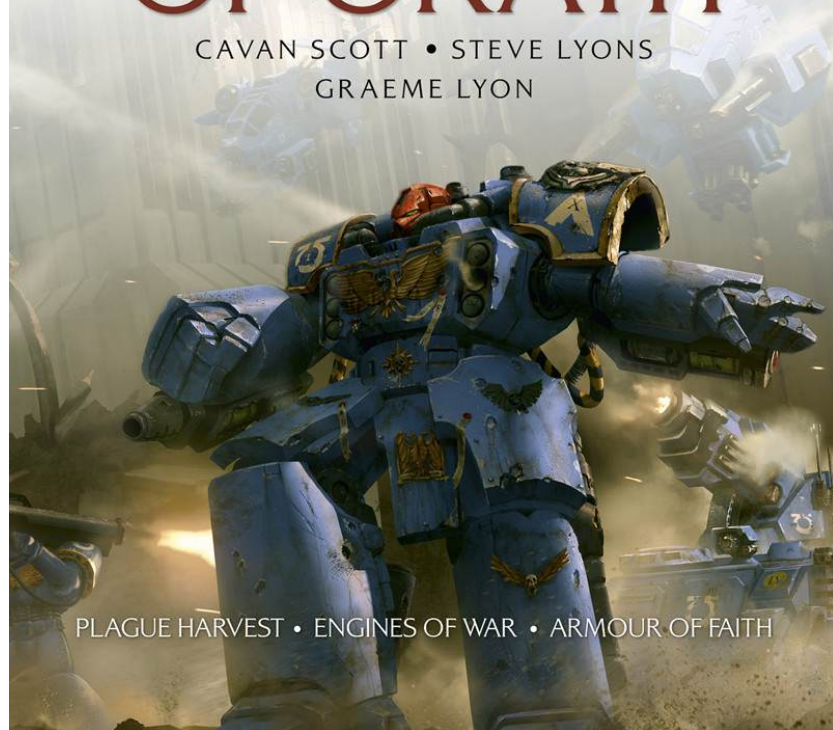




# THE PLAGUES OF ORATH

CAVAN SCOTT • STEVE LYONS  
GRAEME LYON



PLAGUE HARVEST • ENGINES OF WAR • ARMOUR OF FAITH



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# THE PLAGUES OF ORATH



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### Warhammer 40,000

It is the 41st millennium. For more than a hundred centuries the Emperor has sat immobile on the Golden Throne of Earth. He is the master of mankind by the will of the gods, and master of a million worlds by the might of his inexhaustible armies. He is a rotting carcass writhing invisibly with power from the Dark Age of Technology. He is the Carrion Lord of the Imperium for whom a thousand souls are sacrificed every day, so that he may never truly die.

Yet even in his deathless state, the Emperor continues his eternal vigilance. Mighty battlefleets cross the daemon-infested miasma of the warp, the only route between distant stars, their way lit by the Astronomican, the psychic manifestation of the Emperor's will. Vast armies give battle in his name on uncounted worlds. Greatest amongst His soldiers are the Adeptus Astartes, the Space Marines, bio-engineered super-warriors. Their comrades in arms are legion: the Astra Militarum and countless planetary defence forces, the ever-vigilant Inquisition and the tech-priests of the Adeptus Mechanicus to name only a few. But for all their multitudes, they are barely enough to hold off the ever-present threat from aliens, heretics, mutants - and worse.

To be a man in such times is to be one amongst untold billions. It is to live in the cruellest and most bloody regime imaginable. These are the tales of those times. Forget the power of technology and science, for so much has been forgotten, never to be re-learned. Forget the promise of progress and understanding, for in the grim dark future there is only war. There is no peace amongst the stars, only an eternity of carnage and slaughter, and the laughter of thirsting gods.

# PLAGUE HARVEST

CAVAN SCOTT





## One

Surely it couldn't be morning already?

Roj Ithell groaned, rubbing his eyes roughly with the palm of his hand.

'What time is it?' he slurred, rolling over, noticing the shallow imprint in the mattress where Katrina should have been. He ran a hand over the sheet. Cold. She must have been up for a while.

Roj pulled himself up, wincing as his feet made contact with the cold floorboards. He yawned, trying to focus on the aquila mounted on the wall beside the bed, running through his morning devotions with little enthusiasm. The farmhouse seemed so quiet.

He trudged out of the bedroom, stopping at the doorway to Anya's room. Kat was sleeping in the girl's cot, holding their daughter close. What a night. The Physician had warned them that Anya's fever might get worse before she got better. Surely it shouldn't take this long?

At least Kat was getting some sleep at last. She had borne the brunt of it in the night, sending him back to bed. He protested, but she wouldn't hear of it.

'You've got to be up with the dawn,' she'd insisted. 'You need to sleep.'

He couldn't ask for a better wife.

Which was more than could be said about his brother-in-law.

'You want to meet me when?' he'd spluttered when Mattias had dropped the bombshell the night before.

'You need to see it for yourself, Roj,' came the reply. 'If we're going to meet the quotas...'

'Fine, fine.' Roj had thrown his hands into the air, surrendering. Even when they were at school, Roj knew better than to argue with Mattias once he had an idea lodged in that stubborn head of his. 'I'll be there.'

'First light?'

'First light, by the central water tower,' Roj had agreed, a smile breaking out across his bearded face. 'Sometimes I wonder who's in charge of this plantation. You or me.'

'Definitely me,' Mattias joked, satisfied with the outcome. 'Now go and look after my niece. Kat will be dead on her feet.'

'Your sister is as strong as a grox,' Roj insisted, waving his overseer away. 'She'll outlive us all.'

It certainly felt that way this morning. Roj was struggling to identify a part of his body that wasn't aching.

Roj pulled on a shirt, swearing as the material snagged on his artificial arm. The pistons squealed as he struggled to pull it free, ripping a hole in the fabric. Roj threw it to the side, reaching for another. Six years after the threshing accident and his mechanical limb still infuriated him.

'Looks ugly as hell,' Mattias had said when he had first set eyes on the metal pincers that bore little resemblance to the fingers they were replacing, 'but guess it will do the job. Just like the rest of you.'

Funny, Matt. Real funny.

Managing to struggle into the rest of his clothes without further damage, Roj crept down the stairs, wincing as they creaked beneath his feet.

A door opened in the hallway below, light streaming across the tiled floor. A head poked out, lined face creasing as it spotted him making his way down.

'Mr Ithell,' the old woman said, pulling her robe tighter around her neck, 'you're up early.'

'Things to do, Ezmey, don't you worry.'

'I thought it might be...'

Roj raised his hand, cutting off the housekeeper's concern.

'Anya is sleeping. Mrs Ithell is with her.'

The old woman nodded.

'You'll need some breakfast before heading out. Did you hear the storm last night?'

She headed towards the stairs that led down into the kitchen, no doubt already concocting the perfect breakfast menu in her head. Roj glanced at the antique grandfather-chrono that stood in the hallway.

'No time, I'm afraid, Ezmey.' The housekeeper looked as if she was about to argue. 'Need to get going. I'll eat when I get back.'

Ezmey tutted. 'Very well. I'll make up some oats. You've liked those since you were a boy.' Roj smiled at the memory, but the expression soon faded when the woman started coughing.

'That's a nasty hack, Ezmey. You need to take it easy. We can't have you getting sick too.'

Ezmey dismissed the thought with a snort. 'It'll take more than a cough to lay me out, don't you worry.'

Outside, the air was fresher than he'd expected. Roj shivered as he closed the farmhouse door softly, his stump throbbing steadily against his implants. More rain today then. His missing limb was more reliable than any weather station - and had throbbed more often than not in recent days.

Roj trudged over to the shed, his booted feet splashing through puddles. He'd never known a season like it. The wettest in living history, Pa Serlon

had said, staring up at the grey sky. He could believe it. Throne knew what the crops would look like. Mattias was right to make an inspection. They had to be ready for the worst.

The door to the shed squealed as he yanked it open, the sudden noise startling the akanu in its stall.

'Yes, yes. I know,' he snapped at the large, flightless bird that squawked harshly in the enclosed space of the shed. 'No one likes being up this early, but keep it quiet. You'll wake the entire farm.'

The akanu continued to complain, kicking at its hay with large four-toed feet, but settled as Roj attached the harness and led the bird to the cart on the other side of the courtyard. Anya was wary of the akanu they used on the plantation, even though she had been around them all her life. It wasn't hard to see why. The blue-feathered bird towered over Roj, let alone a child. Kat had suggested he use a transporter to get around the estate, but Roj had stuck with the akanu-drawn cart. If they had been good enough for dad, they were good enough for him. Besides, grain was much cheaper than fuel - and they didn't break down half as much, either. 'That's it, girl,' he soothed, connecting the bird to the sturdy four-wheeled vehicle. 'Nice and easy now.'

The creature pecked at the ground as he clambered on board the cart, but soon looked up when Roj pulled on the reins.

Roj stretched in his seat as the cart rattled between the gigantic fields, the akanu's feet slapping down on the slick pathway. A drop of ice-cold rain stung his forehead. Great. That was all he needed. Perhaps he should have brought the covered transporter, after all. He'd just wanted to feel the wind in his air, no matter how brisk it was.

He glanced around at the sorghum growing in the fields; a sea of deep green leaves. Maybe Mattias was being overcautious. The crop looked strong enough from up here, surprisingly so. Those new gen-engineered seeds had been worth the investment. His dad wouldn't have approved. He was old school, believing that all you needed was strong soil and good husbandry. A little helping hand didn't hurt though. Orath supplied grain for most of the subsector. Why not make the most of the planet's natural resources? An akanu or two were one thing, but when it came to production, Roj was determined to drag the plantation into the here and now. Sorghum 184 was the future.

The water tower came into view as Roj steered the cart around the chemical store. Not far now, then back home for Ezmey's breakfast. Roj was finally feeling hungry - although his stomach churned at the sight of the fortress on the horizon. Even though it was thirty or so kilometres away, the damned place dominated the skyline and still made him feel uneasy, even after all this time.

Why wouldn't it? Space Marines on their doorstep, their ominous presence felt, even though the Angels of Death themselves were hardly ever seen.

Before she had fallen ill, Anya had quizzed him about their presence.

'Why are they on Orath, Daddy? Is there a war coming?'

Roj had shushed his daughter, stroking her long blonde hair. 'Don't be silly, love. This is a peaceful planet.'

'Mr Bridgeman said that there's no such thing.'

'Dain Bridgeman says a lot of things - which is why most of us ignore him.'

But Roj wished he could explain why the Space Marines were here, if only to put Anya's mind at rest. The truth was that he'd asked his own father the same question, and had received much the same answer. No one knew why the Space Marines had chosen to build their bases on Orath all those years ago. They'd been here for generations. That was just the way of things.

'Better to accept they're here and move on,' his dad had said. 'Let them live their lives and get on with your own.'

It made sense. What was the worst they did, after all? Occasionally shatter the peace of the fields, flying overhead in their gunships. Dad always used to say that garrisons were reminders of how lucky they were to live on a world free from war. Perhaps he'd been right.

'Whoa there.'

Roj pulled on the rein, slowing the akanu as they approached the water tower. The bird hissed, as bad-tempered as ever, but obediently came to a halt beside Mattias's own transport. No akanu for his brother-in-law. Matt hated the birds, preferring to thunder around the plantation in a six-wheeler. Said he liked being high up, so he could see the top of the sorghum. Roj suspected he found the akanu a little on the slow side. He was always on the go.

Roj jumped down, tying the akanu to one of the legs of the water tower, his brow creased into a frown as he took in the crop. 'Maybe you were right Matt. That corn doesn't look right at all.'

He made his way over to the edge of the field, his feet squelching through the mud. The stalks were thinner than they should be, off-colour too. Perhaps the rain had taken its toll after all. Roj shivered, but not because of the chill in the air. A thought nagged at the back of his mind. Something was missing; he just couldn't tell what. He turned 360 degrees, taking in the boundary. Everything looked present and correct, the akanu gently squawking to itself behind him.

What was it?

'Matt?' Roj called out, crouching down to examine an ear that had snapped from its stem.

Holding the oversized cob between his legs, he shucked the leaves, expecting to be rewarded with a flash of brilliant yellow kernels. That was another of Sorghum 184's selling points. Larger cobs than any other strain, able to feed twice as many folk than usual. But these seeds weren't

bursting with goodness. They were shrivelled and black. He stood, reaching up to snag another ear. This one looked more promising. The kernels were the right size at least, but when he pressed against them with his finger, they burst like sacks of pus, putrid-smelling gunk oozing out. It was almost as if the corn was rotting where it stood. Any hope of saving the harvest dissipated. If this continued, it could be the worst year in the plantation's history. First there had been the earthquake a month or so ago. Three of the outbuildings were damaged, the roof of the eastern barn completely caving in. If that wasn't enough, sweating fever had broken out among the workers, leaving them short-handed just about everywhere. And now this. What were the odds?

'Mattias, it's me,' he called, assuming his brother-in-law had ventured deeper into the cereal to see the extent of the damage. 'I can see why you wanted me out here. What are we looking at? Fifty per cent loss? Sixty?' Throne help them if it was more than that.

No answer came.

A sudden roar made Roj spin on his heel, almost losing his balance. Two Space Marine aircraft thundered overhead - a heavily-armoured Imperial equivalent of a skimmer and some kind of fighter just below the clouds.

That's when it hit him. There were no birds. Usually a flock of ground-nesting birds would have erupted from the sorghum, disturbed by the noise. Today, as the sound of the thrusters faded into the distance, there was nothing. No whirl of startled wings. No cries of alarm. No birdsong at all.

What had happened to all the birds?

Unnerved, Roj pushed himself into the tall cereal, the cloying stink of wet vegetation filling his nostrils. 'Mattias, where are you? What are you playing at?'

If this was some kind of joke, it wasn't a very funny one.

Someone coughed ahead of him. A weak, grating hack.

'Matt?'

Roj crashed forward and bamboo-like stems snapped as he followed the sound. The crop was full of whining midges, nipping at his skin. He slapped the back of his neck in irritation. Why hadn't the pesticides dealt with the bloody things?

'Matt, are you all right?'

His brother-in-law was far from all right. He was lying face down on the floor, his body heaving.

'Emperor, what's happened?' Roj gasped, dropping to the ground, his knees sinking into soft mud. He leant forward, reaching across with his robotic arm to roll Matt over. 'Are you...'

The words died in his throat. Mattias had looked drained the night before, heavy circles beneath his eyes, but Roj had put it down to fatigue, to the stresses of the last few months, concerns about the crops.

But his brother-in-law's face was now a mass of weeping sores, livid against deathly pale skin. His swollen eyelids were jammed with a thick yellow crust and white froth speckled trembling purple lips. His breath, when it came, was nothing more than a hollow rattle.

And the smell...

'Throne,' Roj gagged, fighting the urge to be sick. 'What's happened to you?'

He leant back on his knees, hand over his mouth, momentarily unsure what to do next. Should he call for help? No, by the look of Mattias there wasn't time. He needed to get Matt back to the village, to Ligart. The Physician would know what to do.

'Come on then,' Roj said, slipping his good arm under his brother-in-law's back. 'Can't have you lying about. Not while there's work to do.'

He slipped once, twice, trying to haul the overseer to his feet, cursing his mechanical arm that whirred and clicked with the effort. Matt had been there for him after the accident, telling him that everything would be fine.

'You can rely on me, Roj, you know that. I won't let you down.'

He owed Matt. Owed him so much.

'That's it,' Roj said, finally managing to get them both up. Mattias was hanging like a dead weight, head lolling forward. 'What's that sister-in-law of mine been feeding you, eh?' Emperor, Lilia would fall apart when she saw Matt like this. 'That's it. On your feet. Need to get you to the skimmer.'

They hadn't walked three steps before Roj slipped, landing awkwardly on top of Mattias. The overseer cried out; a frightened little whimper. This was all wrong. Roj couldn't remember Matt even catching a cold.

After a while, Roj gave up trying to carry his brother-in-law. He grabbed the back of Mattias's shirt and dragged him out of the sorghum like a sack of grain, talking to him all the time, knowing full well that he couldn't hear. It was for his own benefit, not Matt's.

The rain was coming in by the time Roj manhandled Mattias into the back of the truck. For once, Matt's need for speed was welcome. The akanu could stay sheltered beneath the water tower until later. Roj wasn't even sure if Matt was still breathing, but wasn't going to wait around to search for a pulse. Let a professional check him over. It might not be as bad as it looked.

'Yeah, not kidding yourself there, at all,' Roj taunted himself as he fired up the engine, twisting in his seat to throw an old blanket over his friend's worryingly still body. 'A little rain never hurt anyone, eh Matt?'

Matt looked like nothing could ever hurt him again.

What am I going to tell Kat? Roj thought as the skimmer rushed over the sorghum. This would hit her hard, especially with Anya so ill.

Behind him, Mattias groaned, turning over beneath the blanket. Roj almost shouted with relief. He was still alive and, as the old saying went, where there's life, there's...

A hand closed around Roj's mouth, pulling him back into the headrest. His eyes widened as he saw Matt's face reflected in the screen, cracked lips twisted back into a snarl.

He tried to call out, but his brother-in-law's foul-tasting fingers were crammed into his mouth, his arm around Roj's throat. In desperation, he let go of the controls, clawing at Mattias's arm.

All he could hear was Matt's ragged breath and the ghost of a tuneless dirge in his ear. What in the nine hells? His fevered brother-in-law was singing when trying to kill him? When trying to kill them both?

Roj made a grab for the controls, metal pincers closing around the wheel, but it was too late. The truck skidded across the wet pathway, straight towards the chemical store. Roj squeezed his eyes shut as they ploughed through the corrugated doors, smashing through the barrels of pesticides and fertiliser before crunching into a row of racks.

Roj was thrown out of his seat and through the front screen. He didn't feel the glass give way, didn't even really feel the impact of his body against the shelves. His shoulder was on fire, even as he came crashing down onto the front of the truck. There on the steering wheel, just in front of him, was his artificial arm, the pincers still locked around the padded metal. His hand went to his shoulder, only to jerk away as it met torn metal and live wires. His robotic limb had been yanked clean away.

A moan came from inside the truck. Matt was still alive. Roj called his name, peering into the cab, smoke stinging his eyes. There was a sudden burst of heat as something at the back of the truck ignited, the glow showing Matt clawing at the seat that pinned him down, trying to pull himself out. No, that wasn't it. He was trying to get to Roj.

The two men stared into each other's eyes; friends since childhood. Family. The flames blossomed, snapping Roj out of his reverie. The chemicals. If the truck was on fire, the whole place could go up. His mind raced, trying to work out how he could get Matt out. If he could. It would have been difficult enough with two arms, but one?

'I'm sorry,' Roj shouted into the cab and slid down to the ground, crying out as his ankle gave way beneath him. He hit the ground, sending new waves of pain shooting through his body.

But that didn't matter. He needed to get to safety.

He had no idea how he did it, limping through the flames. Instinct took over. One minute he was trapped in a world of black smoke and confusion and the next he was outside, the rain cooling his skin. He hobbled away from the shed, just as the first barrel went up, igniting the rest. The shed disintegrated into razor-sharp shards, a massive fireball rising majestically into the sky. The shockwave plucked Roj from his feet, throwing him clear of the blast. He rolled, broken stalks scratching his arm, his face, before finally coming to a halt, gasping for breath. When he looked up, the fire had already spread to the crop.

He needed to get out of here, to get help. They could lose everything. In a daze, Roj scrambled to his feet and stumbled away from the blaze. As he fled, he was sure he could still hear Mattias singing in the heart of the fire.



## Two

Librarian Vabion of the Ultramarines soared above the fields of Orath, the wind rushing through his tightly cropped grey hair. Throwing his arms out wide, he allowed himself to be lost in the moment, raising his head against the warmth of the sun. He was happy, truly happy, the sweet smell of the countryside filling his lungs.

A shadow crossed in front of the sun.

Vabion opened his eyes, glancing down at the crops. As he watched, the stalks withered, seeds flying from rotten pods. A song wafted over the breeze, discordant, incongruous - and Vabion was falling, the sorghum rushing up to greet him, the stink of death choking him as he fell. Crying out, he threw up his arms to break his fall, preparing for the inevitable crack of bones as he smacked into the ground...

Vabion jolted in his seat, his eyes snapping open behind his helm. He was back above the fields of Orath, not flying through the sky as in his vision, but safe in the confines of a Land Speeder.

'Sir, are you well?'

The Librarian turned to face the owner of the voice. The Space Marine's power armour was polished silver, a skull-headed raptor emblazoned across an oversized pauldron - the livery of the Doom Eagles, his current companions here on Orath.

'Quite well, thank you Brother Ritan,' Vabion replied, keeping his voice steady.

'You cried out,' Ritan informed him, obviously unwilling to let the matter drop. Who did the steersman think he was talking to? Vabion was an Ultramarine with 600 years of experience. The Doom Eagle had yet to reach his second century. He needed to show some respect.

'I suggest you concentrate on piloting this Speeder, brother.'

The Doom Eagle fell into a brooding silence. He had some sense at least. Besides, Vabion had more to worry about than an impertinent pup. The veracity of his vision had unsettled him. Where had it come from? One minute he had been meditating, using the journey from Fort Garm to commune with the Emperor, and the next...

In all his years, Vabion had never experienced something so vivid.

'Coming up on the listening post, Ritan.'

A voice crackled over the vox, broadcast automatically through Vabion's helm. The Librarian looked up, watching the towers of Fort Kerberos, his home for more than two centuries, loom into view.

'Yes, I see it Kerna,' Ritan snapped back, gunning the engine just a fraction more. 'You are cleared to proceed.'

'Good of you to say so.'

The vox cut off.

'One day, Kerna...' Ritan muttered beneath his breath. The Space Marine's meaning was obvious.

'You do not like Brother Kerna, do you, Ritan?' Vabion observed, enjoying the way the Doom Eagle shifted uncomfortably in his seat.

'He is a good warrior,' Ritan replied, gunning the engine slightly.

'Which doesn't answer my question.'

Ritan just glowered ahead.

'I've seen many Space Marines pass through these garrisons, Ritan. A new squadron every six months, different Chapters every time.'

'It must be fascinating,' Ritan rumbled, his sarcasm obvious.

'It is,' Vabion insisted, a smile playing across his lips. 'The chance to work alongside so many Chapters is rare. You see the differences as well as the similarities. The tenacity of the Aurora, the piety of the White Consuls. All born of Ultramar, all following their own path. And then there's your own Chapter, The Doom Eagles of Gathis II.'

'What of us?' Ritan bristled.

'So pragmatic, so driven. Your acceptance of your own mortality is extraordinary.'

'Only in accepting the inevitable can we find strength,' Ritan growled, recalling the litanies learnt as a neophyte. 'Only through death can we live.'

Vabion nodded. 'Indeed. And your doctrines also speak of detaching yourself from glory, honour and jealousy, do they not?' He let silence reign for a second or two, before adding: 'You could learn much from Kerna.'

'As I have said, he is a...'

'...good warrior, yes,' Vabion interrupted, 'but he has seen much. In the short time I have known Kerna, I've realised that his only ambition is to serve.'

'We are Doom Eagles,' Ritan insisted flatly. 'We exist only to spare others from grief.'

Yes, thought Vabion ruefully, and you must think me as green as a new recruit. Your service is no vocation, Ritan. It is a career. You long for prestige, nothing more. That is why your tour of duty here on Orath is such torture, so far from the glory of battle. But your presence here is vital, whether you believe it or not.

Vabion expected Ritan to sit fuming at his controls, put firmly in his place,

but the young Doom Eagle surprised him: 'May I ask you a question, Librarian?'

It depends what it is, Vabion considered.

'Of course, Brother.'

'Why Orath?'

Vabion answered the question with a sharp laugh. Over two hundred years of serving on the planet and no one had dared asked him the question. Perhaps there was more to this cub after all.

He turned to regard his brother. 'Why would an Ultramarine allow himself to be stationed on a distant agri-world for two centuries? Well, Orath may be distant, but the listening posts located at Forts Garm and Kerberos offer great strategic value.'

How easily the lies came after all this time.

'As you know, I monitor and analyse any communications we intercept, looking for patterns, key phrases.'

'I understand that,' Ritan interjected, 'but you fought at the battle of Necran against the Tyranid Hive, the siege of Ashira.'

'To reclaim the reliquary of Marius Gage. That was a good battle.'

'Good? It has already passed into legend. The advance of the Fifth across the Janivan pass. Thousands of greenskins slaughtered.'

'You have done your research, Brother Ritan.'

'Your reputation precedes you, Librarian - and yet you give it all up to become permanent custodian of two listening posts.'

Vabion's eyes climbed the array of auguries that stretched before them.

'We do our duty, wherever that leads us.'

Now it was Ritan's turn to doubt his companion's words.

'And why a revolving garrison of Space Marines? Why not station Imperial Guards here?'

Vabion's smile faded. He knew he should not have started this, should not have baited the Doom Eagle. A mistake. Once the questions began, they would never stop. Let Ritan think what he will. Let him consider Vabion's posting to Orath a punishment for some past indiscretion, but let it drop.

'Why waste the resources...'

Vabion raised a hand, gazing out on the swaying crops. 'Orath provides an opportunity for training. For contemplation.'

As far as he was concerned the conversation was over, although Ritan obviously thought differently: 'What do Space Marines need with...'

Vabion talked over him, noticing something in the distance. 'Ritan, break off from your approach.'

'What?' his battle-brother replied. 'I was about to request for the gates to open.'

'The gates can wait. We need to sweep the area around the bastion. No more than a kilometre from the battlements.'

'Librarian,' Ritan began, his frustration barely kept in check. 'Sergeant

Artorius is expecting...'

Vabion thumbed the vox-bead on the side of his helm.

'Vabion to Kerberos, we are performing a visual check of the fort's vicinity. Please inform Sergeant Artorius that we will be delayed.'

'Message received, Vabion,' came the response. 'Do you require assistance?'

'Negative,' the Librarian replied abruptly, scanning the horizon even as the Land Speeder banked to the right. 'Vabion out.'

'What are we looking for?' Ritan asked, accepting the new orders with little grace but, thankfully, no further argument.

'I will know when I see it,' replied Vabion, praying to the Emperor that he was wrong.

The murmur of Space Marines at prayer echoed through Fort Kerberos. As he walked the hushed corridors of the central keep, Brother Meleki wondered if the tower had been designed so that the sounds of devotions would travel along the low vaulted ceilings, to remind the faithful of why they served. He certainly had never experienced a place like this, his squad's home for the next six months. Such a sizeable fortress for so few occupants. Of course, he hadn't questioned the posting - unlike Ritan, who had as always made his feelings known.

'I do not understand why we are here,' Meleki's battle-brother had announced during maintenance rituals on their first day on Orath. 'Blasphemous forces swarm across the Imperium, threatening to overrun entire systems, and they send us here. A paltry world in an insignificant corner of the galaxy.'

'Orath is a lot of things, but insignificant is not one of them,' Kerna had argued, beginning to strip his bolter in the armoury. 'Cereal production running to millions of acres. Livestock farming on an industrial scale.'

Ritan had rolled his eyes.

'The Imperial Guard relies on the supplies from this paltry world,' Kerna had concluded.

'Then why doesn't the Guard protect it?' Ritan spat in response.

Meleki had watched his brothers quarrel in silence. At two hundred years, Ritan was barely older than himself, but Kerna had seen centuries of battle. A livid scar, slashed across his face, twisted his mouth into a permanent grin. He wore it well, a reminder that a battle could be lost with a moment's hesitation - a lesson that the ork responsible for the injury had learnt to its cost.

Meleki knew that some of the younger Space Marines in the Fists of the Fallen found Kerna's frozen expression unsettling. Many who rose up the ranks of the Eighth Company believed that a smile had no place on the face of a Doom Eagle. A smile spoke of joy. Frivolity. Anathema to the Scions of Gathis II. Doom Eagles were born of loss, forged by the realisation that all things - including their own existence - must come to an

end. Even though he had only recently been promoted from the Scout corps, Meleki was fully aware that other Chapters viewed them as fatalists, obsessed with their own extinction. That was not true. Yes, a Doom Eagle was fully aware that death may strike at any moment, but this realisation only served to empower them. Oblivion held no sway over them. They embraced the long shadow of their own mortality. Turned it against their enemies.

When you acknowledged that life was finite, your need to serve burned all the stronger. Every second of every minute of every hour was important - vital. Nothing could be wasted, so that when you finally fell you knew your life had been worthwhile.

Meleki understood this was the reason Ritan grumbled as he ran through his weapon checks. It wasn't heresy or insubordination, but impatience. He was eager to prove his devotion.

The same desire burned deep in his own chest, but Meleki accepted that it wasn't his place to analyse every posting, no matter how unusual. Doom Eagles served. Doom Eagles died. That was the way of things.

'Use this time,' Sergeant Artorius had advised during their first briefing. 'Learn how to work as a unit, to understand how each of your battle-brothers operate. Discover each other's strengths so that we endure no weakness.'

Even then Ritan had complained, under his breath, of course. Even he wouldn't dare question the sergeant.

Artorius's briefing had provided all the information they needed to know. 'The squad is split between two permanent garrisons,' he explained, a hololith of the planet hovering behind him, 'Fort Kerberos, here in the north, and Fort Garm in the southern hemisphere.'

Even the position of the bastions was peculiar. If Meleki could dig through the centre of the planet, he would emerge in Fort Garm. The citadels were the perfect mirror images of each other - hangars, dormitories, weapon stores and apothecarions surrounding a central keep festooned with augury arrays.

'Each fort is maintained by five Space Marines, two pilots and one Techmarine,' Artorius had continued, acknowledging Brother Jerius, the red-armoured giant standing at the back of the company. 'I will be stationed here at Kerberos, but will travel between the two bases to monitor progress.'

'And what of the Ultramarine?' Ritan piped up, drawing a glare from Kerna. 'Librarian Vabion has his work and we have ours.' The sergeant's tone informed Ritan that there would be no more questions. 'At times, you may be assigned to accompany him back and forth from Garm.'

'To protect him from what?' Sedeca, another of their number, had muttered, not wanting to attract the sergeant's attention.

'Boredom probably,' Ritan had answered. 'That's all this place will bring.'

Only if we have to listen to your whinging, Meleki had thought, but kept his mouth shut. No use in making enemies in his own squad.

The murmured devotions mixed with a chorus of clicks and beeps as Meleki approached the Listening Chamber. Here the data from the auguries was gathered and processed. The listening posts on Orath monitored communication channels, the servitors slaved to the cogitators in the Chamber searching for key phrases and suspicious patterns.

They weren't alone. Techmarine Jerius was also in the Chamber, hard at work at one of the many consoles that lined the room. Glyphs from the displays reflected against the Techmarine's dark red helm. Meleki had never seen Jerius's face. No one had, save maybe Kerna and Sergeant Artorius. As always there were stories - that the Thunderhawk crash that had taken both the Techmarine's legs had also ravaged his countenance so badly that Jerius chose to hide it beneath the helm. Meleki gave the rumour little credence. Such affectation smacked of vanity, which was not part of the Techmarine's make-up. Jerius was as black and white as they came, living his life to the letter of the codex; no deviation, no compromise. It was more likely that the Techmarine didn't remove his helm because he considered it a waste of time and energy. Why remove something you might need at a moment's notice, even here in a half-deserted bastion?

'Brother Jerius,' Meleki began, barely even noticing the lines of servitors silently toiling away over their consoles, 'it is time for our training session.'

Jerius didn't acknowledge Meleki's presence. There was no malice in the act; the Techmarine simply hadn't finished the task at hand. From what little Meleki knew about the augury systems, the Techmarine was running a diagnosis check on the main mast. He had manually realigned the surveyors before morning firing rites and was ensuring that the cogitators were receiving the correct data streams.

Finally, when satisfied, Jerius turned to his younger battle-brother.

'You are early,' he stated, his flat delivery neither suggesting that this was desirable nor an inconvenience.

'I could return later,' Meleki replied.

'No,' Jerius simply said, rising to his feet, servo-arms folding automatically behind him. 'It is time.'

Meleki's gaze fell across the servitors. 'Has there been any unusual activity?'

'Negative,' Jerius said, double-checking the display he had been using. 'Interplanetary traffic within acceptable parameters.'

His work in the chamber done, Jerius started for the entrance, the motors in his mechanical legs whirring softly with every step. Legend had it that Jerius had designed his replacement limbs himself. Meleki could well believe it. The Techmarine was forever upgrading his augmetics, making adjustments, replacing components. The Techmarine's work was never done. He could always find something to improve, which was exactly why

Meleki had been pleased when Jerius agreed to walk him through the workings of the Stormtalons. He couldn't ask for a better teacher.

Meleki started after the Techmarine. 'Today we examine the targeting array?'

'One of the primary systems on any gunship,' Jerius replied. 'A pilot cannot rely on automated auspex alone. If a fault developed.'

Jerius was cut off as a black-cloaked serf appeared around the corner of the corridor and barrelled straight into the Techmarine.

'A t-thousand apologies, my lord,' the serf stammered, wincing in anticipation of a blow that never came.

'Look where you are going,' Jerius snapped, no doubt glowering behind his helm.

The serf bowed low. 'I will, sir. You have my word.'

'I would rather a clear path,' Jerius barked and the serf, realising he was still stupidly standing in the Techmarine's way, nearly tripped on his cloak as he scampered to the side.

'I am sorry, my lord.'

Jerius didn't respond, but marched off, pistons hissing with typical efficiency.

Meleki stopped to regard the serf. 'What is your name?'

A look of panic flashed across the serf's fallow features.

'F-falk, my lord,' he stuttered.

'Be more careful in future, Falk,' Meleki advised. 'There are those who are not as gracious as Jerius.'

The serf bowed once more, shaking visibly. He drew his cloak closer to him, one arm hidden beneath its sombre folds. 'I will, sir.'

'Now, be on your way,' said Meleki, finally giving the serf leave.

Gabbling thanks, Falk rushed on. Meleki watched him go. The serf had been lucky he had not barged into Ritan. No wonder the man was shaking.

Falk didn't dare breathe until he was sure that the Space Marines had continued on their way. He stood, hand clamped across his chest until the heavy footsteps of the Doom Eagles faded away.

Falk let out a relieved breath and collapsed against a nearby column.

That had been close. Too close. The way the Space Marine had looked at him. Like he knew something was wrong.

Nothing is wrong.

Of course. Nothing was wrong. Everything was as it should be. Except for the arm hidden beneath his cloak, of course. His flesh was itching uncontrollably. It was all he could do not to tear at it with his fingernails, to claw the irritation away - but at least the pain had stopped, for now. He had hardly slept the previous night, cramp set deep within his muscles, no, deeper even than that. In his bones.

Don't be stupid. Bones can't cramp.

No, that was right. Of course it was. Bone couldn't cramp. What was he

thinking? Falk was just tired, his reserves exhausted. Too many early mornings and late nights.

Not that they would ever thank you for working yourself ragged. They hardly even notice you are there.

Falk shook his head. He didn't serve to receive praise or gratitude. He served because it was the Emperor's will.

Perhaps the pain is the Emperor's will. All part of the divine plan.

Falk gasped in sudden agony, immediately clasping his good hand over his mouth to stifle another outburst. Someone would hear.

No one is listening.

The convulsions began again, his arm jumping uncontrollably beneath the heavy cloak. This couldn't go on. He needed to head back to the serfs' quarters, to seek out Hareen, their medicae. Hareen would know what was happening, what to do, before it got any worse. A chill struck Falk. What if there was something wrong with his bones? What if there was an infection of the marrow? He'd seen it before. There was only one way to stop the disease spreading. Lose the limb.

But how would he be able to serve then? His masters wouldn't waste bionic implants on the likes of a serf.

They'll make you a servitor. A mindless drone.

Falk couldn't let this happen. Hareen would help him. Hareen always helped him.

But what if he tells the Librarian?

The thought was too much to bear. Falk could see the Librarian's face twisting in disgust. In horror. See him drawing his sword.

In his delirium, Falk cried out, his shrill voice echoing along the cloisters. 'Emperor save me.'

Yes, He can save you.

That was it. Falk suddenly knew what he had to do. He wouldn't trouble Hareen. The medicae had duties. Distracting him would be a sin.

'No, I will go to the serf's chapel, pray to the Golden Throne. If it is His will, the Emperor will cleanse me. Make me new.'

You are the Emperor's loyal servant. He will not forsake you.

His mind made up, Falk hurried down the high corridors, keeping the pain at bay by humming the hymn that had been running through his mind for days now.

A gift from the Throne itself, the voice in his head told him, comfort in your darkest hour.

Yes, thought Falk, true comfort. Praise the Emperor.



## Three

'Looks like the fire's gone out,' Dain Bridgeman said, staring through the fire-trucks' windscreen. 'At the least the rain is good for something.'

Barett Halfen kept his speed up, the heavy vehicle's tracks powering along the road that ran between the sprawling fields. 'We still need to check. See what damage there is.'

They'd noticed the smoke half an hour ago, black plumes rising against the grey sky. Dain was right. The flames had probably been extinguished, but Mattias wouldn't thank them if they left it to chance. A crop fire was the last thing the plantation needed. They had tried to raise Mattias as soon as they'd left the village, but there'd been no answer. They hadn't been able to raise Ithell either.

Dain fidgeted in the seat beside him, tapping his fingers on the armrest. 'It has to be the chemical store.'

'Maybe.'

'That much smoke. It's the only possible answer.'

'You know as much as me, Dain. We'll see when we get..' Something in the sorghum caught Barett's eye.

He slammed his foot down, the truck's brakes immediately locking. 'Hold on.'

Dain cried out, grabbing onto his harness to stop being thrown forward.

'What are you doing?'

'There's someone in the corn.'

'Out there in this? They mad?'

Barett didn't answer as the truck slid to a halt.

'Where were they?' Dain asked, but Barett had pulled open the door and jumped from the cab.

'Who's there?' he called out, pulling the hood of his rain-protector over his head 'You all right?'

'What do you mean, are they all right?' Dain appeared beside him. 'Why wouldn't they be all right?'

Barett stepped forward, peering into the crop. Dain could hear them now, crashing around in the stalks, getting nearer.

'Didn't you see the way they were staggering all over the place?' Barrett asked.

Dain took a step back. 'I was too busy trying to stop myself smashing through the... whoa!'

A man tore out of the sorghum, stumbling right towards Barrett. He wore no rain-protector, his clothes plastered against its skin.

'Roj?' Barrett asked, amazed to see the plantation owner in such a state. Ithell ran into him, hand clawing at Barrett's slick protector. 'Slow down there. What's happened?'

'Throne. Look at his face!'

Roj Ithell's knees buckled and he collapsed to the wet ground, Barrett trying to support his boss as he fell. Roj let out a keening moan, staring up at his employee, eyes flashing with panic. Dain gagged. Roj's face was a mass of seeping blisters, his lips swollen beyond recognition. One of his nostrils had completely closed over, the other flaring wildly.

'What the hell's wrong with his face?'

'How the hell should I know? Help me get him on the barge.'

'I ain't touching him. He's diseased.'

'He needs our help!' Barrett snapped back. 'He can hardly breathe.'

'This ain't right,' Dain moaned, finally giving in and grabbing Roj's kicking legs. 'We ain't paid enough for this.'

'Quit complaining and get hold of his feet,' Barrett hissed before turning his attention back to Roj. 'We're going to get you on the barge now. Try to hold still.'

They tried to haul him up, but Ithell just screamed, his body twisting out of Barrett's grip. He thudded back to the mud, howling all the time.

Dain dropped Roj's feet, rubbing his palms against his protector as if trying to brush off infection. 'He's too sick to move. We could be doing more damage than good.'

For once Barrett agreed. 'Fine, I'll stay with him. You head back to the settlement. Get Ligart out here.'

'You sure?'

'Of course I am. Give me your protector.'

'You're joking!'

'Give it.'

Grumbling, Dain struggled out of the overcoat and threw it to Barrett, before clambering up into the truck. He didn't even look back as the bulky cab swung around on the track-base to face the way they'd come. He flicked a lever, switching the tracks into reverse, and opened the throttle.

Better off out of it, he thought.

On the ground, Barrett draped the protector over Roj's convulsing body.

'Hang on in there, Roj,' Barrett shouted over the roar of the engines. 'Dain will be as quick as he can.'

Roj seemed to calm as the barge screamed away.

'That's it. Not long now.'

The man's breathing was shallow, the whites of his eyes stained red with ruptured blood vessels. He made a weak grab for Barrett's arm, the farm worker trying not to flinch at the touch. The back of the plantation owner's hand was smothered in pulsing abscesses. As gently as he could, Barrett guided the hand back onto Roj's heaving chest. The man responded by starting to hack uncontrollably, bile gurgling thickly in his throat.

Barrett glanced over in the direction of the village, willing Dain to hurry. He didn't notice what was trying to push itself out of Roj's mouth. Roj coughed once again, his swollen lips parting wide enough for the large fly to escape. It buzzed angrily in the rain, as another appeared on Ithell's lips.

