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FEAR THE ALIEN

Edited by Christian Dunn



FEAR THE ALIEN

A Warhammer 40,000 anthology

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The Imperium of Man has many enemies among the stars, but none are reviled so much as the alien. Dangerous races seek to destroy humanity wherever they turn –the brutish orks, the ravening hordes of the tyrannid, the unrelenting necrons and the mysterious forces of the tau and the eldar. Across the universe, humanity and their defenders, the Space Marines, seek to eradicate these xenos threats. Yet all they can hope for is another day of survival – for to stand against the alien is to enter an unending war... Featuring stories by Dan Abnett, Aaron Dembski-Bowden, Nick Kyme, Juliet McKenna, C.L. Werner and many more, Fear the Alien is an unmissable collection for fans of Warhammer 40,000 and military science fiction.

About the Editor

After cutting his teeth on Inferno! and Warhammer Monthly (the only comic book ever to win an Eagle Award and get canceled in the same week), Christian Dunn spent many years as the Commissioning Editor of both Black Flame and Solaris. He is now safely ensconced back in the bosom of Black Library as their Range Development Editor where runs the e-book, Print on Demand and audio ranges, as well as being responsible for unearthing new writing talent.

He lives in Nottingham, England and always keeps a freshly greased chainsaw under his pillow in anticipation of the inevitable zombie apocalypse.

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From FEAR ITSELF by Juliet E McKenna

‘HERE THEY COME,’ breathed the vox-sergeant.

Guardsmen on the walls clustered around their heavy bolters. The weapons’ racking cough sent deadly explosive rounds ripping into the tyranids. Oxy-phosphor flares indicated at least one heavy bolter loaded with Inferno ammunition.

In the paved hollow of the compound, mortar squads deployed in unhurried routine. One man dropped a shell in the gaping weapon. The other yanked the firing lanyard and the stubby barrel spat explosives high over the wall. Catmos saw the crews swiftly adjusting azimuth and bearing as spotters on the ramparts relayed details of each detonation. Every round must extract the maximum death toll from the tyranid multitude. Guardsmen resupplying the ramparts with ammo dodged around the mortars.

Retreating to the top of the steps, Catmos was about to go back down to the basement. He changed his mind. His first duty in a battle was assessing the wounded who needed skills and time the medics couldn’t spare. He could do that as well if not better up here.

Despite all the heavy-weapon crews’ efforts, the first wave of tyranids reached the walls. They leaped into the gaps between the heavy bolters, propelled by powerful hind legs that were bent and angled like a dog’s, ending

in a bony excrescence that was part hoof, part claw. Talons on their middle limbs hooked securely onto the rampart. They heaved themselves up, hissing and spitting, their forelimbs brandishing bony scythes as long as a man's arm.

One skewered a Guardsman under the chin, his face disappearing in a wash of blood. The creature lifted him off his feet, shaking him to free its claw. Neck snapping, the man's body fell away, limp in death.

The creatures' carapaces were segmented like some giant, loathsome insect. Overlapping plates jutted upwards from their backs, the colour of old rust and dried blood. Beneath, their skeletal limbs and thorax were the sickly white of leprous skin. Grotesquely swollen, red chitin-plated heads roved from side to side. Slime dripped from thrusting jaws, myriad teeth like a needle-shark's. Catmos locked gazes with one of the repellent creatures. Its cat-slit eyes were fever-bright, intent only on mindless murder.

How could they possibly survive? His chest was an empty hollow. Bolter rounds were falling like winter hail and they still could not prevail. Their lasgun power packs would fail before this onslaught faltered. If they killed these vermin till the corpses were piled as high as the rampart, that only gave the tyranids an easier way into the compound.

Catmos's heart raced with panic but his limbs were frozen with fear. He couldn't run. He couldn't reach his laspistol. What was the point? Even the men on the walls were huddling behind their heavy bolters. Seductive despair beckoned, a black blanket to hide beneath.

