

The Joust

By Dirk Wehner

Another drove of Skitarii was smashed apart by a swing of *Queen of Shades*' reaper chainsword. The soldiers of the Machine God came apart in sprays of blood and oily fluids, snuffed out of existence in a bare second. Erelyn Vo Lucaris, the Fallen Noble who sat the Knight Despoiler's corrupted Throne Mechanicum, felt no joy at their deaths. She sensed that *Queen of Shades*' machine spirit knew the same disappointing lack. On the contrary, the Skitarii angered Erelyn with their almost ridiculous paltriness.

How dare they attack us? Do they really believe they can stop us? Even harm us?

With a disgusted scream echoed by *Queen of Shades*' war horn, she raised the Knight's foot and smashed it down onto the insectile creatures. Erelyn sneered at their deaths.

Barely worth our attention.

Queen of Shades' heavy stubbers added to the carnage, punching smoking holes into armoured and augmented bodies. The corrupted machine seemed to agree with Erelyn, as did the cursed and screaming ghosts of her predecessors who howled through the neural linkage she shared with her Throne.

Not worth the kill. Not worth our attention. This is nought but butchery. There is no honour in this.

Another mechanical snarl rumbled from *Queen of Shades*' vox horn as the Knight's thunderstrike gauntlet came crashing down. The Knight clubbed a crab-like walking tank into the ground, then scooped up its burning wreckage and hurled it into the Skitarii ranks. More of the Omnissiah's warriors gathered close to *Queen of Shades*, peppering the Knight Despoiler with energy blasts.

They were barely scratching the heraldry of House Lucaris, yet even that small insult could not go unanswered.

Erelyn turned, looming over them like an ancient death god in her Knight armour.

'The deaths I grant you are more than such vermin deserve,' she growled, but she knew that she would slay them nonetheless.

Again, the reaper chainsword sang its terrible song of death, each torn Skitarii a single note in the gruesome symphony. Erelyn brought her thunderstrike gauntlet down and grabbed two of the red-robed warriors, lifting them from the ground. Maybe if she could look them directly in their eyes, maybe if she could smell their fear... slowly she lifted the struggling pair of Skitarii closer to the rudimentary sensory pits that had grown amidst the biomechanical mass of *Queen of Shades*' faceplate. Oily froth bubbled from the Knight's grille as the pressure of the armoured fist slowly increased.

Yes...

'Halt!'

The clear, vox-amplified voice cut through the clamour of the war that raged furiously all around. Erelyn's head jerked around, servos whining and engine-clusters thrumming as *Queen of Shades*





sought to emulate its mistress' motion. Fallen Noble and knightly steed growled as one.

'Yes, heretic. You and that degenerate ogre you pilot. Here in the Emperor's sight do I issue formal challenge.'

This loyalist Knight was Paladin pattern, reaper chainsword idling on one arm, repeater battlecannon jutting from the other, heavy stubbers tracking with predatory hunger. It was clad in the panoply of House Terryn.

How Erelyn hated House Terryn!

She made a point of slowly crushing the two struggling Skitarii in her Knight's fist without averting her eyes from the newcomer. Then she carelessly tossed them away and swung *Queen of Shades* around to face the newcomer with several ground-shaking steps.

In the crimson light of her Knight Despoiler's flesh-and-metal cockpit, Erelyn's lips parted into a spiteful smile. 'Finally,' she muttered. 'An opponent that may prove worthy of my time.'

The Terryn Knight brandished its reaper chainsword in a formal salute, cutting-teeth revving, smoke snorting from the weapon's exhausts.

'Know the name of your demise, foul abomination,' boomed the loyalist through his vox horn. 'I am Sir Reginaris Castephere Terryn of House Terryn, piloting the Paladin *Celebriter*. Your death by my blade shall be swift and your...'

How he drones on of honour and piety, Erelyn thought with a spasm of disgust. How false are the notions to which he cleaves. How blinkered. How self-satisfied and limited and stagnant.

Had she ever been such a dull and blinkered

creature, Erelyn wondered? Sir Reginaris' voice, like the rest of the battle, faded away in her mind, displaced by an angry static roar. All she felt was rage. All she saw was the foe in his clean and noble armour with its infantile heraldry. This fool was blind to the horror of the burning galaxy in which he lived his stilted life. He did not see the majesty and horror of the Dark Gods, the inevitable end to which all things must come.

He does not see it, but it sees him...

'Enough,' Erelyn roared. She drove mental goads into her Knight's feral machine spirit and *Queen of Shades* gave a thunderous, inhuman roar as it charged. The ground shook under the corrupted engine's feet as *Queen of Shades* lifted its whirring chainsword high.

Exhaust fumes coughed from *Celebriter's* engine stacks as its pilot drove it forward to meet the Knight Despoiler's charge. The loyalist machine's pace was more measured, its chainsword held ready to parry a wild swing.

Erelyn expected the Terryn Knight to fire upon her as she closed the distance, but its pilot held back.

A gesture of honour, she thought incredulously.

With an angry howl, Erelyn brought *Queen of Shades'* chainsword around in a wide swing as the two Knights met with a thunderous crash. She aimed for *Celebriter's* head, but her wrathfully buzzing weapon was stopped in its tracks as it met the churning teeth of her foe's blade. White-hot sparks flew as industrial cutting teeth slammed and ground together then tore apart. *Celebriter* stepped deftly past *Queen of Shades*, massive feet pounding the ground, whirling blade-teeth ripping a glowing line across the Knight Despoiler's chestplate as the Knights parted.

Both war machines took a few steps, carried onwards by their own momentum, before they turned to face each other again.

'Well met, traitor,' came Reginald's confident voice from *Celebriter's* vox horn, 'but not nearly well enough.'