The settlement's streets were deserted as Dain slammed on the fire-charge's airbrakes. Not that he could blame his neighbours for staying inside. What kind of idiot headed out in a storm without a rain-protector?

Roj Ithell, that's who.

Dain came in too fast, bumpers scraping against the dirt road, causing the tethered bovids sheltering in a nearby paddock to bellow at the sudden noise. Dain was out of the craft before the fans even started to wind down.

He charged across the central square, booted feet splashing through muddy puddles, heading towards Augustus Ligart's surgery. He'd get the Physician out to Roj as promised and then put as much distance between himself and the sick man as possible. Barrett had been an idiot to stay with him. Loyalty is one thing, but risking catching whatever had got Ithell was another.

'Eta, I need your pa,' Dain demanded as he threw open the door to the surgery, expecting to find Ligart's plain daughter in her customary place beside the fire. Eta was nowhere to be seen. The chairs, usually occupied by Ligart's patients, were empty; the softly-lit room eerily quiet.

'Hello?'

Dain trod mud onto the floor as he crossed the room, heading towards the Physician's inner sanctum, but Ligart's office was as deserted as the front room, books left open on the large, wooden desk.

The ceiling creaked above Dain's head.

'Ligart, is that you?' Dain called out, yanking open the door that led to the rickety stairs at the back. 'We've got an emergency. Ithell's sick. Real sick.' No response. Where was the old goat? Dain took the steps two at a time, calling the Physician's name as he turned onto the upper landing before skidding to an abrupt halt.

'Emperor, no,' Dain said, clasping a thin hand over his mouth. Ligart was on the floor, his red beard matted with bile. The doctor wheezed, a blackened tongue jutting over purple lips, and stretched out an imploring hand, but Dain wasn't waiting around. He rushed down the stairs so fast

he almost ended up in a heap at the bottom, turning his ankle painfully on the last step.

Cursing, he limped across the front room, bursting out onto the porch where he proceeded to throw up on the wooden slats. First Ithell and then Ligart. What was happening?

Wiping his mouth with the back of his hand, Dain looked up at the building next door. Ma Serlon's place. Wincing, he hobbled down the surgery's steps and hurried to the neighbouring hab. The rain had finally stopped, but he hardly noticed as he tried the door. It opened a crack, something blocking it from the other side. Dain should have stopped then, should've headed straight for home. His neighbours would have put good money on him running, but this time curiosity won out over cowardice. Dain had to be sure. Had to know.

Taking a step back, he put his shoulder to the door, feeling whatever was on the other side give way, but not enough to get through. He tried again, something cracking under the impact, but at least now the gap was wide enough to squeeze through.

Grunting with effort, Dain shoved against the door and pushed his way in. A stench hit him immediately, making him retch. Another sign that he should have abandoned his search.

'Ma,' he called out as he barged his way into the candlelit room. 'Are you there? Something bad's happening.'

He had known Ma Serlon since he was a boy, growing up just two habs down the street. Everyone knew the Serlons. Pa Serlon had worked the plantation longer than anyone could remember. Still did, whenever possible. Ma Serlon had baked his mother pies twice a week, a treat for the boys, she said. Succulent berries wrapped in thick, buttered pastry. Dain had always loved pie day, the sweet tang of stewed fruits drifting out of Ma Serlon's open windows.

The house smelt sweet today too, but the wrong kind of sweet. Saccharine. Like meat gone bad.

Dain turned, immediately stumbling against the wall, sobbing at the sight that greeted him.

'Oh, Pa. Not you too.'

The old man was slumped in his chair, a blanket thrown over his knees. His face was almost unrecognisable, now familiar cankers obscuring his features, calloused hands hanging down lifelessly.

Dain heard a rattle somewhere to his side, down low, on the floor. Dain didn't have to look to know what had been blocking the door.

Ma Serlon must have collapsed when she had been heading out for help. She was still alive, croaking his name as he pushed himself back out onto the porch.

'This can't be happening,' he muttered wildly, as he gasped for breath, leaning on the railings. He looked frantically at the houses that lined the

central square, wondering if the same sight would greet him if he explored each one, his friends and neighbours struck down by whatever plague had been unleashed.

'Alice.' His wife's name sprung to his lips and Dain was running through the streets of the village, feet pounding on the wet paths as he rushed home. 'Please be all right. Please be all right.'



## Four

In the courtyard of Fort Kerberos, Kerna closed his eyes and let the driving rain pelt against his face. He breathed deeply, savouring the heady aroma of water against hot flagstones. For a moment, he was transported far across the Imperium, to home. Not the fishing village where he had been born, where he had first been chosen to endure the Aspirants' trial all those years ago, but to Ghost Mountain, the highest summit of the rain-lashed Razorpeaks range.

How many times had he stood on its peak, gazing down at the world below, remembering where he had come from? As a child he'd gawped at the flimsy gliders the tribesmen of Gathis II used to traverse their home world, marvelling that men could fly. Years later, as a fully-fledged member of the Doom Eagles, he still marvelled, although the reason for the wonder had changed. Now he was amazed that the people he'd left behind even survived armed only with primitive tools.

Yet the rain made no distinction between Space Marines and those the Adeptus Astartes protected. It fell on battle-brother and poor peasant alike. All were equal when the heavens opened.

'Brother Kerna.'

Meleki's voice roused Kerna from his thoughts. He opened his eyes to see the recently-promoted Scout crossing the courtyard, accompanied by Jerius, the rain hissing off the Techmarine's red power armour. Of course. Artorius had granted the pair special dispensation to miss midday prayers to continue the young pilot's Stormtalon training. They would perform their devotions later.

'Good day, Brother Jerius. Meleki,' Kerna said, grabbing the Doom Eagle's wrist in greeting.

Behind them another voice rang out.

'Is it?' Kerna turned and felt his spirits sink just a little.

'Every day is good serving the Emperor, Brother Ritan,' Kerna reminded the thorn in all their sides.

The Space Marine just grunted.

'The left stabiliser needs tuning,' Ritan barked at Jerius, ripping the helm

from his head to reveal a face surprisingly free of scars. The only outward sign that the young Doom Eagle had seen battle was the ocular implant that had replaced the eye he'd lost on the fields of Nigraven. Ritan would go far - he was as brave as he was arrogant - but would foster little in the way of camaraderie in his brothers.

Just the way he'd want it, Kerna considered.

'Your Land Speeder was underperforming?' Jerius inquired, regarding the craft that was idling behind them with such intensity that it was as if the Techmarine was already attempting to commune with the machine-spirit within.

'That's an understatement.' Ritan growled, his strong jaw so tightly clenched that Kerna could almost hear the Space Marine's teeth grinding together. 'I could hardly bring her out of the turns.'

'You didn't seem to be having problems from where I was looking,' commented Kerna, his hackles rising at Ritan's tone. One day the Space Marine's lack of respect would lead him into trouble. Luckily for Ritan, his battle-brothers would come to his aid, whether they held him in high regard or not.

'It deteriorated during our impromptu final sweep,' Ritan spat, his good eye flashing with irritation.

'Yes, what was that all about?' Kerna asked, genuinely intrigued. He had been surprised to find that Ritan and Vabion had not returned when he had brought his Stormtalon down. 'What were you looking for?'

'Ask him,' Ritan snapped, throwing a dark glance over his pauldron. Kerna followed his gaze, seeing Librarian Vabion approaching. 'There was nothing we haven't seen day after day. Field after field of wheat.'

'It's sorghum,' Meleki corrected. Kerna had to suppress a smile, although with his face the way it was, no one would be able to tell the difference.

'Whatever it is,' Ritan scowled back, 'some of the damned seeds must have got sucked into the engine.'

'I will check it immediately,' Jerius said without emotion.

'You do that,' Ritan growled, favouring Meleki with one last glare before continuing on his way. 'I need to strip my weapons, make sure something is working around here.'

'Don't forget your prayers,' Kerna reminded the seething Doom Eagle. 'It's midday devotions.'

'Then go pray yourself,' Ritan shot back. 'I shall petition the Emperor as I perform my maintenance rituals.'

'How efficient,' Meleki muttered darkly as they watched Ritan stalk towards the central keep, absently throwing his helm in the direction of a sickly-looking serf, demanding that it was cleaned.

Kerna placed an arm on his fellow pilot's shoulder. 'Pay no attention to Ritan. He is feeling the frustration of being so far from what he considers the action, but hasn't the maturity to control himself. It will come.'

Maybe , he added to himself.

'Doom Eagles should feel no frustration,' Meleki insisted. 'We know our duty and must serve - wherever that may be.'

Kerna nodded, switching his attention to the Techmarine. 'The Land Speeder may have vexed our saturnine brother, but I'm pleased to report that the Heart of Sorrow performed beautifully on my flight back from Garm. You have worked miracles, Jerius.'

'She served you well?'

'As I am certain that she will for many years to come.'

'I thought the only certainty in life was that it will end,' a voice observed behind them. Kerna turned to see Vabion approach. He bowed slightly, acknowledging the comment.

'You have been studying our doctrines, Librarian.'

'It was either that or converse with Brother Ritan,' Vabion smiled grimly. Kerna mirrored the gesture. In the short time he had known the venerable Ultramarine, Kerna had come to like Vabion - especially as he seemed to have the measure of their troublesome brother.

'All Doom Eagles acknowledge our eventual passing. It informs our every decision,' Meleki added, eager as always to help.

'A lesson many Ultramarines could do well to learn,' acknowledged Vabion, turning back to Kerna and changing the subject. 'Tell me Brother Kerna, did you notice anything peculiar during our journey back from Garm?'

Kerna frowned. 'Peculiar, Librarian?'

'In the crops,' Vabion clarified, peering deep into the Doom Eagle's eyes.

'Anything unusual about the sorghum?'

Kerna could only shake his head. 'Not that I could see, although I admit, one field of cereal is much the same as the next for me.'

Vabion held the pilot's gaze for a moment, as if he was searching for something.

'Very well. Thank you, brother.' The Librarian faced Meleki. 'Do you know where I may find Sergeant Artorius?'

'In his chambers, sir. The sergeant always prays alone.'

Vabion nodded sharply. 'Of course. I must not keep you from your own devotions.'

With that, the aged Librarian marched towards the building Artorius used as his private quarters to the east of the central tower.

'What was that about?' Meleki asked, watching the Ultramarine leave.

'No idea, lad,' Kerna admitted, casting his mind back to his flight from Garm. Had he missed something? What had Vabion noticed about the crops?

The air of the chapel was cool against Falk's flushed skin, the sound of his sobs punctuated by the thwack of the leather crop against his exposed flesh.

His diseased flesh.

He rocked on his knees as he continued to lash himself, bathed in the light from the stained glass window that dominated the chapel. Scintillating reds, blues and ochres dappled his body, illuminating just how far he had fallen.

Of course, the window was a conceit. The serfs' chapel was deep within the keep, far from the thick exterior walls. It was not Orath's sun that made the colours dance, but a series of tiny lume-globes set behind the stylised representation of the Emperor.

A trick of the light.

A lie.

Like Falk's very life.

'Why?' the serf cried out, staring up into the image's harsh eyes. 'Why must I endure this torment?'

The Emperor didn't reply, but glared down at Falk, his glazed features twisted into an expression of disgust.

'All I ever wanted was to serve you.'

You have served Him. You have served Him well, whispered the voice in his head.

'And this is how I'm repaid. By being made to suffer.'

The crop was now drawing blood, Falk's shoulders a latticework of self-inflicted cuts. The arm he had been hiding for so long felt like it was on fire, twitching uncontrollably as it hung against his pustule-encrusted side. He didn't care who saw it now. He just wanted to be whole again.

You can be whole.

'Then tell me,' Falk wailed, tears slicing paths through the dirt on his cheeks. 'Tell me how I can be free of this affliction. Hear my plea.'

'I hear you.'

Falk's breath caught in his throat, his head snapping up. Could it be? Could his prayers have been answered?

They have been answered.

Hardly daring to breathe, he gazed up into the face of the Emperor, a face that was now smiling warmly down at him.

'You have endured much,' the Emperor acknowledged, his benevolent face shining more than ever. 'You have proved your devotion.'

'Is this the voice of the Emperor?' Falk whispered, doubting his own senses, wiping tears from his eyes with the back of his good hand. 'Is this the voice of my Lord?'

'It is, my child. You will be blessed.'

'I have been blessed,' Falk laughed, a childlike grin spreading across his pocked face. Then he bent double again, suddenly afraid to look upon his god. 'I am not worthy.'

'You doubt me?'

'No,' Falk cried out, rising back to his knees, the crop dropping from his hand. 'You are my Saviour.'

The Emperor nodded, with the sound of scraping glass. 'I am. And you have been chosen.'

'For what?' Falk asked, the intense pain in his arm all but forgotten.

'A holy quest,' the Emperor replied, 'to find your reward.'

Falk struggled to his feet, never taking his eyes from the window.

'Will I be healed?'

'You shall be made anew.'

'Oh thank you, Lord. Thank you.'

The Emperor raised a hand, silencing the serf.

'You must travel deep beneath this fortress, to a place forbidden. Only there will you find salvation.'

'Beneath?' A frown crossed Falk's sweat-drenched brow. 'But how?'

'Follow the song in your heart, my child. You will know where it leads.'

The lights behind the window flared white, bleaching out the colours in the Emperor's fine robes. Falk raised what used to be an arm to shield his eyes but when he looked again, the Emperor had returned to His usual pose, just another image in a stained glass window.

No, more than that. Much more. This is where He appeared to you. Where He changed your life.

'Where he chose me,' Falk giggled, covering his mouth with trembling fingers.

Yes. Now will you go? Will you obey your Emperor?

Falk rushed to where he had discarded his robe.

'I will,' he promised, throwing the cloak around him, not even noticing when the rough cloth scratched painfully against his raw shoulders. 'I must.'

Then follow the song.

'But I can hear no song?'

Yes you can. Listen to your soul.

Falk paused for a second, confused, uncertainty clouding his mind once more - and then there it was, where it had been for the last few days. A distant voice, singing at the back of his mind. At first he had thought the strain tuneless, an irritant, symptomatic of his troubled state of mind, but now he could hear it as it truly was. A soporific aria of such monotonous beauty. A gift from the Throne.

Follow the song, Falk. Follow your destiny.

'My destiny.'

And the destiny of all on Orath. You will bring them the greatest gift of all.

'They shall praise my name.'

They shall join the song.

'Yes,' Falk declared, stumbling out of the chapel. 'All shall sing His praise.'

As Falk left the chapel, the lume-globes behind the Emperor's window blew out, one by one.



## Five

Vabion found Sergeant Artorius exactly where Meleki had said, kneeling in his private command chambers. He hovered at the door for a second, not wanting to disturb the commanding officer's devotions. Even though he had only known the Doom Eagle for a short period, Vabion couldn't help but respect the sergeant. Artorius was a Doom Eagle through and through, his demeanour grave, his outlook pragmatic to the extreme. From the few stories Artorius had shared over the modest rations served in the echoing refectory, the sergeant did his duty, no matter what the cost, and expected his men to do the same, without hesitation. His eyes had flashed with each memory - victory against the ork hordes of Gantalere, the routing of Raven's Gate - but his words weren't the vainglory Vabion had experienced from lesser Marines. As he had expected from a son of Gathis II, Artorius focused on the Doom Eagles who had fallen in the midst of triumph, those who had given their lives in the line of duty. In Artorius's eyes, they were as worthy as the men who had left the battlefield alive, perhaps more so. He honoured them with every retelling.

Vabion had listened to each story without comment. He, of all men, appreciated the importance of self-sacrifice.

'Sergeant, may I have a word?'

Artorius looked up from the shrine set into the corner of the room.

'Vabion,' he said, rising from his knees and approaching the Librarian with arm outstretched. 'I trust your inspection at Garm was satisfactory.'

The Ultramarine grasped the sergeant's wrist. 'Your men are performing their duties with distinction, Artorius. You should have no concern there.'

'I do not.' There was no challenge in the sergeant's voice, just a statement of facts. 'But I do not need to be able to read minds to see that something vexes you, my friend.'

Vabion paused for a moment, searching the sergeant's face. Is that what they were - friends? He'd kept the secret for two hundred years, not telling another soul outside of his own Chapter. The hesitation as he made up his mind must have been excruciating for the Doom Eagle, but Artorius waited respectfully, his lined face unreadable.

'I have not told you why I came to Orath.'

'And I have not asked.'

'Which is appreciated, but it is time.' Vabion indicated the controls beside a screen set into a large stone table, covered in scrolls and data-slates. 'May I?'

Artorius merely nodded, following the Librarian to the desk. Vabion jabbed at buttons set into its surface. The lights of the chamber dimmed as a hololithic image shimmered into view above the table, the faint buzz of the projectors rising in pitch as the vision of Orath solidified. Artorius had told his stories, now it was the Librarian's turn.

'It began with a call for help. Eldar raiders had descended on Orath, to strip the planet of its riches.'

'The crops?' Artorius asked, turning his attention back to the Librarian.

'They were attempting to steal the harvest.'

'Nothing so mundane.' Vabion's hands moved over the controls, the planet spinning on its axis. 'A sinkhole had appeared in one of the plantations.' A red dot pulsated in the middle of the northern hemisphere's major continent. 'Here.'

'But, that is...'

'Right beneath our feet, yes.' The hololith zoomed in to present a curved map of the surrounding countryside, but instead of the recognisable masts of Fort Kerberos jutting towards them, nothing but a gaping fissure marked their present location. 'No one knew what had opened it, although the local workforce had reported one of the minor earth tremors that still occur to this day.'

'There was nothing minor about the 'quake we endured on our arrival,' Artorius reminded him, not taking his eyes off the crevice.

'Indeed,' Vabion agreed. The Librarian had to admit that they had been increasing in magnitude. The recent seism, not two weeks previously, had even opened a crack in the wall of the keep. The breach had been easily repaired, but the fact that it had happened at all was a worry. Another sign Vabion had missed? Maybe.

The Librarian forced his thoughts back to the story in hand. 'The sinkhole revealed hidden treasures. A curious farmhand descended into the chasm and discovered an underground chamber, full of alien artefacts.'

Artorius bristled at the description. 'Alien?'

Vabion nodded, staring into the hole on the map's surface as if he could gaze back through time. 'Orath, it became clear, had been sacred to the eldar for centuries, a world of great importance.'

Artorius's brow furrowed. 'But there are no signs of previous civilisation. No ruins or temples.'

'Not on the surface, but beneath the ground.' Vabion could feel himself being scrutinised by Artorius now, as questions no doubt raged through the sergeant's mind. Why hadn't he been told about this? What had been

found? Thankfully, Artorius allowed him to continue, whether he deserved such an honour or not.

'The farmer discovered a chamber full of treasures, a shrine no less. He began trading the artefacts he unearthed, attracting the wrong kind of attention.'

'Some of these artefacts got off world?'

'The fool advertised what he had to offer, broadcasting what he had found to the entire subsector.'

'And he was noticed.'

'The people of Orath knew nothing about the ways of the universe. When the first traders arrived, the farmer greeted them with open arms, but they were just the beginning.'

'The raiders?'

'They descended like locusts, laying waste to the planet. Supply ships were destroyed, crops burned, the locals slaughtered.'

'Xenos scum.'

Vabion nodded. 'The raiders set up a barricade so that no one else could plunder the loot. And so we were summoned.'

Vabion paused for a moment, lost in his memories. His last drop. If he had known back then, would he have taken more care to remember each and every detail? The sound of the clamps being released in high orbit, the bone-shaking vibrations, the blistering heat of re-entry breaking through the heavy shielding, air so hot it singed your throat. Then would come the roar of the retro-thrusters, the realisation you were minutes from impact, seconds sometimes. The concussive jolt before hatches blew clear, the drop pod unfurling like a demented flower of death and destruction. The roar of battle greeting you like an old friend, beckoning you out into the carnage.

Vabion gasped as he found himself back in the past, charging down the still-smouldering ramp, screaming at the raiders: 'Courage and Honour!'

But he never made it to the battlefield, instead he was flying, not by Thunderhawk or even jump pack, but by the force of his own will. He soared higher and higher over Orath, looking down at the gaps in the harvest, swathes of blackened sorghum, broken and rotting. He could still hear the battle far away, the screams of the raiders, the calls of his battle-brothers and behind it, just on the edges of his perception, a low, keening song - accompanied by a deep-rolling laugh.

'Vabion?'

Artorius's voice was like a slap in the face, bringing him to his senses.

'What was that?'

The Librarian realised he was leaning heavily on the stone table.

'A vision. More insistent than the first.'

'The first? What else are you not telling me, Vabion?'

It took all of the Librarian's strength to stand. 'It was an easy victory. The

cowards turned and ran, abandoning their booty with little in the way of a fight. But I had to see it for myself.'

'The farmer's treasure trove?'

Vabion nodded, his head still spinning from the fury of the vision. 'I volunteered to descend into the subterranean chamber myself.'

Now it was Artorius's turn to lean in.

'What did you find?'

Ritan was still fuming as he stomped through the corridors of the keep. It was typical of Meleki, trying to get the upper hand, to make himself look good in Kerna's eyes. He snorted humourlessly. What good would that do him? Kerna fancied himself as Artorius's confidant, but he was the same as the rest of them. Older too. Past his prime. Probably why he was content to babysit this dismal listening post. Ritan would run through checks, performing training runs, but he didn't have to enjoy it, or the company it forced him to keep.

Let Meleki suck up to Kerna. Ritan would prepare for when the Fist of the Fallen returned to their natural environment; when they were knee-pad deep in xenos bodies. Angrily, he swiped his chainsword through empty air, imagining its teeth biting through tyranid hide or ork bulk. Soon, he prayed, make it soon.

Ritan's nose wrinkled, not through frustration for once but something suspicious. He sniffed deeply, his ire suddenly displaced by curiosity. There was something there. A sour odour - almost too faint even for Space Marine senses. Ritan inhaled, feeling his neuroglottis fire as the fort's cool air washed over his tongue. Yes, he was right. A spore in the air; noisome. Toxic.

Without another thought, he drew his bolt pistol with his right hand, the grip of his left tightening around the hilt of his chainsword. He was too far from the refectory, too deep within the main structure, to be troubled by what little food waste the fort produced. No, this was something else, something malevolent. Maybe he would see action on this loathsome ball after all.



## Six

Dain charged up the steps to his hab, his lungs screaming for breath, and flung open the unlocked door. They never threw the bolt, even at night. Why would they? The settlement was safe. Everyone looked out for each other. They were a community.

Or rather they had been until today.

'Alice!' he gasped, running from room to room. 'Where are you?'

'Dain?'

The voice came from upstairs.

'Thank the Throne, are you all right? Something's happened, something bad.'

He raced upstairs, following his wife's voice.

'Dain, I don't feel too good.'

Oh Throne, no, Dain thought, as he heard a fusillade of coughs burst from their bedroom. Please Emperor, not Alice.

He charged into the room. Alice was on the bed, retching into a bucket she'd brought up from the yard.

'Hey, easy now,' Dain said, trying to keep the panic from his voice as he rushed around the bed, his eyes flicking down to Alice's swollen belly.

'That's it. Remember what Ma Serlon used to say? Better out than in.'

Used to. The thought of Ma made his voice catch.

Alice looked up to him with watery eyes. She was deathly pale, a cluster of sores gathered around her usually full lips.

'Dain, what's wrong with me?'

'Now, let's not panic...'

'Dain, the baby!'

'The baby will be fine. There's... a bug going round, that's all. It'll be fine.'

'This is no bug. Look at me!'

Then she swore, but Alice never swore. He was the one who cursed. She would scold him, saying that he wouldn't be able to use that kind of language when their boy was born. He'd laugh and promise he'd change before that happened.

'You need to call Doctor Ligart,' she pleaded with him, grabbing the front of

his shirt.

'No, Ligart can't help.'

'What do you mean? Of course he can.'

'We'll go somewhere else.'

'No, I want Ligart, do you hear?' Alice insisted, her weak voice becoming hysterical. 'Get me Ligart, Dain. Get me Ligart!'

'He's dead, all right?' Dain grabbed his wife's shoulders. Her nightdress was soaked with sweat. 'He can't help anyone, do you understand?'

'Dead?' Alice sobbed, raising a hand to her mouth. The lesions had taken hold there too.

'We'll try the next town. Take next door's skimmer.' They wouldn't need it anymore if they were like the rest. 'Come on.'

'No,' Alice moaned, heaving again. 'I can't. I-I feel too sick.'

'You have to, Alice, do you hear me? For the baby. You have to let me get you away from here.'

Nodding, she tried to stand, but immediately collapsed back in a faint. Dain leapt forward to catch her, sweeping her into his arms. She began hacking again, but threw a shaking arm around his shoulders.

'That's it, honey. I'm just going to take you downstairs.'

Alice was barely conscious by the time Dain struggled out of the hab, her head lolling against him.

'That's it, honey,' Dain encouraged as he carried her over to his next door neighbour's Land Crawler. Melkins never usually minded if he borrowed it - and this was an emergency. If he knew his old friend, the ignition key would be in the cubbyhole beneath the controls. He lowered Alice into the passenger seat and slid the door shut.

'Just relax,' he called as he sprinted around to the driver's seat, 'I'll get you to someone who can help.'

Yeah, but who? he asked himself as he searched for the key, finding it exactly where he'd expected. Good old Melkins. He slammed it into place and thumbed the ignition, looking back towards the centre of the village. The spires of Fort Kerberos rose in the distance.

'The Angels of Death,' he whispered beneath his breath, immediately regretting his use of the Space Marine's nickname. 'They'll be able to help, Alice. They know stuff, more than Ligart ever did. We'll go there, ask for sanctuary. They'll know what to do. Just hang in there. This won't take long, I promise.'

He thought Alice said something, so he leant in, trying to ignore how bad his wife smelt. Like a corpse.

'What's that?'

But Alice wasn't talking; she was singing, a shapeless tune that Dain had never heard before, but that had to be better, right?

'That's it. Keep singing. You'll be all right. Both of you.'

The Land Crawler lurched forward.

'I promise you, baby. It'll be fine.'

The more Ritan followed the trail, the stronger the spores became. He marched through areas of the fort he had never been, nondescript corridors, dust-filled storerooms. The place was a veritable labyrinth, although why it needed to house so many rooms when only a handful of Space Marines were posted here at one time, Ritan could not imagine.

The air was thick with contaminants now, leading him on through a large dim chamber, a large stone relief covering the far wall. The Imperial aquila. You could tell this place was built by Ultramarines. Ostentatious idiots.

He stormed into another corridor only to find that the trail had gone cold. Ritan took another breath. The air was clear.

Ritan turned, cautiously walking back into the aquila chamber, his eyes narrowing. While the other rooms he'd explored were full of equipment, this space was empty. He glanced down at the flagstones, noticing another difference. Every other floor in the keep was laid in simple lines, each sand-coloured tile staggered against the next. It was a pattern duplicated on floors throughout the Imperium, from high cathedrals to lowly garden paths. Not so here. This chamber boasted a distinctive motif.

A large circular stone sat at the centre of the room, curved slabs spreading out to form a round shape, ringed by a darker stone rim. It looked like a giant wheel set into the floor.

Ritan stooped, placing his chainsword on the floor and removing a glove. He ran a finger on the grooves between the rings nearest the edge of the design. The inner stones were held in place with rough grout, but the crack between the sand-coloured slabs and the darker fringe were free of the mortar. Those stones felt like they were packed close together, held by nothing but the pressure of the stones on either side.

The Doom Eagle sat back on his haunches, pulling his glove back on, and inhaled once more. The toxins in the air were more intense than ever. He reached up, toggling a control on the edge of his ocular implant. The lenses whirled and clicked and the implant cycled through all available filters. Electromagnetics, heat, energy signatures, infrared.

'There you are.'

He could see them now, illuminated by the filter, spiralling like glowing dustmotes in the air. He swept the room, lingering on the large image of the aquila. There were more of the spores, not floating in front of the carved sigil but smeared across its surface in five livid groups - each roughly the shape of a human hand.

Ritan stood, retrieving his chainsword, and walked across the circular tiles towards the aquila. It was huge, stretching the length of the wall, the full span of a Space Marine's arms. He examined the stains, each increasing in intensity as they ran across the eagle's body; on the tip of the left wing, the left foot, the right beak, right shoulder and finally, the third from last feather on the right wing.

'A pattern, but for what purpose?'

Without pausing Ritan reached up, pressing his gloved fingers against the first rapidly fading patch.

The stone wing gave way beneath his fingertips. The movement was almost imperceptible, but it was there, accompanied by a faint but discernible click. He moved across the relief pressing each spot in turn. Again the mechanical clicks repeated themselves. By the time Ritan depressed the bird's shoulder, he could feel vibrations shifting beneath his feet, a series of deep resounding thuds as if ancient machinery was falling into place.

Turning to face the circular motif on the floor, Ritan all but slammed his palm on the final feather and was rewarded by the sound of gears grinding heavily against each other.

If Ritan was surprised when the centre of the tiled wheel started to fall away, he didn't show it. His face might as well have been carved from the same stone as the aquila. The central rings of the design dropped down, tile edges squealing uncomfortably against each other before the entire thing rolled to the side, hidden beneath the rest of the floor.

Almost immediately, lume-globes flamed into life within the entrance that had opened, revealing a large spiral staircase that dropped down into shadows far below. The steps were thick and wide, designed for broad feet, each worn in the centre by centuries of heavy boots tramping up and down.

'Leading where?'

Curiously, Ritan took the first step, noticing how well his own boot matched the indentation. A Space Marine then? One of their own.

'And for what purpose?' Ritan growled as he made a decision. Other men would have gone back to report what he had found - other men like Kerna. But what would Artorius command? That they explore, ascertain what lay hidden at the bottom of the mysterious stairwell. Why wait? It would be better to discover for himself, and then report back to the sergeant, armed with facts and not mysteries.

If this was a threat to the bastion, then Artorius would want to know. He would demand to know.

No hesitation. No fear. Only duty.

Clutching his weapons tightly, Ritan began his descent.

'What now?' Dain cursed as he was forced to slow the Land Crawler. He hadn't thought anything of the flies at first. A couple of the fat insects had splattered against the windscreen, usual for this time of year, but then he'd realised the air was teeming with the things.

The nearer he got to the centre of town, the worse the swarm became. The skimmer was plastered by their bodies now, sickly green fluid splashed all over the screen, so thick he could barely see. How could it have got this bad? He'd only been here half an hour ago. Dain flicked the wipers, but it only made things worse, smearing the gore back and forth.

Beside him, Alice started to hack again, a deep rattling cough sending her body into convulsions.

'Easy, now,' Dain said, desperately trying to remain calm. He reached across and placed a hand on her arm, withdrawing it quickly when he felt the soft edges of the weeping blisters. 'We'll get through this soon. The Space Marines will help us.'

They have to, he thought, wiping his hand on his trouser leg and coughing himself. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, noticing the red welts rising up beneath the skin. He couldn't get sick as well. He just couldn't.

The Land Crawler stuttered, the engine stalling, pitching Dain forward in his seat.

'I don't believe it. The bloody things must have got into the intake.'

A bloat fly murmured past his head.

'They're in here too.' Dain swatted at the insect as the skimmer stalled. 'I'll have to check the engine.'

He reached for the door handle, but stopped when Alice doubled over, retching heavily. It was then he realised that the flies seemed to be flitting around her head.

'Baby?' he asked, as his wife offered him scared eyes. Her body heaved and Dain shifted back in his seat, expected to be covered in the contents of her stomach - but Alice wasn't sick. Instead, his wife spewed a swarm of angry flies right into his face. Dain screamed, trying to protect himself from the bugs with one hand, scrabbling with the door control with the other.

The door swung up and he fell back, his head smacking against the road. The insects were all over him, streaming out of the Land Crawler, stinging his eyes, pushing their way into his mouth, their drone-like thunder in his ears.

Calling for Alice, he tried to get back into the cab, but was pushed back by the sheer number of the flies. They covered him from head to foot, nipping at exposed skin, feeding on the sores that were erupting along his flesh. He bit down, feeling their hairy bodies pop between his teeth. They were scrabbling across his tongue, forcing themselves down his throat, clambering into his ear canals, his nose.

Dain managed to take three or four steps before collapsing to the floor, no longer able to breathe. Not that such an inconvenience would be a problem for long. Soon he would rise again, they all would. Ithell. Ligart. Ma and Pa Serlon - even his darling Alice. They would no longer need to draw breath, wouldn't even remember who they were. One urge would consume them. One need. To serve He who had blessed them. All other thoughts forgotten.

But, lying there, in the dirt, Dain could still remember his unborn child - and cursed the Emperor for letting this happen to them.



## Seven

The staircase seemed never-ending, guiding Ritan deeper and deeper beneath the fortress. The air was stale, but still full of the spores that danced in front of him, the trail fresher than ever.

When he finally reached the bottom, the Doom Eagle found himself standing in a long, sloping corridor that curved around ahead. The lume-globes had gone, replaced by sodium torches that threw flickering shadows against the cambered ceiling.

Ritan ran his fingers against the walls. Their construction had changed too. This wasn't rockcrete, but a material Ritan had never seen before, almost like bone or ivory.

'What is this place?' Ritan hissed, his words echoing along the strange corridor.

Almost in response, another voice drifted back towards him. A sob. Someone was down here with him.

'Identify yourself,' he called out, his challenge reverberating along the walls. There was no response, save for more wails, not far away.

Ritan started forward, his bolt pistol held level. 'This is a stronghold of the Adeptus Astartes. Show yourself and state your business.'

The Doom Eagle followed the twisting corridor until the sight that greeted him caused him to falter for the first time in his life.

The hololith shifted in front of Artorius, the planet blurring to be replaced by a sprawling chamber. The high-vaulted ceiling was suspended on impossibly thin buttresses that swept gracefully up from a floor covered in intricate hieroglyphs. Between each column, alcoves were set into the gem-encrusted walls, cogitator screens flashing with a thousand scrolling eldar runes.

The sergeant's mouth pulled into a snarl. What might have been beautiful for some was nothing more than blasphemy to the Space Marines.

The sergeant jabbed a finger towards a tall crystalline structure in the middle of the shrine. 'What is that?'

Vabion continued his story. 'At first we thought it nothing more than a false idol.'

The Librarian's fingers played across the controls. 'Then I discovered these.'

The image zoomed into the far wall, highlighting a series of simple pictograms. Stylised figures cowered before an arcane sigil - two rings joined by what looked like a jagged bolt of lightning. While the uppermost ring was unbroken, the lower of the two was shattered, as if flying apart. Vabion pointed towards the image. 'I believe this rune represents a rift in the warp - a rift the eldar discovered running directly through the planet.' 'A rift?' Artorius's hand instinctively dropped to the hilt of his chainsword. 'Think of it as a fault line running through creation.' Vabion manipulated the controls and the hololith shifted back to the crystal. 'The pictograms suggest that the eldar managed to stabilise the rift using these crystals, sealing it by means of technology we've yet to understand.'

The image rotated, giving Artorius a 360 degree view of the structure. The massive crystal shard protruded from a raised dais, flashes of energy coruscating at its glinting heart.

'What is it made from?'

Vabion shook his head. 'I've studied the Great Keys for two hundred years and still cannot tell you.'

Artorius glanced up at the name.

'Keys?' he asked, 'Plural.'

The controls beeped as Vabion shifted the image back to a view of the planet. The hololith span so the sinkhole was located at the planet's uppermost point.

'From what I have deciphered, the eldar called them the Keys of Vaul. The first is here, beneath our feet.' The psyker indicated the pulsing red dot that represented the shrine. 'And the second is on the other side of the planet, exactly matching the first.' Another bead of light began to throb at the bottom of the orange translucent globe.

'Beneath Fort Garm,' rumbled Artorius, his arms folded tight across his monumental chest.

The hololith zoomed back into the site of the sinkhole, a three-dimensional representation of Fort Kerberos's building brick by brick.

'The garrisons were established to protect the shrines, on my recommendation. As soon as I approached the first Key I could feel the darkness it was holding at bay.'

'And if the Keys were removed?' The question hung in the air for a second as the Librarian met the sergeant's gaze.

'I am not sure. I volunteered to remain on Orath as permanent custodian of the shrines, charged with studying the Keys, trying to gauge the threat. Two centuries have passed and I am still no nearer to an answer.'

'But the cogitators in the shrine?'

'The glyphs are unlike any we've seen before. I have translated scraps of data, but the results are cryptic at best. My best theory is that the programme the network is running is some kind of hex, a charm against the destructive power of Chaos.'

'And, so we have no idea if the rift may be relatively small...'

'...or another Eye of Terror.' Vabion nodded. 'We do not know. The ancient eldar took their secrets with them. Certainly the danger was great enough to warrant building the shrines themselves.'

The Librarian fell silent, letting the sergeant process the information. Artorius's jaw was set, a solitary muscle pulsing in beat with his anger, but when he spoke his voice was steady, controlled.

'So over time, the shrines were forgotten, hidden away from sight. Everyone who knew of them dead...'

'Or silenced,' Vabion admitted.

'Except you.' The statement was pointed. The Librarian knew where this line of questioning was heading.

'We kept the shrines' existence secret from everyone, including those charged with guarding them.'

The sergeant shook his head.

'Listening posts, on a seemingly insignificant agri-world.'

'A useful cover. The information they provide is of use to the Imperium...'

'But they really exist to ensure no one discovers the existence of these Keys,' Artorius stated flatly, shaking his head. 'So why tell me? Because of your visions?'

Vabion extinguished the hololith. 'Partly. But also due to something I noticed during our journey back from Garm. The crops are...' He faltered, his head spinning. 'The crops...'

When he replied, Artorius's voice sounded as if it was bubbling up through water. 'What about the crops? Vabion?'

But the Librarian couldn't answer, he was falling forwards, raising his hands to protect his face from the stone table, preparing for the sudden impact; the impact that never came.

He was flying, soaring over the fields of golden cereal once again, the sun burning the back of his neck, the roar of the wind filling his ears. Vabion threw back his head and laughed, overwhelmed by the experience. He felt alive. More alive than he had for years.

He swept down, swooping lower over the harvest.

'Look at it. There's nothing wrong, no sign of blight at all.'

He threw his arms wide, rising back up into the air.

'The crops are strong, the air fresh. Orath is as bountiful as ever.'

The words were hardly out of Vabion's mouth when the chill he had experienced fell over him. He looked up, squinting into the brilliant sun. Clouds were moving in from the east, faster than he'd ever seen, their shadows sucking the colour from the corn below.

In a second they had smothered the sky, blocking out the sun, plunging the world into darkness. Bitter winds buffeted the Librarian, forcing him to a standstill. Vabion hung in the air, unable to move forward, but straining not to be blown back.

Something crackled far beneath him. He looked down to see channels appearing in the carpet of green, great swathes of the harvest flattening as if trampled by invisible giants rushing this way and that. Stalks snapping, seeds bursting in their cobs, oozing out of the withering leaves like thick, black molasses.

'This isn't random,' Vabion realised, watching the trails of disease streak out towards the horizon. 'There's a pattern forming.'

But what? He needed to rise, to gain more height. He looked to the clouds, despairing as he saw they'd been whipped into a broiling maelstrom above his head. Lightning flashed from the churning vortex, a tremulous laugh rolling like thunder across the ravaged plains, the same laugh he had heard before. Deep. Wet.

Vabion screamed as the first bolt of lightning struck him, frying the flesh on his bones. He tried to escape, to find shelter, but couldn't move - caught in the web of electricity that blazed from the heart of the storm, surging through his body.

'Vabion!'

The voice called to him above the din of the storm. He threw out a blackened hand, desperate to be saved, but couldn't speak, his tongue boiled away.

'Vabion, come back to me! Vabion!'

It was like hitting an air pocket. One minute there was noise and clamour and pain and fear and then... nothing, save for the buzz of Artorius's cogitator.

'Cias?'

'I'm here, Appius. I've got you.'

Vabion realised he was on his back, staring up at the ceiling of Artorius's command quarters in confusion.

'What did you see, Vabion?' the sergeant asked, not wasting time to enquire after the Librarian's health or state of mind. Ever practical.

'We need to patrol the area.' Vabion grabbed Artorius's arm, letting the sergeant help him back to his feet. 'Ritan and I did a sweep earlier looking for gaps in the crops.'

'For signs of disease?'

Vabion didn't need to reply.

'I will send the Stormtalons on patrol,' Artorius said, grabbing his helm, 'have them report anything unusual.'

Vabion nodded, trying to control the waves of nausea that were still threatening to overcome him. He had never experienced a vision so palpable.

'And I must check on the Key.'



## Eight

Falk cried out as pain surged through his body. Muscles burned. Tendons snapped. Bones shattered, knitting together in forms they were never designed to take, before splintering again a moment later. He could feel his skin bubbling, his mouth full of the bitter tang of blood and bile. It was as if every cell in his body was being torn apart, unseen hands clawing at him from the inside.

It was heaven.

You have come far, Falk. You have done well.

'You are pleased with me?' Falk gibbered, his voice sounding alien in his own ears.

Most pleased. You are blessed.