The lascannons ringing the tower's upper levels burst into life. The alien exploded in a reeking shower of bony fragments and cauterised gobbets of flesh. The

same laser blast blew apart the handful following the trailblazer. The air rang with deafening shrieks as beam after beam of brilliant death cut a swathe through the chattering hordes.

The close-packed Guardsmen on the battlements were firing their lasguns. Pinpoint beams severed limbs and gouged deep into those swollen heads. They blinded noxious eyes and slashed flickering tongues clean through. Lieutenant Jephthad stepped out of a heavy bolter's shadow and calmly focussed his fire on one murderously flailing tyrannid after another.

Catmos drew a shuddering breath. He felt like some fool turning his back on a winter blizzard to huddle over a petrosene stove, not caring that blocking winter's draughts through his house was starving the heater of fresh air. Not knowing the glowing element would burn all the oxygen, condemning everyone to sleep-sick death. Now he felt as if someone had kicked open the door and dragged him out, letting the biting wind scour the toxins from his blood.

Squad medics were patching up wounded men and sending them back. No one expected different. Back on Alnavik, if a marble bear chased you, you climbed a razor pine and didn't complain about your cuts. You were alive, weren't you? Catmos ripped his laspistol from its holster, ready to offer covering fire to a pair of medics carrying a casualty down from the rampart. The man clutched at his broken breastplate, blood oozing over his fingers.

'The gates! The gates!'

Men on the walls were yelling. Lieutenant Jephthad slid down a ladder and raced across the compound. Something hit the outer face of the gates, fifteen metres in front of the tower. The impact was deafening. The

layered plasteel buckled but didn't break. Catmos's relief was short-lived. As the gates twisted, a narrow gap opened by one hinge. A massive barbed claw carefully explored the weakness.

There was a second explosion; something detonated right against the entrance. The plasteel held but gaps were opening all around the gates. Bubbling black acid oozed, weakening the ceramite plating.

The lascannons on the tower would defend the entrance if the gates gave way. Catmos looked around, shielding his eyes from the blinding beams. But the lascannons were aiming higher, not lower.

Bat-like shadows blighted the sunshine. These tyranids flew on leathery wings, membranes spread between the splayed bones of their mutated middle limbs. Their evil gaze searched for targets, their forelimbs clutching weapon-symbiotes. Catmos tensed as the monstrosities flew high above the ramparts, their viciously barbed tails lashing between their atrophied hind legs. Would they hover and fire or stoop like a hawk for the kill? Either way, the Guardsmen on the walls couldn't take their eyes off the tyranid ground assault, not if they wished to live.

Lascannons burned through the warm air. The flying tyranids caught in their crosshairs disintegrated. Any of the vermin too close to those initial casualties fell too, wings shredded by razor shards of shattered chitin. But as they tumbled from the sky, their weapon-symbiotes still spat borer worms at the mortar crews. Crashing onto the paving, their twisting tails cut Guardsmen's legs from under them. Contorted spines embedded in men's thighs as the flying tyranids flailed in their death throes.

Those monstrosities still aloft vomited lurid gobs of bio-plasma. Catmos saw one spatter a grey-haired

Guardsman. Clinging green fire ignited his flak-armour, his hair. Snarling with agony and hatred, the man kept firing, bringing down the alien who killed him. The merciful ignition of his lasgun's powerpack freed him from his torment, an instant before Catmos's finger tightened on his laspistol trigger.

The twisted gate screeched. Massive russet claws slid through the foaming black acid. Barbs dug deep as whatever was outside pulled harder, inexorably widening the gap. Ceramite began to rupture.

'With me!'

Commissar Thirzat charged out of the central tower, flak-armour over his tunic, his plasma pistol in one hand, a power sword in the other. Cadets followed carrying flakboard. Others hauled rockcrete beams. Rallying to Lieutenant Jephthad, the Guardsmen in the compound began forcing a path to the entrance, despatching wounded tyranids fallen from the sky, stamping on ravenous borer beetles scuttling round their boots. Mortar crews dragged their weapons aside, sacrificing range and aim. Undeterred, they resumed firing blindly.

