shot, he had simply trusted that it would be made.

My regards, brother.

Meznar stood at the centre of the walls directly above the Sabre's gatehouse. The Orks had successfully breached the great aperture in a previous assault. It had cost the Obsidian Jaguars thirty warriors and four precious battle tanks to contain the wound in the fortress monastery, and now the Land Raider Redeemer *Fires of Ceibhal* and Land Raider Crusader *Makanah* blocked the entrance. When *Fires of Ceibhal* opened fire, and great swathes of greenskins were set alight by torrents of burning promethium, Meznar knew just how close the Orks were. The xenos would be upon the walls in moments.

'Gun them down! Slay them all!' roared Kualka over the vox. 'Punish the xenos scum for their incursion into this world, our world, the world of your fathers and brothers!' The Chaplain paced the length of the walls, chainsword held aloft, his mere presence visibly stiffening serf and battle-brother alike.

'Brothers, the Primarch's blood runs in our veins. The Emperor's blood runs in our veins. With such power at our very core, how can we not best this foe? Show them the error of their alien ways! Show them that to face the Obsidian Jaguars means death! Give them pain, give them humiliation, give them defeat!'

To Meznar's right, a broad, heavy ladder was braced against the wall. He recognised the wood it was made of – precatorae maxima, as it was known as in High Gothic. Steelpalms covered much of Ceibhal's land surface, and their timber was renowned for the phenomenal strength that gave the trees their name. The Orks were not only devastating the Obsidian Jaguars' home world, they were turning it against the Space Marines. Anger filled him.

'No Ork shall escape punishment for this atrocity,' he said to himself. It was yet another insult to his Chapter and home world, after the death and destruction they had wrought.

Meznar saw three serfs rush to the ladder closest to him, with bayonets fixed. He could see how blunted the blades had become in the fighting. The soldiers had fought hard. For all their visible exhaustion, they followed doctrine. Ladders were bottlenecks into which the enemy funnelled themselves by necessity, but the brute that appeared on the battlements was

colossal – its fangs were nearly the length of the soldiers' forearms and its blade was a huge chunk of sharpened metal. Within seconds the serfs were hacked apart, blood and organs slopping onto the floor and shocked and pained expressions still etched into what remained of their faces.

Without hesitation, Meznar drew his power sword and ignited it. Energy rippled down the polished-black obsidian blade. The Ork he faced roared and charged him, its bright yellow armour painted red with the blood of the fallen.

'Your blood shall be shed next, filth,' Meznar said as he engaged. His parry of the Ork's first blow required two hands, the impact of the meeting blades shaking his entire body. He countered quickly with a number of thrusts to force the creature onto the defensive and drive it back to the ladder. For all the creature's raw power, it was no bladesman. Meznar had spent years of his life in practice cages. He used his opponent's size and relative slowness against it, ducking blows, always moving and driving the Ork to reckless anger. The brute overstepped, its desperation to kill leaving an opening. Meznar took it, driving his blade into the greenskin up to the hilt and withdrawing it quickly, stabbing the greenskin twice more in quick succession.

Another of the xenos beasts was ascending the ladder. Meznar kicked it in the jaw, sending it crashing into the heaving masses below. He looked along the length of the wall. In both directions, Space Marines and serfs were embattled. Green brutes in yellow armour poured onto the walls, but Meznar's warriors were holding them. Xenos blood flooded the battlements. He knew it was time.

'Cozam, Tyzok, Akalan, Yarat, strike them!' Meznar commanded. 'Xilonen, Quedira, Xoco, unleash the fury of the Kuaht!'

As Meznar returned to the fray, hacking down Orks and shooting into the throngs massing below the walls, hidden sally ports opened. Squadrons of Predators thundered into battle, with Repulsors by their sides. Autocannon, heavy bolter and gatling cannon fire tore through the Orks, who had been caught by surprise. The battle tanks raced at high speed, running down those greenskins too slow to evade them. Squads of Inceptors leapt into battle, their jet packs roaring as they dropped into the horde. Their assault bolters chewed through scores of Orks, and plasma incinerators made a mockery of the greenskins' crude armour and light vehicles. The final piece to the devastating attack was the squadrons of aircraft that now soared overhead. A dozen sleek gunships banked over the battlefield. With each

passing second they accounted for scores of Orks, creating a nigh on impassable wall of fire where their missiles and plasma fire scoured the ground.

The initiative was now firmly in the Obsidian Jaguars' hands. *The Fires of Ceibhal* and *Makanah* surged forward, adding their bellicose might to the furious counter-attack. No more Orks ascended their ladders, and those on the wall were quickly isolated and cut down.

Meznan watched as the remaining Orks were driven away. He pulled his warriors back. He knew his forces would not be able to strike back in such a way again. The Orks would no doubt have learned where the sally ports were and would strike with their own aircraft now, but the xenos had once again been thrown back, and more time had been bought.

'We hold, brothers!' Meznan declared, ensuring all could hear him whilst raising his bloodied sword aloft. A number of serfs cheered, but most could

manage little more than bringing a fist to their heart, or making the sign of the Aquila.

'The Sabre shall never fall,' echoed Kualka. Meznan watched as his tired warriors raised their bolt rifles and boltguns in triumph, but they did so with less force and purpose than when they had first thrown the Orks from the walls. He cast an eye over the strategic disposition analyses in his autosenses, visible only to those with the highest clearance.

'Emperor save us,' he said. The picture of what was stacked against them had never been more stark.

We cannot hold, he thought. Not unless our brothers return, or the Wolves somehow come.

Thinking of his brothers saw his strength return.

'We will last until the Chapter returns,' he said under his breath, a conviction in his voice that he himself did not truly believe.