'I am blessed,' the serf repeated, smiling wildly. His parched lips cracked as they stretched over diseased gums.

Falk had no idea how long it had taken to find this place. Minutes or hours, time had little meaning anymore. There was only pain - exquisite, beautiful pain - and the song, drowning everything else out.

He hadn't known where he was going. He'd never seen some of the corridors before, never been permitted to explore the keep.

They wouldn't let you. Didn't trust you.

He had just followed the song. Every step had been agony, every breath a living hell, but as he'd staggered into the aquila chamber the chorus had swollen to a crescendo. The blithest sound he had ever heard. Rapture.

How he had laughed when he had been shown how to open the entrance to the staircase. The truth of Fort Kerberos hidden in plain sight.

'They thought they could keep it from me,' he spat as his spine twisted into a new pattern. 'Didn't deem me worthy.'

They will pay. For their deception, for their arrogance.

'For how they have treated me all these years.'

Like you did not exist.

'Like I was nothing.'

But you are everything, Falk.

'I am your salvation.'

Our deliverance.

'I have joined the song.'

You are the song.

'I am the song...'

It had always been there, the song. He knew that now. He had heard it in his mother's womb, when he was pushed out into the world. When he had pledged his life to becoming an Ultramarine.

When he had failed the trials.

No. They failed you.

The song was never-ending. Eternal. It would be sung long after he had gone to dust.

No, you will never die. You will sing the song forever.

'Who is there?'

Falk gasped. Another voice. Gruff. Accusatory. One he thought he remembered.

'Show yourself.'

Demanding to be heard.

They want to drown out the song.

'They can't. The song is everything. The song is all.'

They want to silence the song. To silence you. They always have.

Falk snarled. Never again. Things were different now. He was different.

'This is your last warning...' the voice insisted.

They must pay for what they have done.

'They must die,' Falk decided.

'Meleki, where is Kerna?'

Meleki looked up to see Artorius striding towards the Stormtalons, his red helm tucked beneath his arm.

Jerius answered for the young pilot. 'Brother Kerna is offering his thanks for a safe journey.'

'In the chapel?'

'Yes sir,' Meleki replied.

Artorius nodded. 'Go and fetch him. Jerius, begin pre-flight checks.'

'We are going on patrol?' Meleki asked, confused. No flights were scheduled until tonight's battle practice.

'I need you to perform a sweep of the area around the fort.'

'How wide?'

'A fifty kilometre radius.'

'Understood.'

'And if that doesn't show anything, repeat at one hundred kilometres. You are looking for signs of disease in the crops. Any signs at all.'

'In the crops?' Meleki repeated, intrigued, before Jerius cut in.

'Do not question the sergeant's orders.'

Meleki felt his face flush. 'I am sorry, sir, I meant no disrespect.'

Artorius waved away the apology. 'There will be a full briefing on your

return.'

'But, if we're searching for signs of blight...' Meleki continued, knowing full well that his question would prompt another scowl from Jerius.

Artorius paused, searching the young pilot's eyes. Meleki was convinced he'd overstepped the mark and was preparing to apologise once again when the sergeant finally spoke up.

'There have been too many secrets in this place.'

'Sir?'

'There is a potential rift running through this planet.'

Meleki couldn't stifle his reaction. 'In the warp?' Beside him even Jerius shifted where he stood, hand dropping to his bolter, servo-arms whirring forward as if ready for attack.

Artorius nodded. 'Any disease in the harvest may simply be a natural occurrence, but we cannot take any risks. Vabion is checking his...'

Another pause.

'...his equipment. In the meantime, I need you both in the air as soon as possible.'

Meleki nodded sharply, the gravity of the situation only now beginning to sink in. 'I shall fetch Kerna at once.'

He excused himself, heading for the Space Marine chapel where he would find the more experienced pilot deep in prayer. As he crossed the courtyard, the Doom Eagle felt a sudden thrill. A breach in the warp, here on Orath. He found himself praying they would find something, rebuking himself immediately. Such thoughts were forbidden. Was he actually hoping to find daemonic activity on this peaceful world? Didn't he realise what that would mean?

Meleki couldn't fight the smile that tugged against the corners of his mouth. Defending the Imperium from the forces of Chaos. A chance to serve the Emperor.

Surely hoping for that wasn't a sin.

Ritan couldn't believe what he was seeing. An alien shrine hidden beneath a Space Marine base. What treachery was this? What desecration?

He took a step forward, never letting his gun drop for a second. In front of him a shimmering shard of crystal rose from a series of steps in the centre of the vast room, the light of cogitators that lined the unnaturally smooth walls reflecting off its translucent surfaces.

Suddenly everything slotted into place.

'Vabion?' Ritan called out, coming to a stop beside the crystal. He felt a prickling across his skin. Emperor only knew what unholy purpose the artefact served. 'Is that you, in the shadows? Where you belong?'

Someone moved behind one of the curved buttresses.

'Is this why you engineered your posting to this miserable world? Forbidden knowledge from a xenos temple?'

There was no answer. He started forward again, slowly, preparing for

attack.

'It makes sense,' Ritan continued, his ocular implant switching to heat vision. Yes, there was someone hiding there. Someone big. 'You disappear for hours at a time, no one ever asking why.'

He could hear Kerna now. 'Do not question a senior officer. Do your duty.'

Sycophantic fool.

'Kerna is in awe of you, of the Ultramarines. Blinded by past glories. Not me. I see you for what you are.' A thought occurred to him. 'Maybe he's involved. Is that it? Is Kerna in league with you? What have you offered him?'

Another doubt came to mind. If Kerna was part of the plot, whatever it was, what about Artorius? No. He found that hard to believe - although the very fact that the sergeant had allowed himself to be deceived was somehow more disappointing. Ritan had looked up to Artorius. Thought him a good man. He wouldn't make that mistake again.

'Won't you come out and face me, traitor? What is it your Chapter says? Courage and Honour?' Ritan snorted in derision. 'You have neither.'

He was almost at the buttress now, his trigger finger itching to fire. Then he cocked his head, listening intently.

'Are you singing?' The man had obviously lost his mind. 'Will you sing when I drag you back to the surface to pay for your crimes? Or will you beg for forgiveness?'

'Will we beg, he asks,' a voice replied and not the one Ritan was expecting. It was thick with mucus. 'We are past begging, past bowing and scraping to the likes of him.' Thick with hate. 'The real question is whether he will beg, to us. For mercy.'

That was enough. Ritan wasn't going to suffer such impertinence, not from Vabion, not from anyone. He stepped around the buttress, bolter steady and sure in his hand. 'In the Emperor's name, I demand you...'

Reveal yourself. That is what he was going to say - but he wasn't given the opportunity.

The flail cracked out of the shadow, slicing against Ritan's face, sending out a spray of red mist. The Doom Eagle staggered against the support arch, pain blossoming across his cheek.

'No more demands,' the voice bellowed over the ringing of his ears. 'No more orders.'

Another lash, splitting the red aquila on his chestplate, gouging the muscle beneath.

'Not possible,' Ritan wheezed, looking down at his chest in shock, the wounds already begin to fester. 'What are you?'

His ocular implant shattered, deep furrows appearing across his cheek, his teeth smashed from his jaws.

'Salvation,' the fiend screamed. 'Deliverance.'

Ritan fired wildly, the thunderous report of his bolter echoing around the chamber, drowning out his assailant's shrieks - only to be silenced when the flail came down hard on his gun arm, smashing ceramite, shredding muscle. He cried out, his legs buckling, bolt pistol slipping from his grasp. He felt so weak. So helpless.

'Can't be happening,' he panted, his entire body shaking as he dropped to his knees. 'I am. A Doom. Eagle.'

'You are dead!' the voice exalted, breaking into a peal of manic laughter. 'You are nothing.'

Another strike, across his pauldron, into his shoulder, scraping against bone. Ritan tried to look up, tried to focus in the dim light of the shrine. He could barely move, his muscles failing, limbs impossibly heavy. He knew his chainsword was still in his hand, but couldn't even lift it.

The figure in front of him blurred, then came into sharp relief, causing his already pounding hearts to thud all the faster in his ruined chest.

'You're a serf...' Ritan gasped in amazement, the muscles in his neck bunching.

'He recognises us,' the creature screamed in glee, 'at last!'

There was no mistaking the tattered, stained cloak that hung from the monster's back, or the small human head that sat preposterously on top of a pair of heaving shoulders. The servant's body was mutating before his eyes, tumours erupting across its chest, muscles clustering beneath corrupted flesh. One arm was withered, hanging limply, while the other had been replaced by the long meaty flail, yellowing bones jutting from ulcerated gashes.

'But can he tell us our name?' the serf drooled, suddenly snapping the flail across Ritan's side. The Doom Eagle gagged, unable to whimper, let alone cry out. 'Does he know who we are?'

Ritan tried to feel for his chainsword, but his fingers wouldn't respond, his entire arm numb. White foam frothed on his slack lips, his good eye slowly closing as his face swelled. Whatever pestilence was swarming through his body, it was too great even for a Space Marine's superior healing abilities.

'Did he not hear us?' the serf-thing cackled, delivering another toxic blow. 'Does he not know?'

Do I know what? Ritan wondered, feeling his grip on the world slip. He barely knew where he was. Couldn't even be sure who he was. All he wanted to do was rest, to be free of the pain, of the demented voice, yelling at him. So angry.

He thought he should pray, but couldn't remember how. Instead he started humming the song that throbbed at the back of his head.

The comforting, tuneless song.



## Nine

'No!' Vabion breathed.

The fact that someone had found the shrine was enough of a shock. That it was left open was inconceivable.

'Two hundred years,' The Librarian muttered, stepping cautiously into the aquila chamber. 'Two hundred years and no one has come close to discovering you.'

That in itself was a lie. A few had almost stumbled on the secret of Kerberos, but Vabion had worked hard to ensure the truth remained hidden. He had been forced to do some terrible things - but this was different.

He stared at the staircase, his grip tightening around his force sword, a sickening feeling settling in his stomach.

The place stank of the warp.

'Something corrupted has walked this way,' he said, as if uttering the words could somehow protect him from the dark forces at play. 'Something unhallowed.'

Vabion dropped on one knee, leaning on his sword, the sharp point pressing into the stone slabs.

'Protect me, oh Lord, as I protect others.

Deliver me, oh Lord, as I deliver others from damnation.

You are mighty. Your enemies are weak.

You are truth. Your enemies are lies.

You are victorious. Your enemies are lost.

I will bind them in Your glory,

Smite them in Your name.

Your will be done.'

Thumping his chestplate with an armoured fist, Vabion rose to his feet, his mind clear and his purpose true.

His will be done.

The Librarian trod the steps he had walked so many, many times - ignoring the nagging fear that told him that the battle was already lost, no matter how many prayers he uttered.

The skies of Orath reverberated to the sound of the Stormtalons. Kerna sank back into his harness, feeling the rumble of the engine surge through his body. He had been asked before why he had never pushed for promotion, why he remained happy to serve the Emperor as a pilot. Others took his reluctance to scale the chain of command as a lack of ambition, but it was simply a case of knowing one's place in the universe. He belonged here, in a Stormtalon's cockpit, feeling the vibrations rise up the stick he held in his hands, the roar of the stabilisers in his ear, knowing he could bring death raining down from the skies on their enemies at any moment.

Up here, the years weighed less, the burden of his service easier to bear. Death would come, there was no changing that, but here, at the controls of the Heart of Sorrow, he would always make a difference.

'The Emperor is our protection,' Kerna said to himself, recalling the invocation he had learnt when he had first taken to the skies of Gathis II. 'The Emperor is our guide. And we shall be His teeth.'

He opened the Heart's throttle and felt the Stormtalon respond, increasing in speed without hesitation. Doom Eagle through and through.

'Kerna, come in.' Meleki's eager voice broke through the vox-line.

'I hear you, Meleki,' the older pilot responded.

'Look to your eight o'clock.'

Kerna did as instructed, scanning the horizon.

'Do you see them?'

'Hard not to,' Kerna replied. 'Low hanging clouds.'

'Are you sure they're clouds?'

The lad was right. The clouds were dark, heavy, but so near the ground, localised to small areas. Kerna tapped the runes on his display screen, zooming the Stormtalon's nose piktors into the nearest cloud mass.

'Twenty kilometres away,' he muttered to himself.

'And another to the south-west. Much larger.'

'I see it.'

'Kerna, isn't that the location of the human settlement?'

'I am afraid it is.'

Kerna heard a growl to starboard and glanced through the canopy. Meleki had brought his Stormtalon, The Endurance of Gathis, to Kerna's wing.

'They could be fires.'

'Possible,' Kerna acknowledged, but his gut told him they were anything but. If what Artorius had told Meleki was true, a few cereal fires were the best they could hope for. He thumbed a toggle on the vox. 'Kerna to base. Unidentified cloud formations sighted due west of Kerberos. Will investigate.'

'Understood, Kerna.' The pilot raised his eyebrows. Artorius himself was manning the vox. He had expected to hear Ritan's contemptuous tones. The sergeant was taking this threat seriously. 'What about the harvest?'

Kerna twisted in his seat, looking down through the reinforced canopy.

'Definite signs of disease, sir.'

'Over how big an area?'

'As far as the eye can see.'

There was a silence at the other end of the vox-line, then: 'Meleki, swing around and head towards the grox farms to the south. We need to know if this is limited to arable crops.'

Kerna turned, seeing the younger steersman nodding within the Endurance.

'Understood. Will report back.'

Meleki immediately dropped his left wing, swooping below the Heart. To the south of Fort Kerberos, the crops gave way to vast hangars, each housing thousands of lobotomised grox, bred intensively for their meat.

'Keep in constant communication,' Kerna instructed Meleki as he gunned the Heart towards the nearest swirling black cloud. 'Let me know what you find.'

'Likewise,' came the reply.

The descent had been difficult, both physically and mentally. Even with the protection of his psychic hood, Vabion had been shocked with the intensity of the warp energies that rushed up to greet him, wave after wave. He had been forced to stop numerous times and place a hand on the wall to steady himself.

A song was playing through his mind.

The song he had heard in his vision.

Now he stood at the foot of the stairwell, preparing himself to stride forward, trying to block the tuneless dirge that seemed to emanate from the stones themselves.

'You must be strong,' he told himself, 'to overcome whatever lies ahead.'

The words bolstered him. The Emperor was with him. He was sure of that. What was it his Doom Eagle cousins said?

'Ah, yes,' he murmured. 'No hesitation.'

The Ultramarine marched towards the threshold of the shrine, exploring the eldar's sacred space with his mind.

'I know you are here,' he declared, striding into the chamber. 'I know what you want. And I know I will defeat you.'

'He is confident,' came the shrill reply, a voice Vabion found familiar. He made straight for the Key, climbing the three shallow steps on the dais, feeling the crystal's familiar pressure against his mind. At first, the shard's strange energies had been a frustration, a puzzle that needed to be solved. Now, after all these years they were a comfort. Like an old friend.

He placed a palm on the crystal, the malicious presence in the chamber subsiding. He allowed himself a moment drawing strength from the mysterious crystal, staring into the flickering lightning trapped at its heart.

Then he closed his eyes, focusing deeply. It was a ritual he had performed thousands of times before. Imagining he could see every inch of the shard's translucent surface at once, searching for flaws.

'There...'

The revelation hit him with such force that he nearly reeled back, stumbling from the platform. Not opening his eyes, he tracked the fault, running his hand to the base of the crystal, where the shard plunged into the wraithbone seal.

He could see it in his mind, highlighted as if aglow. A hairline crack in the surface, no more than a few centimetres.

But that is all it would take.

For a moment, Vabion's mind jumped, away from the shrine. He was back in the rolling skies, higher than any vision so far. As always, the rot was spreading in the sorghum, forming its patterns.

'No, not just any pattern.' Vabion flinched at the sight. An all too familiar sigil. 'No. Not here. Not now.'

'He's found it,' the voice cheered, pulling the Librarian back to the shrine. 'Found the imperfection.'

Vabion rose unsteadily to his feet.

'It was the earthquake, wasn't it,' Vabion said, stepping down from the dais.

'That's what your masters used to fracture the Key.'

As he talked, Vabion explored the darkness with psychic tendrils, immediately recoiling as they brushed against a lost mind.

'You are right to cower,' he announced, holding his force sword with both hands as he crossed the rune-covered floor. 'I will send you back to whatever hell you have been dragged from. You have no place here.'

'No place he says,' the strident voice came back. 'The arrogance. Always the same.'

'You speak as if you know me.'

'Oh, we do.'

'Then show yourself.'

'That's what the other one said.'

'The other?'

'Show yourself. Show yourself. Over and over. He fell, fell so far. Come and see.'

The stench hit Vabion at once. He had been concentrating so much on the psychic realm that he had blanked out the real world - but it was now impossible to ignore. He felt his gorge rise as his eyes fell upon something sprawled next to one of the buttresses.

No. Not something. Someone.

'Ritan!'

Not that Vabion could recognise the Doom Eagle from his face. The warrior was on his back, one arm reaching for his discarded chainsword. Bubbling flesh seeped through lacerated power armour, pooling beneath the ceramite. Only the eye implant slowly sinking into the mass of tumours that used to be Ritan's once-proud face betrayed his identity.

'Does he see now?' the sibilant voice continued. 'Does he realise nothing

can save him? Not his witchcraft. Not his husk of a god.'

'He is greater than yours,' Vabion snapped, barely keeping his temper in check. Ritan had been an insufferable pup at times, but he hadn't deserved his fate. 'The Holy Father will protect me. I am an Ultramarine. No daemon will have my soul.'

He felt the blow coming before it struck, lashing across his back, stripping the armour away in one strike.

Vabion span, bringing his sword down despite the pain, slicing through excrescent-smearred flesh. His attacker fell back, gaping at the stump where its plague flail had been. The repulsive extremity thrashed at his feet like a wounded snake before the afflicted skin burst, spilling wriggling maggots over the gleaming floor.

The Ultramarine didn't wait for another opportunity. He dived forward, burying his sword deep within the beast's misshapen flesh - but the real damage was yet to come.

The Librarian opened his mind to the warp itself, channelling its terrible energies down the blade, into the creature's body. The aberration bellowed in pain, its humped back exploding in a cascade of brilliant, cleansing balefire. Corrupted matter and twisted bones splattered across the shrine as Vabion yanked his weapon free, dragging the mutant forward, down on its knees.

The monstrosity lurched forward, retching on the floor, a deluge of ichor splattering across Vabion's feet. The Librarian watched disgusted as the body shrank, like a deflating balloon.

'This is for Ritan,' Vabion barked, raising his sword high above his head, the pox-ridden traitor almost at its original size.

'Wait,' the pawn wailed, looking up at its would-be executioner. 'Tell us... tell me one thing.'

Vabion's eyes narrowed, wondering if this was a final, desperate trick.

'What do you want to know?' he growled, curiosity getting the better of him.

'Do you know my name?'

Vabion brought his sword down, severing the serf's neck. The body flopped into the mess on the floor, the head rolling to the side, eyes wide and unseeing.

'Yes,' Vabion uttered, finally feeling the pain that raged across his back.

'Your name was Falk.'

The Librarian sank to his knees, shuddering as his body fought the pestilence the plague flail had delivered.

'You are my protection,' he prayed, leaning on his sword as he had before. 'You are my deliverance. You...'

The sound of a voice singing made Vabion pause.

Not just any voice.

Falk's voice.

Vabion opened his eyes and found himself staring into the eyes of the serf, eyes very much alive, eyes filled with malice.

'Join the song,' the decapitated head giggled.

Vabion didn't have time to react. Fresh agony coursed through his back, not caused by Falk's previous attack, but by a new, unexpected weapon. As blood bubbled to his lips, the Ultramarine looked down in amazement to see a barbed spearhead sticking out of his chest, transfixing him to the floor.

Even as he cried out in pain and surprise, the Librarian heard the noise he had dreaded from the moment he had set foot in the shrine over two hundred years ago. The sound of the Great Key beginning to shatter.

The force sword fell from his hands, clattering across the floor, as he watched heavily corroded boots stalk around Falk's body, stopping directly in front of him.

The Librarian tried to look up at the newcomer, but the spear twisted savagely in his chest. A vice-like pressure gripped his body, his vision bleaching.

'One of his hearts is stopping, master,' babbled the head. 'Are you pleased? Did we do well?'

Vabion gasped for a breath that would not come.

'You did wonderfully,' said a foul voice drenched in corruption.

'Will we receive our reward?' Falk asked hopefully.

'Without question.' One of the heavy boots reared up for a second, before stamping down on the serf's abscessed head, crushing it to a pulp. 'As will you, custodian. As will you.'

Vabion's body began to convulse, shaking as his augs fought the infections. He still couldn't see his tormentors, but knew what they were.

'Plague Marines,' Vabion sneered, naming his enemies, the first step to controlling them. 'Tainted by Nurgle. Cursed.'

His captor laughed, grinding the remains of Falk's skull beneath his boot.

'Not tainted, Librarian. Blessed.'



## Ten

Kerna tipped the nose of the Heart of Sorrow, swooping towards the strange cloud Meleki had spotted on the horizon. It was much larger than he'd originally estimated, blossoming out across the surrounding fields even as he watched.

'What are you seeing?' Meleki's voice was heavy with interference over the vox-line.

'It's no fire,' Kerna reported, slowing the Stormtalon, 'but I'm not sure it's cloud either. What about you?'

'It's the same here. Like a veil stretching across the grox farms.'

'Any sign of livestock?'

'They would be inside even if I could see, but there's no sign of activity. No workers, vehicles. Nothing at all.'

Kerna made a decision. 'I am going to take the Heart down...'

'Into the cloud?'

The pilot nodded, even though his battle-brother couldn't see. 'The jet wash may clear the fog, let me see what is happening beneath.'

'Understood.'

Meleki was learning. Not long ago, he would have questioned the decision, suggested an alternative - but there must be no hesitation.

'Stand by.' Kerna hit the airbrakes, slowing the Stormtalon, while simultaneously reaching for the vector controls. It was a manoeuvre he had performed time and time again. As the retro-thrusters fired, the gunship's wings began to rotate with a clank of gears, the Heart's engines swivelling down to face the cloud itself. Within seconds the Stormtalon was hovering above its target, waiting for the command to drop. Kerna glanced out of the canopy and began the descent; the thrusters roaring like a Gathis mountain lion.

He peered closer, glyphs flashing across his helm as the cogitator struggled to analyse the swirling mass.

It wasn't until the Heart's weapon stacks dipped beneath the cloud that Kerna realised his mistake. A black dot shot up from the whirling mass, heading straight for the cockpit. Kerna didn't have time to react until its

oversized, hairy body slammed into the canopy, livid guts splattering in a wide arc. Then there were more of them, throwing themselves at the Stormtalon as if trying to smash their way through. They rattled against the canopy like rain, coming from all angles, an ever-growing mass of twitching corpses plastered across the glass.

Kerna swore beneath his breath, opening the engines, the sudden thrust parting the brume beneath him.

'It's not a cloud,' he barked into the vox. 'It's a swarm.'

'Say again...' Meleki's response crackled through his helm's earpiece. 'You're breaking up.'

'Deathbottles.'

The Heart lurched, falling deeper into the insect throng. The rat-a-tat-tat against the canopy intensified, drowning out the warning bell that tolled as fault locator glyphs flashed across his vision. He twisted in his seat, seeing thick smoke belch from his port thruster. The infernal bugs had clogged the intake, the engines on the point of overheating.

'How can something so small cause so much damage?' he growled as the Heart bucked, before finally beginning a laboured ascent. The engines had cleared - but not enough.

'Meleki, I require assistance,' he reported as calmly as possible, trying to turn the Stormtalon to face Fort Kerberos as they rose. 'The Heart is compromised.'

'Are you bailing out?' Another textbook response. Straight to the point.

'Not yet, but...'

His voice trailed off as he cleared the swarm. The Heart's nose had dropped, leaving him staring down at the fields of rotting sorghum. The deathbottles were multiplying, spreading out over the decaying harvest, their drone unnaturally loud even above the troubled roar of the engines - but that wasn't all.

'Kerna!' Meleki called over the vox, alarmed by the sudden silence. 'Are you there?'

'They're running,' Kerna reported, almost to himself. 'On the ground.'

'Who's running?'

'Survivors.'

'From the settlement?'

'Must be. No, wait...'

'Kerna?'

'Something's not right. The way they're moving...'

'What do you mean?'

Kerna frowned. None of the survivors, if that is what they were, looked back as they ran. He'd expect at least a couple to steal one last glance of their infested home, of the horror they were fleeing. No one stopped to help their neighbour as they stumbled in the mud. They all looked forward, towards the fort, their arms and legs strangely uncoordinated, like

marionettes dragged across a stage by an inexperienced puppeteer.

'Dozens of them, probably more, moving as one.'

'As a pack.'

'They're not human. Not any more.'

'Then what are they?'

When Kerna replied, his voice was flat, without a glimmer of emotion, simply stating the facts, nothing more.

'Plague Zombies. The settlement has been infected - and they're heading for the bastion.'

Dain was in agony. Beautiful, exquisite agony. He barely noticed the air pressing down on him as the Space Marine's gunship banked overhead; hardly felt the vibration of its stricken engines running through his bones.

All he wanted to do was run and sing.

The song was everything to him, driving him on, drowning everything else out. The grind of the thunder, the cries of the rest of the pack as their bodies continued to change; to purify in their decay. They were blessed. Truly blessed.

In front of him, a woman stumbled, almost sprawling to the ground before righting herself. In the past he would have stopped to catch her. No longer. He simply barged past, feeling brittle bones crack as she spiralled away. He didn't look back as she tumbled in the muck of the perished crops, didn't see the pack trample over her.

A memory tugged at his mind, somewhere beneath the song. He'd known the woman once. Yes, he was sure of it. Her skin had been strong and supple then, her head covered in lustrous curls.

He remembered her voice, the excited tremor when she had shared the news. Good news. The kind that made him pick her up and spin her around.

Laughter and joy, tempered with doubt and uncertainty. How would they cope? Would he be able to support them? Would he be a good... a good...

What was the word?

He couldn't remember.

Didn't care.

That life meant nothing to him now. There would be no more doubts, no more uncertainty - only the song and his god and the hunger. Throne, he was so hungry.

Soon, he wouldn't remember any words at all. He wouldn't be able to reason, to make choices, to have regrets. All he would have was his instinct - and the song. Always the song.

A rattle broke out, followed by screams. The sound should have meant something to him, should have inspired fear, should have him running for cover. For safety.

He couldn't remember why. He couldn't remember anything. His past. His

name. Even the fact that he'd ever had one.

He looked up, confused, angry, scanning the skies with rheumy eyes. There it was, the source of the noise, a giant, metal bird, swooping angrily towards them.

The creature that used to be Dain Bridgeman howled at the blazing cannons, the sting of the gunship's shells ripping through his arms, his chest, knocking him onto his back.

There was no pain, even as the heel of the woman he had once known came crashing down on his face.

There was nothing, save for the song.

Artorius scowled at the hololith of Fort Kerberos on the table, weighing up the defensive possibilities. The structure was fairly standard. Four sloping ramparts, each cornered by large gun-turrets. The keep sat at the centre of the courtyard with the serf's barracks located near the north-west turret, opposite the squat building he used as his command quarters to the east. The Stormtalon hangars hugged the west wall, while the armoury and apothecarion were housed in heavily-armoured, one storey buildings in front of the keep's south-facing entrance. The entire place was ridiculously large for such a small company, and now he knew the reason. Kerberos wasn't there to protect them, but the shrine hidden beneath its foundations.

But would the defences be enough?

Kerna's voice sounded tinny over the vox, the report of the Heart's cannons punctuating the pilot's report.

'Have engaged the damned. Engines holding. For now.'

'Take as many of them as you can,' Artorius ordered, extinguishing the hololith and marching from his chambers, the stink of rotting vegetation hitting him the moment he stepped into the courtyard. He flexed his hand, his chainfist revving in response to the gesture. He knew many considered the weapon unwieldy and slow, best left to Terminator units, but it had served him well in the past and would do so today, if the Emperor willed.

He thumbed the vox control, opening a channel to his other pilot. 'Brother Meleki, what is your situation?'

More gunfire filtered through the feed.

'En route to Kerna, Sir.'

'And the damned?'

'Streaming out of every deathbottle swarm.'

And heading for the bastion, Artorius thought. A rune flashed across his visor. Incoming message from Fort Garm, on the other side of the planet.

'Artorius.'

'This is Hura, Fort Garm.'

'I know who you are, brother,' Artorius barked impatiently, hurrying past the aircraft hangers. 'Report.'

'Our Stormtalons have been scrambled as ordered, sir.'

'E.T.A?'

'They will arrive at your destination in seventeen hours, local time.'

Seventeen hours. An eternity if the situation worsened. Artorius banished the thought. You worked with what resources you had.

'Any sign of contagion around Garm?'

'Negative sir. Have dispatched Land Speeders to sweep the area.'

'Excellent. Report back if...'

'ARTORIUS!'

The scream came from everywhere and nowhere. It felt as if the sergeant had taken a mace to his head, a burst of brilliant colour pinwheeling across his vision.

'Vabion,' he gasped, collapsing to his knees.

'Sir?' Hura buzzed in his vox. Artorius tried to swat his concerned voice away as if it was a bug. 'Sir, what has happened?'

And then the shout was gone, rushing past him like a sandstorm, scouring his mind, leaving him raw.

'Kerberos, please respond.'

Artorius shook his head, trying to make sense of the world again. 'It was Vabion. He cried out to me.'

'I do not understand, sir...'

'Neither do I, Hura. Artorius out.'

He killed the channel, pushing himself back up. He toggled his helm control.

'Vabion, come in.'

There was no response, save for the thunder that rolled in the distance.

'Repeat: Vabion. Are you there?'

Nothing. For all he knew, Artorius had just experienced the psyker's death throes. Whatever it had been, the answer lay in this damned Key. The sergeant would find it and protect it, laying down his life in the process if necessary.

'Duty forever,' he murmured, running through the litany as he set off for the keep. 'To our dying breath and beyond. Emperor protect me.'

Emperor protect us all.

Plasma-fire echoed around the courtyard. Artorius's head snapped around. That had come from the serf's barracks on the other side of the fort. He changed direction, circling around the central tower.

He wasn't alone. Behind him, he heard footsteps. He glanced over his shoulder to see Brothers Blasius and Sedeca barrelling out of the hangers. A muscle on the side of his eye twitched. No sign of Ritan. Usually he would be the first into the fray, desperate to show his worth to the Chapter.

'With me,' he shouted, banishing the thought. They came around the keep, more plasma-fire greeting them, accompanied by the hiss of hydraulics and the cry of something not quite human.

'By the warp,' Artorius cursed as the scene came into view. It was Jerius, fighting what appeared to be a horde of daemons. Artorius looked again,

taking in the thick cloaks wrapped around their bloated bodies. They were serfs, or rather they used to be, their bodies contorted out of shape. Limbs had been replaced by ribbed flails or curved blades fashioned out of their very bones. He counted eight, two of their execrable brethren already dead at the Techmarine's feet. Jerius's plasma-cutter, mounted on one of his whirling servo-arms, dispatched another, torching its swollen head.

His Doom Eagles didn't wait for the order. They opened fire, their bolts peppering the monstrosities. Artorius brandished his chainfist, blades that could bite through a tank making short work of tainted flesh. As he ploughed through a second corrupted serf, he could hear Jerius praying. Impressive. Even in the midst of battle, the Doom Eagle was petitioning the spirits that drove his artificial legs and servo-arms.

In response, the heavy pincers at the end of the servo-arm clamped around the head of one of the rampaging serfs and crushed it like a ripe fruit.

'May all our prayers be granted,' Artorius snarled as he used the butt of his bolt pistol to slam the head of another of the serfs into the wall. The former servant slid to the floor leaving a trail of pulsating brain matter. Artorius delivered two bolts into its head. You could never be sure with the damned.



## Eleven

The temperature inside the shrine was stifling. Or maybe it was the fever. Vabion couldn't tell.

'Librarian...'

All he knew was that the sound of that voice was making his head spin faster than before. That unnatural voice, like everything else in this Emperor-forsaken place. A profanity.

'Look upon me.'

Even if Vabion wanted to, he doubted he could raise his head. The spear was still lodged in his chest, countless infections running through his veins. He had tried to call out telepathically to Artorius, to warn him, but the sadist holding the spear had twisted the shaft, the razor-sharp barbs slicing new wounds to add to his growing collection. The pain had been enough to cut short his cry for help, robbing him of his psychic abilities. He would never have believed it possible. For so long, his powers had defined who he was, how he served the Emperor. To be so reduced, that was the real agony, no matter what they did to his body. He was nearing the end, that much was certain. The moment would have to be chosen carefully.

'Did you hear me, fool?'

'I am no fool,' Vabion hissed.

The figure standing in front of the Librarian laughed. A wet, unsettling sound.

'Get him to his feet.'

Vabion screamed as the spear levered up against his damaged flesh. At the same time, hands grabbed his arms, the grip impossibly strong, bruising his skin even through his armour.

The Librarian was forced to face his tormentor for the first time.

A Chaos lord. The very words sickened him. A former captain who had turned away from the Golden Throne to follow the dark path that led only to damnation.

Vabion looked the traitor up and down. His body was a bloated sack of necrotic flesh, encased in a rusty mass of armour that dripped with the acrid discharge of ulcers and boils. His bowels were exposed, writhing like

glistening worms, and he wore no helm, proudly displaying his wrecked face for all to see. The Champion's right cheek was ripped away to reveal rows of decaying teeth hanging from a yellowed jaw. While his withered eye sockets were empty, it was obvious that the heretic could still see - another daemonic gift from his foul Lord.

'We have much to be grateful to you for, do we not, Pestilan?' the Champion said, glancing over Vabion's shoulder. He heard the bearer of the spear snigger, the laugh touching his mind as well as his ear. So, this Pestilan was a sorcerer, the Chaotic equivalent of the Librarians.

More information. More power.

'Your cooperation was vital,' said the Champion.

'I did nothing to help you,' Vabion spat.

'Granted, Falk did well.' The Chaos lord paused, dismissively indicating Ritan's petrifying corpse with the blade of his War Scythe. 'The death of your brother weakened the seal, but still wasn't enough to let us break through. For that we needed another sacrifice. A righteous one. You did the rest.'

Vabion wasn't going to rise to the bait, even as he watched something push itself from the Champion's gut and scamper up its master's chest to perch on the Chaos lord's spiked pauldron. It was a Nurgling, a diabolic familiar created in the image of Nurgle himself. The scabrous creature plucked a strip of meat from the Champion's ruined cheek, crammed it into its mouth and began to chew.

'You will never win,' Vabion promised, spitting in the Champion's face. The spittle pooled in one of the empty eye sockets. The fiend leant forward, nearly dislodging the Nurgling from his shoulder.

'I already have. Show him.'

Fingers pressed against Vabion's throbbing forehead, sharp nails digging into his flesh. Vabion tried to resist but Pestilan was too strong, pushing past his defences, plunging him into another waking dream. A nightmare.

The shrine vanished, Champion and all, replaced by a vision of Orath stretching beneath him. But this time it was different. This time Vabion wasn't flying, but transfixed to a gigantic tree by Pestilan's spear, his body lifeless, unable to move.

'Look upon your world,' Pestilan hissed into Vabion's ears, into his mind. 'See what you have done.'

'I will not look,' Vabion insisted, although he had no choice.

'You must.'

He felt his head pushed forward, forcing him to gaze upon the planet spinning far below. As before, the blight was raging through the crops, carving paths through the withered sorghum. The channels joining together, forming giant rings in the fields - the sigil of Nurgle, writ large across an entire continent.

The air was full of music, the disciples of the unclean one singing a tune

as malformed as the god they worshipped - and there he was, lounging on a vast throne of melted bones and screaming corpses, Grandfather Nurgle himself, a mound of unholy, gurgling flesh. At his right side stood the Champion, looming over the ruin of Fort Kerberos, War Scythe in hand. Nothing could have prepared Vabion for the sight of Nurgle in all his infernal glory, not his years of training, his devotion to the Golden Throne. The Librarian sobbed in anguish, sickened to his very soul. If he could have gouged out his own eyes, he would have done it gladly. In that moment, everything withered and died. His beliefs. Values. Hopes for the future. Tainted forever. Rotting away faster than the crops in the fields far below. He had failed. Failed his primarch. Failed his Emperor. Only madness remained. Damnation.

'Do you see, Space Marine?' Pestilan jeered. 'Do you see Lord Naracoth's victory?'

Vabion couldn't breathe. Couldn't even remember his name. No. It would not end this way. He was an Ultramarine. Courage and Honour. That was his creed. Nothing could take that away from him. Not Pestilan. Not the Champion. Not Nurgle himself.

'What did you call him?' he wheezed, desperate to find a fixed point in the midst of the delirium. 'What did you call your Champion?'

'Naracoth,' came the rapturous response.

'Naracoth,' Vabion repeated, rolling the word around his tongue.

Names were power. Names could bind.

Names could kill.

'Remember it,' the sorcerer gloated, 'for it will be your doom.'

In front of them, Naracoth raised his Scythe, viscous slime dripping from its twisted handle, and brought the weapon down, cleaving the very air in two. Vabion could only scream as the daemons of the warp rushed out of the rift, creatures no words could describe, no eyes should ever see.

'No!' he yelled, pushing against the gnarled back of the tree.

'Now you feel it,' Pestilan shrieked in his ear. 'Now you feel fear.'

But Vabion wasn't finished yet. His scream hadn't been of terror, but of defiance.

'I am an Ultramarine,' he bellowed, shoving back, not in the vision, but in the shrine. 'I feel no fear.'

Pestilan's mistake had been linking minds. He had sought to dominate, to mentally cripple, but all he had done was provide an anchor.

The sorcerer wasn't prepared for Vabion to act in the real world, but the Librarian had used the vision as an opportunity to steady his cramped limbs, to prepare. He thrust back, pushing himself along the length of the spear, ignoring the explosion of pain in his chest. The back of his skull smashed into Pestilan's helm, causing the sorcerer to stumble, out of surprise rather than pain.

Not that it mattered. The result was the same. Vabion grabbed the shaft of

the weapon and pulled it clear of his chest. In as fluid a movement as he could muster, the Ultramarine twisted, shoving the spearhead into the neck of one of the Plague Marines that had held him, before jabbing the pole-arm back into the exposed chest of the other. The foot of the staff sank deep into the traitor's peccant flesh, bursting out of its back.

Out of the corner of his eye, Vabion saw Naracoth's War Scythe flashing down towards him. He twisted the spear, throwing the Chaos Marine into the weapon's path. The Scythe's blade sliced into the brute, but Vabion didn't have the chance to celebrate. Behind him, Pestilan pulled his shattered helm away with one hand, throwing the other into the air. Eldritch energy blasted from his splayed fingers, slamming into Vabion. The Librarian bellowed in pain and crashed to the floor, his body writhing under the unholy onslaught.

Never had he felt such pain. Every cell in his body boiled, the power of the immaterium flowed freely through his mind. Convulsing, Vabion bit clear through his tongue, his limbs caught in a macabre dance.

'That's enough,' Naracoth ordered, Pestilan obeying immediately. Vabion moaned as his body continued thrashing of its own accord. Choking, he could only watch as Naracoth and his Marines loomed over him. The Plague Marine that had received the blow from the Scythe kicked him in the side, causing him to spit blood over the polished floor.

'I said enough,' Naracoth boomed, smashing the Marine across its helm with the back of a spiked gauntlet, drawing another peel of insane laughter from the Nurgling.

Vabion rolled onto his back and stared up at them, unable to speak.

'By Mortarion, Pestilan,' the Champion rumbled, 'this one is strong-willed. He will make a fine sacrifice, don't you think?'

The sorcerer merely nodded, tumescent maggots dropping down from a face the like of which Vabion had ever seen. Pestilan's countenance was a mangled knot of gnashing teeth and flashing eyes, set in a bed of rotting muscle. The grubs showered down on the Librarian, wriggling into his mouth and gnawing at his eyes.

'Bring him,' Naracoth commanded, and the Plague Marines grabbed Vabion's armour. Pestilan stepped aside to let them drag the Librarian up the steps to the Key, his head smacking painfully against the crystal he had studied for so long.

'You fought well,' the Champion admitted. 'As I knew you would. I suspect you even believed you could win.'

The Nurgling nearly fell from Naracoth's shoulder in excitement.

'That was necessary. Despair can only prosper once hope is extinguished - and now all hope is gone.'

Naracoth raised his Scythe, bringing the foot of the staff over Vabion's eye. The Librarian tried to wriggle away, but was paralysed, staring up at the sigil of Nurgle carved into the bottom of the corroded metal.

'One final sacrifice,' Naracoth roared as he brought the staff crashing down through Vabion's eye.

As he died, Vabion couldn't feel the staff crack through the back of his skull. He couldn't see the blood running freely around the seal or hear the Key begin to crack. He wasn't even aware of the hymns of praise Naracoth and his traitorous band sang to their Lord.