Catmos and every soldier on the tower's platforms concentrated their fire on the scything tyranids still scrambling over the wall. Up on the ramparts, men fought and bled. If those vermin attacked the Guardsmen and cadets, their attempt to reinforce the entrance was doomed.

Guardsmen and cadets formed a solid wedge, Thirzat at its tip. Step by dogged step, the commissar led them forwards. Catmos could see the shimmer of heat from weapons rising above the cadets in the centre, still grimly dragging forwards materials to repair the breach. Lieutenant Jephthad was walking backwards, resolute in command of the rear.

Too late. With a mighty heave, those monstrous claws ripped the left-hand gate in half. Unlike the creatures scuttling over the compound paving, this creature stood upright: a repellent parody of a man with its fingered hands clutching a weapon-symbiote. It was twice the size of the tallest Alba Marmorean, even standing on its bent legs. Its massive carapace and the chitinous plates jutting from its head were the putrid brown of rotten fruit. Its uppermost pallid limbs bore massive talons brandished high above its broad shoulders.

Catmos recalled an *Officio Medicae* briefing, longer ago than he could guess. This was a tyranid warrior. One of the most deadly creatures the Hive Mind spawned, dominating lesser progeny and driving them to do its will.

Smaller tyranids were fighting to get through the gap behind it. Scurrying across the compound paving, they reared up on mid- and hind-claws, forelimbs clutching fleshborers and devourers.

For an instant that seemed half a lifetime, the tyranid warrior surveyed the carnage. As the closest Guardsman levelled his lasgun, a new horror sprang out from behind it, so fast Catmos took a moment to realise what had happened.

This was a different monster, more slightly built with twice-jointed uppermost limbs studded with fang-like claws to pierce and crush. It wasn't using those, flinging out its clawed hand instead. For an instant, Catmos allowed himself to hope. It had no hope of reaching the Guardsman. Then he saw that didn't matter. Bony hooks shot out from the tyranid's skeletal flanks, embedding in the Guardsman's arms and face. The creature raised its clawed limbs again. Sinews linking the

hooks to its narrow body contracted. Despite his frantic struggles, the hapless Guardsman was drawn into the tyranid's grotesque embrace.

The hooks were already tearing him to pieces. Dripping tentacles hanging from the alien's maw caressed his head. Their tips slithered into his ears, his mouth. As the man writhed, the creature's grip tightened. Now the tendrils thrust into his eyes, his nostrils. Blood and mucus gushed as spasms wracked the dying man.

The vile tyranid shivered with obscene satisfaction, throwing its victim aside. Its gory tentacles gently licked each other clean of brain tissue. Jaundiced gold, its luminous eyes fastened on a new target. Another abrupt gesture flung its flesh hooks to snare the soldier.

Commissar Thirzat was charging towards it. His power sword cut through the sinews. A plasma pistol shot took it straight in the face and its seared tentacles shrivelled. The monster staggered backwards to collapse in a thrashing heap.

The massive tyranid warrior rounded on Thirzat with a roar, as soldiers, mortar crews and medicae were all turning their lasguns on the tyranids in the compound. The alien vermin shrieked and died as their armoured exoskeletons fractured under ceaseless las-fire. The heavy bolters on the ramparts were still mowing down the swarms attacking the outside of the walls.

No one could help Commissar Thirzat fighting the tyranid warrior. His plasma shots targeted its mouth, its eyes, the underside of its joints every time it swiped with a murderous claw. His power sword cut deep in its forelimbs as he ducked and weaved. Catmos hadn't ever seen a fighting man so quick on his feet.

With an ear-piercing shriek of fury, the monstrosity took an unexpected step back. The lesser tyranids behind

it wavered. The warrior slipped on some fallen flyer's wing membrane, giving Thirzat the chance to break away. Jephthad and the rearguard fired a concentrated volley at it. Ichor glistening on its carapace, the massive creature retreated, lashing out indiscriminately at the milling cohorts outside the gate. As it vanished, the assault slackened, not much but just enough.

'Secure that breach!' Thirzat bellowed, near-breathless.

