



# ONE

## *The 41st Millennium...*

The eighteen riders made their way along the base of the frozen stream bed, their horses carefully picking their steps through the ice-slick rocky ground. Despite their caution, and the herd of nearly a hundred scaly-skinned grox they were driving through the snow, Gedrik knew they were making good time.

He twisted in the saddle, making sure the herd was still together.

Gedrik was lean and rangy, wrapped tightly in a battered, but well cared-for snow cape with leather riding trousers, padded on the inner thighs, and warm, fur lined boots. His head was protected by a thick colback of toughened leather and furs, his face wrapped in a woollen scarf to keep the worst of the vicious mountain winds at bay.

The green plaid so common on Caernus IV, Gedrik's home planet, was tied loosely across his chest, its frayed ends hanging over the wire-wound hilt of his sword. Hidden in his left boot, he also carried a slender bladed dagger. He had crafted both weapons himself from the Metal six years ago, and they were still as sharp and untarnished as the day he had forged them. Preacher Mallein had taught him how to use the sword, and they were lessons he had learned well; no one in the Four Valleys could fight as well as Gedrik.

To complete his arsenal he carried a simple bolt-action rifle slung across his wide shoulders. Gedrik knew they were almost home and he looked forward to a warm fire and the even warmer embrace of his wife, Maeren.

This last week on the mountains, gathering the herd for the slaughter, had been hard, as though the wind and snow had sought to scour the pitiful humans who dared their wrath from the rocky peaks.

But soon they would be home and Gedrik could almost taste the fine steak Maeren would cook for him once Gohbar had begun slaughtering the herd.

He turned as he heard a muffled curse behind him and grinned as his cousin, Faergus rode alongside him. Though Gedrik knew that 'rode' was a flattering term for Faergus's skill in the saddle.

Gedrik's cousin could only be described as a bear of a man, with huge shoulders and a thick, shapeless neck. His face was battered and lumpen, with a squashed nose broken in countless brawls and a thick, black beard.

His feet dangled almost to the snow and Gedrik could well understand his mount's desire to unseat him. He ignored his cousin's discomfort, content to simply enjoy the majestic beauty of the Gelroch Mountains as they travelled home.

The sun was an hour past its zenith when the snow-wreathed settlement of Morten's Reach came

into view. Nestling in the loop of a sluggish river at the centre of a wide glen, the buildings of the community seemed to huddle together as though for shared warmth. Gedrik could see the inhabitants milling about the town square in front of the small stone-built temple to the Emperor, squatting on the slopes of the Hill of the Metal. Preacher Mallein must have just finished one of his sermons, and Gedrik smiled as he pictured his son, Rouari, telling him all about the winged angels and heroic deeds of the Emperor over supper. Mallein could spin a fine tale, that was for sure!

Smoke drifted from the forge and, on the near side of the village, Gedrik could see Gohbar the slaughterman preparing the iron-walled corral on the river bank for the grox.

Gedrik urged his mount on, fresh energy filling him at the thought of Maeren and a home cooked meal. Only the grox seemed reluctant to pick up the pace, but a few shouted oaths and well-placed blows from Faergus's shock-prod soon sorted that out.

Gedrik allowed his gaze to wander as he caught a flash of movement across the glen. He narrowed his eyes and raised a hand to shield his sight from the low, winter sun. Something had moved behind a thick copse of evergreens at the crest of the opposite rise, he could have sworn it. Automatically, he unslung his rifle and worked the bolt, chambering a bullet.

'Trouble?' asked Faergus, noting Gedrik's actions.

'I'm not sure. I thought I saw something,' said Gedrik, pointing to the dark tree-line.

Faergus squinted across the glen, drawing his own weapon, a stubby barrelled shotgun from its shoulder scabbard.

'I don't see--' began Faergus as a dozen, sleek prowed vehicles emerged from the trees. Wickedly angled with blades and curved barbs, the vehicles swept down the hillside towards the settlement, their open decks swarming with warriors. Black bolts spat from weapons mounted on the foredecks of the skimming craft, exploding with shocking violence amongst the buildings of Morten's Reach.