But he did experience something he had never known during his long life. Vabion felt fear.



## Twelve

To the east of Kerberos, The Heart of Sorrow banked, its assault cannons carving up the Plague Zombies that scrambled towards the fort. Inside the cockpit, Kerna watched in grim satisfaction as his guns did their work, tearing apart the rotting attackers.

'That's it,' he coaxed, pulling back on the stick, 'hold it together.'

Up to now the pilot's prayers had been answered. The Heart's engines, though sluggish, had cleared themselves, the gunship turning as he climbed. And not before time.

Kerna's eyes rested on the horizon.

'More of you,' he said, taking in the shambling figures closing in from all four points of the compass. 'Has no one on this planet escaped infection?'

As the Stormtalon came about, his eyes rested on the nearest cloud of deathbottles.

'By the Emperor...'

The swarms were behaving differently now, the insects flying around and around as one. He checked his auspex.

'In the same direction,' he muttered, fascinated. 'They're moving in the same direction. Like a formation.'

He gunned the Heart towards the cloud, trying to get a closer look at the vortex the flies were forming.

'No. Not a vortex. It's a gateway!'

The Heart of Sorrow slewed to the left as, without warning, daemons flocked out of the portal the deathbottles had formed.

'Rot Flies,' Kerna hissed, pulling the Stormtalon into their path and opening up his cannons, cutting down the first of the daemoniac attackers.

Kerna had heard tales of Rot Flies, although the reality was worse than he had imagined. The monstrous insects were enormous, their bodies distended by foul gases, coarse hairs erupting around deep gashes that exposed their slick innards to the elements. Two sets of ragged, decomposing wings propelled them forwards and each carried one of Nurgle's foot soldiers - a Plaguebearer - on their hunched backs. The infernal riders hung onto chitinous saddles, waving corroded plague knives and glaring at Kerna

through his canopy with frenzied, cyclopean eyes.

He weaved expertly through the swarm, cheering as two more of the nightmarish steeds erupted in bursts of emerald slime, the Plaguebearers tumbling screaming to the ground.

'That's the best you can do?'

A Rot Fly dropped down from above, spewing digestive juices from its long, pus-covered proboscis. The stuff splashed against the cockpit, hissing alarmingly. The canopy itself frothed, bubbling where the foul concoction of juices had made contact.

'Like acid,' Kerna grunted, glancing to his lascannon stack. The silver ceramite was boiling there too.

'So, deadlier than I gave you credit for. No matter. The Heart has never let me down yet.'

He glanced at the rear display, finding more Rot Flies gaining fast. He counted ten at least, their tattered wings blurring as they bore down on him.

'Fast too,' the pilot commented. 'But how quickly can you react?'

He slammed on the airbrakes, the Rot Flies streaking past, not expecting the sudden deceleration.

'Thought so,' he grinned, targeting the lascannons. Three more of the daemons dissolved into flames as his shots found their mark. But the celebrations were short lived. Suddenly, Rot Flies were everywhere, not just behind or in front, but coming from the sides as well. They may not have had artillery but they could manoeuvre faster than the Stormtalon, the purulence they spat from their snouts scarring the Heart's armour with every pass. Warning runes flashed across his helm, as the acid reached vital systems, the acrid stench of electric fires filling the cockpit.

He looked up from the controls just a moment too late to react, and ploughed into a Rot Fly head on. The gunship shuddered with the impact, the fault locators immediately reporting that the communicator sensor array had been damaged. The burning smell intensified as the caustic ichor went to work, another Plaguebearer steering his mount in for a collision course. Kerna reacted initiatively, skidding the gunship to the side, avoiding contact - but only by a whisper.

'You can't shoot me down, so you'll ram me, eh?'

Back on Gathis II, Kerna's flight instructor had maintained that weaker guns could never win a fight. These obscene creatures were setting out to disprove that fact. He threw the stick to the right, narrowly missing another suicidal bombardment, but found himself blinded as the Heart smashed directly into a Rot Fly.

The bulging abdomen split, spilling its steaming viscera across the canopy. Kerna found himself staring at the face of one of the partly-digested victims, plastered against the already smoking screen. His view blocked, the Stormtalon bucked as it clipped another attacker. Kerna slammed his fist

down on the canopy release control, expecting the reinforced glass to jettison, but was rewarded only with the clunk of jammed locks. Cursing, the Doom Eagle pounded the canopy frame, the stink of the Fly's corpse breaking into the cockpit as the cover started to come away. Then, with the sound of squealing plasteel, the canopy was wrenched away, the sudden inrush shoving Kerna back into his harness.

The Doom Eagle sent the Heart into a sharp climb. A Rot Fly shrieked by, disgorging the contents of its stomach into the open cockpit. The sludge sizzled against his power armour, the unholy taint already starting to eat its way through, but Kerna barely noticed, bringing another Plague Drone into his sights and squeezing off a fresh salvo. If he was going to go down, he would take as many of the fiends with him as he could.

The Stormtalon inverted, looping around before levelling off. In front of him, a line of Rot Flies dropped down, converging on his position.

'This is it, then.' There was no way he could hit all four at once, but could beat them at their own game and knock them out of the sky. Kerna threw the Heart into a dizzying spin, guns and lascannons blazing, his yells of defiance lost in the wind.

All four daemons erupted into a mist of blood and guts. Pulling out of the spin, Kerna's eyes followed the sound of engines. It was the Endurance, the last of the sun glinting off the gunship's pitted silver hull.

Kerna thumbed the vox controls, switching from the Heart's communication system to a local direct channel.

'My comms relay is down,' he called to Meleki, taking out another Rot Fly as they spoke. There was no need for thanks. His battle-brother would know he was grateful. 'I need you to call all this in.'

'As you command.'

Below them Rot Flies continued to belch out of the Deathbottle, the sky darkening at preternatural speed. The crops were all but gone now, the land carpeted in a grimy morass.

'It's no good,' reported Meleki, the alarm noticeable in his voice. 'No response from base.'

'Then we need to return. Whatever is happening, the fort is at the centre of it.'

Meleki didn't respond. Instead, he just followed Kerna's lead, turning back to base. Glowering at the charging hordes, Kerna couldn't help but recall his flippancy over the crops.

One field of cereal is much the same as the next for me.

And he'd thought Ritan naive. If he survived the day, he prayed the Emperor would forgive him.

Outside the serf's barracks, the battle had gone the way Artorius had expected. Strong though the corrupted servants had become, they were still no match for superior Space Marine firepower. Artorius turned, gunning down the last deviant. His prayer of thanks was tempered by the realisation

that greater challenges lay ahead.

A voice broke through his helm: 'Garm to Artorius.'

'I hear you, Hura.'

'Sir,' the Doom Eagle replied. 'It's our auguries. They're going off the scale. Warp energies like I've never seen.'

'In your location?'

'No sir, yours. Our readings show massive psychic disruption in orbit.'

Artorius looked into the darkened skies. 'Let me guess, directly above Kerberos.'

'Affirmative, sir.'

'The Key must be failing.'

'Key, sir?'

'Ready yourself Hura. We face a major daemonic incursion.' Out of the corner of his eye he could see Blasius and Sedeca glance at each other. This couldn't have been a surprise to them. 'We must stop the forces of Chaos, whatever the cost.'

'We are dead already.' The response was automatic, as training dictated.

'The Emperor will protect us as we protect him.' Artorius killed the channel and turned to Jerius.

'This Key?' the Techmarine prompted.

Artorius checked his bolter. 'It holds the rift at bay. There is another beneath Garm. Vabion was their custodian.'

'Was?' Blasius picked up.

'Is,' Artorius corrected himself, although he had no way of knowing for sure.

He felt a surge of anger. None of this would have been happening if the truth about Orath hadn't been hidden away. If they had known, they could have prepared. They would have seen the corruption in the serfs. Noticed the signs. Could this have been what the Ruinous Powers had planned all along? Tricking good people into believing they were doing the right thing. From the farmer who explored the sinkhole to Vabion and the Ultramarine hierarchy. They'd all been deceived.

'The Key is located in a chamber beneath the keep,' Artorius explained.

'We must assume we'll encounter opposition.'

'Sergeant?' It was Sedeca, looking out towards the west walls. 'Listen.'

Artorius followed the Space Marine's gaze. Sedeca was right. There was something there, a low keening hum, but not just one voice.

There were hundreds.

'With me.'

The Doom Eagles sprinted over to the battlements, Artorius sucking air through his teeth when he saw what was approaching. The plains were teeming with Nurgle's decaying followers, what little sorghum remained trampled into sludge beneath the relentless march of the baying horde.

'Sir,' Jerius cut in, servo-arms swivelling around to point out small blots in

the sky. 'They're not alone.'

'Plague Drones,' Artorius sneered. 'Distance?'

'First wave, half a kilometre at best,' the Techmarine estimated.

'But what is that noise?' Sedeca asked.

'They're singing,' Blasius replied in disbelief.

'If that's what you can call it.' Jerius strode over to the heavy-duty lascannon mounted on a nearby bulwark. He crouched down, his artificial legs hissing, and revealed a screen. Tapping the controls, he reported what Artorius had already guessed.

'Scanners show that we are being approached from all sides. The damned number in the thousands.'

'The entire population of the northern hemisphere,' Blasius commented flatly.

'Against four of us,' added Sedeca.

Jerius rose to his feet. 'Sounds like good odds to me.'

Artorius allowed himself a grim smile. 'Careful Jerius, that almost sounds like a joke.'

The Techmarine cocked his head as if such a thing would never do. 'Sir, I do have a suggestion.'

'I thought you might.'

'If I can slave the other gun-turrets to this cogitator...'

'You can defend the battlements alone?' Artorius saw where his Techmarine was going with this.

Jerius nodded. 'Leaving the three of you to secure the Key.'

Artorius placed a hand on the Techmarine's shoulder, half expecting him to shrug it off.

'Do your duty,' the sergeant said, indicating for Blasius and Sedeca to follow him. 'For Gathis II.'

'For the Imperium,' the Techmarine responded as his battle-brothers sprinted away. Without giving the approaching hordes another glance, Jerius got to work.



## Thirteen

An experienced Space Marine didn't need to be a psyker to develop a sixth sense. Artorius had no idea what was happening in the shrine, but knew they shouldn't just barge straight into the keep. It wasn't hesitation - just prudence.

Scouting around the serf's barracks he indicated for Sedeca and Blasius to continue over the courtyard.

'Sedeca, take up position behind the armoury,' the sergeant breathed over a closed vox-channel. 'Blasius, you loop around and wait at the east wall of the keep.'

'Yes sir,' the Doom Eagles replied in unison, following his orders without question.

His men away, Artorius flattened himself against the barracks and peered around at the heavy tower doors. They were still shut. Excellent. He would have Blasius enter and check the area, covered by Sedeca and himself. Once they were sure it was clear, they would proceed inside the keep and find this Key. A simple manoeuvre.

'Sir, the doors.'

Sedeca's warning changed matters immediately. As Artorius watched, the entrance to the keep swung open. He balled his fist, waiting to see who would appear through the opening gap, that same sixth sense telling him that neither Vabion nor Ritan would step into the light.

'Emperor's teeth,' Sedeca cursed quietly in his ear. Artorius shared the sentiment, his scowl increasing as a heinous figure lumbered from the tower. Its filthy armour was eaten away both by rust and the juices that ran freely from ulcerous growths that squeezed through every chink. Even from this distance, the sergeant could see a haze of insects buzzing around the solitary black horn that jutted up from its grimy helm.

The mark of the Death Guard.

The traitor wasn't alone. Three more Plague Marines swaggered into the light, the largest wielding a War Scythe nearly twice its height, a severed head impaled on the weapon's long spike. The discoloured skin was covered in welts and a bloody hole gaped where an eye should have

been, but there was no mistaking the slack features.

Vabion.

Artorius vowed he would bring the Chaos Champion down himself.

The sound of las-fire cut through the air, first from Jerius's direction on the wall and then around the fort as the other gun-turrets automatically began to fire. The Techmarine had done it.

In front of them, the Champion turned to a sorcerer with a devilish mass of teeth and eyes for a face. Artorius watched as the Plague Lord jabbed a finger towards the western ramparts. The sorcerer bowed low, before stalking off towards the sound of Jerius's guns. Another command from the Champion sent the other two Plague Marines trudging off in the direction of the Eastern turrets.

That's it, thought Artorius. Go and look for the Doom Eagles you expect to find behind the guns. Leave your master standing alone.

Power armour glinted across the other side of the courtyard. Perfect. Blasius was now in position, pressed flat against the wall of the keep. Artorius watched with satisfaction as the Doom Eagle expertly tracked one of the trudging Plague Marines with his bolter, waiting for the word.

'Hold your position,' the sergeant instructed into the vox. 'Wait for the enemy to separate. Jerius, you're about to have company.'

'Understood,' came the Techmarine's level reply, accompanied by regular blasts of las-fire.

Artorius regarded the Champion, standing alone by the keep doors, scythe in hand.

What about you? Artorius wondered, his eyes narrowing. What are you waiting for? Defending the shrine?

Something splashed across Artorius's vision, a foul stench pervading his helm. He glanced up, cursing as he locked eyes with a Nurgling that was peering down at him from the barracks roof, bile dripping down from its giggling maw. The fleshy demon tumbled forwards, dropping down onto Artorius's face before the sergeant could even raise his bolter. It clawed at the Space Marine, stupidly trying to gnaw its way through his helm, needle-like teeth snapping off in the process. If any of those fangs found naked flesh they would deliver a multitude of poxes, but were thankfully no match for ceramite.

Artorius grabbed the foul creature's flabby back, his armoured fingers sinking into its soft flesh, and smashed it against the wall. The second blow splattered the thing's internal organs across the brickwork, but the demon's shrieks had already betrayed him. Artorius heard Naracoth bark an order and the wall of the barracks began to disintegrate under an onslaught of plague-infused bolts. Shaking steaming blood from his fingers, Artorius waited for a break in the volley before dropping around the corner to return fire. His bolts found their target, fragments of corroded power armour and lumps of mouldering flesh leaping from the Plague Marine. The traitorous scum

didn't even slow. Impervious to pain, it merely lumbered forward, death blazing from the ancient-looking bolter pistols it held in both hands.

Across the courtyard, Sedeca had engaged another of the Death Guards, but to similar effect. The Marine spouted endless gouts of flame from a plasma-blaster, seemingly unaware that it was under fire from the Doom Eagle. No matter how many times it was hit, the traitor continued tramping towards Sedeca, horny scabs appearing over its wounds mere seconds after they'd been inflicted. This was impossible. How did you fight an enemy that didn't feel pain?

'I'm taking the Chaos lord,' Blasius announced matter-of-factly across the vox, rushing towards Naracoth, chainsword held high. 'For the Emperor!' Artorius was forced back around the corner of the barracks, but didn't need to see the outcome of the attack. Blasius's war cry immediately degenerated into a cry of pain as the Champion buried his War Scythe into the Doom Eagle's shoulder. For a second the terrible shriek of metal against ceramite shrieked through Artorius's helm before the vox-line abruptly cut off.

The sergeant couldn't respond to his battle-brother's death, although he vowed he would personally carve Blasius's name onto the obsidian Walls of the Fallen, back on Gathis II - if he survived the day himself.

With teeth gritted, he threw himself around the wall and fired directly into the Plague Marine's path.

At the battlements, Jerius couldn't prepare himself for the attack he knew was coming. All around him, lascannons fired, slaved to his own gun-turret, the air burning with the metallic ozone of every salvo.

All the time he muttered prayers to the dozens of machine-spirits who were working in unison to protect Kerberos. He was the line that couldn't be crossed and nothing could distract him from his task.

With an inhuman bellow, a Rot Fly swooped down towards the Techmarine, spitting blazing skulls from its filthy proboscis. Jerius twisted the turret, a searing barrage of cobalt energy ripping through its putrid guts. The Plaguebearer on its back screamed in fury as steed and mount crashed down into the bulwark and tumbled away to the ground below.

Something clattered across the floor at his feet. Jerius glanced down, his eyes widening as he realised what he was looking at. A pulsing, mummified head grinned up at him, the mouth and eyes sewn shut, luminescent maggots wriggling free from its shrunken nose and ears.

'Blight grenade,' the Techmarine cried out, before the concussive blast knocked him from the turret. Jerius smashed against the battlement, choking as noisome fumes overcame his helm's ventilator, spores from the grenade already eating their way through his power armour.

Another fireball blossomed at his feet, sending up a bloom of infected shrapnel and toxin-heavy smoke. Jerius reached for his bolter, but his cybernetic legs jolted, pushing him away from his weapon. Pain lanced

through his body as his implants began to short out, his systems disrupted by the grenade's corrosive forces.

Through the miasma, he could make out a figure. The sorcerer known as Pestilan stood, plague-spear in hand, half a dozen blight grenades spiralling around his skeletal form, held in the air by unaccountable power.

With a flick of the sorcerer's hand, two of the death heads shot towards Jerius - but this time the Techmarine was ready. His plasma-cutter swept down, igniting both of the grenades in turn. At the same time, the Techmarine's grabber arm jerked to the floor, knocking his bolter towards his waiting hand.

He might not be able to walk, but he could still fight. Ignoring the cramp shooting up his arm, Jerius grabbed his bolt pistol and raised it towards his attacker.

Six shots thudded into the sorcerer's shoulder - but Pestilan didn't fall. Instead he laughed - a noise like a knife on glass - as if the injuries had only tickled.

'My turn,' the Plague Marine hissed, balefire flaring in his multiple eyes. Dark energies crackled from his crooked fingers, slamming into the Techmarine's chest.

Sedeca broke from cover and charged straight at the plasma-gun wielding Plague Marine. As Artorius continued swapping bolts with his own attacker, the Doom Eagle swung his chainsword, its teeth carving into the three skulls emblazoned on the Death Guard's pauldron.

The blade stuck fast and deep in the brute's shoulder, giving the pain-insensitive traitor the opportunity it needed. Even as Sedeca slammed his fist into the Death Guard's breached helm, struggling to pull his sword free, the Plague Marine brought the barrel of his plasma-gun to the Doom Eagle's head. The traitor fired, Sedeca's helm disappearing in the burst of flame. The fire, fuelled by unhallowed magic, melted the Space Marine's helm clean away, burning through flesh and bone in seconds.

Sedeca's body dropped and the Plague Marine turned, bringing his weapon to bear on Artorius, Sedeca's chainsword still wedged deep in its shoulder. The sergeant twisted in time with the monster, aiming and pulling the trigger in a movement honed by centuries of combat. Across the courtyard, the bolts found their mark, the Plague Marine's head dissolving into a cloud of bone and decaying brain matter - but still the fiend didn't stop. It staggered forward three, maybe four steps before it finally realised it was dead and tumbled forward, landing in a loathsome heap beside Sedeca's corpse.

The sergeant switched targets again, focusing on the ponderous Plague Marine that was traipsing ever nearer to his own position. The bolts punched deep, shattering the already chipped power armour and detaching the arm, bolter and all, just below the elbow. The traitor didn't even flinch, continuing to fire from its remaining gun.

Artorius retreated around the corner, ready for another chance to attack,

and came face-to-face with a hefty figure charging towards him.

Naracoth's War Scythe sliced through the air, but Artorius reacted as if he'd been prepared for the attack all along. He feinted back against the wall, firing into the Plague Champion's chest at point-blank range even as the crackling blade smashed harmlessly into the floor in front of him. Ichor sprayed from the wound, splashing over Artorius, burning through his armour.

Naracoth didn't hesitate. Swinging up the Scythe, he smashed the foot of the staff into Artorius's helm. The faceplate flattened the sergeant's nose, blood bursting across his face like juice from squashed fruit.

A second blow, to his stomach, sent him pitching forwards, the dark energies that flowed through the staff shooting directly into his guts. His bolter skittering across the floor, Artorius crashed to his knees, expecting his head to be cleaved from his shoulders at any moment.



## Fourteen

Jerius could no longer make out detail, only shapes, like shadows in the mist - but the pathogens from the blight grenade hadn't affected his hearing.

He heard Pestilan's cry of triumph, imagined the sorcerer charging forward, spear low like a lance. He had even calculated the exact moment the spearhead would pierce his chest.

While he couldn't match the Plague Marine's depraved tolerance, Jerius had lived with pain every second of every day since the Thunderhawk crash. He had used his own chainsword to remove his trapped legs, cauterised the stumps with his plasma-cutter. The bionic limbs, which he had fitted himself, burned with every step. What was Pestilan's attack but one more torment to add to the collection?

As the spear burst from his back, the Techmarine brought down his servo-arm as he'd planned, the pincers closing tight. His implants immediately registered resistance and Jerius knew he had Pestilan's neck in his grip.

The sorcerer responded by twisting the spear, but the pain barely registered anymore. Jerius knew he was going into shock, his system shutting down, but even now the Techmarine didn't despair. This was more than a Doom Eagle's acceptance of the inevitable. Jerius wasn't just a Space Marine, he was a disciple of the Machine-God. The flesh was weak, but the machine was strong. His cold metal pincers turned, forcing Pestilan's head over. There was a satisfying crack as the sorcerer's vertebrae finally shattered, and the pressure on the spear lessened as Pestilan fell away.

Releasing the sorcerer's body, the servo-arm found the spear and, closing around the shaft, ripped it free. This time Jerius did scream, the weapon inflicting more damage on the way out than it had caused going in. He sank back, exhausted, but he could still make out the sounds of the unclean hordes. They had started to scale the walls, avoiding the lascannons. Barely even able to draw breath, the Techmarine turned his plasma-cutter on the first Plague Zombie to scramble over the top of the battlements.

His sergeant's order played through his clouding mind.

Do your duty. For Gathis II.

The stink of burning flesh filled the already pungent air.

For the Imperium.

'Where is your relic of a god now?' Naracoth jeered as he raised his scythe high for the killing blow.

'Nearer than yours,' Artorius screamed, twisting up and slamming his hand against the Plague Champion's belt. The Chaos lord looked down, the skin around his empty sockets widening as he spied the Krak grenade Artorius had magnalocked into place.

The sergeant was already rolling out of the way when the charge went off, throwing Naracoth back into the barracks wall.

Artorius didn't wait to see if he had killed his foe. Retrieving his bolter, he sprung to his feet, straight into the path of the oncoming Plague Marine. Infected bolter-fire strafed his back as he barged headfirst into the traitor, his shoulders sinking into its entropic guts.

'You may not feel pain,' Artorius roared, the force of the impact causing the Chaos Marine to tumble back, 'but you can still fall.'

The brute crashed to the ground, firing bolts wildly in an arc. Thudding a knee into its chest, Artorius punched down into the Marine's face, the chainfist's blades cutting deep into cancerous flesh. With supreme effort, the Doom Eagle dragged the whirring teeth down, through the Plague Marine's neck, slicing its chest cavity open.

'Get up from this, turncoat,' Artorius snarled as bloated flies burst from the wound. They whined around the sergeant's face but he didn't swat them away. Instead he dragged the chainfist free and took the Plague Marine's head off with a final flourish.

The corrupted warrior bucked beneath Artorius's weight before finally falling silent, diseased blood oozing across the flagstones.

Jerius thanked the Emperor for sparing him the sight of the aberrations that were pouring into the fort. The noise and the smell was bad enough - perhaps his blindness was a blessing after all.

The Techmarine had managed to haul himself up, hanging desperately onto the turret. His bolter was back in his hand and he was spraying the side of the bulwark with indiscriminate gunfire, his plasma-cutter blazing above him. Hearing the unmistakable drone of a Plaguebearer, Jerius swung his servo-arm down. He grabbed the daemon and swung it like a writhing club, knocking its unholy brethren from the battlements. He would have smiled grimly if his features weren't now permanently slack, paralysed by the diseases that were ripping his body apart.

Heat surged up his spine and for one glorious moment the stench of the damned was overpowered by the biting tang of burning wire. He tried to shift, but his right leg was completely frozen. He was immobile, incapable of even dragging himself forward. The end was now inevitable, but he had

been dead ever since he'd endured the aspirant trails deep within the Razorpeaks. Memories flooded back involuntarily. The sound of his fellow candidates screaming as they plummeted into the lava-flows below the Eyrie, the numbing pain of the flesh flaying from his bones as he struggled through passages lined with thorns as sharp as butcher knives. Every Doom Eagle was born in a frenzy of pain - the fact they died in agony was proof that the universe was nothing if not consistent.

'We are Doom Eagles,' the Techmarine slurred, 'We are dead alr-'

The chant was cut short by Pestilan's plague knife slipping beneath Jerius's helm and slicing through the Techmarine's throat. Jerius gargled blood and gave up his spirit, slumping forward, his legs still frozen in place.

Pestilan pulled the knife free as Jerius fell, baying in victory, his vile head sat forevermore at an unnatural angle from the rest of its body. The sorcerer threw his arms up high, praising Nurgle as the zombie hordes surged over the battlements, scrambling towards the keep.

'Praise the Lord of Disease, Death and Destruction,' the Plague Marine exalted, looking sideways into the heavens and seeing two Stormtalons descending from blackened skies. The lead gunship's cannons blazed like angry fireflies and Pestilan's psalm was left unfinished, his virulent body ripped apart in a blitz of las-fire.

Artorius pushed himself up from the Plague Marine's corpse as the Stormtalons roared above.

'Kerna,' he yelled, activating his vox, his eyes darting over the crowds of zombies clamouring towards him. 'Clear the infestation. Do you copy?'

He received nothing but static. The Stormtalons had overshot Kerberos and were already pitching around. They didn't need any further orders; the pilots would know what to do.

Casting his eyes around to catch a glance of Naracoth, Artorius sprinted towards the keep's open doors. The Plague Champion was nowhere to be seen, but Artorius wasn't naive enough to believe that it was dead.

The air filled with the rattle of the Stormtalons' guns as Kerna and Meleki performed another fly past, the ground itself bucking beneath the bombardment.

Artorius was thrown from his feet. No, this was more than the Stormtalons' attack. The tremors were too intense. It was as if something was forcing itself up from beneath the fort.

From the rift that ran through the planet.

From the warp itself.

Yelling in defiance, Artorius leapt towards the doors as the courtyard buckled. Shattered stones erupted into the air and the sergeant was thrown forward. He could see gigantic, rust-covered talons bursting from beneath the slabs.

With a crack, Artorius hit the heavy tower doors and slid dazed to the now uneven floor.

'Say again, Meleki?'

Kerna could barely make out what his fellow pilot was yelling across the vox, the Doom Eagle's voice distorted by the waves of white noise which squealed through the speakers.

He had a suspicion that his battle-brother was congratulating him on the amount of Plague Zombies and Plaguebearers he had mowed down during their last pass.

'Stow the celebrations,' Kerna muttered beneath his breath, throwing the Heart into a turn. The two Stormtalons peeled away from each other as they came around, warning bells lost in the rushing wind of the open cockpit. 'We're a long way from saving the day yet.'

They were the last words Kerna would ever utter.

In the Endurance, Meleki pulled hard on his stick.

'Kerna, did the sergeant make it?' he shouted, fighting against the sheer force of the gees the gunship was pulling. 'Kerna?'

There was no response.

'Channel's finally fried,' Meleki told himself, the pressure of the turn bearing down at him. The Stormtalon levelled off as it came about. 'No need for the vox. We can do this in our sleep, eh Kerna.'

They had practised the manoeuvre time and time again, coming in at 90 degrees, Kerna slightly ahead. They'd cross, turn and repeat the tactic, firing directly into the ground forces with every pass.

The damned didn't stand a chance.

Until now.

The thing was flying up towards the Heart of Sorrow. Up from the ground, not dropping from the skies. Its scythe-like wings were flattened out, claws reaching up towards Kerna's gunship. The fang-lined jaws were wide open, baleflamer jutting forward like a perverted metallic tongue.

And then there was the noise. The beast's profane howl was indescribable, like a nightmare being torn in two; an unearthly wail that threatened to shatter even the sanest of minds.

There was nothing rational about the daemon engine that had pushed itself up from the very bowels of the planet itself.

It was a Heldrake - a winged daemon engine forged at the heart of the warp. Once a gunship much like the Endurance, the Heldrake had been twisted beyond recognition. It no longer resembled any aircraft he had ever seen, taking the form of an apocalyptic dragon from ancient legend. Deep within the monstrous form, the withered body of the original steersman was cocooned in a nest of cable and bone, his flesh fused with the distorted metal, soul devoured long ago by the daemons that breathed infernal life into the war craft.

The ultimate predator of the skies.

And one that had Kerna in its sights.

The Heart of Sorrow slewed to the right, trying to avoid collision, but it was

hopeless. The Stormtalon was dwarfed by the mechanical atrocity that moved in for the kill.

The Heldrake grabbed at the gunship like a craghawk snatching a sparrow, talons slicing easily through the aircraft's armour plating.

'Kerna!'

The craft seemed to hang in the air for a second, locked in a deadly embrace, before the Heldrake dropped its fearsome head and disgorged its baleflamer into Kerna's cockpit. The Heart of Sorrow exploded into a ball of blinding flame.

Without even thinking, Meleki turned the Endurance's nose into the fireball and opened fire, lascannons flashing ahead.

With a bellow of victory, the Heldrake burst from the firestorm, flying straight towards the Stormtalon.



## Fifteen

Artorius didn't wait to see what had burst from the ground, or witness the fate of his Stormtalons. There was no callousness in the act. There was nothing a lone Space Marine on the ground could do to save them now, but he might still be able to protect the Key.

Grunting with the effort, Artorius swung the heavy tower doors shut just as the first of the damned scrambled over the churned ground to reach the threshold. Their rotten fingernails scratched at the ancient wood as he slammed the heavy deadlocks home, the infected horde's lamentations muffled by solid oak imported from the forests of Macragge.

The devastation of the courtyard hadn't reached the interior of the tower, the keep's foundations standing firm. Artorius ripped his wrecked red helm from his head, expecting cool air against his bruised skin. Instead the atmosphere was humid, sweat immediately prickling against his neck.

'Now, Vabion,' he asked into the relative quiet of the entrance chamber, 'where is this shrine of yours?'

His eyes fell across a trail that ran across the floor. He crouched down, stopping short of running his gauntleted fingers over the flagstones. A kaleidoscope of splattered juices; greens, browns and red, no doubt dripped from the Plague Marines festering bodies.

'Mixed with Vabion's blood,' he acknowledged grimly, filtering the unearthly shrieks from outside. Gripping his bolter tightly he marched forwards, following the grisly path, heading deeper into the structure.

By the time he'd found the aquila chamber and started to descend the stairs to the shrine, Artorius's vision was beginning to swim.

It made no sense. His injuries were hardly severe. Why was he feeling this way? He stopped, pinching the bridge of his broken nose with trembling fingers. The bones had already set, albeit flattened against his face.

Then he saw his glove. The ceramite was pitted and chipped. The damage continued down his arm, across his chest. As some points the armour had completely rusted away.

'The Champion,' he hissed, realising what had happened. He had been

splashed by Naracoth's blood - not once, but twice. When he had fired into the Chaos lord's chest and when the grenade had detonated. It had eaten through his power armour, exposing him to whatever toxins the traitorous dog had been incubating. Then there was the Plague Marine. He had literally knelt in its filth, breathing in the gases escaping from its decaying flesh as it had died.

'Protect me,' Artorius begged, forcing himself to take another step. His limbs were as heavy as Terminator armour, the blood in his veins feeling as if it was congealing with every beat of his hearts. 'Need to keep going.'

When he finally reached the bottom of the stairs, the corridor in front was twisting as if it was looping around itself.

Voices rushed towards him, bouncing off the distorted walls. Familiar voices.

'Go back,' Jerius screamed, urging him to flee. 'Save yourself.'

He blinked, seeing the faces of his battle-brothers in the torches that lined the shifting walls.

'All is lost,' insisted Ritan.

'Just illusions,' he gasped. He was sure Kerna's face had joined the others. 'If there's a warp breach, at the end of this corridor...'

'You will die,' Jerius called.

'You know the answer to that,' Artorius choked on a ball of phlegm that caught in his throat. He spat it out. It was blood-red. 'Must focus. Continue.'

But Artorius halted when he crossed the threshold to the shrine, hesitating not from fatigue, but awe.

'Holy Terra.'

Nothing had prepared him for the scale of the place, not Vabion's hololith or the story that had accompanied it. The chattering screens had been silenced, their once gleaming surfaces cracked, but the light from a thousand strange gems burned through the heavy mist that hung in the air. They seemed to call to him, urging him forward.

'No,' commanded the voices in his head. 'Turn back.'

'You are phantoms of the mind,' he shouted in response. 'Nothing more.'

Disobeying the spectres, he staggered towards the Key.

Or what was left of it.

The crystal had been smashed, scattered across the floor. He stumbled towards the dais, where a single, solitary shard rose from the platform. The wraithbone seal was smothered in a dark stain, empty power armour lying on the other side of the steps.

'A sacrifice,' the sergeant hissed. 'That's how they did it.'

The rich blue paintwork had been eaten by rust, the aquila across the once noble breast cracked, its edges eroded away. Vabion's body had completely putrefied, reduced to a puddle of festering sludge. Artorius looked away, disgusted at the waste. 'It was not your fault,' he said, although the words sounded hollow in his ear.

'Then who is to blame, Doom Eagle?'

Artorius's head snapped up at the sound of the voice. It wasn't ethereal like the haunts that had tried to turn him away, but it had no place in the natural world either.

'Traitorous scum.' Artorius turned towards the Chaos lord, raising his shaking bolter. The Champion stepped out of the shadows at the far end of the shrine. Where his swollen intestines had draped, Naracoth's abdomen was now crammed with a host of wriggling, chattering Nurglings, each jostling for position as they filled the void blasted clear by Artorius's grenade. One tumbled from the cavity to land in the pile of foetid biomass and corroded armour that lay at the Chaos lord's feet.

Doom Eagle armour.

'Run away,' Ritan's voice urged him.

'You have failed,' Naracoth sneered, absently squashing the Nurgling beneath his boot. 'Your men are dead or dying. The crops have failed. Orath belongs to us. We shall open a new Eye of Terror in this place.'

'Part of the Key is still in place,' Artorius insisted, readying himself for attack. 'There is still...'

'Hope?' Naracoth scoffed, his ever present War Scythe held in both hands. 'Vabion had hope. It didn't save him. Your hope lies in the reinforcements you believe are screaming towards us. They won't save you, either.'

'Maybe not,' Artorius spat, trying to gather the last of his resources, 'but they will destroy you.'

Naracoth continued as if Artorius hadn't uttered a word.

'Imagine the strain the rift is placing on the Key hidden beneath Garm. All it took was one tiny fissure to allow us passage. You should see the cracks in the other Key. Your battle-brothers have already been consumed.'

'You lie!'

'Do I? Melkan. Krytorius. Hura.' The blood froze in Artorius's veins. 'Names you recognise? Brethren no more.' Naracoth crouched down, running his hand through the biological debris that used to be Ritan. 'They belong to me. They belong to Nurgle.'

Still smiling, Naracoth sucked the viscous remains from his fingertips.

Artorius could take no more. Pulling the trigger of his bolter, the sergeant charged forward with a bellow of rage.

The Endurance of Gathis strafed the back of the Heldrake with lascannon fire as he passed, but to little effect.

The Chaos born monstrosity roared, bathing the Stormtalon in balefire, scrambling half the instruments on board and cracking the canopy. Meleki pulled up into a loop, hoping to flip over and down onto the creature, but came in too fast. The Doom Eagle found himself diving into thin air and by the time he pulled up, the Heldrake had come around to hang on Meleki's six o'clock, hellish flames licking at his tail.

He knew that he couldn't outrun the possessed aircraft, its infernal engines

more powerful than any Stormtalon. The best he could do was to skid from left to right, drawing the beast away from the fort, never presenting the daemonic machine with a clear target. Keep moving, remain unpredictable, stay alive.

For now at least.

Warning glyphs were already flashing, the engines on the point of overheating. Flame streamed past the canopy, widening the cracks, filling the cockpit with the stink of sulphur.

'Getting too close,' Meleki gasped, his eyes stinging with the reek. 'Need to finish this.'

Yanking the stick towards him, Meleki threw the Endurance into another heart-stopping climb. For a moment, as dark orbs danced at the edge of his vision, Meleki felt at peace, removed from the world, absolutely sure about what he was about to do.

And then, as the engines threatened to stall, he pulled himself back to the here and now. The gunship was on its tail, in a near vertical ascent. He didn't even need to glance at the rear displays to know that the Heldrake was climbing with him. He could feel it behind him, jaws open, waiting for the kill.

'Not today.'

The Stormtalon inverted, pulling more gees than Meleki had ever experienced. Even with his Lyman's ear, Meleki felt himself whiting out as the aircraft pitched into a spiralling descent, corkscrewing back down to the planet.

'Follow, damn you,' he spat, checking the displays. 'That's it. Come and get me.'

The Heldrake had taken the bait, trying to match his spiral. The monster was faster than the Endurance, but it was also bulkier. In the warp, its immense size wouldn't hamper its flight, but here, in the real world, it was subject to the same laws of physics that governed Meleki's own ship.

He hoped.

It was risky - a manoeuvre Meleki had never performed himself. Throw the ship into a tight spiral, gambling that your larger pursuer won't be able to turn as fast. The stick shook in his hand as he kept himself spinning down, never taking his eyes from the rear display.

It was working.

'That's it,' he laughed without humour. 'You can't match the turns, can you? Can't keep in close.'

Sure enough, the Heldrake was being forced to loosen its corkscrew, taking more airspace with every revolution.

The smaller, more agile Endurance only needed a fraction of the space to turn, spinning faster and faster, dropping back along the Heldrake's long body with every roll. Where he had started the descent in front of the abomination, Meleki was now above the bulk of its accursed hull and,

before long, dropping behind.

It was the moment he'd been waiting for. As soon as he saw the umbilical cables trailing from the dragon's rear, the Doom Eagle unleashed his side-mounted lascannons, raking against the Heldrake's oxidised tail.

The daemon engine pulled out of the dive, trying to turn so it could return fire, but Meleki wasn't about to let go. The electronic whine in his ears informed him that the heat-seeking missiles had locked onto their target. He was ready.

Meleki fired everything he had. Las-fire cut into the Heldrake's ribbed spine, corroded armour plates sliced clean from its metallic hide. The Heldrake bucked, its dragon-like head whipping around, but it was already too late. With a thumb of the trigger, Meleki's missiles were away, zeroing in on the last vestiges of the Heldrake's original form - the two sets of exhaust vents that blazed on either side of its back. The rockets slammed into the engines, triggering a chain reaction that saw the daemon rip itself apart.

Unable to pull up in time, Meleki soared through the inferno, burning debris streaking across his fuselage. For a second, he imagined he saw the twisted remains of the Heldrake's pilot screaming in defiance, its face a mass of lesions and crudely implanted cables - and then the vision was gone, the Endurance barrelling out of the firestorm.

Before today, Meleki might have celebrated his victory, but not now. He could almost hear Kerna telling him not to get carried away.

'I know, old friend,' he said sadly. 'The battle is far from won.'

Pulling the gunship into a hard left, Meleki came about and streaked back towards Fort Kerberos.



## Sixteen

Artorius was thrown back with such force that the buttress cracked, dust cascading down on the two combatants from the high ceiling. The sergeant slid down to the rune-lined floor, his gun hanging helplessly by his side. Naracoth's scythe had cut deep, nearly cleaving the Doom Eagle's arm from his body.

The Chaos lord loomed over the fallen Space Marine, Nurglings hopping down from his stomach to nip and tear at the flesh that was already beginning to swell beneath Artorius's breached armour.

'You are as weak as that foolish Librarian,' Naracoth gloated, backhanding the sergeant across the mouth, his spiked gauntlet opening Artorius's cheek and dislodging what were left of his teeth. 'But your blood will serve me well.'

Artorius groaned, blood bubbling on his torn lips. He tried to raise his power fist, the teeth of his chainblade clogged with Naracoth's flesh, but the gauntlet clattered back to the floor, the sergeant's resources spent. Bloodshot eyes rolled up in their sockets.

It was over.

Naracoth bellowed in triumph, throwing his heavy scythe aside. Grabbing Artorius's chestplate, the Champion hauled the broken Doom Eagle towards the Key, no lackeys to assist him now. It didn't matter, he babbled, barely even grunting with the exertion. Soon he would have a mighty company steeped in filth and decay.

'I only wish you could see it,' he cackled, dragging the sergeant up to the shard, 'but what kind of sacrifice would you be if you were left alive?'

Naracoth let Artorius fall back onto the wraithbone seal and produced a sacrificial knife, the wicked blade alive with forbidden runes.

Carefully, almost lovingly, he raised the sergeant's chin, exposing his throat.

'Accept this offering, my Lord,' Naracoth intoned, pressing the blade down onto the pale skin, 'and bless your humble servant. The sacrifice will be made.'

A bead of blood appeared beneath the blade and ran down to the seal - and Artorius's eyes snapped open, glaring up at the Chaos lord.