The cadets were already busy with their flakboard and rockcrete as Jephthad's men blasted the lesser spawn to bloody ruin. While the rest of the Guardsmen killed those tyranids trapped inside, Catmos assessed the most grievously wounded. A cut to the thigh, bright with arterial blood. He pressed a suction-dressing down hard. A hand half-cut, half-torn from its wrist. A styptic-bandage and some tranquillium and that could wait. A grey-faced Guardsman with bloody froth on his bluish lips. Priority Red: his first patient. Etrick and Tind were responsible for the wounded who could be returned to the battle. Catmos fought to save the worst injured for medevac.

Hurrying down to the basement, he found Mathein and the other two orderlies had shifted the recovering wounded to sit on rolled sleepsacs, leaning against the walls. On the mattresses, sensor blankets gleamed with fresh counterseptic, telltales blinking in readiness. Thermosealed trays of servoclamps and electroscalpels were stacked high. Etrick and Tind were ready at their operating tables and the blood recycler hummed. The resuscitrex diodes indicated it was fully charged.

'Let's get to work,' Catmos said grimly.

From IRON INFERNO by C. L. Werner

THE BROWN SKIES of Izanagi smouldered into complete blackness with the onset of night. Neither moon nor star could penetrate the dust-filled murk of the atmosphere.

Kaptain Grimruk Badtoof pressed the magnoculars against his face, the human-built instrument looking like a tiny toy in the ork's immense hand. Grimruk scrunched his scarred face into a scowl and squinted through one of the lenses of the magnoculars. A thick finger pawed awkwardly at the modulator controls set into the side of the instrument. Guttural snarls rumbled through the ork's fanged mouth as he thumbed past the setting he wanted. It was with difficulty that he resisted the urge to dash the magnoculars to the ground and stomp them beneath his steel-shod boots.

Finally, the ork kaptain found the setting he wanted. The black world around him leapt into vibrant hues of green as the night-vision mechanisms became active. Grimruk always thought it was an appropriate thing, the way the human device made things green. It was almost as if the humans who made them had understood that the night belonged to the orks.

A low, bestial grunt trespassed into Grimruk's thoughts, asking him what he saw.

Grimruk didn't look to see which of his warriors had asked the question. With his free hand he simply struck out and swatted the speaker. There was a satisfying crunch of gristle and a truculent yelp of pain. The question wasn't repeated. He'd given his mob strict orders to keep their gobs shut. The last thing he needed was for one of them getting gabby and giving the humans warning.

Grimruk stared through the magnoculars, passing them across the bristling defences of the human position. He studied the lines of wire, the fortified bunkers and complex trench works. The ork grunted in appreciation as he passed his gaze over the artillery pieces poking out from the structure on top of the mesa. Those were some big guns, the kind of thing the mekboyz could really put to good use.

The ork's leathery features twisted in a brutish smile as he watched the figures of sentries moving through the wire. Grimruk paid careful attention to where they stepped, what they touched and what they didn't. When he wanted to, the ork could remember things with photographic detail. It was one of the benefits of having half his skull replaced by a painboy's experiment.

The kaptain watched the soldiers make their way back into the trenches, then followed them until they disappeared into one of the bunkers. With a satisfied grunt, Grimruk lowered the magnoculars, shoving them into the scrawny arms of Wizgrot. The thin, emaciated creature was much smaller than the hulking ork, though it shared the same leathery green hide. Where the ork's bulk was suggestive of awesome brute strength, that of Wizgrot was lean and sneaky.

The gretchin orderly took Grimruk's magnoculars and replaced them into the steel case he carried. Grimruk scowled at Wizgrot. Shivering, the gretchin sketched a salute and snapped his heels together. Grimruk cuffed him anyway, sending the orderly's spiked helm rolling through the dust. Wizgrot scrambled after the helmet, bringing barks of harsh laughter from the orks watching him.

Grimruk rounded on his troops, glaring at them with his good eye. The other, lost along with the better part of

his skull, had been replaced by a crude electrical device, a scanner light that simply bounced from side to side in the pit of his empty eye socket. The rest of the ork's face on that side of his head was simply a mass of rusty steel plates bolted to his skull. Grimruk scratched at the line of scar tissue that marked the join between flesh and metal.