Erelyn breathed heavily as her own anger melded with the rage of the ghosts in her Throne and the burning hatred of *Queen of Shades'* machine spirit. She felt the furious desire of her engine to retaliate for the inflicted wound. The battle was still raging around the Knights, but she was only dimly aware of it.

'Kill,' she panted as sweat dripped down her face. 'Kill. Kill. Kill!' Again *Queen of Shades* leapt forward, eager to destroy.

Celebriter surged towards *Queen of Shades* again. The ground shook as the two engines of war closed in on each other. With a yell, Erelyn compelled *Queen of Shades* to unleash a hail of stubber fire against her enemy. She knew they wouldn't harm the other Knight, but the sheer act of violence sated her desire to inflict pain.



Celebriter's ion shield flickered as it intercepted the shots. The Knight Paladin did not slow down, ready for the next clash. The loyalist's bravery felt like an insult to Erelyn, the clean noble colours of House Terryn hideous and mocking to her eyes.

Queen of Shades leant into the charge with protesting engines, belching black smoke from its exhausts as balance warnings shrilled through Erelyn's cockpit. With the force of an ironclad avalanche, the Chaos Knight crashed into its loyal counterpart, ramming it headlong. Erelyn landed a crushing blow with her thunderstrike gauntlet, ripping armour plates from *Celebriter's* shoulder. She tried to push her screaming chainsword into her opponent's metal guts, but Sir Reginaris deflected the thrust with his own blade. The teeth of the enormous chainswords raised a din like a collapsing manufactory as they met for a second time. For a brief moment, the two Knights measured their strength, but neither could gain the upper hand.

With a frustrated curse, Erelyn broke loose. Servomotors howled like wounded animals as she drove *Queen of Shades* to disengage, fighting the feral war engine's belligerent machine spirit as she forced it to obey her will. The Knights parted again and brought some distance between themselves before pounding around to face each other a third time.

'We are equally skilled, it seems,' announced Sir Reginaris. 'I must begrudgingly admit so. But I shall win and you shall fall, because the Emperor is with me. The Emperor protects.'

Erelyn's response was a feral scream that seemed to burst from her own throat and the vox-horn of her Knight as a single, bestial sound.

For the third time, *Queen of Shades* pounded wreckage and corpses flat as Erelyn urged her war machine forwards. She felt hatred rising in her throat like bile as the Imperial Knight filled her vision. It was all she could see, all she could think of; she wanted him dead and his machine defiled and destroyed. Her cold heart beat faster, throbbing with the fell rhythm of her Knight's thundering reactor.

'Kill!' she shouted. *Kill*, screamed the ghosts of her throne. *Queen of Shades'* rising roar seemed to echo the word as the corrupted machine tore towards the hated foe.

Celebriter's pilot seemed to sense that this would be their last exchange as he pushed his armoured steed into a loping charge of its own. The flames of the surrounding battlefield rose higher as the distance between the Knights melted away. Erelyn's wrath manifested as a blackened halo around her machine, a crackling perversion of its ion field that boiled across her vision like madness made manifest.

Now comes the kill! Now comes the kill!

She didn't know if the thought was hers, or if it were the bloodthirsty urging of her Throne's ghosts.

Or is it Queen of Shades herself, she wondered in the instant before the two towering war engines collided for the final time.

As the Knights crashed into each other, Erelyn swung her thunderstrike gauntlet in a wild roundhouse blow. Sir Reginaris met the ferocious strike with a deft turn of his reaper chainsword. Sparks fell like rain. Tortured metal parted and *Queen of Shades'* thunderstrike gauntlet came away at the elbow. It fell like a clumsy meteor to slam down fifty yards from the duelling war engines. Reginaris didn't stop there, carrying his blow onwards, inwards, tilting the weapon to its maximum extension and scything its cutting teeth into *Queen of Shades'* flank. The reaper chainsword bit deep. Erelyn screamed with sympathetic agony as armour, cabling, pipes and machinery disintegrated into a fiery blizzard of wreckage that felt to the Fallen Noble as though it was pouring out of her own ruptured gut.

The loyalist's cry of triumph boomed from his Knight's vox-horn, but it was cut off a bare instant later. Erelyn's strike had been wild, but not

miscalculated. Even as *Celebriter's* blade was carving into *Queen of Shades*, so the Knight Despoiler's own chainsword came up, point first, and was rammed with psychotic strength straight through the loyalist engine's chestplate.

'If your Emperor protects...' Erelyn gasped as blood drizzled from her mouth and smoke filled her cockpit, '...where is he now?'

Erelyn's laughter became manic as she plunged her chainsword deeper and deeper, her enemy's weapon ripping further into her Knight's innermost workings until its teeth chewed through the wall of her cockpit and peppered her with fire and shrapnel. The pain was indescribable, a red howl of agony that caused Erelyn's vision to turn grey at the edges.

Queen of Shades was dying.

She was dying.

It didn't matter. Servo-motors screamed and exhaust fumes billowed as Sir Reginaris desperately attempted to rip his blade free of his enemy's body, but it was caught fast. Inexorably, *Queen of Shades'* reaper chainsword sawed ever deeper as the sagging engine's entire weight fell upon it. Sparks and tongues of flame filled the air as *Queen of Shades* bisected *Celebriter* in its death throes.

As the enormous weapon finally reached the enthroned Noble inside *Celebriter*, his brief scream was cut off with a sound like a grox being shoved into an industrial fan. His Knight shuddered then slumped, settling dark and lifeless upon its motive actuators.

Erelyn smiled dimly as she exhaled her last breath and succumbed to the darkness.

Victory was hers.