'There shall only be one sacrifice today,' the sergeant croaked, bringing his good arm up in an arc. In his hand he held the shard of the crystal he had grabbed as he had been pulled towards the Key, its jagged edges reflecting the look of surprise on Naracoth's face. It slammed into the Champion's head, embedding itself deep within the Chaos Marine's murderous brain.

The Plague Lord stared down with empty eyes, the knife slipping from his fingers. Artorius shoved him back, the Champion collapsing clear of the seal, a strange gargle escaping from his throat. There was no scream as his body convulsed, the flesh becoming like liquid, falling away from his bones. Naracoth and his Nurglings died with a whimper, leaving nothing but skeletons and armour that crumbled into dust.

The sergeant let his hand fall back, his chainblade clattering against the floor and laughed for the first time in fifty years.

'Praise the Throne,' he wheezed. The Chaos Champion lay dead and the final sacrifice had yet to be made. Without Naracoth, the incursion would fail and Nurgle would be pushed back into the world beyond.

He was finished himself. Of course he was - but Artorius was dead already. It was enough that he had served his Emperor and the Patriarch to his last.

He had won.

High above the fort, Rot Flies rose up to meet the Endurance . The gunship shuddered, its primary wing slicing through a daemonic thorax, the contents of its stomach spilling down on the zombies and Plaguebearers that still clawed at the tower doors.

At the front of the crush, one of the ghouls tried to prize the doors open, the grey stump of its missing arm bobbing helplessly. Long ago, it had left its family sleeping at home. Now it had no memories of such things. All it knew was that it needed to get into the keep, to reach the Key, to make a sacrifice.

In the cockpit of the Stormtalon, a warning bell sounded. The mid-air collision had done more damage than Meleki first imagined. The port engine slowed and stalled. Calmly, Meleki switched to stabilisers, only to be rewarded with more alerts. Primary stabilisers were no longer operational. Targeting array offline. He was left with one functioning engine and secondary thrusters.

The fort below was a disaster site, the courtyard swallowed up by a crater, buildings flattened. Only the keep remained, a testament to Ultramarine architecture. As he watched, Plague Drones threw themselves against its wall, as if they could demolish the tower with the force of their distended bodies alone.

'One choice left,' the Doom Eagle decided.

The Endurance swung around and dropped its nose. Meleki glared at the damned.

'If I'm going down,' he growled, 'I'll take you all with me.'

Gunning the engine, Meleki wondered if the sacrifice he was making would be remembered.

The Endurance of Gathis ploughed into the mass of writhing bodies, the fuel tanks igniting, sending up a cloud of thick, choking smoke that could be seen for kilometres around.

Deep below the ground, Artorius heard a rumble from above and watched as cracks appeared across the stone ceiling, dust pouring down as great clumps of masonry worked themselves loose. They tumbled, one after another, crashing into the polished floor, the weight of the collapsing tower above too much to bear.

The sound of the roof coming down should have been the last thing Artorius heard. It would have been, if it hadn't been for the mocking voice at the back of his mind that laughed and jeered.

And sang a song.

# ENGINES OF WAR

STEVE LYONS





They were hit as soon as they dropped out of the warp. Galenus had barely had time to see it coming. He stood on the bridge of the Quintillus, framed by the spreading bronze wings of the Imperial aquila in tarnished bas-relief. He had mag-locked the boots of his power armour to the deck plates, anticipating another rough re-entry into real space.

The battle-barge's ancient engines had howled out their usual protest as the nature of reality had been forcibly rewritten around them.

Next, the shutters that had covered the viewports during the jump - to spare the eyes of the crew, and their minds, from the terrors of the immaterium - had begun to retract.

Galenus had seen the enemy ship in front of them, close enough that he couldn't make out the stars behind it. He had caught a fleeting impression of a slime-covered hull and cannon barrels glaring out at him from an endless row of dark turrets.

Then, the cannons had flared in unison.

Sergeant Arkelius was in one of the Quintillus's launch bays.

He felt the first shockwave rippling through the ship, and knew it was under attack.

He kept his balance by bracing himself against the Hunter tank beside him - and by shifting his fully-armoured weight onto his left foot.

A bolt of pain shot through his left hip, the legacy of a recent injury. Arkelius grunted; not because of the pain itself, but because of what it represented. He didn't like to be reminded of his all too recent failure.

A ship-wide alert signal began to wail.

He felt the deck beneath his feet tilting. The Quintillus, he deduced, was taking evasive action - too urgently for the artificial gravity to fully compensate. Their enemy - whoever, whatever they were - were well armed. The yields of a hundred warheads couldn't ordinarily have shaken the Quintillus.

Several Chapter-serfs - roughly half of the score or so present - had been bowled over by the shockwave. They were struggling to their feet again, resuming their work, before their masters - a squad of Techmarines - could punish them for their tardiness.

The Chapter-serfs were loading up a pair of Thunderhawk gunships,

preparing them for an imminent launch.

Arkelius, likewise, did the only useful thing he could do in the circumstances. He prayed. He asked the Emperor to protect His faithful sons in the Ultramarines Fifth Company - for the sake of the vital mission ahead of them and, he dared to hope, the many more to come.

It wasn't that he was afraid to die. Far from it. It was just that, for the past five weeks - every frustrating hour spent in enforced inactivity - only one thought had kept this faithful warrior going. He had looked forward to the moment when he would finally return to the battlefield and see the whites of his enemies' eyes again.

He didn't want to die like this.

The enemy ship was a battle-barge, like the Ultramarines own, with the same void shields and bombardment cannons. It could have been assembled on the same forge world.

The difference was that, now, it was in the hands of traitors.

It had been allowed to rot. It looked to Galenus like the hull was held together by rust, while patches of fungus clung to it like green and black warts. Three circles had been painted crudely across the bow in a triangular pattern: the symbol of the Plague God. This was a Death Guard ship.

It must have been lying in wait at the edge of this system; that much had been expected. Its near collision with the Quintillus, however, could hardly have been planned. A skilled psyker might have sensed the Imperial barge's approach through the warp, but could only have guessed at its precise time and point of emergence.

The shipmaster's quick reflexes - and those of his helmsmen - had saved them. The Quintillus had pulled up and away from the enemy vessel, void energy sparking from their two sets of shields as they scraped together.

The shipmaster ordered his gunners to return fire at will. They brought the whole of the starboard weapons battery to bear. Galenus watched and nodded his approval as a series of explosions tore along the plague ship's mottled hull.

The plague ship banked away laboriously, striving to protect its weakened spot from further attack. The Quintillus's route into the system was now clear. The shipmaster glanced at Galenus. 'We could come around and finish this, while we have the advantage,' he said.

Galenus shook his head. 'I say we resume our course.'

It was the shipmaster's call. However, he chose to follow Galenus's wishes.

The battle-barge was carrying three companies' worth of Space Marines. In fact, it was carrying three Ultramarines companies: the Emperor's finest, so they prided themselves. Galenus was the captain of one of those companies - the Fifth Company, the Wardens of the Eastern Fringe - and the officer in overall command of their combined force.

They were answering a distress call from a world at the edge of the

Ultima Segmentum: the region of space that the Ultramarines administered. Galenus could see the world in question now through the forward viewport: a luminous green disc, encircled by infinite shadows.

A servitor advised that the plague ship was coming around behind them. It wasn't about to let them go so easily. The shipmaster had all available power diverted to reinforce the Quintillus's stern shields. Simultaneously, Galenus activated the comm-bead in his gorget and broadcast on a ship-wide frequency. He ordered all ground forces to report to their drop pods and ships immediately, and prepare for emergency deployment.

The bright green world in the viewport was growing steadily larger.

Galenus could see now that its colour was an unnatural one: it was sickly, almost yellow. It made him think of rotten fruit. Worse still was the seething corona of purple energy that crowned the yellow-green planet's northern hemisphere.

The Chapter Master himself had briefed Galenus on this mission. He had told him that the battle for the world that lay ahead of him - the world and its people - had already been fought and lost. He was fighting for something far more important now.

With engines howling and void shields flaring, with the plague ship hot on its tail, its cannons blazing, the battle-barge Quintillus screamed towards a planet named Orath.

Chelaki was well acquainted with Orath's once-fertile fields.

The last he remembered, those fields had been spinning up to meet him. He had thought himself dead - although, in fact, this was hardly a new sensation for him. In his mind, he had been dying since the day he had first donned his silver power armour and become a Space Marine, a pilot in the Doom Eagles Chapter. Every second of his continued existence since then had been a blessing from the Emperor.

Something was burning. He could smell it, even through his helmet's air filtration systems. There was something else too: a putrid, overripe stench that even the fire couldn't mask, that made his nostrils want to shrivel up and close.

Chelaki remembered. He had been wrestling with the controls of his Stormtalon gunship as rune panels exploded in his face. He must have blacked out; he could feel the darkness still clinging onto him now. His injector system pumped another dose of adrenaline into his primary heart. The cold shock convulsed his body and tore his eyes open.

He was pinned in the Stormtalon's wreckage, staring straight up at the sky, which was curiously flecked with purple. He had flown for seventeen hours across the planet - he and one other pilot - racing to the aid of a squad of battle-brothers under siege. He remembered that terrible moment when he realised they had arrived too late.

The sky had been cracked open. The unholy energies of the warp were seeping through the jagged rift. Chelaki had seen flaming drop pods

plummeting to earth. His gunship had been met by a swarm of mutant insects, and among them, worse horrors still.

He had been prepared to face a small but powerful Death Guard force. The situation, evidently, had escalated since then. Now, Orath was the subject of a full-scale invasion.

He sent out a tentative vox signal. As expected, there came no answer. The remaining members of his own squad were out of range, half a world away, at Fort Garm. As for the Fists of the Fallen - the Doom Eagles squad that had been charged with protecting Fort Kerberos - there were no other survivors.

Chelaki was the last man standing.

Today, he was more blessed than he could ever have imagined - which only gave him all the more to repay the Emperor for.

In the launch bay, a Techmarine completed his final checks on the Scourge of the Skies. He clambered down from the vehicle's roof, and gave its newly-appointed commander an affirmative nod. It was time, then.

Arkelius took one last look around the Scourge's gleaming blue exterior. He knew it would be some time before he saw it again - if ever.

He had never commanded a tank in the field before. He had never set foot inside this particular variant - a Hunter - although of course he had studied its schematics closely.

Like the Predator Destroyers that made up most of the Ultramarines artillery, the Hunter was based on the ubiquitous Rhino template. The major differences were an extra layer of armour plating - and the Skyspear missile launcher bolted to the Hunter's back.

The Scourge was recently returned from a complete refit. It was freshly painted in Ultramarines blue, proudly bearing the Chapter's stylised U-symbol in white.

Arkelius hauled himself up onto the Hunter's roof. He squeezed his broad shoulders through the tank commander's hatch and dropped into a cramped compartment.

His crewmates were ready at their stations. He could see his gunner, lunus, through an open hatchway behind him. Brother Corbin was in the driver's compartment to Arkelius's right, separated from him by a thick bulkhead.

Arkelius reached up and pulled his hatch shut, firmly. His only views of the outside world were now through narrow vision slits. The main one was in the Scourge's sloping prow directly in front of him, and he adjusted his seat until he could see squarely through it. There were smaller slits around the hatch above him too.

He addressed his crewmates over the Scourge's vox-frequency.

'We're ready to roll,' he growled.

Brother Corbin fired up the Hunter's engine. Its roar was deafening to Arkelius in his confined quarters. He adjusted his hearing implants to filter

out the worst of it. Still, the engine's vibrations carried through his power armour and rattled his bones.

Leaning forwards, he peered through his front vision slit.

Corbin was following the hand signals of a hunchbacked Chapter-serf, guiding the Scourge across the launch bay and towards the nearest Thunderhawk. Expertly, he threaded his way between a pair of landing stanchions. Another tank - a Predator Destructor - was already dangling from the Thunderhawk's belly. Corbin pulled up behind it.

A moment later, Arkelius heard and felt magnetic arms clamping onto the Scourge's hull, and they were hoisted off the ground.

He was about to tell Corbin to kill the engine when he realised that he already had.

Arkelius had read Brother Corbin's service record prior to their first meeting that morning. He had served for almost as long as the sergeant had, and most of his experience had been gained at the controls of this very vehicle.

Arkelius, in contrast, was more used to leading infantry squads, and he had the battle honours to prove that he was good at it. At least, until that fateful day five weeks ago, when an ork's bloody blade had laid him low.

Intellectually, he knew there was nothing he could have done to prevent it. All the same, he couldn't help but blame himself. He felt he ought to have been more careful.

For weeks now, he had known that he was destined for the planet Orath. Galenus had assigned him to command a garrison there, watching over a pair of minor listening posts; the captain's way, he had imagined, of keeping him on the sidelines a while longer. He couldn't shake the nagging feeling that Galenus no longer trusted him.

But then, everything had changed.

It was quiet inside the Hunter battle tank, and dark, just a little light falling into Arkelius's compartment through the vision slits. He could hear Lunus breathing softly behind him.

This wasn't the way he had pictured his arrival on Orath, and for that much, at least, he was profoundly grateful. Nor, indeed, was this how he had envisaged his long-awaited return to battle, with his boltgun holstered at his weakened hip and his chainsword sheathed.

He wouldn't see the whites of any enemies' eyes today.

The yellow-green planet now almost filled the forward viewport.

On its master's command, the Quintillus threw open its launch bays. It spewed out a swarm of smaller vessels: Stormtalons and Thunderhawks, mostly. The swarm peeled away from its mother ship and streaked eagerly towards the looming, bright orb.

The smaller ships outpaced the Quintillus as it began to level out of its dive. Their ceramite-plated hulls blazed fiercely as they struck the planetary atmosphere.

On the bridge, Galenus's eyes were glued to a tactical display. It showed a rolling map of the mostly flat terrain beneath him, and the battle-barge's position and projected flight path relative to it. His objective on the ground was marked too, with a blinking red triangle. It was labelled in High Gothic script as 'Fort Kerberos'.

The triangle was partially obscured - and near-encircled - by an irregular purple shape, which blighted the tactical display like a stain. It could only have been Orath's newly opened rift. It was larger than Galenus had imagined.

He knew, from his briefing, that time was very much of the essence. He had to position his troops as close to the fort as he possibly could. He couldn't risk the Quintillus being sucked into that rift, however.

He had asked the shipmaster to take them lower than he would normally have dared.

He knew they were taking a gamble. The battle-barge wasn't built for atmospheric flight. Its engines were already upping their protests a notch - even at this distance from the planet - as they fought to resist the slightest tug of gravity upon their massive burden. Even if they won that battle, there was a chance of the ship's hull buckling under the stress.

Galenus focused on the tactical display in front of him as the shipmaster barked out a series of minor course corrections. The Quintillus was flying underneath the warp rift now - and its icon was steadily approaching the blinking triangle.

At last, the red triangle turned white as the ship's icon overlapped it, and the shipmaster issued a one-word command.

'Now!'

A servitor confirmed that his cue had been acted upon.

The drop pods had been ejected, each carrying two combat squads of five Space Marines. They appeared on the tactical display as flickering images, plummeting to the ground faster than any cogitator could lock onto them and track them.

That was it, thought Galenus. Three companies despatched to the latest battlefield as required. Now he could worry about himself - and the Quintillus.

The shipmaster bellowed over the screaming engines, 'Get us out of here! Pull up!'

The crew seemed to have been wrestling with their controls for an age before the battle-barge responded. At last, it began to climb again, centimetre by agonising centimetre. It grazed the outermost tendrils of the warp rift, and Galenus had to shield his eyes from its vicious purple glare, which was already making his brain itch.

The Quintillus wrenched itself free of Orath's pull and soared again. Had Galenus had the time, he might have breathed a small sigh of relief. But they weren't out of danger yet. 'The plague ship,' barked the shipmaster.

'Where is it?'

Crewmembers were scrambling around the bridge in a frenzy, running diagnostic checks, taking readings. 'It broke off its pursuit of us, sir,' one of them reported. 'It went after the transporters.' He punched up the information on the tactical display.

'Bring us around,' the shipmaster ordered. 'I want eyes - and guns - on that junk pile.' Once again, the deck plates tilted as the Quintillus banked ponderously to the right.

A moment later, Orath heaved back into sight in the forward viewport - along with the rotting plague ship, which was now between them and the yellow-green planet.

The plague ship had a straggler in its sights. Its cannons blazed, and the luckless Thunderhawk - along with its pilot and the Predator Destructors it had been carrying - were consumed in a blossom of flame.

Galenus held himself still, clenching his jaw. He had to remind himself that this wasn't his battle to fight. The shipmaster knew what he was doing.

On his snarled command, his gunners assailed the plague ship with everything they had: assault cannons, torpedoes, they even brought their lances online and pounded the enemy's shields with focused energy beams. The plague ship reeled under the sustained assault and the last of its would-be prey, the Imperial swarm, slipped out of its grasp.

The Quintillus kept up the punishing bombardment regardless.

Galenus watched with grim satisfaction as a muck-encrusted engine pod exploded. The stricken plague ship came around, and, for a moment, the captain thought it was actually going to try to ram them. It veered away, however, and plunged into the warp rift instead.

It was probably returning to the Eye of Terror, he thought. Doubtless, it had a base there, perhaps on the Plague Planet itself.

He only prayed that the ship was as damaged as it had appeared to be. Otherwise, there was a chance of it returning - loaded up with reinforcements.

Chelaki remembered.

Blazing drop pods plummeting from the sky; the air filled with hideous, bloated flying insects, large enough to be ridden as mounts; Fort Kerberos in ruins.

He remembered the creature - or some manner of infernal machine? - that had come screeching out of nowhere, with burning breath and rending claws. It had shrugged off his cannon fire and torn the cockpit of his Stormtalon apart.

Tangled up in twisted metal, he hadn't had a chance to bail out.

There had only been two Doom Eagles squads stationed on Orath. It had seemed like more than enough to guard a pair of minor listening posts.

A jagged shard of the Stormtalon's hull had pierced Chelaki's side.

The force of the crash must have driven it straight through his armour. It

had lodged itself deep between his ribs. It seemed to have the whole weight of the hull pressing down on it. He didn't have the strength to pull it out.

The only thing he could do was pull himself off the shard. To gain the leverage he needed, he had to shift his position and let the shard tear further through his flesh. His armour increased the flow of stimulants to his brain to dull the pain.

At last, with a spray of arterial blood, Chelaki stumbled uncertainly from the gunship's wreckage. He wasn't able to get his legs underneath him in time and he landed flat on his face and stomach. He levered himself up to his knees.

He had come down in a grain field. But the sorghum-variant crops around him were diseased and blackened - and smouldering, as a cluster of small fires struggled to take hold in their midst. The crops, he realised, were the source of that rotten stench in the air.

The readouts in his helmet were warning him of a hundred different airborne diseases and viruses, both known and unknown. His armour had been fractured and fatally compromised. No longer was it airtight. The wound in Chelaki's side had scabbed over - his Larraman's organ had done its job, as always - but it felt as if it was burning.

He heard a scraping, snuffling sound, and turned. Two creatures were clambering over the wreckage behind him. They were only a few feet tall: squat, misshapen horrors that looked as if they had been moulded from filth and excrement. The folds of their stomachs undulated as they moved, and their oozing cold sores left slime trails in their wakes.

Chelaki guessed that they had been searching the crash site for carrion. One of them had been poised to spring at his neck and shoulders.

He planted his hand in the ashy ground beside him, rolled away from the muck-creatures and to his feet. In the process, he drew his chainsword and thumbed its activation rune. Its engine roared, its whirling blade shrieked, and the creatures balked as their intended victim proved himself less helpless than he had seemed.

Chelaki took a step towards them and swung his blade. It sliced through the nearest of his attackers, but coughed and sputtered indignantly as great globs of the creature's feculence adhered to its teeth.

The second muck-creature must have known it couldn't outrun a Space Marine. It flew at Chelaki instead. A spiked tongue lashed out from inside a ring of teeth and flecked his armour with rancid green and black spittle.

It hit him in the stomach, extruding filthy, rope-like tendrils to bind itself to him. It was squirming its way towards Chelaki's wound, as if attracted by the newly formed scab. He tried to block its questing, slobbering tongue, but it simply oozed its way around his gauntlet. He felt it clawing, tearing at his exposed flesh.

Disgusted, he thrust the edge of his blade into the creature's formless

mass and tried to scrape it off him, striking furious sparks off his own armour in the process.

He must have hit a vital organ inside the creature - presumably there was something in there somewhere - because it shrieked and suddenly released its grip on him.

It smacked into the ground at Chelaki's feet, and he stamped on it with all his strength and armoured weight. The creature popped like a festering boil, and he was spattered up to his chest with its pus.

A third muck-creature was watching him from amid the wreckage. He had almost missed it, but his motion sensors had detected its presence.

It must have been hanging back, waiting for an opening to strike, or perhaps just a chance to share in its fellows' spoils. It had witnessed the fate of those fellows and was trying to slink away. Chelaki knew that, if it did, it would reveal his presence here to its Death Guard masters. He snatched his boltgun out of its holster and squeezed the trigger, but the weapon didn't fire. Its chamber was cracked; an explosive round was jammed inside it.

He cast the bolter aside - he would retrieve it later if he could; for now, he couldn't take the risk of it detonating in his hand - and he started to run. He rounded the downed gunship just in time to see the muck-creature slithering through the mangled frame of the cockpit canopy on the other side.

It tried to scamper away from him but Chelaki caught up to it easily and despatched it with a single sweep of his blade. In the wake of his exertion, however, he was left with a pounding heart and heaving lungs. He could feel sweat prickling his brow.

He took a moment - the first chance he had - to get his bearings.

He saw the crack in the sky, the warp rift, pulsing hatefully. If anything, it looked even wider than it had before. He knew that Fort Kerberos - what remained of it - lay directly beneath that crack, hidden from him for the present by an intervening rise. The air above the site was clogged with dust and smoke - but, with his augmented eyes, Chelaki could make out darker shapes flitting through the miasma. He remembered the huge flies and their hideous riders, and he fell back to the wreck of the Stormtalon and squatted in its shadow.

He had a chance - one final chance - to strike a blow against the Emperor's enemies. He knew he mustn't waste it. He had to find a way across this field, somehow, without the rift's violet light glinting off his silver armour and betraying him.

Chelaki couldn't wait for nightfall. He feared he didn't have that long. What he needed, he concluded, was a distraction - and no sooner had he formed that thought, than the Emperor saw fit to oblige him again.

His gaze was drawn upwards, once more, by the howling of engines. Two Thunderhawks streaked above his head, and Chelaki grinned as he took in

their bright blue livery and the white Chapter symbols on their bows. They were flying low, circling the occupied site of the destroyed fort. As Chelaki watched, more blue ships swooped from the heavens to join them. In the distance, to the north-west, blue drop pods were plummeting from the clouds like hailstones.

Salvation was here.

Why hadn't they landed yet?

Arkelius ground his teeth, impatiently. A drop pod would have delivered him to the front lines by now. His blade could have had its first taste of traitor blood.

He was monitoring vox-chatter with one ear. He had heard about the destruction of one of the other Thunderhawks. It must have been carrying a pair of tanks too. Two tank crews - six battle-brothers - gone before they had even set wheels on the ground. Not only was that a dreadful loss to the Chapter, but it also was no way for a warrior to die.

Through his vision slit, Arkelius could only see the rear of the tank in front of him. He wondered how high up they still were.

His right ear was attuned to the Scourge's internal frequency. His crewmates - Corbin and Iunus - were comparing what they knew about the Death Guard, mostly tales of past Imperial victories over them. If they felt any tension at all, they didn't show it - or perhaps, thought Arkelius, this was their way of dealing with it.

He couldn't see the expressions of either of his brothers to judge. He had ordered 'helmets on' as soon as their Thunderhawk had launched.

Galenus had emphasised this point in his briefing. They were facing disciples of Nurgle, the oldest and foulest of the Ruinous Powers. They were worshippers of pestilence and decay, and their deadliest weapons were neither their blades nor their guns.

'I've seen whole companies ravaged by the diseases they spread,' the captain had said grimly. 'I do not wish to see that happening again.'

That was why he had requisitioned all the heavy artillery possible, including some fresh from the assembly yards on Ryza. That was why he had placed as many men as he could inside those tanks. That was why he had broken up Arkelius's squad and thrust him into a new, unfamiliar role.

Inside the Scourge of the Skies, Arkelius was as well-protected as he could be. The tank was fitted with oxygen filters; most of the air inside it was recycled, anyway. His power armour - for as long as it remained intact with the helmet in place - provided him with a strong additional layer of defence.

Arkelius understood this and was duly grateful for it. All the same, he preferred to fight without the helmet. He was told he had an intimidating countenance, with his shaved head, flattened nose and the duelling scar that ran the length of his right cheek. He liked to let his enemies see it. He liked to lock glares with them, let them see he had no fear of them.

He liked to feel their warm blood on his face.

'What do you think, sergeant?' asked lunus.

Arkelius had no idea what his gunner was talking about. He had been tuning out his crewmates' voices, lost in his own thoughts.

Corbin filled him in, 'Orath. It's an agri planet, a breadbasket world, with no real strategic value. We wondered what the Death Guard could possibly want with it.'

Arkelius's only answer was a noncommittal grunt.

'We also wondered,' said lunus, 'since the crops down there and the farmers too are dead anyway, and contaminated.'

'-then why send us in at all?' Corbin concluded. 'What does the Imperium have to gain from a ground assault at this point? Why not just fire off a salvo of rockets from orbit, or blast the whole world to ashes? Stop the rot from spreading further?'

'Unless,' said lunus, 'perhaps there's something about Orath, about this "breadbasket world", that we don't know?'

'The captain doesn't have to explain his decisions to you,' Arkelius growled.

'No, sergeant,' agreed Corbin. 'Of course he doesn't.'

He fell silent then - lunus too - and Arkelius was left to his own thoughts again.

The fact was that he couldn't have told them anything if he had wanted to. He had put the same questions to Galenus himself earlier - and received the same curt answer. Whatever Orath's secret was - because Arkelius, like Corbin and lunus, was certain it must have one - it was considered too sensitive for his ears.

A new voice crackled over the Scourge's frequency: their Thunderhawk pilot. He advised the Hunter's tank commander and crew that - at last - he was putting them down. Arkelius acknowledged him gratefully, and told Corbin to restart the engine. For the second time, he realised that his driver had pre-empted his order.

Runes blazed into life on the control banks around Arkelius, bathing him in a muted glow. He held onto his seat as the Thunderhawk decelerated sharply. A moment later, the Scourge of the Skies's chassis let out a groan of relief as the clamping arms released it.

It fell the last few metres to Orath's surface, and landed with a violent jolt.

Raising his head, Arkelius peered through one of the vision slits above him. He saw more Thunderhawks, swooping down around his tank like giant metal birds. They laid their equally giant metal eggs, then shot away into the overcast sky.

He couldn't see much else, so he turned to his tactical displays for information. They had put down in a field, thirty kilometres to the north-west of their objective: Fort Kerberos, one of Orath's former listening posts, now the Death Guard's base of operations.

Arkelius instructed Corbin to release the brakes and step on the accelerator

pedal. The Hunter's tracks spun for almost a second before finding traction in the ashy ground.

Then, the Scourge of the Skies surged forwards. It smashed its way through blackened, wilting sorghum sheaves that grew almost as high as Arkelius's main vision slit and crushed them into pulp beneath its armoured-metal weight.

A new voice came over the vox-net: Captain Numitor of the Eighth Reserve Company. He instructed the Ultramarines artillery to form up into an arc, with their most powerful units - like the Hunters, the Scourge and the Stalkers - towards the rear.

Eyes on his displays, Arkelius voxed directions to Corbin. The driver brought the Scourge around and manoeuvred it into position, on the right-hand flank of the most impressive array of artillery that Arkelius had ever seen: at least twenty tanks, by his count. They were flanked by a Predator Destructor ahead of them and a Stalker behind.

In the field in front of the tanks, two hundred Space Marines were forming up too. They were loading up their bolters, performing litanies of accuracy and hatred over each shell. Arkelius felt a fleeting pang of jealousy, wishing he was out there with them.

Behind him, lunus was preparing the Scourge's weaponry.

The next voice they heard was Galenus's, voxing from the orbiting Quintillus. He reminded his brothers of their mission: to retake the captured fort, despite the fact that - according to the battle-barge's scans - the Death Guard had reduced it to a ruin. Arkelius could guess what his two crewmates would make of that.

The captain then gave way to the company Chaplain, who bestowed the blessings of the Emperor upon the assembled force. Then, at last, Captain Numitor gave the order that Arkelius had been waiting for, and which he immediately relayed to his eager driver.

'Artillery - advance!'

Galenus strode brusquely into the Quintillus's strategium.

His senior staff were waiting for him around its U-shaped table, as was Captain Mikael Fabian of the Third Company, flanked by his own entourage. Numitor of the Eighth was already down on Orath, of course, but he too was represented by several aides.

Terserus stood quietly in one corner, but dominated the room all the same. Galenus liked to have him present at these meetings - after all, he was the Fifth Company's most venerable and experienced member. He valued his wisdom.

Terserus had led Galenus's first squad as a fully-fledged battle-brother. Galenus had often said that everything he knew, Sergeant Terserus had taught him. Three-quarters of a century ago, he had tried to overrun an enemy tank. In the process, he had been struck point-blank in the chest by its autocannon and blasted to shreds.

He had refused to die - he had always been stubborn, even by Space Marine standards - though his body had been beyond saving. His remains - some would say his very soul - had been interred in Dreadnought armour, so that he could continue to serve.

Galenus took his place at the top of the table - at the apex of the U's curve - but didn't sit down. He rested his fists on the table instead.

He studied the hovering tactical hololith that almost filled the space between the table's arms. It showed him nothing that he hadn't already known. His army had set down to the north-west of Fort Kerberos and begun their march towards it.

'This is what we know,' said Galenus. 'Two ancient eldar artefacts were found beneath the surface of Orath. We call them - Librarian Appius Vabion called them - the Great Seals. He believed that the Seals secure a warp rift of unknown magnitude. Their purpose is to hold that rift at bay. What we don't know...'

He straightened up and pursed his thin lips. 'What we don't know, frankly, could fill tomes. Even Vabion, who devoted his life to the study of the Great Seals - even he confessed to me, in his final report before he died, that he had hardly begun to unpick their secrets.

'What we can deduce is that the Great Seals were fashioned for a purpose. What we suspect - what we fear - is that the Orath rift... It could be big. A second Eye of Terror, perhaps.'

Several human aides shuddered at the very sound of those words, and traced the sign of the Imperial aquila across their chests.

'We suspect that, were the Great Seals to be destroyed...'

'But hasn't one of them been destroyed already?' Captain Fabian spoke up.

'Another thing we don't know,' Galenus conceded. 'Two listening posts were constructed on this world, two centuries ago. Fort Kerberos. Fort Garm. Their purpose - their primary purpose - was to justify the presence of an Imperial garrison on Orath. The men stationed there were never told what they were really guarding. For two hundred years, the Great Seals remained hidden underneath those forts - until now. Now, clearly, the secret is out.

'Two days ago, a Death Guard army attacked Fort Kerberos.

'They reached the Great Seal underneath it and attempted to destroy it. However, according to the latest information we have, they were unsuccessful. A shard of the Great Seal remained intact. The current Orath garrison - two Doom Eagles squads - were all but wiped out. But the enemy paid dearly for their victory.

'Their leader, their Plague Champion, was slain and Fort Kerberos collapsed. The Great Seal - what remains of it, if anything at all remains - was buried.'

'But the rift-' protested Fabian.

Galenus nodded. 'The warp rift, as doubtless you have seen, has already opened. Or perhaps it has only just begun to open. Again, we don't know. We do know - from our orbital scans - that the Death Guard are busy excavating the Fort Kerberos site.'

'What about Fort Garm?' asked Fabian.

A tall, armoured figure stood in the shadows behind him. He stepped forward now and requested permission to speak, which Galenus granted. The figure wore the horned-skull symbol of the Librarium on his right shoulder and the rank insignia of an epistolary was stitched into his blue and yellow robe.

'Librarian Vabion believed,' he said quietly, 'that the Great Seals worked in concert. It could be that, with either one of them destroyed, the other would simply break too. The full force of the rift would be unleashed.'

'Or it could be, Emperor willing,' Galenus added, 'that the Death Guard don't know about the Fort Garm Seal - in which case, it would be folly for us to draw their attention to it. For the present, we can only assume the worst.'

'We must assume that the Kerberos Seal remains partially intact, and that, to some extent at least, it still holds the rift in check. That the Death Guard intend to destroy it and have the means, and that the results of their so doing would be...'

He paused to suck in air between his teeth before he uttered the word, 'Apocalyptic'.

Another voice spoke, then: a rumbling, augmented voice, a little slurred but ringing with confidence and authority. 'Our enemies want whatever lies beneath Fort Kerberos,' said Terserus. 'Our sacred duty is to keep it from them.'

Nobody argued with him. The Dreadnought armour that Terserus wore - that he had earned - commanded the utmost respect and even reverence of all those present.

'An atomic strike was considered and ruled out,' Galenus explained. 'We can't take the risk of further damaging either of the Seals. That has left us with only one option. As Brother Terserus says, we have to hit the Death Guard hard and hit them fast. We have to rout them and ensure they don't return - else, God-Emperor knows exactly what they might unleash.'

The captain's steel-grey eyes had been darting between the various members of his audience and the tactical hololith between them. As new information had come in from his pilots in the field, the display had been remotely updated.

'And with that, gentlemen,' he announced, straightening his back and squaring his shoulders, 'you know exactly as much as I do. Any questions?'

If there were, Galenus didn't wait to hear them. He was already halfway to the door and nodded to Terserus, who followed him. His lurching footsteps

shook the metal deck plates, and a couple of aides were forced to sidle out of his path.

'Captain Fabian,' Galenus rapped over his shoulder. 'I want you to remain aboard the Quintillus and coordinate our efforts from here. I want to know if anything comes out of that warp rift - or of any indication that it may be increasing in size.'

Fabian pushed himself to his feet. 'You're going down to the planet?'

'Hit them fast,' Galenus reminded him, pausing in the doorway. 'So far, our tactics are working. The bulk of the enemy forces have been drawn out from the fort site to meet our army, but not all of them. I kept two squads in reserve - one of them my own - and a Thunderhawk, for precisely this purpose.'

'I - we - will put down as far behind enemy lines as we can. We may be outnumbered, but our aim is simply to keep the Death Guard busy, too busy to dig for the Great Seal - until our battle-brothers can break through their defences and stop them permanently.'

Chelaki felt sick. He told himself that the mere sight of the rancid followers of Nurgle had soured his stomach, but he knew that wasn't the truth.

He had reached the small rise beyond the field in which he had crash-landed. He lay flat on its leeward slope and peered cautiously over its crest.

He saw huge metal machines picking through the wreckage of Fort Kerberos. He recognised some of them as agricultural vehicles, once used by Orath's farmers. He saw a couple of old Imperial Rhinos too. They had been defaced by blasphemous symbols and had dozer-blades fitted to their front ends.

In between the machines, he saw hunched, shambling figures, wielding shovels and pickaxes. Filthy, ragged clothing hung from their bodies; diseased skin was peeling from their bones. Their eyes, their expressions, were vacant; they tackled their labours lethargically, like failing automata, only going through the motions.

He realised what the shambling creatures were: the former farmers of Orath, along with their wives and children. Their bodies and minds had been ravaged by disease. They looked as if they should be dead, and perhaps they were.

Was this the fate that awaited him too, he wondered?

The creatures - the zombies - worked under the direction of a force of Death Guard. Plague Marines. Their armoured suits were neglected, rusted to the point where it seemed impossible that they could still function, although they did. Their original colours were long lost in a murky morass of greens and browns.

One of their number seemed to stand above the others. His armour had a greater number of adornments - presumably, his sick idea of battle honours - including a belt of human skulls slung low about his hips. His

head was uncovered and looked hardly more healthy than the dead, rotting skulls did. He was missing an eye and a nose; fat, wriggling maggots had infested the empty sockets. Occasionally, a maggot would pop out of its crowded nest, bounce off its host's chestplate and burst as it hit the ground.

Chelaki trained his auto-senses on the ghoulish figure. According to his range finder, he was half a kilometre away. Too far for a kill shot to that tempting bare head, even if he had a working bolter with him. And, with the zombies and the Plague Marines in between them, he knew he would never reach him.

He could still see dark, flying shapes through the ever-present haze, further from him now than they had been before. He glimpsed a pair of shapes larger than the others with jagged, razor-edged wings, leaving smoke trails, and he remembered the machine-creature - the fire-belching daemon engine - that had wrenched him out of the sky.

The bulk of the Death Guard army, Chelaki supposed, would be marching beneath their fliers, to the north-west, closing with the Imperial forces that had landed in that direction. He could hear the grinding engines of their tanks and even glimpse the backs of some of them as they set up a defensive line in front of the excavation site.

Chelaki and his brothers had been charged with protecting this world. They had failed, and this part of it at least had been claimed by Chaos. But the Emperor had given him a chance to expunge his shame; Chelaki had no doubt that he had been spared and placed here in this spot at this time for a reason.

Now, he only had to work out what he was meant to do; how best to utilise the fragile gift that he had been given. He had to make the rest of his life count for something.

'I have eyes on the enemy, sergeant,' reported Corbin.

'I see them too,' Arkelius growled. 'Maintain formation. Turn us six - no, seven - degrees to port and ease up on the pedal a little.'

They were just about visible through his forward vision slit: the first ranks of the plague army who were grotesque, man-sized daemon creatures, grey-skinned and so badly deformed that from this distance it was hard to tell where one of them ended and the next one began.

They were like a tidal wave of putrid flesh, crashing over the horizon, and Arkelius knew from the vox-chatter that filled his helmet - from the reports of the Ultramarines Stormtalon and Thunderhawk pilots - that there were worse horrors to come behind them.

Ashen-skinned daemons were appearing in the gloomy sky too. They were riding on the backs of huge, hideous winged insects, wielding swords.

Arkelius heard the familiar rattle of autocannon fire. The sound was muted by the Scourge of the Skies's armour plating and almost drowned out by its engine. Still, the signal it sent out was clear enough. Battle had been

joined.

The Predator Destroyers ahead of him strafed the enemy while they had the chance, and the daemon creatures - scores of them - surged forward, snarling and salivating. On Captain Numitor's orders two hundred Space Marines broke into a full charge, and the opposing forces met in a savage explosion of fire, metal, entrails and blood.

Arkelius dragged his eyes away from the grisly spectacle.

He couldn't be distracted by what was happening on the ground. Not today. Today, his primary concern had to be with what was happening above it. His new charge was named the Scourge of the Skies for a reason.

A squadron of Imperial Stormtalons had entered the fray, screaming noisily over Arkelius's head, appearing in his limited field of vision a moment later. A couple of daemon riders were riddled by the gunships' assault cannons, thrown backwards from their insect mounts, while at least one of the giant flies too was blasted to pieces.

Several of them kept coming, nevertheless, soaring effortlessly over the melee on the ground, and suddenly it became clear to Arkelius that their targets were the big guns at the rear of the battlefield, the Scourge of the Skies and its fellows.

Not a moment too soon came the order from Captain Numitor for all artillery units to halt and to hold their positions, firing at the enemy at will.

'Corbin, step on the brakes, but keep the engine ticking over,' Arkelius instructed. 'Lunus, pick a target - an airborne target - and lock onto it. Find a mount with a rider if you can. That way, we have a chance of scoring two kills with a single hit.'

Corbin voxed him, 'If there's time, we should plant the stabilisers before we'

'Yes,' said Arkelius, tersely, 'thank you, brother, I am aware of that. Lower the stabilisers.'

'I have a target lock, sergeant,' reported Lunus. 'Permission to'

Arkelius interrupted him, 'Yes, do it, just'

Something small and round came spinning towards his vision slit - a grenade? It looked more like a skull to him. Presumably, one of the daemon insect-riders had flung it, though Arkelius hadn't seen it. The skull bounced off the Scourge's prow with a blinding flash, and the Hunter was rocked violently. Arkelius planted his hands on the bulkheads around him, to brace himself, as warning runes flashed red across his control banks.

'Damage report,' he snapped, 'quickly.'

'I'm running diagnostics now, sergeant,' reported Corbin.

Behind Arkelius, Lunus had been jolted almost out of his seat by the explosion. Catching hold of a grab rail, he levered his armoured bulk back into position. 'Do you still have that target lock?' Arkelius asked him, and, checking his monitors, Lunus confirmed that he did.

He tightened his hand around a trigger, and the Scourge was rocked again, this time by a punishing recoil from its rooftop missile launcher. Had its stabilisers not been sunk into the ground, it might well have been toppled onto its side.

A sleek blue rocket shot away from the Hunter towards the stars. Arkelius craned forward to follow its exhaust trail with his eyes. The missile smacked into its targets - a fly and its daemon rider - and consumed them in a bloom of flame.

The hit must have registered on lunus's monitors too, because he couldn't hold in a curt exclamation of triumph. He was still young; at least, he appeared so to Arkelius. lunus's face, he had noted that morning, was smooth and unscarred and his eyes were still blue and clear.