He reached a decision, one that brought a smile of sadistic amusement across his face. Grimruk settled his attention on Gobsnot, one of his lieutenants. Gobsnot was just stupid enough to make a good diversion. The ork kaptain grabbed hold of his underling's tunic, dragging him close so he could grumble new orders into the nob's ear.

Gobsnot turned away from Grimruk. Growling at the mob milling around listening to the exchange, he called out a few comrades. When the detail was mustered, the orks loped off into the darkness in the direction Grimruk had pointed.

Grimruk watched them vanish into the gloom, a cunning light in his eye. He reached to his belt and pulled a tattered mass of fabric and leather from where it had been tucked beneath it. His clumsy hands tugged and teased the worn, tortured material into a crude approximation of shape. Straightening himself to his full height of two and a half metres, the ork kaptain scrunched the battered hat onto his misshapen head. It was ludicrously small, barely covering the top of the brute's scalp. It wasn't the fit that concerned Grimruk, however. It was the message behind the hat. He'd torn it from the body of a boss human in the ruins of Vervunhive, one of the black-clad officers who kept their soldiers in line by shooting the ones that tried to weasel out of a fight. Grimruk smiled as he saw that his own troops understood that same message.

The kaptain studied his warriors, watching the eagerness building up inside them. He needed to squelch that right away. His hand closed about the heft of the immense chainaxe he carried. He thumbed the activation stud, grinning as the steel teeth of the weapon shuddered into life, whirring like lightning as they screeched along the edge of the axe.

Grimruk turned, his long coat whipping about him in the biting Izanagian wind. He didn't look back to see if his troops were following him. They were the best kommandos in the clan, the hardest fighters the Blood Axes could provide. They weren't afraid of anything. They'd follow him into Gork's mouth if he told them to.

Besides, if any of them did try to run out on him, they knew he wouldn't stop looking for them. He had a long memory for a kaptain. It was another side effect of having half his skull replaced by a painboy.

THEY MADE GOOD time even when they did reach the wire. Grimruk placed the credit for that on his foresight. He'd kitted his troops with red boots before setting out on their scouting mission. Even the lowest grot knew red ones were faster than others.

The massive ork kaptain crouched down beside the barbed fencing, his eye watching the terrain around him. He could just faintly see the flickering lights of the bunkers, sometimes the dim gleam of a soldier's lho-stick as he drew smoke into his lungs to fend off the cold of night. The sight gave Grimruk an idea. He snapped his fingers at Wizgrot. The weedy gretchin fumbled about among his many packs and belts until he found what his boss wanted. Grimruk stuffed the thick cigar into the corner of his fanged maw, clamping down on it with his heavy teeth.

Another snap of his fingers and Wizgrot was straining on tiptoe to light the ugly smelling rolls of dried squig-sinew. Grimruk drew a lungful of the filth into his chest and grunted. Now if any of the sentries did spot movement in the wire, they would see the gleam of his cigar and think it was just one of their patrols coming back. The size discrepancy between ork and human was a minor detail the kaptain chose to dismiss.

Besides, Grimruk considered as he took another drag, pretty soon the soldiers would have other things on their minds. The kaptain stared out at the darkness, wondering how far Gobsnot and his boyz had gone. They should be just about into the wire by now. Watching the way the human patrols had avoided that stretch of the perimeter, Grimruk was pretty certain there was something nasty waiting there for Gobsnot.

The deafening boom of explosives thundered through the night. Grimruk's grin broadened. It seemed Gobsnot's boyz had found some mines.

Instantly the trenchworks ahead of the orks burst into activity. Soldiers scrambled along the line, racing to positions closest to the disturbed minefield. The darkness evaporated as heavy floodlamps sparked into life, as the sizzling beams of lasguns slashed through the gloom. The barking chatter of a heavy bolter snarled into action while the dull crump of mortars and light artillery pounded the earth. More mines exploded as Gobsnot's embattled kommandos tried to retreat from the withering fire trained upon them.