'Emperor's blood!' cursed Gedrik, raking back his spurs, all thought of the herd forgotten as he pushed his horse to a gallop. Without looking, he knew the rest of his men were behind him. Screams and the dull crack of gunfire echoed from below and hot fear gripped his heart at the thought of these terrible aliens in his home.

Heedless of the danger of such a mad gallop, Gedrik pushed his mount hard over the stony ground. Despite the horse's bouncing rush, he saw the alien vehicles begin to spread out, a group detaching from each flank to encircle the settlement while the remainder speared towards the heart of the township. Gedrik saw his people scatter, running for their homes or the sanctuary of the temple as the first skimmers blasted their way into the village, reducing building after building to rubble.

Closer now, the horse careering up to the outskirts of the village, he saw a woman clutching a child – Maeren and Rouari? – dash inside the church as Preacher Mallein was cut down by a flurry of lethal splinters fired from alien rifles. Whooping warriors in close-fitting armour of black and red somersaulted from the decks of their vehicles and sprinted through the township, firing long barrelled guns from the hip.

He shouted in horror as he saw the villagers gunned down where they stood, women and children running towards the church, their bodies jerking in the fusillade. Black smoke boiled skyward as more buildings burned and the screams of the dying cut Gedrik like a knife. Small arms fire blasted from a few windows, felling a number of the alien raiders and he knew the invaders would not take Morten's Reach without a fight.

His wild charge had carried him almost to the river, close enough to see old Gohbar run screaming

towards a group of the alien warriors, a flensing halberd raised above his head. The aliens turned and laughingly despatched the slaughterman with a volley from their deadly rifles before disappearing into the smoke of the village's death throes.

Gedrik willed his horse ever faster as he thundered across the river bridge, beside the generator mill he had helped build with his own hands, and passed the convulsing Gohbar. The man's face was purple and distended, his tongue protruding from his mouth like a swollen black snake. The entire town was in flames, the heat and smoke intolerable.

Gedrik emerged into the settlement's square, stopping his horse violently. Two of the attackers' craft hovered before the temple, the alien warriors dragging screaming townspeople towards them. Their faces were exquisitely cruel and pale; humanoid, yet wholly alien. Gedrik stood forward in the stirrups and aimed his rifle at one of the red armoured invaders, placing its angled helm squarely between his sights.

He squeezed the trigger, punching the warrior from its feet, sending blood jetting from its neck. The others scattered and Gedrik yelled out, hammering his spurs into his mount's flanks. The horse leapt forwards and Gedrik fired twice more, pitching another two aliens to the ground before the rifle jammed.

The aliens turned their weapons on him, but the Emperor was with him and their whickering ammunition flew wide of the mark. Then he was amongst them and swung his rifle in a brutal arc, smashing an enemy's skull to shards. He dropped the gun and drew his sword. He caught a flash of red, before a bolt of dark light blasted his horse from under him.

Kicking his feet free of the stirrups, Gedrik jumped from the dying beast and landed lightly before a knot of the alien warriors and lashed out with his shimmering, broad bladed sword.

The first fell with its guts looping around its ankles and the second died with Gedrik's sword lodged deep in its chest. Their alien armour was no protection against the preternatural sharpness of Gedrik's sword, which cut through it with ease. The third thrust with a smoking blade on the end of its rifle and Gedrik dodged backwards, losing his grip on the sword. The alien advanced slowly, emotionless behind its smooth-faced helm.

Gedrik snarled and dived towards his foe. He rolled beneath the alien's weapon, dragging his dagger from his boot and hammering it through the warrior's calf. The alien fell, shrieking horribly, and Gedrik wrenched the knife free, plunging it repeatedly through the alien's chest.

He saw Faergus following him, blasting two of the aliens to bloody rags with a thunderous blast of his shotgun. Faergus wheeled his horse as Gedrik retrieved his sword and shouted to his cousin.

'Get everyone you can inside the temple. We'll try to hold them from there!'

Faergus nodded, but before he could move, a flaring wash of violet fire blasted from one of the alien vehicles and engulfed him. Faergus screamed as the horrifying energies burned the flesh from his frame in moments. Slowly his charred skeleton toppled from the shrieking horse and Gedrik felt his stomach lurch at his cousin's terrible death. The horse toppled, a bloody gouge burned through the beast's flank where the alien weapon had struck.