A perusal of his record had confirmed it: he had been a scout until as recently as four years ago, and since then had served only in his current role. As a tank gunner, lunus would not have experienced combat as Arkelius knew it. How often, he wondered, had lunus stood toe-to-toe with a heretic or a perverted mutant freak - or an ork - with the stink of its blood in his nostrils and throat and no time to think, his only options to fight and kill or to die?

'We can toast your marksmanship skills later,' Arkelius grumbled.

'Yes, sergeant,' agreed lunus. 'Reloading the Skyspear now, sergeant.'

'Corbin, how are those diagnostics coming?' asked Arkelius.

'We had a little overheating in the engine,' his driver answered him, 'but I've pumped some coolant down there and it seems fine. We've lost external temperature sensors. Oh, and there's a crack in my vision slit. The Scourge has coped with worse, a lot worse.'

'Got another target lock, sergeant,' lunus boasted.

'You know what to do, brother,' Arkelius told him.

lunus fired, and, once again, the Hunter shuddered as it spat out its deadly payload. The target this time - another daemon rider - was alert enough to see its reckoning coming. It spurred its mount into a neck-breaking dive, and the missile almost grazed the insect's tattered wings but missed them by a hair. It soared away into the clouds and was lost.

'Bad luck,' Arkelius commiserated. 'Still, two clean kills out of two shots is-'

'The final count isn't in yet, sergeant,' said lunus. 'Ten o'clock, high, look!'

It took Arkelius a moment - but then he saw it. The Scourge's missile had turned itself around in midair. It was coming at the insect and its daemon rider again. At least, Arkelius assumed it was the same insect, the same rider - and the very same missile.

He had been familiarised, of course - via hypno-conditioning - with the Skyspear's unique properties. To see those properties in action, however, was something else.

This time, the daemon didn't get a chance to dodge. Thinking itself safe, it had taken on a Stormtalon in single combat and swiped at the Imperial

ship's engine pod with a double-bladed sword. It barrel-rolled out of the way as the Stormtalon's guns responded - and straight into the teeth of the missile that it hadn't seen coming up behind it.

Arkelius was tempted to let out an exclamation himself.

By now, Orath's sky was a writhing mass of wings and bodies, both organic and mechanical in nature. They were spinning, twisting, wheeling around each other in a dizzying dance; one in which the slightest misstep could result in a sudden, explosive death for the dancer.

A sustained barrage of gunfire from the ground only added to the lethal confusion.

The Ultramarines had two Hunter tanks and two Stalkers, each of the latter sporting an Icarus stormcannon array: two triple-barrelled cannons. They were peppering the flies and their riders with solid rounds whenever they saw an opening. They were forced to hold back a little, however, lest they strike an ally.

The Hunters' gunners, with their unerring guided missiles, had no such problem. 'Another target lock, sergeant,' lunus reported.

Behind his helmet, Arkelius smiled to himself as he gave the order: 'Fire!'

A wave of nausea took Chelaki by surprise.

It swept over him, blurring his vision and robbing him of his sense of balance.

His oculobe - the implant at the base of his brain that blessed him with superhuman eyesight - tried to compensate, but only worsened matters. Before he knew it, he had sunk to one knee, one hand on the ground. He cursed himself under his breath for his weakness.

He felt his secondary heart kicking in, pumping frantically to compensate for his primary heart's weakness.

He had given the ruins of Fort Kerberos a fairly wide berth. If only he had had more explosives about him, he thought, or a working gun, if he could have seen a way to get up close to the enemy commander. He had concluded, however, that he could best serve by joining the newly arrived Ultramarines on the battlefield, who were just a few more kilometres to the north, close enough that he was able to tune in to their vox-chatter.

Chelaki pushed himself back to his feet. He fixed his sights on the billowing cloud of smoke ahead of him, just on this side of the horizon.

He forced his leaden legs to move, one after the other, settling into a pounding rhythm as he ploughed through one infected and dying field after another. He crashed through the smouldering ruins of a brick-built farmhouse without breaking his newly regained stride.

In the smoke, he could now see the silhouettes of writhing figures. They grew larger, slowly gaining in colour and definition, as he drew closer to them. Now, he could make out the proud blues of the Ultramarines armour, and the shapes of the ghastly, grey-skinned creatures they were fighting.

Chelaki had glimpsed these daemons from his cockpit earlier, but this was

the first time he had been able to get a good look at them. Like the zombies at the fort, they seemed to be in the throes of some virulent illness. Their limbs were wasting away, while their stomachs were horribly distended. They didn't act as if they were ill, however; quite the opposite.

Each of them possessed a single, bloodshot eye, an ork-like snout and a slavering mouthful of yellowing, chipped teeth. They had horns too - a single horn each - growing out of the tops of their heads. They did their fighting, however, with massive, rusted swords, which they appeared to wield with supernatural strength.

Five daemons had outflanked a Space Marine squad on the edge of the melee. Their numbers were even, but the daemons were winning the encounter. In the time it took to reach them, Chelaki saw two Space Marines - and only one of their opponents - falling. He howled a litany of vengeance as he thumbed the activation rune of his chainsword.

Up close, the daemon creatures had a stink of death and decay. Swarms of tiny, black flies buzzed about them; their flesh was lousy with so many writhing parasites that it almost seemed to be alive. Most horrifically of all, their bodies were bursting open at the seams like old cushions, exposing their rotten innards.

Chelaki aimed for one of those exposed spots: a gaping rent beneath the shoulder blades of one of the daemon creatures. His chainsword bit into an overripe, black organ, but it was as if the daemon didn't feel any pain at all. He staggered it, at least, with the force of his blow and it rounded on him, swinging its rusty blade at him. He dodged its thrust, but not the offhanded swipe that followed it. The daemon's filthy talons sliced into his wounded side, and Chelaki was unable to bite back an agonised grunt. Blood rushed to his head, his eyes failed him again and for a second he was blind.

He could still hear the daemon creature. It was chanting an unholy catechism in some ancient, unspeakable language. He felt as if the words were worming their way into his brain, like the infinite miasma of the warp, threatening his very sanity. At least the chanting told him exactly where the daemon was, and he threw up his sword and blocked its next attack.

He heard bolter fire, and, as his vision cleared, he made out the shape of the daemon creature lying dead at his feet. One of the Ultramarines - the squad's sergeant - had finished it off. Chelaki could take pride, at least, in having been a useful distraction. The odds had shifted now: four to three in the Space Marines favour.

One burst of a heavy flamer later, and the odds were four to two.

The daemon creatures fought to the bloody end, surviving blows that would have parted an ork's head from its shoulders. Inexorably, however, they were defeated. The last of them, backing away from Chelaki's chainsword blade, fell onto the teeth of another and collapsed in a disgusting heap of steaming offal.

A gruff voice broke over Chelaki's helmet vox-link, thanking him for his intervention. 'Thank the Emperor,' he replied, 'for putting me here.'

He had guessed that the speaker was the Ultramarines sergeant, whose face was hidden behind his bright blue helmet. His guess was confirmed as the sergeant stepped forward and clapped him on the arm. 'Beyus,' he introduced himself. He gave Chelaki his squad's vox-frequency, so they could talk more privately.

In the meantime his brother with the flamer was cremating the daemon corpses, along with the ticks, worms and insects still crawling over them, and any part of the trampled ground that they had touched.

Beyus noticed the jagged rent in Chelaki's armour. 'I'd see a Techmarine if you can,' he suggested, 'and get that patched up. The daemons' swords are coated with deadly poisons and worse. It only takes the slightest scratch to-'

Chelaki nodded. 'Yes, sergeant. I will. If I get the chance.' He couldn't bring himself to voice his darkest suspicion, almost a certainty now, that any such precautions would be futile in his case. It was already too late for him.

'You're a member of the Orath garrison? A Fist of the Fallen?' asked Beyus.

'The last of them, sergeant.'

'I'd be honoured if you would fight with us, my brother.'

'To the death!' agreed Chelaki, knowing that his death could be imminent.

His words were almost drowned out by a sudden, bloodcurdling screech. He looked up as jagged, razor-edged wings passed above him.

More brothers were fighting and killing and dying to the north; to the west, he could make out an obdurate blue line of Imperial tanks. In the midst of the raging combat, he saw a Chaplain in jet-black armour, brandishing his holy symbol and fiercely mouthing litanies of cleansing as he swung his powered mace.

An Apothecary, in white, loomed out of the drifting smoke. He dropped to one knee beside the first of Beyus's fallen men. Chelaki couldn't tell if he was ministering to him or merely harvesting the precious gene-seed from his dying body.

A fresh wave of daemon creatures was surging towards them. There were more of them, this time, but Chelaki's newfound squad was more than ready for them. Bolter fire sliced through the daemons before they could even get close; they shrugged off most of it, but not all. Three daemons fell and only one of them rose again.

Chelaki ignored the dizziness in his head and the sickness in his gut. He planted his feet as firmly as he could in the ground and swore to let no force on this blighted world move them. He set the teeth of his chainsword whirling and met the Emperor's enemies head-on.

'I saw Fabian's face, at the conference table.'

Galenus was squatting in the belly of a flying Thunderhawk, with the other

four members of his command squad gathered around him. Only one of them could hear his voice, however; the captain had his helmet on and was talking to Terserus over a private vox-channel.

He would never have spoken in such a way to anyone else. He would never have let anyone else hear the slightest trace of doubt in his voice.

'He disagreed with my decision,' Galenus continued. 'He thought I should have been the one to stay behind and coordinate our forces from orbit. But, Emperor damn it, someone else can sit behind a desk, poring over tactical hololiths and waiting for the Librarians to divine some information we can use. Our brothers are fighting tooth and nail for the Emperor, laying down their lives in His service, and they need-'

'They need to know their leader is with them,' rumbled Terserus.

Galenus glanced up at his old sergeant, rather, at the hulking adamantium shell in which his scant remains were entombed. Sometimes, he forgot there was a vestige of a man inside that shell; a man whose face he hadn't seen in over seventy-five years. Galenus's oldest, best friend was just a voice inside his helmet.

'You have the makings of a captain,' said Terserus. 'I always said so.'

'I've been a captain for over forty years,' Galenus reminded him.

The Thunderhawk's copilot reported in from the cockpit. They had dropped beneath the clouds now, he advised, and were on their final approach towards Fort Kerberos. So far, they had encountered only minimal resistance. The Death Guard had committed most of their aerial forces to the north-west front, but now they had started to pull some of them back, too late.

The Thunderhawk swooped on the ruined fort from the east, and strafed it with lascannons and heavy bolters. 'It's no use, sir,' the copilot voxed. 'The creatures they have digging for them, it's as if they have no minds of their own. They see us coming, but they don't even try to run. It takes a direct hit - we have to kill them - to stop them from working.'

'Acknowledged,' said Galenus. 'How long until we are in position?'

'Estimating... Two enemy contacts approaching from the north-west and coming fast. I don't know what they are, but... Almost within bolter range already. It's going to be close. We're coming around now, sir, and approaching the drop zone in...'

The copilot switched vox-frequencies so the rest of the squad could hear him. 'Prepare for landing in twenty seconds, nineteen, eighteen...'

Galenus signalled to a battle-brother, who yanked open a hatch in the hull beside them. The Thunderhawk's airbrakes had been applied, and Galenus braced himself in the hatchway's circular mouth against the inertial forces that threatened to bowl him over. They were coming in low, so low that the ground was no more than a grey and black blur to him.

'Hover mode engaged in five, four, three, two...'

Then Galenus gave the order, 'On my mark... Go!'

He leapt through the open hatchway and simultaneously activated the jump pack strapped to his back. Its rocket engine fired and caught him at the apogee of his leap, sparing him an unceremonious landing.

He put down, almost gracefully, at the edge of Fort Kerberos's ruins.

As he straightened up, the ground shook with a series of heavy impacts. Three members of his squad - and all five members of another, who had jumped from the Thunderhawk's port side - had landed around him. He glanced up to see the last of his brothers - Terserus - plummeting towards them like a meteorite.

No jump pack would have been able to bear his weight, nor, in his Dreadnought armour, did Terserus need one. Two battle-brothers had to leap aside or risk being crushed by him. He slammed into the earth in between them and the dust settled to reveal him crouched at the epicentre of a self-made crater.

In the meantime, their transporter was in trouble. Hovering above their heads, the Thunderhawk was a virtual sitting duck. Its attackers - the copilot's two 'enemy contacts', presumably - had jagged, razor-sharp wings and grapple-like claws. Galenus couldn't tell if they were creature or machine; more likely, he suspected, an unholy fusion of both.

The daemon engines had the aspects of mythical dragons, an impression only enhanced by the goutts of fire belching from their elongated maws. The Thunderhawk couldn't pick up the speed it needed to evade them, and, blasted by infernal flames, its armour plating melted into so much slag and its engines burned.

By the time it could bring its weapons to bear, the damage had been done.

A sustained blast from the lascannon scorched a daemon's tail and caused it to withdraw, momentarily, but the other had alighted upon the Thunderhawk's wing and was tearing it to shreds with its metal talons. The best its crew could do now was stave off the inevitable crash, and keep the daemons occupied a while longer.

Galenus and his small team on the ground had troubles of their own.

The captain saw the Death Guard's zombie slaves ahead of him, still shovelling rubble as if the firefight above them wasn't happening. Any minute now, he feared - any second - they could break through to the underground shrine in which the first of the Great Seals was housed. They had to be stopped.

In his team's way, however, were the Death Guard themselves.

There were seven of them, the Plague God's favoured number: Plague Marines, kicking their way through mounds of rubble to intercept the new arrivals. In contrast to Galenus's assault team, none of them were wearing their helmets. They showed off their scabrous faces, as if proud of them; proud of their flaking skin, disgusting boils and weeping sores.

Each Plague Marine wielded an equally scabrous knife and a gun that

looked as if it might fall apart if he tried to fire it. Galenus knew, however - from experience, hard-won, a long time ago - that each weapon would work well enough.

He addressed his two squads over their vox-link. 'Fewer of them than I expected. Ten of us should be able to take them down.'

He asked Terserus to take point. The fibre bundles that powered his armour had just accomplished the arduous task of lifting him upright, and not only was he the most powerful warrior among them, he was also the one most protected against infection.

The Dreadnought raised his left fist. It was wrapped in a gauntlet almost large enough to cover a man's head. He called on the machine-spirits inside the glove, and it crackled with bright blue energy. He had no right hand or forearm; instead, a storm bolter - effectively, two regular bolters welded together, providing him with double the firepower - protruded from his right elbow joint.

Galenus was harbouring no illusions. He had the Death Guard outnumbered, but each of them was more than a match for the average Space Marine. The captain figured that Terserus made them even. As the Dreadnought stamped forward - and his battle-brothers fell in behind him with their chainswords drawn - he addressed them all out loud. He cranked his vox-grille up to full volume, making sure the enemy heard him.

'We are the Ultramarines, the Sons of Guilliman,' he bellowed, quoting the famous words of Chapter Master Marneus Calgar. 'Whilst we draw breath, we stand. Whilst we stand, we fight. Whilst we fight, we prevail. Nothing shall stay our wrath!'

Sometimes, he forgot that he was no longer a field commander. Not that Galenus objected. Terserus had near-perfect recall of events from centuries ago; his grasp on recent days, on the other hand, was tenuous in the extreme.

Most likely, he had already forgotten his conversation with Galenus in the Thunderhawk - and that was just how the captain liked it.

Arkelius relayed the good news to his crew, who didn't share his access to command frequencies: 'The captain and his team have put down behind enemy lines.'

'I hope they leave a few Death Guard for the rest of us,' Corbin grunted.

'Meaning what, exactly?' Arkelius asked, sharply.

'No disrespect, sergeant. I just meant that Captain Galenus is well-known for leading from the front. When I and I - and the Scourge - were with the Eighth Company, we heard.'

'I have another target lock,' Iunus interrupted him. 'No, damn it, I don't. It's veering in and out of my range.'

Arkelius checked through his vision slits. The sky above his head was almost clear. Both sides in the aerial battle had taken casualties - he couldn't tell which side had taken more - and the combat zone had shifted

eastward. The daemon fliers, he imagined, were shying away from the Hunters and the Stalkers, having seen their capabilities.

He voxed Captain Numitor, 'Permission to break formation, sir, and seek a better firing position.'

Permission was granted.

Arkelius ordered Corbin to pull up the stabilisers and advance slowly. As usual, his driver anticipated him, and barely had the words left his throat when the Scourge of the Skies juddered into motion again. He suspected that Corbin thought he could have commanded the tank himself, and lunus probably agreed with him.

Arkelius had been warned that this could happen.

Tank crews spent a great deal of time cooped up together. The bonds that formed between them were among the strongest in their Chapters, and each crew tended to bond with its vehicle too, becoming almost like cogs in its machinery. When a crewmember, particularly a tank commander, was lost - in this case, reassigned to a less experienced crew - it could take a while for the others to learn to work with his replacement.

Arkelius had one advantage over his experienced driver and gunner. Between his extra vision slits and the vox reports in his ear, he had a broader overview of the theatre of war than either of them. Corbin had just one slit, which allowed him to see straight ahead, while lunus couldn't see outside at all, and he only had the readings on his various monitors.

Arkelius knew that his brothers were gaining ground against their daemon opponents.

He had also learned that Galenus's Thunderhawk had crashed and burned. He was glad to hear a slightly breathless report from its pilot, confirming that the crew had bailed out.

The pilot described fire-breathing daemon engines, like dragons: two of them. There had been a few garbled reports of such creatures before - they had picked off a Stormtalon on the periphery of the battlefield - but no one had got a good look at them until now.

They had circled the wreckage of the Thunderhawk once, but seemed uninterested in finishing off its former occupants. They had wheeled around and headed back north-west, the way they had come. A moment later, another Stormtalon pilot saw them, bearing down hard on his starboard side.

Arkelius told Corbin to alter their heading and increase their speed. 'Forget the flies and their riders. We're hunting bigger game now. lunus, two targets, roughly four hundred metres ahead of us, larger than the others and faster. Let me know when you have them.'

Another pair of close explosions shook the Hunter.

'Sergeant, we're pulling ahead of the other tanks,' Corbin advised over the vox-channel. 'We're making ourselves a target for'

'I'm told we're fairly well-armoured,' Arkelius snarled. 'Let's trust to that and

take a chance, shall we? We have a pair of monstrosities tearing through our gunships out there. We're loaded up with the best, the most accurate, surface-to-air weapons in the Emperor's arsenal. I say we introduce the one to the other and-

'Sergeant!' lunus yelled.

Arkelius saw it for himself, on his own monitors: an auspex contact, growing larger, more insistent by the second; the tiny, flickering runes that accompanied it on the screen were blinking red, a warning that the object was approaching them on a collision course.

His gaze darted to his forward vision slit, and he saw it framed there too: one of the mutant flies, without a rider, spiralling out of the sky towards him. He thought it must be out of control as its wings appeared to be damaged. Then he realised that the insect was on a deliberate suicide run, and he saw the reason why: on its tail was a Skyspear missile.

'Coming in too low, too fast,' lunus reported. 'I can't get a target lock on it.'

'Abort that missile, now!'

'I can't do that either, sergeant. It isn't one of our missiles.'

Corbin broke in: 'The other Hunter must have fired it.' As if Arkelius had needed telling.

He was already voxing the commander of the Vengeance of Daedalus , but before he could speak to him, the fly - at least twice the size of an average man - smacked into the Scourge's prow and explosively disgorged its disgusting innards.

The impact shattered the armaplas pane of Arkelius's vision slit: its outer pane, that was. The ancient designers of the Rhino and its mechanised offspring hadn't let them be so easily penetrated; their vision slits were actually short fixed periscopes, with a vertical tube and several lenses and mirrors separating the user's eye from what the slit showed him.

Arkelius didn't have to worry about one dead, mutant fly. He had to worry about what was coming up behind it.

Brusquely, he informed the Daedalus's commander of his vehicle's predicament; too late, he feared. There was a good reason why Skyspear missiles were as effective as they were.

Unlike other missiles, their flights weren't guided by machine-spirits and cogitators. They were guided by human intelligences. The mummified brains of distinguished Chapter-serfs were entombed within the Skyspears' warheads, still partially aware.

What this meant, in practice, was that they did more than just follow enemy pilots; they could actually outthink them, anticipating their evasive manoeuvres. They almost always hit their targets - sooner or later - as Arkelius had seen for himself. Even when their targets were currently splattered across the front of a friendly tank.

Arkelius could do nothing now but pray.

He wasn't used to that feeling, and he hated it. Even on the worst day of his life; even as the ork axe had cleaved his armour and the dirt of an alien battlefield had rushed up to meet his face; even then, as long as he had been able to cling to consciousness - and to his bolter and chainsword - he hadn't felt as powerless as he did now.

The nose cone of the missile had grown to fill his view through the vision slit.

Then, with a sudden flash of light, it was gone.

The Daedalus's gunner had transmitted the abort codes in time - or perhaps, just perhaps, the embalmed intelligence inside the Skyspear had seen the havoc it was about to wreak and acted on its own initiative. The result, either way, was that the missile had been destroyed, without its deadly warhead being triggered.

The Scourge of the Skies had been buffeted by the blast, but had weathered it. Corbin had acted on his own initiative too, lowering the hydraulic stabilisers.

Arkelius already had another problem. The suicidal fly on his prow was - incredibly - clinging to a shred of life. It was stabbing through his broken vision slit with a slender barbed stinger. Its wings, torn though they were, vibrated furiously, creating a loud buzz that seemed to drill into Arkelius's ears.

The stinger, of course, couldn't reach him in his sealed compartment. The fly must have realised this for itself because it squirmed around and showed him its misshapen head instead. Green pus dribbled from its clicking mandibles. Its three compound eyes seemed to fix the tank commander with a baleful glare through his periscope mirrors.

Then, the fly vomited up a thick stream of viscous green liquid. Arkelius's readouts confirmed his instinctive suspicion: the ooze was virulently acidic. It was eating into the Scourge's armour plating. He cursed under his breath. He threw open his circular top hatch. He levered himself up until his head and chest were above the Scourge's roof, and he could see the fly on the front of the tank below him. The fly saw him too - those blasted compound eyes, he realised - and it spat at him. Acidic green ooze splattered against Arkelius's forearm and it began to strip away the topmost layers of his ablative armour. He shook off as much of it as he could.

Then, he emptied a full bolter magazine into the insect's vile, black body.

The fly slid down the Scourge's sloping prow and out of Arkelius's sight. He dropped back into his seat and pulled down the hatch behind him. His right forearm was a mass of congealed blue ceramite and plasteel. He voxed Corbin, telling him to pull up the stabilisers and step on the accelerator pedal. He felt no more than a slight bump as they rode over the fly's remains and crushed them underneath their caterpillar tracks.

'Resume course, sergeant?' asked Corbin.

Arkelius checked through the slits in his hatch again. The battle in the sky

was showing no signs of abating. Flies and their riders were being battered by Stormtalon assault cannons. It looked as if the tide was slowly turning the Imperium's way.

And now, at last, he saw it: little more than a fleeting shadow, from this distance, a suggestion of outspread wings and an elongated neck. It was twisting and wheeling its way through a mass of blue machinery and chitinous carapaces. One of the blasphemous daemon engines; what else could it have been?

Arkelius gave a new heading to his driver, and an estimated range to his gunner.

'Let's bring that affront to all that is holy down!' he snarled.

The Thunderhawk had gone down behind a hill to the north.

A thick plume of smoke spiralled skyward from the crash site, and Galenus monitored the vox-chatter in his ear until he knew that the crew had escaped with their lives.

To him, every man who fell under his command - every brother who died before Galenus did, while following his orders - was a cause for regret. He knew he couldn't fight all his company's battles for them; he could certainly fight the biggest ones, however.

He had gone toe-to-toe with the broadest-shouldered, strongest-looking of the seven Death Guard at the ruined fort. The traitor's exposed head was little more than a mouldering skull, with scraps of grey skin fluttering from it like tattered banners. His charnel stench made Galenus want to retch. Of the Imperium's many enemies, there were none that disgusted him more than these: former Space Marines themselves, turned to the Ruinous Powers.

The Plague Marine parried Galenus's chainsword with the stock of a plasma pistol, and, somehow, it wasn't sliced in two by the slashing blade. He thrust his pox-ridden knife at the captain's guts. Twisting out of its way, Galenus fired his bolter at the Plague Marine's skull. An unexpected swipe jarred his firing hand and sent his shot awry.

Galenus had taken the measure of his opponent now. The Plague Marine was stronger, if a little slower, than he was. He was confident, however, that he could defend himself against the enemy, keep him occupied, for as long as he had to.

His battle-brothers - on the captain's orders - had partnered up, each fighting a single opponent, all apart from Terserus, that was, who had taken on two Death Guard by himself. They were trying to keep out of his reach - understandably - and concentrating their bolter fire on Terserus's chest in the vain hope of punching through his armour.

Galenus's sealed helmet buzzed with urgent vox reports.

He picked out a voice from among them: a Sergeant Beyus from the Eighth Company. He had found a surviving member of Orath's garrison, who had set eyes - briefly - upon the enemy leader. He described a

Death Guard a head or more taller than the others, with a missing nose, a maggot-infested eye socket and a belt of skulls.

A Plague Champion, thought Galenus. That was what they called themselves.

Artorius - the commander of the Fists of the Fallen - had spoken of such a being in his final reports from Orath. It was believed, however, that Naracoth had died: locked in combat with Artorius himself beneath Fort Kerberos, when the building had come down on their heads. The description of this new figure didn't fit him, anyway.

So, this has to be a new Champion...

Galenus voxed Beyus directly, 'Where is he?' Beyus patched him through to the Doom Eagle, Brother Chelaki, who answered his question.

'I should be able to see him,' concluded Galenus. 'Why can't I see him?' Chelaki couldn't answer him. Galenus warned his two squads to be wary; there could be more enemies - more powerful enemies - yet to show themselves. He contacted Captain Fabian on the Quintillus to ask if he had detected any troop movements in the area.

Simultaneously he feinted to the left, drawing an unforeseen opponent into the arc of his chainsword blade and landing a solid blow to his left wrist - the wrist of his knife hand. Another foe might have lost his grip on his weapon, but Plague Marines were abnormally resistant to pain.

Galenus was winged by an answering burst of plasma, which heated his left pauldron until it glowed red and seared the flesh underneath it.

The Plague Marine took a step back and brought his pistol to bear again, this time at Galenus's head. The barrel of the gun was corroded, oozing green pus out of a number of hairline cracks; it could only have been through the application of the vilest sorcery that it functioned at all.

Fabian's voice crackled in his ear again, 'You were right. We have engine emissions, a kilometre and a half to the south-east of your current position.' 'How many?'

'Two, three, it's hard to tell. They're airborne, beginning to fan out... Two. We have two confirmed contacts. Thunderhawks, from the shape of them - but they certainly aren't ours.'

'Where are they headed?'

'Stand by... They're levelling off at a cruising altitude. Looks like this is a planetary flight then. We have their trajectories and are projecting most likely destinations.'

Galenus mouthed two words to himself, grimly, 'Fort Garm.'

In the meantime, he evaded another plasma blast and closed with his opponent again. A fierce flurry of cuts and thrusts forced the Plague Marine onto his back foot, a sitting duck for a sustained salvo of bolter fire. Bolts pinged off the Plague Marine's armour and chipped his skull, but the traitor didn't bleed, he only oozed more of that bright green pus.

'We have it,' said Fabian in Galenus's ear. 'We know where those ships

are going.'

He spoke two words then, which made his fellow captain curse aloud.

The Ultramarines were beginning to make some real headway.

In Chelaki's estimation, they had gained almost half the distance to the ruins of Fort Kerberos from their starting point, across the blackened grain fields. Now, however, the second wave of the Death Guard army - at least thirty Traitor Marines in discoloured and encrusted power armour - had entered the fray. They carried with them a tattered banner fashioned from flayed human skin, and their arrival was turning the tide again.

Sergeant Beyus and his two surviving original squad members were battling a mutated fly that had pounced on them from above. Before Chelaki could join them, however - in a moment of fever-induced distraction - a daemon leapt on him from behind.

It had him in a chokehold, forcing him down onto one knee. He managed to grab its deceptively bony wrist, but it took all the strength he had to keep its hand - and the sword it held - away from his throat. He heard Sergeant Beyus's shouted warning - 'Incoming!' - but there wasn't a great deal he could do about it.

Something was coming up through the field behind him. Something big. Something metal. He could hear its engines screaming even over the clamour of the battle. He could hear its hull protesting as it bounced and scraped along the ground. The daemon must have heard it too, but apparently it was happy to be crushed if it could hold him here for just a second longer and ensure that he was crushed too.

It was still chanting throatily to itself. The words were gibberish, but at the same time there was an ineffable sense of wrongness about them. The sound of them, clawing their way into his ears, made Chelaki's eyes itch and his head hurt.

He put everything he had into one final, desperate effort, pushing himself backwards and over onto his back. He landed on top of the squirming daemon creature and, taken by surprise, it loosened its grip on him.

He tore himself free of it. He scrambled through the infected stalks of grain on his hands and knees. The daemon lunged after him and caught his ankle. Chelaki kicked out at it, and his boot sank into the soft tissue of its single eye.

It let go of him again - as a bright blue mass of metal came ploughing through the field and right over the prostrate creature. Had Chelaki been any closer to it - had he not been able to withdraw his foot in time - he would surely have shared its grisly fate.

He lay flat on his stomach, buried in the black grain. He was short of breath and his hearts were pounding in his ears. The burning pain from the wound in his side had spread, until he felt as if his every nerve was on fire. He longed to close his heavy eyes, but he knew that if he did he wouldn't be able to open them again.

He pushed himself up, laboriously, letting his armour do most of the work. The mass of blue metal had come to rest, about a hundred metres behind him. It was a Stormtalon, as he had already deduced. It had come down hard and left a burning furrow in its wake. From the rear, however, it didn't seem too badly damaged.

Sergeant Beyus and his men had despatched their insect opponent and were clambering over the gunship's nose. Its pilot must have been alive and in need of assistance. Indeed, a moment later, they lifted him out through the shattered glaci. The pilot was unconscious, and Chelaki heard the sergeant voxing for the services of an Apothecary.

Chelaki was still struggling to draw breath. He removed his helmet; what good was it doing him now, anyway? The cold air hit his skin like a bucket of water, and he realised that his face was drenched in sweat.

Numerous tiny parasites were crawling over his armour. They must have jumped to him from their former host, the daemon creature. He brushed them off, disgusted, crushing as many of them as he could underfoot as they scuttled away from him.

Somehow, he made it to the front of the Stormtalon. He hoisted himself up into the empty cockpit and dropped heavily into the pilot's seat. The gunship's engines had been killed, but the dashboard runes were still lit up. Sergeant Beyus voxed him, 'Chelaki, what are you doing?'

'I think...' he said, flicking a few runes, running a few tests. 'I don't think there's too much damage.' It must have been the pilot, rather than the ship, that had been critically wounded, and he must have clung to consciousness long enough to complete a safe, albeit bumpy, landing. A better landing than Chelaki had managed, anyway.

'I can get this ship back in the air,' he declared.

'Are you sure?' asked Beyus, doubtfully.

'This is what I was trained for, sergeant,' Chelaki told him.

He held his back straight, with an effort, looking Beyus in the eye. He couldn't let him see how weak he truly was. Had his sergeant suspected that he had become infected, that the rot had spread to Chelaki's very soul, he would surely have had him executed on the spot.

He wasn't ready to die just yet.

All the years he had served he had spent at a gunship's helm. He didn't think he had the strength to swing a chainsword any longer, but Chelaki could have flown a Stormtalon in his sleep; and the Emperor had seen fit, at this moment of all moments, to drop a Stormtalon virtually at his feet.

Beyus nodded his assent. 'And may the Emperor go with you,' he said, as he turned to rejoin his battle-brothers in combat against more plague daemons.

Chelaki felt ashamed of himself, unworthy, for having deceived a superior officer, but he had no doubt that the Emperor was with him indeed. He expected yet more from Chelaki than he had already given - just one final

act of service, perhaps - and the Doom Eagle could better oblige him in the air, in his element, than he could on the ground.

A fresh explosion rocked the Scourge of the Skies .

Arkelius saw a maggot-ridden Death Guard on the battlefield ahead of them. He had lobbed a grenade at the Hunter and was preparing a second one, taking aim.

An alarm screamed out from Arkelius's instrument banks, and Corbin reported in, 'We're overheating again, sergeant. Systems failing across the board.'

Arkelius had lunus fire a volley from the hull-mounted storm bolter. Several of his bolts struck true. The Plague Marine didn't fall, but his grenade detonated in his hand and he took the full force of its blast. Frustratingly, however, he remained standing.

The Death Guard's explosives were fashioned from the shrunken skulls of their slain enemies. They were low on concussive force, but loaded with toxic spores. They were deadly to Nurgle's enemies, but far less so to the Plague God's already diseased followers.

Two Ultramarines closed with the shaken traitor, their chainswords singing. Arkelius instructed Corbin to keep the Scourge moving forwards, but then lunus spoke up as his instruments sounded a chirruping alarm. 'We're coming into weapons range of the enemy's artillery, sergeant. I suggest we'

A rune panel beside him exploded, venting pressurised steam into his compartment.

Arkelius scowled behind his helmet. 'Very well,' he conceded. 'Put on the brakes and lower the stabilisers, and, lunus, target the flies and their riders again, but sparingly. Don't fire until you're sure of a kill.' They only had so many Skyspear missiles - too few to waste any.

He leaned forward to look through his main vision slit again.

His eyes widened at the last sight he had expected to see: a daemon engine, one of the metal dragons. All this time, he had been hunting it and suddenly it had appeared from nowhere. More accurately, it had emerged from the blast field of an exploding missile. It flattened its razor-edged wings and lowered its triangular head as it began to dive.

'lunus!' Arkelius yelled.

'I see it, sergeant. It's coming right at us. No, strike that. We aren't its target.'

The dragon soared over the Scourge , and alighted upon a Predator Destructor. It tore into the turret of the Imperial tank with its claws, shredding its guns in seconds.

Arkelius heard the urgent voice of the Predator's commander, reporting that he was abandoning his vehicle. Its hatches flew open and three power-armoured figures stumbled out of them. lunus, in the meantime, was scrambling to get a lock on the Predator's attacker. He lowered his missile

launcher as far as it would go - until it was near-horizontal - but Arkelius could see his problem: while his target was still attached to the abandoned tank, his auspex couldn't differentiate one from the other.

The dragon breathed fire at the Predator's withdrawing crew before returning to the sky with a raucous screech. One of the crewmembers - the commander, to judge by his numerous honour badges - was hurt, badly burned, and the daemon engine was getting away.

'As soon as you have that lock, lunus...' said Arkelius, tersely.

An age seemed to pass before, at last, lunus's fingers snapped shut around his launch trigger and the Scourge of the Skies trembled with the now-familiar sensation of recoil. Arkelius held his breath as he followed the Skyspear missile's flight. The utmost silence of his crewmates suggested that they were holding theirs too.

The missile quickly dropped onto the daemon engine's tail.

The dragon saw it, and tried in vain to shake it off. It looped around behind a Stormtalon, banked steeply and threaded its way sideways between two giant flies. But the Skyspear evaded both friend and foe alike in dogged pursuit of its programmed target. The daemon had the edge over it in terms of manoeuvrability and it occurred to Arkelius that it was also guided by an interred intelligence. The missile's smaller size, however, compensated for that advantage - and it was faster too. It was homing in on the daemon engine's debased emissions.

The missile struck its fleeing target, right up its exhaust pipes.

The daemon engine exploded - and several monstrous flies in its vicinity were knocked off-balance or injured by the force of the blast and by razor-sharp pieces of shrapnel. Inside the Scourge of the Skies, three voices were raised in triumphant roars.

Arkelius had despatched many enemies of the Emperor, of course. He had lost count of the number long ago. To have destroyed a creature so monstrous, however, so powerful - it felt different. He felt that he - together with his vehicle and his crew, of course - had just accomplished something special, something bigger than he had ever accomplished before.

It was a heady realisation, enough to make him forget the discomfort - the mild itch of claustrophobia - that had lurked on the periphery of his awareness all day.

There was only one thought on the tank commander's mind at that moment, and he clenched his teeth in a grim smile as he voiced it, '...and one to go!'

Two of Galenus's battle-brothers were down.

A Plague Marine planted his foot on the chest of one of them, and plunged his infected knife through a crack in his bright blue armour. He leered across the battlefield at Galenus, with his blackened stumps of teeth, as he twisted his blade in his enemy's guts.

A Plague Marine had fallen too, and, at that moment, Terserus drove his

power fist through the stomach of another, splintering his armour and his spine.

Two casualties apiece, then. With their greater starting numbers, that meant the Ultramarines were gaining the advantage.

Sergeant Thalorus and Brother Filion came to their captain's assistance, giving him a welcome respite from his relentless, skull-headed opponent. He used it to converse with the orbiting Quintillus, specifically, with Captain Fabian's epistolary, who had taken charge of the Librarians of all three companies.

'I need answers now,' he barked. 'Why do we have two Chaos transports - one carrying, we have to assume, a Plague Champion - headed for the second Great Seal?'

'We have been trying to divine the answer to that question, and-'

'Don't tell me what you've been doing. Just tell me what you know.'

The Librarian drew a breath before he answered. 'No doubt remains that those ships are en route to Fort Garm to destroy the Great Seal there. This may be good news for us.'

Galenus raised a cynical eyebrow. 'How so?'

'It could be that our assumptions were... incorrect.' The word was spoken reluctantly. 'It could be that, in order to unleash the warp rift fully, both Great Seals must be broken.'

'Because why else would the Death Guard divide their forces this way,' Galenus mused, 'when they're so close to unearthing and destroying the Kerberos Seal?'

'The problem, captain, is that the eldars' ancient technomancy is still beyond our-'

Galenus tuned out the Librarian's voice. The skull-headed Plague Marine was holding off his two attackers; they couldn't seem to penetrate his defences. Galenus, however, had spotted that a patch of the armour between his ribs had rusted away, and that there was a fresh-looking, suppurating wound behind it.

He holstered his boltgun and drew his gladius. Like Terserus's power fist, the short sword's blade fizzed with energy. Of course, it was smaller and less powerful than the fist. However, at close quarters and in skilled hands - like the captain's - it was a highly effective weapon.

With a forward lunge, he thrust his gladius into the Plague Marine's side.

He was pleased to elicit a grunt from the traitor's throat - the first sign of pain or weakness that he had displayed. Galenus stepped back and left the rest to his battle-brothers. He was thinking about what the Librarian had told him.

It was certainly an appealing notion, he thought, if they were to achieve their evil goal, the Death Guard had to win on two fronts, while the Ultramarines had only to beat them on one. It would mean he could forget about the southbound enemy forces. An appealing notion indeed...

'But what if it's the Death Guard who have made the wrong assumptions?'  
'Captain?'

'What if we were right before and wrong now?' Galenus asked. 'We could win the battle here but lose the war. Can you guarantee that won't happen? That, if we allow the Garm Seal to be destroyed, it won't mean the end of everything?'

'I have a team of Codicers consulting the Emperor's Tarot as we speak to determine-'

'I'll take that as a "no", then,' said Galenus.

A death's-head grenade exploded against Terserus's armour, enveloping him in a pall of smoke but hardly shaking him. The skull-headed Plague Marine gave way to the inevitable at last, and was decapitated cleanly by Brother Filion's chainsword.

Galenus voxed the sergeant in charge of his aerial forces. He asked him how many ships he could spare from the ongoing battle. With its greater speed, a Stormtalon could easily catch up to the southbound Chaos-controlled Thunderhawks, although its cannons would be little use against their near-impervious hulls.

'I want them to run interference,' Galenus explained. 'Do whatever they can to slow those plague ships down. Whatever it takes.'

Next he voxed Fabian, 'Contact the surviving members of the garrison at Fort Garm. Tell them to lay explosives throughout the building and to blow them the second they see the enemy coming. Let them dig for the Garm Seal too.'

He knew he was only buying time, at best. He just prayed that it might be time enough.

Chelaki felt better than he had in several hours. He was calmer, more focused. He had the wind in his face and he could finally breathe again.

The ground dropped away beneath his cockpit. Within seconds, the Ultramarines and the daemons fighting down there were little more than blue and grey specks to him, like icons on a hololithic projection.

He didn't like the sound of his port engine, which was grumbling hoarsely. It must have been damaged in the crash-landing. He ought to have known that, but he had had neither the time nor the energy for his usual preflight checks.

No matter, he told himself. He didn't need much more from the engines than they had already given him. They had already lifted him up here, back into the sky.

A vox-grille in one of his control panels crackled. A voice - the voice of another Ultramarine sergeant - addressed him by the call sign of his vessel and ordered him to identify himself. Chelaki complied, and at the same time he eased his joystick forwards and plunged into the midst of the ongoing aerial battle.

