

Demon Hunter

R J Burgess

By the time Father Asakite set down on the tiny moon of Arianas, the human settlement was already doomed.

He arrived just minutes after the first distress call went out to find half the buildings ablaze, the others rapidly emptying as their owners spilled out into the morning air, only to be cut down in seconds. Angry fire leapt from home to home. Buildings belched smoke through cavities in their walls. The air filled with screams.

Towering over it all, the giant demon raised its tentacles and let loose a roar that shook the forest to its roots.

From his vantage point at the top of the ravine, Father Asakite waved the sign of the cross over his chest. "Father God protect me now..."

In forty years of demon hunting, he had never seen a monster so big as this one. His instruments told him it was 30 metres from end to end and weighed over 400 tonnes, but numbers alone paled in comparison to seeing the thing in the flesh.

A blob, that was the only way to describe the monster rampaging now across the valley floor. A shapeless blob of atrophied flesh pulsating to the beat of ten thousand purloined hearts. It looked like nothing in nature, like a toddler's doodle of what a monster might look like.

It stank too.

Over here, something resembling animal tusks slid in and out the creature's hide leaving trails of fetid slime in their wake. Over there, what looked like thousands of batwings fluttered at the air like pieces of confetti in a breeze. Muscles and cartilage bunched and flexed almost at random beneath its patchwork skin. Some parts of the monster were covered in hair, others were scaled like a lizard. It had tentacles now instead of limbs and a pulsating hole in the side of its body which it used in place of a mouth.

To see and hear it relied solely on touch - a network of hair-like mycelium which it trailed over the ground before it like a series of fungal roots.

Any real animal shaped like this would have collapsed in on itself long ago, crushed to death by the sheer nonsensical physics of its design.

But this was a demon. Physical laws didn't apply.

The old priest regarded the valley below. The settlement was located at the heart of a small crescent-shaped valley perhaps one kilometre in diameter. At the valley's mouth was a fresh water lake. The higher ground was ringed with trees. The wind was against him.

They were perfect hunting conditions.

As he watched, a handful of settlers tried to make a last ditch stand against the beast. They came at it as the foolish

always did, with guns and mortars and things that exploded. The air cracked with the sounds of gun fire. The demon roared as the shots peppered its side.

The demon reeled back, tentacles thrashing. Quick as a sneeze - much quicker than it seemed such a huge monster should be able - the demon shot forth a fresh set of hair-like tendrils from its mouth. Like a spider trapping its prey in a web, it quickly pinned the would-be-soldiers down, binding them one by one before reeling them in to its gaping mouth. The soldiers struggled - some even managed to fire off a few shots before their nervous systems gave over to the monster's will entirely - but it was as futile as fighting a forest fire with a bucket of piss. They all succumbed in time.

Less than ten seconds later, the last of the human resistance was gone. Those soldiers would be stripped down now - skin and bone and muscles all broken down into their constituent parts before being grafted onto the demon, nothing more than fresh elements in a vast Frankenstein's monster.

There was nothing Father Asakite could do to save them.

"Father God bless their souls," he whispered. "Lend strength to my righteous cause as I avenge their deaths today. Let your word be my sword and my faith be my shield. I will send this demon back to the fires of hell from whence it came. Amen."

Like all exorcists, Father Asakite travelled light. Black cowl designed to blend in with his surroundings, a pocket sized

bible clad in silver and a set of Rosary beads tucked into a pouch around his waist. On one hip he carried a small pistol. On the other he carried three molecular destabilizer pylons primed to lay down an electrostatic field at a moment's notice. The detonator itself was located over his belt for ease of access.

They were tools of the trade for any demon hunter. Of all the priests in the Vatican, Father Asakite had used his more than anyone.

The first of the destabilizer pylons he planted in the ground right in front of him. The pylon itself was a metallic rod measuring 30cm end to end with a section on the top that swivelled. On its own the thing was useless, but coupled with its brothers it was the only way to bring down a monster this size.

He moved quickly, following the tree-line as it arched around the ravine. He kept his feet soft and his body low. Through constant prayer, he kept his emotions in check.

The second pylon he placed several hundred meters away from the first on the far side of the ravine. It was important to lay the field down wide enough to catch the monster as close to its centre as possible but not too wide as to render the field harmless.

He had just finished spying out the perfect spot for the final pylon when there was a sudden rustling from the bushes beside him.

Father Asakite whirled round pistol in hand only to find himself face to face with a small boy with straight black hair and Asian features. There was blood on his face and a nasty bruise along his left forearm. He was terrified.

The boy blinked at Father Asakite dumbly. His mouth gaped open.

"Hello," said Father Asakite, lowering his gun.

"Uh," said the boy. He blinked a bit more. "Th-there..." He jabbed a finger at the ravine behind him. "There's a..."

"A demon," finished Father Asakite.

"A monster!"

"I know. I'm a priest."

"It killed everyone!"

"Calm yourself." He pulled the boy away from the ravine and sat him down on a nearby log. They were unlikely to be heard over the cacophony in the valley below but it was always best to be careful when demons were around. Nothing drew them quicker than strong emotions, and fear was one of their favourites. "Close your eyes," he commanded. "Count to ten. You know the Lord's prayer?"

The boy nodded.

"Say it to me."

He turned to see if the demon had heard them.

It hadn't, but annoyingly it was on the move again. As Father Asakite watched, bunches of muscle bulged from the

creature's side as it wrestled against the air. After a moment it managed to shift one of the tentacles near its base and the blob-like mass lurched forwards a metre. It halted, wobbling as it struggled to repeat the action.

Once more it pushed itself forwards, half sliding, half rolling as it ground its way slug-like across the valley floor. It moved sightlessly, heedless of the buildings it demolished in its wake or the fires burning against its side. Father Asakite estimated he had perhaps one hour until it was out of range of for good. He had to move quick.

"You're one of 'em ain't you?" The boy declared suddenly. The worst of his terror was fading now. Prayer tended to have that effect. "You're one o' them Exercisers."

"Exorcists."

"Mum always said you was made up."

"Be grateful your mother was wrong."

The boy looked sad. "Me mum's dead."

"Oh."

"She were alive when the ceiling came down," he added as though that made any difference to the story. "Only her legs got stuck, didn't they? And little Sam, that's my brother, he got killed. Least I think he did. There were lots of blood anyway. And then she were yelling at me, 'Run away. Get help'. So I runned away and the building collapsed behind me and so then I kept on running and now here I am."

Asakite said nothing. By the sounds of things the boy's mother had died a far cleaner death than most.

"Are you gonna kill that thing?" the boy asked.

"Yes."

"How?"

"By being quiet."