Gedrik bounded up the steps of the temple, hammering on the door, shouting out Maeren's name. Splinters were blasted from the building as more aliens converged on the centre of the village, firing wildly towards him. He dived from the steps and rolled to his feet. He saw the surviving inhabitants driven before the aliens to their deaths and, watching it all, a slender, white haired figure in jade green armour atop the lead vehicle.

The figure slashed his huge axe impatiently through the air and Gedrik screamed as his people were shot down where they stood. He wanted to plant his dagger in the alien leader's chest, but knew he would be dead before he got close.

He ducked back, knowing that the people inside the temple could not risk opening the doors now and sprinted around the side, hoping that they had not yet barred the vestry.

Gedrik heard the bark of commands being issued and a deep bass rumble of a powerful weapon. He prayed that someone had managed to send a warning to the nearby communities.

The vestry door was just ahead and he cried in relief as he saw it was still ajar. He skidded to a halt before it and gripped the iron handle.

Before he could pull the door open, the temple exploded, roiling orange flames mushrooming skyward and blasting Gedrik from his feet. Pain like nothing he had ever known engulfed him as the blast smashed him into the hillside behind the building. He flopped like a boneless creature, shocked to his very bones by the impact. His skin burned, patches of his anatomy exposed to the elements by the unnatural flames.

He sensed cool snow upon his body, but could feel no pain.

He knew that was bad. Pain meant life.

He rolled his eyes towards the smoking wreckage of the temple, timber columns poking upwards like blackened ribs. He couldn't make out any bodies, but knew that no one could have survived the explosion and grief swamped him.

Maeren, Rouari, Faergus, Mallein, Gohbar... all gone. Everyone was dead. Even him soon.

His breath rattled in his throat as he heard the low humming of the alien vehicles approaching and he tried to push himself upright, but his limbs would not obey him. Dimly he heard the aliens' sing-song voices, elegant but threatening, and tried to spit a defiant curse. But the voices passed him, climbing the Hill of the Metal. He watched as the green-armoured warrior pointed at the hillside and directed his warriors to spread out. He heard their voices chatter excitedly, but could not understand what they said. Was this the reason his community had been slaughtered?

For the Metal?

He heard the whoosh of flames and the hillside lit up, hissing as the snow flashed to steam. The aliens continued to work the flames of their weapons across the hillside, only stopping when a hooded figure wearing shimmering red robes climbed down from the nearest alien vehicle and raised its hand. The figure stepped forward to examine what had been revealed beneath the snow and a low gasp went up from the aliens as the steam dissipated.

Swirling like quicksilver, the exposed strata sparkled in the sunlight, its entire flank shining with a metallic sheen. Beneath the snow, a whole swathe of the hillside was formed from a smooth, silver metal. It rippled and twisted like a liquid where it had run molten under the heat of the flames, undulating like a living thing. Slowly it began reshaping itself, flowing with swirling currents into a smooth, glass-flat surface until it resembled a gigantic mirror. Gedrik watched as the hooded figure dropped to its knees before the metallic hillside and began chanting in rapture, the words rasping and artificial.

Moments passed before Gedrik realised that the figure's words were familiar to him. He did not truly understand them, but recognised the mantra from times he had spent working in the forge with Faergus.

It was a chant in praise of the Ommissiah. The Machine God.

The robed figure rose to face the aliens' leader and threw back his hood. Gedrik saw that most of the figure's face had been replaced by cybernetic implants. A brass-rimmed vox-unit nestled in the centre of his throat below his stitched lips, crackling with hissing white noise. Ribbed copper wiring curled from beneath his robes and plugged into his empty eye sockets, and meshed discs were sutured over the puckered skin where a normal man's ears would be. His flesh was pallid and grey, but despite all the deforming aspects of the figure's loathsome surgery, Gedrik could see that the man was clearly human, and the horror of such treachery made him want to cry with rage.

Cold agony began seeping into his body and he tried to scream, but unconsciousness swept over him and took the pain away.