Grimruk roared, slashing his chainaxe through the wire. Alarms wailed as the strands of barbed wire snapped beneath the chewing teeth of the axe. The kaptain just grunted in amusement. The humans had already deployed themselves to deal with Gobsnot's

mob. It would take them time to train their guns in his direction. Time the soldiers didn't have.

Grimruk gestured with the churning edge of his axe at the trenchline, snarling at his warriors, inciting the maddened orks, fanning their eagerness for battle into bloodthirsty fury. Almost, the kaptain forgot to impress upon his warriors the strategy behind their mission. They weren't here just to kill things. The warboss wanted intelligence about the human strongpoint, intelligence the kommandos were to bring back to him.

The orks behind Grimruk lifted their weapons in the air, a chatter of boltguns, stubbers and combi-weapons barking into the night. Even the bark of their weapons was almost drowned out by the deep bellowing war cry of their owners.

‘Waaaaaggggh!’

Like rabid beasts, the orks swept past Grimruk, dashing for the human defences. The kaptain saw the closest bunkers turn their weapons on the rushing kommandos. The first bursts of bolter fire were high, aimed at pre-selected targets at the edge of the wire. It took time to correct their aim, to swing the heavy weapons down and rake the oncoming rush of alien killers. By then, dozens of the orks were already pouring into the trenches. Those at the rear were ripped apart by the downturned bolters in the bunkers, their hulking shapes jerking and twisting as the explosive rounds shredded them, but it was too little to save the few soldiers detailed to remain at their posts during the slaughter of Gobsnot's mob.

Grimruk dropped down into the trench just as the heavy bolters began to find their range. A human soldier rushed at him, firing his rifle at the towering ork. Grimruk felt the las-bolt sizzle through his arm, the

wound cauterising instantly behind the searing beam of light. Barely cognisant of the injury, Grimruk seized the soldier by the front of his tunic. The man screamed, trying to smash the ork's face with the plasteel stock of his weapon.

The lasgun smacked uselessly against the steel plates bolted to the ork's skull. Grimruk scowled at the panicked human, turning his head as the soldier tried to hit him again. Annoyed, the kaptain pulled the man into the whirring teeth of his axe. The soldier's body jumped and convulsed as the chainaxe chewed through him. Grimruk let the shredded mess tumble to the ground, then wiped some of the spattered gore from his coat.

Grimruk turned away from the mangled mess of his foe, his eye studying the battle unfolding around him. Wherever his kommandos had entered the trenches, they had seized control of them. The butchered remains of humans were strewn across the earthworks, a few battered survivors fleeing over open ground to reach the protection of their bunkers.

Further away, however, Grimruk could see a different story unfolding. Soldiers were pouring from the higher bunkers, others were racing back from the farther trenches and the fire line they had formed to deal with Gobsnot's mob. The kommandos controlled their section, but the kaptain knew they could not do so for long.

The ork kaptain gestured with his chainaxe at the bunker and roared. He could see a few of the closest orks acknowledge his order. They stopped attacking the escaping soldiers and took off at a lope for the closest bunker. Other orks, noticing the action of their comrades, gave off their own bloodthirsty pursuit and moved to support the bunker attack. The kaptain gave a satisfied

grunt. That was what set his boyz apart from most of the horde. The kommandos understood the need to get a job done even if it meant pulling out of a scrap.

Grimruk snapped his fingers and pointed at the carcass of the soldier he had killed. Wizgrot leaned over the body and tore a ragged strip of cloth from the front of its tunic. The kaptain waited until his orderly stuffed the scrap of cloth into one of the bags the grot carried. Then he lunged at the wall of the trench. The ork's powerful arms had no trouble pulling his bulk up from the pit. Grimruk snapped a command over his shoulder to Wizgrot and hurried to join the rush on the bunker.

Wizgrot cursed and mumbled under his breath as he struggled to climb out of the trench and follow the lead of his kaptain. The short gretchin didn't try too hard, though. The possibility that the fighting would be over by the time he reached the bunker limited the enthusiasm of his efforts.

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