He pointed his nose at a cluster of giant flies and let rip with his

twin-linked assault cannons. He pumped scores of rounds into the hideous creatures in a matter of seconds. A couple of flies survived, but he had shot away the wings of one of them. It could no longer keep its revolting bloated body aloft and was dropping like a stone.

The remaining fly flew at him with a furious buzz. Its mouth gaped open, wider than seemed physically possible. He remembered seeing one of these creatures on the ground. It had been slain, its stomach split open, and the partially digested corpse of a Space Marine had spilled out of it. Chelaki was only too painfully aware of his cockpit's shattered glacis - he had nothing, no shielding, between him and his vengeful attacker.

He threw the Stormtalon into a sideways spin. The fly didn't react to his sudden manoeuvre in time. Instead of landing on the flimsy framework of the cockpit canopy, it glanced off the hull and was stunned. A moment later, it burned and finally expired in the backwash of the starboard-side engine pod.

'Welcome to the team, brother,' said the sergeant's voice from the vox-grille. There were fewer Imperial ships in the air than Chelaki had expected, fewer than he had seen from the ground. It had seemed to him before that the battle was almost won. From up here, however, the odds looked a lot less favourable.

He glanced at his targeting auspex. He saw that two larger shapes with Imperial signatures - more Stormtalons - had broken off combat to fly southward. He didn't know why and he didn't ask. It wasn't his business. At least they hadn't been shot down, as he had briefly feared. 'Glad to be of service, sergeant,' Chelaki voxed.

He had picked up another large shape on the auspex - and this one was no ally. He slammed his joystick hard to the left and banked around. He swooped past another fly. Its rider hurled a grenade in his direction, but missed.

And now he saw it: the metal dragon, the daemon engine that had ripped him out of the sky once already. He was sure it was the one: its right wing had lost one of its metal panels. He had noticed that before, as his gunship was blistering in its infernal fire and his cockpit had crumpled around him.

The daemon's wound didn't seem to have slowed it down. It was jousting with another Stormtalon - and it was winning. It sideswiped the Imperial gunship with a claw, causing black smoke to pour out of its engine. This was it, thought Chelaki. He knew what he had to do now. He knew why the Emperor had kept him alive this long.

The other Stormtalon was already badly damaged; the blow to its engine must have been the final straw. The pilot ejected. It seemed like everything was happening in slow-motion. The Stormtalon spiralled towards the ground. Its former pilot was suspended in midair, in that fraction of a second before gravity took hold of him. The daemon engine was wheeling towards him

again, throwing open its maw to release its searing hellfire.

And Chelaki's thumb was poised over his missile launch rune.

The Typhoon missile launcher was underneath his cockpit. He felt the vibration through the soles of his boots as it spat out three rockets in quick succession. His hope was to ram them down the daemon's open throat.

The first of the missiles flew wide. The daemon engine twisted out of the way of the second, but straight into the path of the third. It unleashed the stream of flames that had been meant for the falling pilot, and the warhead blew before the missile could reach its target. The daemon was battered and flung away by the shockwave, but - as far as the disappointed Chelaki could tell - it wasn't damaged.

At least he had saved his brother pilot's life. The jets in his seat were flaring to control his descent. He had also got the daemon engine's attention.

He had already begun to take evasive action. He plunged into a nearby cloud bank and dived steeply. The daemon engine was faster and more manoeuvrable than Chelaki was. His only hope of shaking it off was to deny it line of sight on him.

Dropping out of the clouds, he saw the Death Guard's tanks underneath him. There were over a dozen of them, plastered with filth, festooned with rotting bones and sprouting arcane weapons like swollen tumours. They were holding their ground in a line in front of Fort Kerberos. They were letting the Imperial invaders come to them, although a few of them were already straining forward, like wolves against a leash.

He was closer to the fort - closer to the warp rift - than he had thought. A little too close for comfort. Had any of those tanks had sky-strafting weaponry like the Imperial Hunters and Stalkers did, he would have made an irresistible target for them.

The daemon engine was above, still searching the clouds for him.

A fly and its rider came at him from the right, but Chelaki wasn't interested in engaging either of them. He banked away from the arc of the rider's swung blade - but the fly spat a plume of green goop in his direction, which he couldn't evade.

His starboard engine pod took the worst of the spray. A second later, predictably, his instrument panels flared red with warning runes. In the meantime, he had outpaced the mutant fly easily enough. He fixed his true nemesis - the dragon, the daemon engine - in his gun sights, and he opened up his throttle.

The acid was eating its way through Chelaki's starboard engine, while the damaged port engine couldn't take the additional strain. He might have made an emergency landing - he might have - but for what purpose, he asked himself grimly?

For the second time today, his ship was done for - and so was he.

He could feel the infection coursing, burning its way through his veins.

Right now - if Chelaki could believe the whispered rumours - a new seed pod was ripening in Nurgle's sickly garden. A budding daemon was leeching off his dwindling life force, weakening him further by the second. If he let the rot take him, then the daemon would have the rest of him. It would have his very soul.

There was only one certain way to stop it; one way to keep the disease from running its course and ensure that the daemon was stillborn.

Chelaki came up behind and beneath the daemon engine. At the instant that it heard his spluttering engines and began to turn, he hit it with everything he had.

The nightmare creature let out a terrible shriek. It tried in vain to twist and roll its way through an impossible gauntlet of exploding rounds. It was clipped by some, buffeted by the blasts of others. Its armour plating was scorched and cracked, but not shattered. The daemon made sure to protect its wounded wing, where it was most vulnerable.

Chelaki loosed off his Typhoon missiles, one after the other. There was no point in worrying about conserving his resources now. He scored a direct hit with his first shot, but missed with the second. The next two, he sent wide of the mark on purpose.

His opponent was finally looking hurt. It had lost more armour, exposing rotting purple flesh. One of the pinions on its right wing was broken, hanging limply. It wasn't enough, and Chelaki had used up his element of surprise.

The daemon engine swooped low and came around, beating its left wing vigorously to compensate for its crippled right. Chelaki knew what it was trying to do, and against a lesser flyer it might have worked.

He had fired those Typhoon missiles wide for a reason: to give the daemon engine only one safe way to go. With the help of his auto-senses - but mostly, his years of training and combat experience - he had predicted its flight plan precisely.

His opponent sheared right as it pulled out of its dip, and if only Chelaki had fallen for its lure he would have been in serious trouble. No doubt, the daemon engine had expected to catch him, side-on, in its sights. He could only imagine what the machine-creature felt as, instead, it found his Stormtalon screaming head-on towards it.

It couldn't avoid a collision with him; there wasn't time. The dragon threw open its mouth, and Chelaki found himself staring past its teeth and its coiling metal tongue. He saw the fireball building there, an instant before the searing flames streamed out towards him.

His starboard engine was bleeding promethium, which ignited - too late to save the fire-breather. Chelaki rammed his gunship at full speed down its throat, even as it exploded and he felt shrapnel tearing through his body.

His last thought was that he had done it. He had accomplished the task

for which the Emperor had spared him: slain the daemon that had slain him in turn. A ghost's revenge. He could think of no more fitting fate for a Doom Eagle.

He died fulfilled.

When Arkelius heard, he felt a brief twinge of disappointment. He suppressed it, of course, knowing it was an unworthy reaction.

He ought to have been gladdened - he was gladdened - by the annihilation of another foul daemon, another great victory won in the Emperor's name. He passed on the news to his crew, who welcomed it unreservedly.

With the daemon engines gone, the Death Guard forces in the air suddenly found themselves outmatched. The few remaining Imperial Stormtalons made short work of several more flies, while even more were picked off by the Stalker tanks beneath them.

The Scourge fired off just one more Skyspear missile. It breezed past its target and looped around for a second run at it. In the meantime, however, the fly met its fate in a hail of cannon fire. By the time the Skyspear struck it, it was already dead and the missile, with its guiding intelligence, was sacrificed in vain.

Arkelius told lunus to hold his fire and conserve their ammunition. He lowered his sights to survey the ground ahead of them. The battle was going the Imperium's way there too; more slowly, but just as surely.

The one-eyed daemons had, for the most part, been dispensed with and Imperial casualties, while not exactly minimal, so far had been comparatively light. The Ultramarines certainly had the advantage of numbers now. Most of their remaining foes, however, were Plague Marines, and Arkelius knew better than to underestimate their strength.

The Scourge's missiles were of no use in this situation. There was no way the Hunter could fire into the melee and not take out more friends than it did foes.

For the first time in a while - since before the destruction of the first daemon engine - Arkelius felt a familiar itch. He longed to be out there, fighting alongside his brothers. He longed to feel the trembling of a chainsword in his palm as it bit into a stinking traitor's armour. An irrational part of him felt unworthy, even, watching from inside his plasteel and ceramite bunker while others put their lives on the line for him.

He threw open his top hatch again. He stood up on his seat and levelled his bolter across the Scourge's roof. He squeezed the trigger whenever he had a clear shot at an enemy, which wasn't nearly as often as he would have liked. At least he was doing something useful.

In between shots, Arkelius prayed that the Emperor would lend strength to his battle-brothers' arms and precision to their weapons. He prayed that for each brother cut down by a Plague Marine's sword, his gene-seed at least might be rescued.

The Death Guard were outnumbered, yes, but each one of them fought to the last breath in his festering body, refusing to surrender even a centimetre of ground.

Once again, Arkelius wondered just what it was they were fighting for. What was it that made Fort Kerberos a prize worth the having, even as it lay in ruins?

The battle seemed to rage forever, Arkelius's enforced inactivity making every second seem to stretch into a lifetime. Then, the field in front of him began to clear at last, and Captain Numitor's voice came over the vox-net again.

The Imperial tanks started forward on Numitor's order. The Scourge was still out a short way ahead of the pack, so, as Arkelius dropped back into his seat, he told his driver to give the other vehicles a second or two to draw level.

It was just as well. Corbin had switched off the engine while they were stationary, giving it a chance to cool down. It took him three tries to restart it, and, when he did so, warning lights flashed across the instrument banks again and Arkelius smelt something burning.

Corbin voxed him, anticipating his commander's question, 'I can hold it together, if we take it slow and steady.'

For the first time he sounded stressed, and, as the Hunter ground into reluctant motion, Arkelius felt it pulling insistently to the left.

They rolled past a Plague Marine, still on his feet and holding his own against four Ultramarines. Then, suddenly, another traitor emerged from the smoke in front of them. His face was hidden by a rash of vile mutations and grafted-on augmetics.

He saw the Scourge bearing down on him, and braced himself as if to halt it with the strength of his own arms. Arkelius had lunus train the hull-mounted storm bolter on the Plague Marine, and they blasted him with explosive rounds.

Then the Plague Marine leapt, a jump pack on his back firing, and he landed with a thump, spread-eagled across the Scourge's prow. He was holding a death's-head grenade, and Arkelius realised that he was trying to jam it down the Skyspear missile launcher's barrel.

He was dragged from his perch by a pair of Ultramarines and shot at point-blank range in the head until he stopped twitching. Arkelius recognised one of the slayers - recognised the markings on his sealed armour, anyway - as Valerion, a former squad-mate.

The Scourge rolled over something its weight couldn't crush - a hillock, or, more likely, an armoured corpse - and, briefly, his vision slit pointed up at the overcast sky. He saw the jagged warp rift and quickly wrenched his eyes away from its purple glare. At least its close proximity told him that they were finally nearing their objective.

Standing in their way, of course, was a line of enemy tanks.

There were several Chaos Predators among them. Most of the tanks, however, were Vindicators: siege engines, fitted with Demolisher cannons and dozer-blades. Their Death Guard owners had modified them in other ways too: more bizarre and horrifying ways.

Directly ahead of the Scourge, one tank had slimy tentacles sprouting from its hull and it was coughing up gouts of flame; another daemon-engine, it seemed. Most of the tanks were daubed with blazing Chaos runes, which made them painful to look at.

They had played little part in the fighting thus far, and had waited in silence for their enemies to come to them. As the battlefield began to clear, however - as the risk of causing collateral damage diminished - they were bringing their guns to bear.

Two Ultramarines were struck by Demolisher shells and vaporised.

Arkelius held the Scourge of the Skies back, alongside its sister Hunter - the Vengeance of Daedalus - and the two Stalkers. He let the Imperial Predator Destructors edge ahead of them. Their autocannons blazed, as did the lascannons in their sponsons, to which the enemy artillery were quick to respond in kind.

The enemy tanks were well within the Skyspear's range now - and close enough for Lunus to get a target lock on any of them, despite the intervening smoke haze. So, Arkelius had his driver step on the brakes and lower the stabilisers.

Lunus asked permission to fire a missile. As Arkelius gave it, he heard sobering news through his earpiece: a Predator, one of theirs, had already been destroyed, struck by one of those Demolishers. Its crew hadn't had time to get out; they had perished in flames.

'All right,' he snarled, addressing his own crew, 'this is it! Captain Galenus is dealing with the Death Guard at the fort. That just leaves these unholy machines for us. Blow our way through them, and it's over. We'll have done the Emperor proud.'

As the leader of an infantry squad, he had often given similar speeches before. In the past, though, he had usually believed them.

The Scourge's first Skyspear missile hit the Vindicator in front of them. Arkelius was sure that it had cracked its armour plating, but the tank's hull flowed like ooze, reforming into a new and even more hideous shape. Its turret spun around to face its attacker.

A pair of searchlights on the Vindicator's prow snapped on, glaring through the smoke of the explosion like malevolent eyes. To Arkelius, it seemed as if those eyes were looking right through the front of the Scourge and directly into his soul.

Galenus learned of Chelaki's fate over the vox-net.

He hadn't known the Doom Eagle, but he would certainly mourn his passing; later, when he had the time. For now, he was just grateful for the gain that his sacrifice had bought.

He had lost three men from his own small force of ten, but the Apothecaries could probably save some of them, if they could reach them. On the other hand, the bodies of three of the seven Death Guard lay broken and half-buried in Fort Kerberos's shifting rubble.

Galenus closed with another of them. As he did so, the Plague Marine's hollow eyes darkened and he jabbered insanely to himself. Suddenly, a cloud of filth erupted around him, filled with hundreds of thousands of tiny flies. Galenus's auto-senses went wild, warning him of the threat of infection, and, reluctantly, he fell back.

His battle-brothers nearby were having more luck. Brother Filion, with a sweep of his chainsword, opened up a fourth Plague Marine's stomach, and, as the traitor sank to his knees coughing up black bile, Sergeant Thalus sliced off his head.

Terserus broke away from his own opponent and stamped into the cloud of pestilence, which clearly held no fear for him. Galenus and Thalus took over from him, flanking the traitor that the Dreadnought had been fighting. As Filion moved to join them too, the captain voxed him.

'No. Deal with the diggers.'

Filion followed orders. He loped sure-footedly across the shifting wreckage, towards the spade-carrying zombies, which didn't react to his approach at all. He announced his presence by sending a grenade ahead of him, pitching it into the heart of the largest zombie grouping.

That got their attention. The explosion scattered the ungainly creatures and put a stop to their labours at long last. Some of them were hurled up to a hundred metres away, and more than a few were brutally dismembered. Hardly any of them, however, stayed down.

The zombies climbed to their feet and came shambling towards Brother Filion.

He pumped them full of bolter fire, putting some down but only staggering most. The first zombies reached him and he greeted them with a screaming chainsword, but the zombies were almost as resistant to injury as the Death Guard themselves.

The zombies swarmed Filion, overwhelming him through sheer weight of numbers. They were scrabbling at his armour, seeking out its seams - or any fresh cracks - with grimy, splintered fingernails. They pinned his right arm to his side, impeding his use of his weapons. His chainsword blade was cutting into a zombie's ribcage, but it didn't seem to care.

Galenus planted his boot in his latest opponent's stomach and pushed hard. Taken by surprise, the Plague Marine sprawled backwards. Galenus had the opening he needed to rush to Brother Filion's assistance. The Plague Marine recovered faster than he had hoped and began to follow him, but found the massive form of Terserus blocking his path.

A rockcrete block shifted under Galenus's foot, almost making him fall. His reaction time seemed a little off; his head felt light, but his stomach was

heavy. He feared he might have been infected by the stinking cloud after all.

Then, his eyes flickered upwards to the purple storm raging high above him. The warp rift. He was directly underneath it now. He fancied that he could feel the foul horrors of the immaterium, scratching at the furthest edges of his mind, looking for a way in. He swallowed hard and told himself not to think about it. He had to be able to concentrate on the task ahead of him. He had to stop that rift from opening any further.

He had to hold the horrors at bay.

Galenus reached Filion's side. He had sheathed his gladius and wielded his chainsword two-handed so that each blow would have the strength of two servo-assisted arms behind it. The zombies were easy enough to hit - they hardly made an effort to defend themselves - but, as Galenus had already seen, near-impossible to kill.

His best bet, clearly, was to carve them into small chunks.

He drove his whirling blade through rotten grey flesh and brittle grey bones. He had saved Brother Filion's life; at least, for now. His one-man cavalry charge had kept his battle-brother from going under. The zombies still had a significant advantage of numbers, but it was much harder to surround two Space Marines - when each of them was watching the other's back - than one.

Galenus risked a backwards glance, aware of the powerful enemy he had left behind him. He saw that Terserus was keeping the Plague Marine occupied, subjecting him to a sustained barrage of bolter fire. He had turned his back on his previous opponent, however - the one who had summoned the cloud, and who now aimed a meltagun at the Dreadnought's back.

A concentrated blast of superheated air caused Terserus's armour to shed blue molten tears. He didn't skip a beat in delivering his retaliation. The storm bolter that had taken the place of his right forearm swivelled vertically, a hundred and eighty degrees, to point behind him. It spat hot metal at the Plague Marine, punching new holes through his armour.

Galenus had one ear tuned to the voice of a southbound Stormtalon pilot. He was on the edge of vox range, fading in and out, but the captain picked up the salient details of his report. The pilot had just laid eyes upon the Death Guard's Thunderhawks.

There were two of them, as the Quintillus's scans had suggested. There was something else too. Another daemon engine - the same as the first two, dragon-like in appearance - had been clinging to one of the transporter's hulls, which was why the scans had missed it. It had disengaged now and was coming at the Imperial Stormtalons, breathing fire.

The pilot's voice cut out altogether then, drowned in static.

Galenus tried to contact the Quintillus, but received no reply. He spoke to Terserus over their private channel instead. The Dreadnought confirmed

that, no, he couldn't raise the battle-barge either; the fault wasn't with the captain's equipment.

'The warp rift,' Galenus muttered. 'It's directly between us now. It must be interfering with our vox signals.' He wondered, for the first time, if Captain Fabian had been right. Should he have stayed in orbit? He didn't like being out of touch with his forces like this.

'You'd rather be up there,' asked Terserus, as if the captain had voiced his thoughts, 'not knowing what was happening down here?'

This happened sometimes: a glimmer of his old self surfacing from the mist - the Sergeant Terserus of old, who knew Galenus better than anyone ever had - and, as usual, he was right. The captain had made his decision. He had to fight and win the battle he had chosen to fight.

He swung his blade and cut both legs off a zombie at the knees. It fell, but dragged itself back towards him on its stomach and elbows. It tried to bite Galenus's ankle; he kicked it in the head repeatedly until the last of its mouldering teeth fell out.

There was more help on the way too. Another battle-brother had broken through the Plague Marines dwindling ranks.

Galenus only wished he knew what was happening elsewhere on the planet.

He wished he knew for sure why Death Guard gunships were headed towards Fort Garm. He wished he knew how the effort to slow them down was going. He wished he knew the condition of Fort Kerberos's Great Seal, still buried somewhere beneath his feet - was it intact or wasn't it?

He just wished he could be certain that he wasn't fighting for nothing.

Below the wreckage of Fort Kerberos - a long way below- a figure stirred. His bones were broken. He was pinned to the ground by heavy debris. He had thought himself dead, and, perhaps, for a short time, he had been.

The last thing he remembered, he had been locked in mortal combat with a single foe; no match for him, or so he had believed at the time.

Naracoth had been arrogant and careless, and the memory of it shamed him.

His enemy - Artorius, the Space Marine, although he had been battered and bloodied - had first taken his hand and then swept his feet out from under him.

He had snatched up a weapon from the ground and plunged it into Naracoth's skull with all his fading strength, penetrating his brain. He should have been dead.

It seemed, however, that his god was not yet done with him.

The roof of the shrine - the shrine in which he had fought, beneath the fort - had mostly collapsed. An obstinate pillar had held, sparing Naracoth the full force of the cave-in. His opponent had not been as blessed by his own paltry deity. A silver gauntlet protruded from beneath a hunk of

rockcrete.

Artorius's head, throat and chest had been utterly crushed.

Naracoth lifted his own bloated head with effort. The sodium torches that had lined the smooth walls had been extinguished. The shrine, however, was bathed in a bright, flickering purple light, the source of which he couldn't see.

His eyes searched for the artefact that had drawn him to this backwater world: the first of the two Great Seals. The shrine had been built around it: a gleaming, crystal rod plunged into a raised stone platform like a key pushed into a lock.

It had been impervious to Naracoth's strongest blows - but not to the sorcerous power of his unclean lord. The blood of one of the Great Seal's keepers had broken the Seal. A shard of it, however, had remained stubbornly intact.

Naracoth had been forced to seek out another sacrifice.

His dry, scabby lips parted. A wheezing laugh bubbled up from his blackened, shrivelled lungs. He hadn't failed in his mission, after all. He may have fallen to his enemy, but he had surely dealt him a mortal blow in the process; the shrine's collapse had only finished the job. Artorius's blood had spilled out of his dying body. Its stain must have spread to the remaining crystal shard; thus the required sacrifice had been made.

Of the first of the Great Seals of Orath, nothing remained; nothing but crystal fragments. The platform into which it had been plunged had shattered too, and it was from somewhere beneath this that the purple light now streamed.

Naracoth reached up with his remaining hand. He gripped the shard of the Great Seal, still lodged within his brain. He closed his fingers tightly around it and yanked it free. The agony was incredible, almost making him black out again, and he screamed.

The fragment was brittle now, and he crushed it in his fist.

The purple light grew brighter, as if it was collecting around him, as if the shard had been keeping it at bay until this moment.

And now, the light was tearing savagely through Naracoth's body. A thousand phantom blades were slicing into his organs; his blood was on fire and he screamed again, longer and louder than before. He had faith, however, that he could endure any pain.

Had he not earned Nurgle's favour, after all?

The Plague God had received his loyal servant's gift, and had chosen to bestow the greatest of all possible rewards upon him. The purple light was tearing Naracoth apart, but at the same time he knew that it was putting him back together.

He could feel the corrupting energy of the immaterium pouring into his veins. His every muscle was mutating, growing larger, more grotesque, more powerful by the second. The rubble pressing down on his legs didn't

bother him any longer. He knew he could lift it easily.

The warp was flooding into Naracoth's mind too. His last fragile strand of sanity finally snapped. He neither noticed nor would he have cared. He had spent his whole life working towards this moment and he had no intention of backing away from it now.

He cast his old persona, his old life, aside with casual glee.

It had been nothing. He had been nothing. He could see that more clearly than ever now, as he felt himself, his blackened soul, becoming elevated in the eyes of his approving god, at last becoming something... something more ...

That burning smell was growing stronger, more pungent.

The Scourge of the Skies had its stabilisers planted, but its engine was still idling. Corbin had said that if he turned it off and they had to move in a hurry, he couldn't guarantee being able to start it again. Arkelius had ordered lunus to target the enemy's well-armed and well-armoured Vindicators and to fire at will. For now, there wasn't much else he could do.

Around him, three dozen metal leviathans jostled ponderously for the best offensive positions. Their tactical options, however, were severely limited. The battle would be decided primarily by the relative strengths of the participants' weapons and their armour plating; factors over which Arkelius had no control.

He couldn't see what was happening ahead of him any longer. The Chaos tanks were pumping out thick clouds of poisonous smoke, forcing most of the Ultramarines on the ground into a tactical withdrawal.

Arkelius found even the vox-chatter difficult to follow. Breathless reports were cut off or contradicted in mid-flow. He heard that a Predator Destructor had been blown apart, then, immediately afterwards, that it hadn't, then, finally, that it had been, after all.

lunus fired at another Vindicator. Arkelius's rune panels reported a direct hit; however, they couldn't tell him what the damage to the enemy tank had been. He told lunus to fire again, but then belayed the order as he struggled to filter one voice out of many in his earpieces: the commander of a Predator up ahead of them.

'It sounds like... Yes, we did it. We destroyed their main turret. They're helpless.' lunus acknowledged the sergeant's information, and adjusted his sights in search of another target.

In the meantime, more reports of damaged and destroyed Vindicators were coming in. The Imperial Stalkers, it seemed, were the most effective against them, with their armour-piercing stormcannons. Along with the Hunters, they could hang back, out of range of those powerful Demolishers. That was about to change, however.

Arkelius relayed the news to his crew, 'They're starting to pull forwards, four of them, two Vindicators from each of the enemy's flanks.'

'I have them, sergeant,' said Lunus. 'Should I-?'

Arkelius nodded. 'Make them our primary targets.'

'We have a couple of Predators,' said Lunus, with a glance at his auspex, 'intercepting the Vindicators on the left. I'll target the ones on the right.'

Barely had he finished speaking when there was a blinding flash of light through Arkelius's vision slits. The Scourge of the Skies was lifted off its tracks - its stabilisers were torn out of the ground - and almost overturned. Alarms screamed and the tank commander's compartment filled up with choking black smoke.

The tank landed with another hefty jolt. Arkelius was slammed sideways into one of his instrument banks, and something exploded inside it.

'What in the warp was that?' he spluttered as he righted himself. A readout in his helmet informed him that his armour had been breached. A twisted shard of adamantium had buried itself in his forearm, drawing blood. 'Felt like a Demolisher shell,' replied Lunus, holding on to a grab rail behind him. 'A lascannon would have had more heat and far less concussive force.'

'Damage report,' Arkelius demanded. 'Brother Corbin?' The console he had hit was on fire. He yanked an extinguisher from a hull-mounted bracket above him, and doused the flames.

His driver's answer was long seconds in coming, and when it did come his voice was strained. He had been hurt. 'They punched a hole right through our armour plating, sergeant,' explained Corbin. 'I took some shrapnel.'

Only one question mattered, 'Can you still drive?'

'I just pulled a shard of ceramite out of my face, sergeant,' said Corbin, 'right by the eye socket. I can't seem to staunch the bleeding. I can drive, but you might have to point me in the right direction.'

It would have to be good enough. Arkelius's only other option was to climb up onto the Scourge's roof again, haul Corbin out through the driver's hatch and take his place, and that would probably have been the death of both of them.

No matter how badly wounded Corbin was - and Arkelius suspected that his injuries were worse than he would admit to - so long as he was stuck inside his cramped compartment, all he could do was soldier on. It was all any of them could do.

'Another problem, sergeant,' said Lunus. 'A blockage in the missile tube. I'm trying to clear it, but-'

'Keep trying,' Arkelius grunted. He pressed his eye to his forward vision slit. He could make out several hazy shapes through the smoke - the Imperial Predator Destructors - and beyond them, the persistent dull flashes of enemy cannon and missile fire.

He had half-expected to be met by the glare of the daemon tank he had seen earlier, the one that, he imagined, must have fired the shell that had hit them. However, he could see no sign of it. No one seemed to be

targeting the Scourge of the Skies, for that matter. It was likely that the Death Guard's tank commanders had written it off, believing it crippled. Arkelius was determined to prove them wrong.

He could hear Corbin shifting in his compartment, which was a good sign. He ordered him to restart the stalled engine, but Corbin reported that the ignition panel had burned out. He was trying to patch it up, half-blind though he was, at least enough for the Hunter's self-repair systems to kick in and do the rest.

Arkelius helped too, by offering up a prayer to the Machine-God. He prayed that they would be on the move again soon. He knew that one more missile strike like the last one, in the meantime, would leave the Scourge of the Skies in pieces, and its crew almost certainly dead.

'This is taking too long!'

Galenus swung his chainsword at a zombie's neck. He had hoped to decapitate it, but his blade choked on its sinew and he had to yank it free.

He had, at least, left a sizeable ichor-spewing gash. The zombie's head was flapping about like a banner in the breeze. Still, it fought on, clawing at the captain's throat.

Terserus's voice boomed in his ear; only he had heard Galenus's frustrated outburst. 'We are doing the Emperor's work. Be glad of that and have the faith to be patient.'

The Dreadnought switched vox-channels to address the other Ultramarines too. 'Aim for their heads. That's where they're most vulnerable.' He had already broadcast the same advice twice, as knowledge gained in old campaigns had drifted in and out of his memory.

As Terserus spoke, he backhanded a zombie with his gun arm and staved in its face. The zombie stayed upright for a second, as if it were too dim-witted to know that it ought to fall. Fall it did, however; it lost control of every muscle in its body at once and crumpled, brain matter leaking out of its nasal cavity.

The last of the Plague Marines was finally down. It had taken three Ultramarines to slice open his power armour and to hack apart the festering, putrid organs that had all but spilled out of it. Even then, Sergeant Thalorus had lain down his life in the process.

Five of Galenus's ten-strong team, however - himself and Terserus included - were on their feet, with only the zombies now standing between them and their ultimate goal, and their numbers were being whittled down, slowly but surely. Too slowly.

The zombies' haggard faces were blank; they betrayed no hint of emotion. Galenus was coming to loathe that more than anything else about them. He had always told his men that with faith, passion and sheer bloody willpower, they could overcome overwhelming odds. The zombies had none of those traits, and yet they were as relentless as any Space Marine.

Had the Death Guard only employed smarter tactics - had they pulled the zombies away from their all-important excavations and sent them up against the Ultramarines earlier - then this battle might have ended very differently.

'Try to draw them out, away from the fort,' the captain hollered.

He matched his actions to his words, falling back a few steps and letting two zombies follow him, snapping and clawing and spitting at him. He had half-thought they might take the chance to disengage and resume their digging, but evidently not.

He kicked the nearest of them and sent it reeling into the other, which bought him time to raise his sword high over his shoulder. He brought it down again in a powerful, two-handed chopping motion. As the first zombie lunged at him, he split its head neatly in two.

The second zombie was right behind it. Galenus deliberately gave a few more steps as he parried its clumsy attack with his armoured forearm. His hope was to get out from underneath the warp rift, to be able to contact the Quintillus again.

Too late, he heard the debris from the collapsed fort shifting behind him.

Brother Filion yelled out a warning too; but the zombie was still up in Galenus's face and he couldn't afford to take his eyes off it. He just needed a second - a half-second, less than that - to deal with the immediate threat. He didn't get it.

One of the Plague Marines had clung to a vestige of life.

It was one that Galenus had encountered briefly earlier: the one that had summoned the cloud of filth. He had fallen to Terserus's storm bolter, but dragged himself back up from the rubble: through faith, through passion, through sheer bloody willpower, perhaps even just through the sorcery of his foul deity.

He plunged a knife into Galenus's back, with enough strength to penetrate his armour.

The blade tore through arteries and muscles before puncturing a kidney; then, the Death Guard gave the haft an additional sadistic twist. Galenus gasped. He would have screamed if only he had had the breath, but one of his lungs had collapsed.

His system was immediately flooded with painkillers, which rushed to his head and left him dizzy - too dizzy to defend himself from his other opponent, the zombie in front of him. With a swipe of a supernaturally strong claw, it slashed through his armour's gorget; with a second swipe, it opened up his throat.

He thought he heard Terserus's voice.

Indeed he had. The Dreadnought had released an ear-shattering bellow of defiance. He palmed off two zombies and came thundering towards his stricken captain, pulverising rockcrete beneath his footsteps.

His storm bolter blazed, even though Galenus was between him and his target, acting as a living shield. A few bolts pinged off the captain's

pauldrons, but, somehow, a lot more of them found the Plague Marine's head.

As it happened, he would probably have fallen anyway. His dishonourable attack must have used up the last of his strength, because he held onto Galenus like a stanchion to keep himself upright. It was gratifying, all the same, to feel his body jerking, his frantic grip releasing and to feel the Death Guard sliding - once more - to the dusty ground, to know that the Emperor's bullets had finally sent him to an overdue grave.

Too late, of course, to spare his final victim.

Warning runes flashed across Galenus's blurry vision. He didn't need his power armour's life signs monitor, however, to tell him what he could feel for himself.

His wounds were mortal.

In a sickly-looking grain field to the north-west of the ruined fort, the tanks of two powerful armies continued their slow-motion dance around each other.

An Imperial Stalker was baited into a trap. As it wheeled around to strike at a Chaos Vindicator from the side - where its armour plating was weaker - another Death Guard tank came up behind it, guns blazing. The Stalker was immobilised, one of its tracks destroyed. The Vindicator's turret spun around and pumped a Demolisher shell into its stricken enemy.

The Ultramarines had lost a Hunter too: the Vengeance of Daedalus. Arkelius was unclear on the details of its demise. He only knew that the crew had, praise the Emperor, escaped with their lives.

The terrain for quite some way around was flat, offering no natural cover. Now, however, the battlefield was becoming littered with burned-out tank corpses, which the remaining drivers scrambled to use to their best advantage. Through his vision slit, Arkelius could make out the remaining Stalker, sheltering behind its dead twin. It edged out to fire off a rapid salvo from its stormcannons, then reversed back into hiding while its gunner reloaded.

In the midst of all this activity, the Scourge of the Skies was paralysed. Its gun was silent. To the other combatants, it must have appeared to be a corpse itself. With so many gunners trying to shoot around it, however, it was far from safe.

Arkelius heard Corbin cursing loudly as the engine failed to start again.

'Try increasing the throttle pressure,' he suggested.

'I already did, sergeant,' Corbin grunted, his tone suggesting that he didn't like being told how to do his job, even injured as he was. He must have done something right, anyway, because the engine wheezed and turned over and almost caught. It was certainly an improvement, thought Arkelius. The downside was that they had undoubtedly just flared red on the auspexes of every enemy tank around them.

'How's that blockage in the missile tube coming along?' he asked.

'Cleared, sergeant,' said lunus. 'I think.'

'You think?'

'I'm getting some odd readings. Damage reports. I think the fault is probably in the cogitators themselves. I think the launcher is cleared and ready for loading. But there's a chance, a small chance that, when I squeeze that trigger...'

'What?' Arkelius barked, impatiently. 'A chance of what?'

It was Corbin who answered him; doubtless, he had been in similar situations before. 'There's a chance of the missile detonating in the chamber,' he said, 'and blowing the Scourge - and all three of us - sky-high.'

Arkelius took a breath. 'lunus, pick a target. Your choice - I can't see a damn thing out there. Be ready to fire on my mark, which I'll give as soon as Corbin can get-'

'I'm trying, sergeant,' Corbin interrupted.

'-this Emperor-forsaken, son-of-a-warp-spawn scrapheap-'

'Can't see to read the status display, but it sounds to me like-'

'-moving again!' Hours' worth of pent-up frustration bubbled up from Arkelius's chest, and he punched the unyielding bulkhead between himself and his driver.

At exactly the moment that he did so, the engine caught with a belligerent roar. The Machine-God had finally answered his prayers.

lunus loosed off a Skyspear missile on cue. A moment later, he boasted of a palpable hit to the port flank of an unsuspecting Vindicator.

'Corbin, reverse us out of here, one-ninety degree bearing,' barked Arkelius. 'lunus, reload and fire again. Same target, if you can. Don't give them a chance to-'

He had almost forgotten about the Scourge's damaged steering.

As they picked up speed, lunus yelled a warning that they were about to back into a friendly Predator Destructor. Corbin managed to regain control in time, and Arkelius guided him with an eye on his monitors, 'Adjust course, fifteen... no, eighteen degrees counter-clockwise. Steady on the accelerator pedal, and bring her to rest in three, two, one... now.'

Corbin stepped on the brake. As he did so, Arkelius saw two lights like glaring eyes bearing down on the Scourge through the smoke. The same searchlights as before? Almost certainly, they belonged to the Vindicator they had just hit, seeking deadly retribution.

The Chaos tank had them firmly in its sights. Arkelius, however, had guided Corbin into a narrow gap between two Predator Destructors. They ground forward at that moment, to protect the Hunter, its crew and, most importantly, its powerful weapon.

The Vindicator tried to manoeuvre around the Imperial tanks. When that failed, it tried to blast its way through them instead. 'They've bought us some time,' said Arkelius. 'Let's make it count.' He told Corbin to lower the

stabilisers, and, the instant he had completed that task, lunus fired again. He aimed his next missile into the air, safely over the friendly Predator Destructors' heads. It soared over the Chaos Vindicator too, before it reached the apex of its arc. But then, the mummified brain inside it took over and brought the missile around for a second pass. It swooped in low and struck its target from behind. Arkelius had to avert his eyes from the fierce explosion. His auto-senses detected a small, brief increase in temperature, even inside his armoured compartment. lunus confirmed that the Vindicator had been obliterated. Its icon on his targeting auspex had blinked out. 'Looks like that made a big difference too,' he remarked. 'We punched a hole through the enemy's line, and our Predators have slipped behind their defences. They just destroyed another Vindicator, and two more have been cut off from the others.'

He was probably exaggerating - about the Scourge's contribution to the turnaround, if nothing else - but Arkelius was happy to believe him. The vox-net alerted him to another threat. The crews of the stricken and destroyed enemy tanks were coming out fighting. Some of them were Plague Marines, some of them hideous mutant aberrations. Few of them lasted long. They were cut down by the Imperial tanks' autocannons, or by Space Marine marksmen stationed at the edge of the battlefield. lunus reported that he had reloaded and had another target lock. Arkelius felt a grin contorting his concealed face. Of course, he knew better than to ever become complacent - more than most, he knew how suddenly the fortunes of war could change - but still, this war was going very well for his side. 'Next stop,' he muttered, just loudly enough for his crewmates to hear him over their shared vox-channel, 'Fort Kerberos.'

Galenus was on his hands and knees in the rubble. He was staring at the ground, although he didn't remember falling. He was dimly aware of a figure looming over him: the zombie that had slashed his throat. An instant later, however, it was gone, replaced by the familiar hulking shape of a friend. Terserus had swiped the zombie's legs out from under it, breaking every bone in them. It was wriggling, trying to stand, but couldn't support itself. It lay helplessly as Terserus planted a foot to each side of it, straddling it. He drove his fist down into the zombie's head with the force of a guided missile. Then he turned his attention to his fallen brother. Galenus had blood in his throat and couldn't speak. Somehow, he managed to brace his left foot underneath him. He transferred his weight onto it, incrementally, but the effort to stand defeated him too. He pitched forward, dizzily, just catching himself on his hands again. 'Brother Typhus's flamer is cremating the last of our opponents,' reported Terserus, 'while the others are making sure the dead stay dead. Fort

Kerberos is ours.'

He hesitated for a moment. Then, his armour's servos whirred as he stooped awkwardly and extended his one hand towards his captain. Galenus squinted up at him. The Dreadnought's obdurate, blue form was etched against the sky like a hab-block, cast into menacing shadow by the warp light behind it. He didn't take the proffered hand.

'Is the Great Seal... still down there?' he rasped. 'Can you see...?'

Brother Filion's voice broke in on his assault team's vox-channel. 'We stopped the Death Guard in time, sir. They didn't break through to the underground shrine.' Good as that was to hear, it didn't answer Galenus's question.

'I'm in contact with Captain Numitor,' said Filion. 'He reports that the traitor army to the north-west is in rout. Our main force is on its way to join us. I also asked him to relay a message to the Quintillus. He'll have them send down servitors and excavating equipment, and more ships to collect the wounded. He... asked after your health, sir.'

'He'll survive,' said Terserus, bluntly.

Galenus wondered what made him so certain. His two hearts were beating an irregular rhythm against his chestplate. He was struggling to stay awake, but he knew he was too badly damaged. His implanted sus-an membrane - the Space Marine's hibernator organ - was beginning to shut his bodily functions down.

Terserus addressed him over their private channel. Once again, his mind had slipped back in time. He sounded like the Sergeant Terserus of the past. 'The Apothecaries will bring you back, I'd stake my right arm on it,' he said. 'The Emperor isn't done with you yet, Brother Galenus. You have the makings of a captain. I always said so.'

Galenus wondered if he might wake up, like Terserus, in Dreadnought armour. He wondered if he would be aware of his fate if he did. He imagined it would feel a lot like being buried alive. Perhaps it would be preferable not to wake at all.

He could take consolation in the fact that this battle was won, although his Chapter would be counting the cost of it for decades to come. It would take that long to find and train new Space Marines to replace those lost on Orath: the hacked- and clawed-apart; the victims of bolter shells and explosive shrapnel; the infected.

He only wished he could have learned the fate of the Kerberos Seal. He wanted to know - before he succumbed to what may be his final sleep - that his decisions had been the correct ones, that the sacrifices he had made had counted for something.

Galenus was trembling. Another weakness of his failing flesh, he thought; but then he realised that the ground itself was shaking underneath his hands and knees.

He collapsed indecorously onto his face and stomach. Terserus was

struggling to keep his balance too, but he planted his heavy feet in the shifting rubble and stood over his captain determinedly, as the tremor grew stronger and turned into a fully fledged earthquake.

Galenus realised, with a numb sense of horror, that the battle wasn't over yet.

Then, just as he was on the point of being able to think no more, he heard and felt a tremendous explosion, and the world behind his closing eyelids turned green.

Arkelius felt the early tremors too.

The last of the Death Guard tanks had been despatched. The ragged remains of the Ultramarines army - battered, bloodied but proud - had formed up and were on the march again. At the helm of the Scourge of the Skies, he felt at least as proud as any of them.

Of course, they were leaving many dead and wounded behind them: almost two-thirds of their initial force. Thunderhawks had begun to arrive from the Quintillus to take them back to its apothecarion. In the meantime, Techmarines patched up vehicles and equipment in the field as best they could, in case of unexpected need.

Corbin was still in the Scourge's driver's seat. Arkelius had wanted to leave him behind, but he had insisted, 'I've come this far, sergeant. I can see this through to the end.'

He swore that his condition had stabilised - the bleeding from his eyes had stopped - so Arkelius had given his assent. The fighting had been over, after all. Or so it had seemed.

The ruins of Fort Kerberos were dead ahead of him, across flat land. The jagged warp rift still raged in the sky above it. He was close enough to see blue-armoured figures clambering over the rubble. The largest of them - Galenus's constant companion, Terserus - was unmistakable. He couldn't see the captain himself, though, which concerned him.

Then, suddenly, the world went into a violent spin.

Arkelius ordered Corbin to plant the stabilisers, knowing even as the words left his mouth that they would do no good. The earth itself had erupted under the Scourge's tracks; there was nothing left for the stabilisers to hold onto.

He was battered against each side of his compartment in turn - he even banged his head on the roof - before the earthquake finally subsided. By now, he was well-used to the red lights and klaxon blares of the emergency alarms.

His forward vision slit was clogged with black stalks of grain.

It took a moment for Arkelius to get his bearings and to realise that the Scourge had come to rest at a precarious angle, its nose pointed at the ground. He didn't know what was holding its rear end up, but every slightest move he made caused the tank to rock alarmingly.

He voxed his two crewmates. Lunus confirmed that he was relatively unhurt,

but there was no reply from Corbin.

Shocked voices were beginning to break into the vox-channels. More than one of them swore that an unholy green fire had burst out of the ground without warning. The epicentre of the blast had been the site of the razed fort, still four hundred metres ahead of them. Even this far out, however, it had tossed both Space Marines and tanks around like children's toys.

Arkelius tried to open his hatch, but it was jammed. The Scourge's hull must have given a little, bending its frame out of shape.

The smell of burning inside his tiny compartment was stronger than ever. Arkelius suspected that the engine was on fire, which meant there was a real risk of the flames spreading to the promethium tanks, or even worse. 'How many Skyspear missiles do we have left?' he asked. He didn't wait for lunus's reply. 'Right now, we're sitting on top of too many atomic warheads.'

He squirmed around until he could brace himself against his bulkheads and get his left foot to the jammed hatch. Then, he kicked it as hard as he could.

Every impact of his boot made the Scourge of the Skies shudder violently. He pretended he couldn't feel the slight pain in his hip, from muscles that had recently been shredded and hadn't yet completely healed. Behind his eyelids, however, he could see the snarling eyes and slavering tusks of the barbarian ork that had beaten him and left him for dead. He imagined it was the ork's face he was kicking. He refused to let it beat him again.

One more good kick, and the hinges of the hatch finally snapped. It fell away, and he could see the grey light of the sky behind it.

He clambered out of the Hunter, helped on his way by a firm push from lunus, who had lowered himself into the tank commander's compartment behind him.

It was only a short hop to the ground, but Arkelius landed in an awkward crouch. His balance was off; that blow to the head had affected him more than he had thought. He blinked away the black spots in his eyes and straightened up.

He could see now that the Scourge's back wheels were resting on the crumpled shell of a Predator Destructor. Flames were licking at its underside. As lunus's head appeared through the hatchway above him, Arkelius had him throw down the extinguisher.

Perching precariously on the Scourge's tilted roof, lunus yanked open the driver's hatch. He first reported that Corbin wasn't moving, and a moment later that his hearts at least were still beating and his multi-lung pumping. He asked for his sergeant's help in lifting his battle-brother out of the wreck to safety, but Arkelius's gaze had travelled past him.

He was looking in horror at the site of the ruined Fort Kerberos, now a scene of unadulterated Chaos. The churned-up ground was alight with sickly green and yellow flames. The warp rift in the sky had changed its

hue and was pulsing with the same putrid energy, great bolts of it lashing down to create a highly localised electrical storm; and, in the centre of that maelstrom, there had appeared a monster, an obscene mockery of life.

It must have been close to six metres tall, twice the height of an Ultramarine, taller even than the giant Terserus. It was a bloated, squat creature, festooned with boils and open sores. Dead grey skin sloughed from its bones to expose black, worm-ridden organs. Scraps of rusted power armour appeared to have been welded to the monster's hide.

A misshapen head protruded from its chest, as if its neck had melted into its torso. Its near-skinless face was twisted with hateful laughter. A pair of giant, holed and tattered insect wings sprouted from the monster's shoulder blades. Even vibrating furiously as they were, they could barely lift their heavy burden a metre or so off the ground, where it hovered.

The monster was like nothing Arkelius had seen before, but instinctively he knew it for what it was. The mere sight of it was enough to envelop his soul in an icy, nameless dread.

Of the man who had called himself Naracoth, nothing remained.

No longer was he a fragile being of flesh and bone. He had been reborn in a form worthy of his god's affection, more able to spread His gifts of disease, decay and destruction across the stars. His body - his new, magnificent, powerful body - was formed from the substance of the warp itself, and his veins seethed with its untamed energies.

He could utilise those energies, direct them, guide their flow. By instinct alone, he had projected an expanding field around him. He had blasted his way out of his collapsed tomb and scattered his enemies before him.

He glared down on them now, the forces of the vaunted Imperium. They were battered and weary from their recent travails, and oh-so-small from his newfound loftier perspective. They may as well have been insects, scuttling across the blighted earth in terror, waiting for him to crush them under his heel.

He was as far above his former self now as his former self had been above the ticks and lice that had leeches off his putrescent flesh. He had become as one with the fundamental forces of Chaos. Grandfather Nurgle had blessed this faithful follower, and had turned him into a prince. A Daemon Prince.

More tanks than just the Scourge of the Skies had been upended. One had even been completely overturned. More crews than just the Scourge's crew were fighting their way out of the wreckage; and, of course, many Space Marines had been knocked over too.

Many of them - like Arkelius - were picking themselves up slowly. Like him, their gazes were rooted to the Daemon Prince hovering over the nearby ruins. They were Ultramarines, however, the Emperor's finest. So they swallowed down their natural feelings of shock and disgust and they got on with doing the Emperor's work.

Galenus's team at the fort were already back on their feet. Their brothers from the main force - those that could - were hurrying to cross the ground between them. They were ready to do battle with this new enemy, no matter how hopeless it may seem, because that was their duty and their honour.

It would have been Arkelius's honour too. He even took a step forward to join the others, acting on instinct. Then, lunus's voice - 'Sergeant!' - pulled him back, reminding him of his duty to his crewmates.

lunus had hauled Corbin up through the Scourge's hatchway. Arkelius helped by supporting his head as, together, they lowered the injured driver down from the Hunter's roof. The lenses in Corbin's helmet had been shattered and his eyes were badly damaged.

'Emperor, grant him the strength to overcome this,' lunus breathed. As Arkelius had noted earlier, he was young, and, for as long as he had served with the Ultramarines, Corbin had served alongside him.

He said nothing to his battle-brother, however. He was listening to the latest vox reports, with a sinking feeling. 'The captain...' he muttered. 'The captain's down.'

It hardly seemed possible. Caito Galenus had been a lieutenant when Arkelius had been recruited into the Fifth Company. He had been a captain for as long as Arkelius had been a sergeant. He had always been there, at the forefront of every combat, leading his men by example, never asking them to take a risk he wouldn't gladly take himself.

Some people - only those who didn't know him - had called him a glory-hunter, albeit never twice within Arkelius's earshot. He had seemed to be invincible.

At the fort, in the captain's absence, Terserus led the charge against the monster. He thundered towards it, his arm-mounted bolters flaring. His bolts pinged off its patches of armour and, equally, off the exposed bones in between them.

The Daemon Prince's bloodshot but fiery eyes narrowed and its twisted maw gaped open. It belched out a thick stream of glistening mucus in its attacker's direction.

Even Terserus was stopped - temporarily, Arkelius hoped - in his tracks.

The three battle-brothers who had been following in his footsteps kept going, but separated, having lost the protection of the Dreadnought's armour in front of them. Their bolters were proving ineffectual too, so they fired up their chainswords.

The first of them reached his hovering foe and slashed at a dangling leg. His blow landed solidly and appeared to have done some damage, although Arkelius was too far away to tell if it had drawn blood. Did a Daemon Prince have blood to draw, he wondered?

The monster let out a contemptuous laugh and dropped heavily onto the rubble, squaring up to its opponent. It was carrying a massive,

filth-encrusted flail, with which it lashed out viciously. The Space Marine threw up an arm to protect his chest and head; the flail's twin chains wrapped around it and shredded his armour.

His brothers came at the Daemon Prince from each side, hoping to slam it between them. Its wings droned loudly as they hauled it back into the sky, maddeningly out of their reach.

In the absence of an Apothecary, Iunus was kneeling beside Corbin, patching him up as best he could with the Scourge's medi-kit. Once that was done, he looked up at his sergeant for instructions. He was already fingering the haft of his sheathed chainsword, in anticipation of what those instructions would be.

An hour earlier, Arkelius wouldn't have hesitated. He would have led Iunus to the front lines in a heartbeat, and been glad of the chance to exercise his muscles in combat - real combat - once again. An hour earlier, he had prayed for a chance like this.

A lot could change in just an hour.

Again, he turned his gaze towards Fort Kerberos's shattered remains, just as the Daemon Prince's pox-ridden flail claimed its first kill. One down, and it had only taken a matter of seconds. The luckless Ultramarine, at least, had not given his life for nothing.

The Daemon Prince's attention had been drawn away from Terserus, which had given him the chance he needed to recover his strength. The Dreadnought bellowed a fierce litany of hatred as he ran at his monstrous foe like a speeding tank.

The Daemon Prince tried to climb further into the sky, but its wings couldn't lift its considerable bulk quickly enough. The Dreadnought tackled it and dragged it back down to the ground. With one arm, he pinned its wings behind its back; with the other, he emptied two bolter clips into its leering face.

They crashed into the rubble together, the Dreadnought and the Daemon Prince, and, for a moment, the watching Arkelius thought - hoped, prayed - that the battle might not have been as hopeless as he had first thought. Just for a moment.

It soon became clear which was the stronger of the two combatants. The Daemon Prince was slower than Terserus, but its flail, where it hit, was slicing into the Dreadnought's casing, cutting fibre bundles inside it. It looked as if his right arm, his storm bolter arm, was dead, although his power fist had landed a few good punches.

The Daemon Prince stretched open its mouth again, this time to cough up a cloud of buzzing black flies. The Dreadnought reeled as the insects engulfed him; still, he clung to the Daemon Prince's feet as it attempted to take to the air once more, doggedly weighting it down.

Then, the fastest of the Space Marines from the main force reached their battle-brother's side and, for all its size, the Daemon Prince found itself

swarmed by a grim mass of blue-armoured avengers. The screams of their angry chainswords rent the air.

They would keep the monster busy for a short time, Arkelius judged. What they needed in the longer term, however, were bigger guns - much bigger. At least two other tank crews had come to the same conclusion. They had started up their engines and were advancing upon the fort again. Their Predator Destructors, however, didn't have what the Scourge of the Skies had. They didn't have the Skyspear missile launcher.

Nor, for that matter, were the Predators sitting with their noses in the ground and their back ends in the air, their engines and most of their onboard systems burned-out.

Arkelius, nevertheless, met his gunner's enquiring gaze. 'Think you can hit that thing from here?' he asked.

lunus looked at him, then past him at the ruined fort and the monstrous Daemon Prince and at the upturned Scourge. He nodded, 'It's well within the Skyspear's range, sergeant.'

Arkelius broadcast an urgent appeal through his vox-grille. He asked for assistance from the closest available units. A tank driver and gunner - having given up on coaxing their own vehicle back to life - responded to his summons.

They were joined by a Techmarine too, clad in the red armour of the Adeptus Mechanicus. His servo-harness, with its mechanical arms and cutters, was exactly what Arkelius needed.

Five brothers, all told, himself and lunus included. It would be enough.

He gathered his team beside the crippled Hunter. 'I want this wreck on its wheels again,' he announced, 'and back in the fight.'

Righting the Scourge proved to be no easy task.

Not that Arkelius had expected it to be. The Hunter must have weighed something close to thirty tonnes, which was a lot of mangled metal for even five Space Marines to lift.

The Techmarine helped. He employed his cutters to disentangle the Scourge's tracks from the crushed Predator Destructor in which they had become embedded. He also braced the Scourge's vital missile launcher with improvised wedges to protect it from any further jarring. He positioned each Space Marine along the Scourge's hull and calculated the optimal angle at which his force should be exerted.

Arkelius was grateful for the Techmarine's input, and accepted that the work he was doing was worthy. At the same time, he chafed at the time it was taking.

He could see his battle-brothers at the fort, fighting and dying in his stead, and he yearned to go to them. The Daemon Prince was hurling Space Marines away from it as if they were no heavier - and no more of a threat to it - than stalks of grain. Most of them got up again and leapt straight back into the fray, but it was wearing them down, slowly but surely.

The Techmarine announced that, at last, his work was done, and it was time for his brothers to do theirs. The knees and shoulders of five suits of power armour bent and strained, and the back end of the Scourge of the Skies was slowly raised, though not without a protest.

The most difficult part of the operation followed, as the Space Marines had to manoeuvre the cumbersome wreck around until its back end was clear of the Predator. Only then could they lower it to the ground, which they managed less gently than Arkelius had hoped.

The Scourge landed heavily on its tracks - and, with a shudder and a wrench and a deathly groan, it settled there, if not exactly standing proud, then at least unbowed.

The Techmarine climbed onto the Hunter's roof. He tinkered at the base of the Skyspear's missile tube with his servo-arms, making sure it was properly aligned. lunus wrenched open the Scourge's side hatch and retook his seat in the rear compartment.

Arkelius dismissed his other two helpers - they hurried off to join the battle - and waited as long as he could bear before prompting his gunner, 'Well? Damage report?'

lunus looked up from his monitors, shaking his head. 'We've lost the targeting auspex, sergeant, which means I can't.'

'Don't tell me what you can't do, only tell me what you can.'

'I could aim the Skyspear manually, sergeant - if I could see the target, that is.'

'Or if someone told you where to shoot.'

'There are too many battle-brothers between us. I'd fire over their heads, of course, but without a target lock, the savant wouldn't know.'

'The savant? The brain inside the missile?' Arkelius scowled. 'Are you telling me it couldn't tell the difference between a Son of Guilliman and that warp-spawned-?'

'I... I can't answer that, sergeant. Perhaps.'

Arkelius glanced towards the fort again. There were half as many Space Marines standing as there had been the last time he had looked. 'What if we got you closer?' he asked.

'Without the targeting auspex, yes, the closer, the better,' said lunus. 'It means less chance for the missile to veer off course or-'

Arkelius didn't wait for him to finish. He stepped back from the hatchway and barked at the red-armoured figure on the Scourge's roof. 'I need an answer, do we have a gun or don't we?' The Techmarine replied that he had done all he could and that the rest was in the hands of the Machine-God now. It would have to do.

Arkelius clambered up onto the Scourge's roof as the Techmarine jumped down from it. The driver's hatch was still open, and he squeezed himself through the narrow circle and lowered himself into the driver's seat. He voxed lunus on the Scourge's frequency.

'All right,' Arkelius growled. 'For the Emperor!'

The driver's compartment of the Scourge was, if anything, more cramped than the tank commander's compartment had been.

Arkelius was hemmed in by equipment. He could barely move without bumping his elbows on something. He placed his hands on the U-shaped joystick and his feet on the brake and accelerator pedals. His main control console was a mess of blinking runes and burned-out panels. He could see light through several fractures in the prow in front of him, doubtless caused by the missile strike in which Corbin had been injured.

As always, vox-chatter filled his helmet, keeping him up to date on the battle outside. He heard that Terserus had picked himself up and launched himself at the Daemon Prince for - what was that now, the fourth time or the fifth? He had staggered it with a series of energised punches, but had been beaten back again by the chains of its unholy flail.

'Hold on,' Arkelius muttered under his breath. 'Just hold on one more minute.'

He punched in the ignition sequence. The Scourge's self-repair systems must have been hard at work - or the Machine-God was listening to Arkelius's prayers again - because, for all the abuse that had been heaped upon it, the engine spluttered into life.

Arkelius eased the accelerator pedal down, and the Hunter grumbled forward. The steering was still faulty, that pull to the left a lot stronger than he had anticipated. The joystick was large and sturdy - an unenhanced human couldn't have handled it at all - but Arkelius feared that, under the amount of force he was having to apply to it, it might break.

Still, he brought the Scourge around until he could see Fort Kerberos - and the Daemon Prince - squarely through the driver's vision slit. His helmet's range-finder supplied him with the monster's bearing, height and distance, which he relayed to his gunner.

'But don't fire yet,' said Arkelius. 'Wait for my mark.'

He stepped harder on the pedal and felt the Scourge's frame juddering ominously around him. He eased up again and let the tank crawl forward at a fraction of its usual speed. As long as it was giving him something, he thought; as long as he was closing in on his target.

The Scourge had reached the edge of the ruins now, crushing debris under its tracks.

Terserus, unfortunately, had just gone down for what sounded like it might be the final time, and, from what Arkelius could see, the Daemon Prince's flail was making short work of its remaining opponents. 'That's it,' he announced to lunus. 'We're out of time.'

He stepped on the brake pedal and lowered the stabilisers. He updated his gunner on the Daemon Prince's position: directly ahead of them and less than two hundred metres away. 'Aim high,' he added, 'and fire at will.'

'I'm still getting warning runes here, sergeant,' lunus cautioned, 'and what

with the damage done to the missile launcher when we-

Arkelius cut to the end of the explanation. 'Blown sky-high. I remember.'

'Perhaps you should bail out. I can take it from here, while you-'

Arkelius interrupted him, gruffly, 'A tank commander stays with his vehicle, lunus. My place is here.' He had never expected to speak such words today. He was even more surprised to realise that he had meant them. The Emperor certainly did work in mysterious ways.

The Daemon Prince had thrown off the last of its attackers, and its insect wings were beginning to vibrate again. There probably wouldn't be a better chance than this. 'Now!' Arkelius screamed. 'Now, lunus! Fire that missile now!'

The order had barely left his mouth when the Scourge of the Skies shuddered - but, by the grace of the God-Emperor, didn't actually explode - and discharged its deadly payload.

lunus was already frantically reloading. In the meantime, the Daemon Prince had hauled its bloated carcass into the air. A lone Imperial Stormtalon had been circling and waiting for a clear shot at it, which finally it had. It swooped to engage the monster. On the ground, the pair of Predator Destructors that had advanced ahead of the Scourge had been waiting for their shots too, and they took them.

The Daemon Prince flinched - it actually flinched - as it was battered by cannon fire from above and below; the worst, the very worst, was yet to hit it.

The Skyspear missile was flying dead on course. Arkelius watched, with a prayer on his lips, as it streaked towards its target, but the prayer turned into a dismayed groan as, at the last possible instant, the Daemon Prince saw its nemesis coming and twisted out of the way.

It had been so close - the monster must have felt the fierce heat of the Skyspear's backwash on its face - but, of course, close wasn't good enough.

Arkelius yelled to lunus to fire again, along the same trajectory. The second missile missed its target too, and by a wider margin than the first one had. The Daemon Prince belched at the buzzing Stormtalon, engulfing it in another feculent cloud. The gunship spun out of its pilot's control and smacked into a nearby hillside like a flaming comet.

'Sergeant,' said lunus, 'if these readings are correct-'

Arkelius knew what he was about to say. He had been keeping a rough count of the Scourge's ammunition in his head. He had known this news was coming, although he had prayed it wouldn't come just yet. 'How many?' he asked, tersely.

'One, sergeant. We have one missile left. It's in the tube now.'

He nodded grimly. He scowled as he fixed the hovering Daemon Prince in his helmet's sights again. It had shifted somewhat to the left and climbed a little. He relayed the figures to his gunner in an unemotional tone. '...and

fire at will!

lunus fired.

A third, a final missile, went blasting away from the Scourge . This time, it seemed that luck - and the will of the Emperor - was finally with it. The Daemon Prince had been staggered by an autocannon punch to the stomach - surely it couldn't recover from such a blow and get out of the Skyspear's way before it hit?

Arkelius could hear movement in the tank commander's compartment to his left. With no missiles left, lunus must have scrambled forwards to see what was happening outside. Arkelius heard his voice, 'Sergeant, look! Look over the daemon's shoulder!'

He pressed his eyes to his vision slit and saw it too. A second missile - one of the two that had missed its target, it had to be - had turned around and was swooping in for another attempt. Arkelius had been right: even without the benefit of a target lock, it knew its enemy.

'God-Emperor be praised!' he whispered.

The Daemon Prince was effectively flanked. Perhaps it could have evaded a single Skyspear missile, but it had no hope of dodging both, and at least one of them would only have stayed on its tail if it had. It looked as if the monster was finished.

Then there was a sudden purple flash of warp energy, bright enough - even at this range - to leave Arkelius dazzled. When his eyes had cleared, the Daemon Prince had vanished. Just like that, it was gone without a trace. He couldn't quite process what he was seeing.

The Skyspear missiles passed each other, flying through the space that their target had just vacated, while Arkelius was left staring in numb disbelief. It was over.

'What happened?' lunus sounded dismayed too. 'Where did it go?'

It took Arkelius a moment to come up with an answer for him. 'We fought our way past the Death Guard army,' he said at length. 'We sent their Daemon Prince fleeing back to the unholy realm it came from, with its tail between its legs. We recaptured Fort Kerberos - what remains of it. We accomplished everything we were tasked to do. That means we won.'

It didn't feel like a victory, though.

Arkelius clambered awkwardly out of the Scourge of the Skies and jumped down from its roof. When no one was looking, he patted it affectionately on the prow.

The Hunter had given its all - as much as any Space Marine could have given - in the Emperor's service. After a refit, he knew it would serve again. When it did, he intended to be sitting in the tank commander's seat. He hoped that Corbin and lunus would be seated beside him. The first ships had arrived to collect the wounded, and casualty lists were being collated. He hadn't heard Corbin's name yet, which meant he was probably a survivor. The same was true of Terserus, whose fate was in the

Techmarines hands. The news on Galenus, however, was less promising. When last seen, the captain had been in a healing coma, but his body had been lost in the rubble when the Daemon Prince had emerged. The warp storm over the ruined fort was still blowing, now purple in colour once more. Arkelius went to join the search for his captain, praying that he might still be saved.

He was contacted on a private vox-channel by Captain Numitor. Arkelius's actions, he insisted, had won the battle and had earned him an honour badge. He accepted the compliment, but he wished he could have done more. He wished he could have made certain that the Daemon Prince wouldn't return.

Arkelius didn't understand everything that had happened here today. He knew, however, that a world - a once-fertile, populated world - had been laid waste by disease, and that an ancient, terrible power had been unleashed and was still on the loose.

He knew one more thing, in his hearts: the war on Orath was far from over.

# ARMOUR OF FAITH

GRAEME LYON



*'Clad yourself in full with the Armour of Faith, that you might take your stand against the foe. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the Ruinous Powers of the benighted warp and against the spiritual forces of evil in that infernal realm. Therefore, clad yourself in full with the Armour of Faith, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done all else, to stand.'*

- Codex Astartes, *Book of Aephesus* (attr.)



## One

Silence, thought Darin Aeroth, was a thing to be treasured.

It was all too rare that his life allowed him to experience true quiet. A silent battlefield was one where the fight was over, and that was no place for a Space Marine. A starship in the void was never quiet, the roar of engines and vibration of centuries-old - at the very least - hull plates a constant companion. Even on Macragge, in the Fortress of Hera, there was always the sound of Chapter-serfs scurrying to and fro, the distant echo of weapons drills and the low hum of the mighty void shield generators that protected the ancient edifice from orbital assault.

No, silence was definitely a thing to enjoy, and this was the closest he was likely to get. The only sound was the roar of the wind outside as the *Fury of Gallicus* descended into the atmosphere of Orath. Muted by the thick plasteel and ceramite plates of the gunship's armour, it sounded like the breeze on a summer day on Iax. Appropriate, he considered. The planet below, according to the reports, was similar to the Garden of Ultramar, verdant and devoted to producing food for other worlds in Ultima Segmentum.

And it was protected by the Ultramarines. That was an important similarity. Aeroth glanced around at the other occupants of the Stormraven. Three members of his squad stood, as did he, arms raised, the outsized fists of their Centurion warsuits gripping thick bars bolted onto the ceiling of the cramped cabin.

The fifth and final Space Marine was clad only in a suit of particularly fine power armour. It was of ancient design, its deadly functionality augmented by baroque ornamentation. It was as black as the void, each plate engraved with passages from the Codex Astartes, the closest thing to a holy tome that the sons of Roboute Guilliman had. Where a battle-brother of the line companies might wear an aquila on his chest and battle-honours on his knee-pads and greaves, the black-armoured warrior had skulls. Each was tiny, carved from bone and engraved with a name.

There were sixty-seven such skulls on Chaplain Manet Sentina's armour.

The Chaplain looked up and met Aeroth's gaze. Sentina's helmet was

mag-locked to his thigh, the gleaming white skull of the faceplate staring at the floor. His skin was dark and his shaven head reflected what little light emanated from the lumen-strips running along the compartment's ceiling. His eyes were set deep into a broad face, and they betrayed nothing of Sentina's thoughts or mood.

*'Seventeen minutes to Fort Garm.'*

Techmarine Isachaar's voice cut through the silence, blaring from the vox-caster set into the corner of the cabin.

'Acknowledged,' said Aeroth. 'How do conditions look on the ground?'

There was a pause before Isachaar's emotionless burr, replete with mechanical undertones, answered.

*'No response from the fort. The main force on the northern continent reports infernal mists. Evidence of blight in the farmlands. Estimated millions dead. Unconfirmed sightings of civilians attacking one another.'*

'Attacking one another?' cut in Brother Oenomaus. 'What madness could make them do such a thing?'

'Many things can turn brother on brother, young one,' replied Lentulus. 'Even within brotherhoods such as ours, civil war is not unknown. For undisciplined humans, anything is possible.'

'The forces of the Ruinous Powers are at work upon Orath,' growled the Chaplain, 'Disease and disorder go hand in hand where the enemies of mankind walk.'

'It seems likely.' Aeroth had seen the so-called 'Plague of Unbelief' before. 'There is a taint that sweeps across worlds, killing the human populace only to raise them by infernal warp-magic to walk again as mindless beasts, roaming the shattered ruins of their former homes. They are drawn to those still living, and when they find them... they feast.'

'Melodramatically put, sergeant.' Lentulus's tone was harsh. 'But accurate. They are no longer human, Oenomaus. Remember that when they stand before you. Not that they will be likely to harm us in these fine warsuits, eh?'

'Be not overconfident, brother.' Sentina turned his deep stare on Lentulus. 'The Archenemy have weapons to breach any battleplate, save the Armour of Faith alone.' The Chaplain pulled his helmet from his thigh and stared into the lenses of the faceplate. 'If our faith is found wanting, we shall fail. If it is strong, victory will be ours.'

Lentulus's face flushed. 'I will not be found wanting, Brother-Chaplain.'

'Nor I!' exclaimed Oenomaus.

Aeroth smiled behind his helmet. This was the young battle-brother's first deployment in a Centurion squad. His eagerness was palpable. He turned to the final member of his squad.

'And you, Iova?'

'I will do what I always do, sergeant. Approach what comes with my eyes open, my weapons primed and my mind sharp.'

Like Lentulus, Iova had forgone a helmet. Experienced Centurion operators often did so, preferring to rely on their own eyes and ears over the suite of auto-senses built into the warsuits' headgear. Lentulus did so out of pride, Aeroth suspected, while for Iova it was a matter of making the most of the experience. Aeroth himself wore a helmet, painted the red and white of his rank. He had even allowed the ludicrous crest to remain attached, but only because he knew it annoyed Lentulus to look at it.

'So say we all, brother.' He paused, gathering his thoughts. 'We don't know quite what to expect below. We know that all contact with the garrisons at Forts Garm and Kerberos was lost months ago. Clearly, the situation on Orath is dire. Our orders are to secure Fort Garm, locate the Doom Eagles who were stationed there and report any enemy movements to the main force.'

'Eight Centurions and a Chaplain to secure an entire continent.' Lentulus's tone was jovial, but with an undercurrent of bitterness. He would have preferred to join the battle at Fort Kerberos, on the other side of the world, and had made those feelings known, as well as his resentment of the reason *why* Squad Aeroth had been despatched on this mission. 'I hope the enemy are ready for us.'

'Captain Galenus believes that whatever enemy forces are on Orath are focused on Fort Kerberos.' Sentina's voice was steel. 'The warp rift that now hangs above this world is above Kerberos, and orbital auguries detected a build-up of life signs there. Keeping Fort Garm secure is a precaution.'

'A wise one,' said Iova. 'The two fortresses are the only notable defences this world has. If Kerberos has already fallen to the foe, Garm must be held.'

'So why only us?' snarled Lentulus.

'Because the Fifth Captain is confident that he can retake Fort Kerberos from whatever awaits him,' said Aeroth. 'He has the bulk of three companies and half the Chapter armoury.'

Lentulus opened his mouth to respond, but his words were drowned out by an almighty *clang* as something impacted hard against the hull of the gunship.

Hell had come to Orath.

That was not a fanciful description, not a metaphor for some abstract concept. Alia Blayke had no time for that sort of thinking. No, the hell that had come to Orath was quite real. It was dangerous. It was personal. And it was in her way.

Alia swung her battered autorifle at the creature that stood before her. It, and another six of its kind, blocked the narrow alley between houses, her only way back to the ragtag group of survivors with whom she travelled. The heavy wooden butt of the autogun smacked into the monster's jaw and she heard the satisfying *crack* of bone shattering. It stumbled back

and she ran, pushing the creature to the side, feeling putrefying flesh give beneath her hand.

She should have been horrified. She should have felt fear, terror, panic. She had at first. Now, after months of encountering the shambling monstrosities on a near-daily basis, after hiding beneath piles of wet, rotten corpses to evade them, after smearing herself in their viscera to pass through a crowd when there was no other way, there was no fear left. No terror. No panic. Only numbness. Sometimes she wished she could feel again, but then she remembered the all-consuming mix of emotions that had seized her the first time she had seen one of them. Of course, it didn't help that it had been... No. If she started to think about that, she *would* feel again, and it would all batter down her defences and come flooding in, and then she would be doomed.

The others faced away from her. She put her head down and stormed through them, swinging her rifle to sweep them aside. She was strong, the result of years of labour on her father's farm, and the frail, rotting bodies of the plague victims were no match for her brawn. She continued to run, churning up the mud. They would follow, and she had to get back to the group, to warn them that there were enemies here, that they weren't safe. Right now, Alia didn't think she'd ever be safe again.

She barrelled round a corner, taking it too tightly and hitting herself on the wooden wall. Pain shot up her arm, but she ignored it. She'd felt worse. The impact killed her momentum, and she dared a look back. The flesh-eaters were nowhere to be seen, but she could hear them in the distance, the low moaning that followed them everywhere. It was almost musical, like a funereal dirge. Appropriate. They were dead, after all. She turned back to see a figure looming over her. Screaming, she lashed out, intent on dashing whatever brains the thing had left against the wall.

'Stop, girl! What are you doing?'

The burly figure before her was no monster. It was Keevan. He raised his meaty fists and grabbed the rifle before it hit him, pulling it roughly from Alia's grasp. She fell, sprawling in the wet mud, and gasped for breath.

'Keevan... I'm...'

'Calm down, girl,' said the big man, reaching down and pulling Alia to her feet. 'What's up?'

She took a deep breath. 'I was checking the buildings on the southern edge, and there was a group of... *them*.'

Keevan tensed. 'Did they see you?'

'Yes. I had to fight my way through them. They'll be following.' She didn't like the panic in her voice. How could she still feel panic, of all things, through the numbness? She knew the answer, of course. The things were the most dangerous creatures she had ever seen, ever known. They had laid waste to her world, to her entire life. What's more, they went against every natural law. They were the dead, risen again to devour the living.

'We have to get back to the priest,' said Keevan, drawing his broad-bladed knife from his belt and giving it a quick kiss on the cutting edge. He claimed to have been a butcher in a farmstead on the east coast before the apocalypse had hit Orath, and that he had always kissed the blade before slaughtering an animal for meat. *'It shows respect for the beast,'* he had told her when she had asked him about the habit. *'And it's a damn sight better than kissing the animal.'* His tone had been jocular, but the laughter hadn't reached his eyes. He wore the same dull, blank expression now. The one they all wore.

So much had changed since the plague had come to Orath. Their way of life was over. Alia knew that nothing would ever be the same. Not since... She stopped that line of thought before it wandered to dark places. Everything had changed. That was enough. Some things had fallen by the wayside naturally, like the Orathian custom of burying bodies to nurture the soil. The sheer scale of the casualties had quickly put paid to that.

Of course, if they'd been able to continue doing that, the dead would have a harder time getting up and killing more of their former friends and family members.

Alia and Keevan turned and walked quickly through the warren of rough streets and alleys of the town stead they had been exploring. They didn't know its name, and there was no one alive to tell them, or at least no one willing to announce their presence to strangers. No surprise there. In her months crossing the continent, Alia had discovered that not only the dead were to be feared. Her pa had always told her that some people were just plain bad, and waiting for a chance to unleash the evil within them. She had never really believed him, though he had darkly hinted that he had seen things that proved it.

She wished he had been with her when she had come across a camp a few weeks after fleeing the family farm. The men had taken her in, been warm and friendly, given her food and a tent to sleep in. But then, that night... She pushed the thought away. That had been a long time ago, and she had been a different person.

'Stop,' Keevan hissed at her, putting his arm out to halt her. She peered past him and saw a trio of shambling corpses, kneeling on the ground, heads buried in the guts of a poor unfortunate. Alia didn't recognise the man, and he looked like he'd been dead a while. He had a hole in his head, and Alia didn't need to ask why he hadn't turned after death, rising to terrorise the living. Of course, if he'd shot himself here...

'His gun might be around here,' she whispered to Keevan. He nodded.

'I had the same thought.'

Guns - and ammunition for them - were in short supply amongst the survivors. Alia had her rifle, but she hadn't fired it since leaving the farm, all those months before. She had one round for it, hanging in a small leather pouch around her neck, next to the crude wooden aquila on its

battered silver chain. She wasn't going to waste that round. She knew she might need it.

'We have to see,' she said. 'I'll distract them, draw them away and you find it.'

Keevan turned and looked at her.

'It's too risky. We need to warn the others.'

'And that's what I'll do. I can outrun them. I'll get back to the square and we can form a defence. Just like the last ten times. But if there's a weapon here...'

'I know,' sighed Keevan. 'You're right. Okay, go. But no unnecessary risks, girl. We need you alive.' He lowered his voice, and she barely heard the rest of his words. 'You're the only one that bloody off-worlder listens to.'

She smiled, reached up and pinched his cheek. 'I'll be fine, Keevan. You keep yourself safe as well.'

He grunted in response and pulled his arm away. Alia stepped out and edged towards the group of flesh-eaters. A wave of foul odour hit her. She had become inured to the general stench of Orath, the rotting crops and the smell of the shambling once-people, but this layered something else on top, the stench of human innards, not yet rotten. She stepped closer to them, out into the open, scooping up a handful of mud, and cleared her throat.

'You want something fresher?' she shouted. Slowly, almost deliberately, they turned. Eerily, they did so in unison, as if some greater intelligence were guiding their actions. 'Come and get me!' she screamed, and flung the mud in the face of the closest. It wouldn't impair the monster - it was guided by other senses than sight, she was sure - but it would certainly make sure that their attention was on her. With a last glance back at Keevan, she turned and ran.



## Two

As he pulled the *Fury of Gallicus* level, Isachaar's mental cortex processed a number of subroutines at once. He checked the augurs to ensure that the *Fury*'s sister craft, *Aeonid's Lament*, was still with him. It was, but was veering away rapidly, pursued by something fast and dangerous. He queried the cogitator databanks for a match for the attackers. He opened the vox to the crew compartment, tersely informing them that the Stormraven was under attack.

The response he received made him query why fully organic beings were so prone to raised voices and profanity. He dismissed that - in nearly two hundred years, he had never come to a satisfactory conclusion anyway - and focused on identifying the attackers. When he did, he checked the results and opened a channel to Chaplain Sentina.

Sentina squeezed the haft of his crozius arcanum, feeling the leather of the grip. Beneath the black armour, his knuckles would be white with tension, he knew. He hated being out of control, and he was rarely more so than in a battle like this. His vox buzzed and the pilot's voice droned into his ear.

*'Brother-Chaplain, the attacking force consists of two fighters, conforming to the Hell Blade pattern used by traitor forces.'*

'Keep them off us, Isachaar. We'll open the hatches and lend some fire.' Sentina turned to the Centurions. 'Two fighters attacking,' he told them tersely.

Aeroth looked over at him. 'Orders, Brother-Chaplain?'

'We will engage them and destroy them. Do what you can to help. Put the weapons on those oversized battle-suits to good use.'

A thrill went through Oenomaus at the Chaplain's order. This was far from his first taste of battle - a decade in the Scout company and five more years learning to use the many heavy weapons of the Devastators had seen him in plenty of combat situations - but using the Centurion warsuit was a new experience. He felt the thrill being echoed by the suit's machine-spirit, and shivered at the sensation, a momentary burst of timeless, ageless hatred and fury. He let go of the bar above his head and

stamped over to the portside hatch, steady and stable despite the rocking of the gunship as Isachaar dodged and weaved around the attacking fire. Over the squad vox, he heard Sentina order the pilot to open the side doors, and then everything was drowned out by the rushing of air as the hatch before him opened, pulling smoothly to one side. Outside was anarchy. A green mist wreathed the sky, limiting visibility, but through it he could just make out contrails from the engines of multiple flyers. He activated the targeting systems in his helm and a series of filters fell across his display, scrolling information about atmospheric conditions, wind speeds and potential targets. He mag-locked his feet to the floor of the cabin and brought up his arms, willing the lascannons slung below each huge fist to power up. He couldn't hear the characteristic whine over the sound of the wind, but his display flashed up both weapons with full charge.

Oenamaus looked around for a target. Something flew past at amazing speed, the velocity too high for even his armour's enhanced auto-senses to track. He pivoted in the direction it had been flying, and there it was - through the ghostly emerald hue of the mist, he saw the distinctive shape of a Hell Blade, long and slender, twin wings jutting out from a small central core with an elongated spike on the rear. The fighter had a bank of vicious looking cannons mounted below the cockpit that were spitting rounds at the *Aeonid's Lament*. He locked on the craft and prepared to fire.

The Stormraven lurched and turned, and he almost lost the target, but his auto-senses compensated and he was rewarded with the ping of a confirmed target lock. Taking a deep breath, he opened fire.

Twin beams of ruby light lanced out from the long cannons mounted beneath his arms and struck the Hell Blade on one outswep wing. It sparked and the craft juddered. He adjusted his aim and prepared to fire again, this time targeting the cockpit.

But he had drawn the attention of the craft's pilot. It swung towards him and pulled closer through the malefic fog, revealing the unmistakable forms of autocannons mounted in two banks of two.

Isachaar had obviously noted the Hell Blade's approach, as he banked steeply and pulled the Stormraven out of the smaller craft's arc of vision. As it swept by, Oenamaus caught a glimpse of the cockpit.

It was empty.

'Brother-sergeant, Chaplain,' he shouted over the squad vox. 'There is no pilot in that fighter.'

'That's impossible,' cut in Lentulus, who was at the starboard hatch, heavy bolters blazing at another enemy flyer. 'They can't fly themselves.'

'Nothing is impossible when we deal with the Archenemy,' said Sentina, his voice sepulchral.

As the Stormraven banked around once again, the Hell Blade came back into view, flying directly towards the Ultramarines vessel. A targeting solution

crossed Oenomaus's view and he opened fire, crimson lances spearing into the fighter's prow as autocannon rounds impacted against the larger craft's hull. One slammed into Oenomaus's leg, but the warsuit's thick plate was proof against the shot. As Isachaar accelerated the Stormraven out of the Hellblade's path, Oenomaus noticed something else.

Along the long, slender, spiked wing of the Chaos-tainted fighter were a cluster of grotesque, unlidged eyes. And they were staring at him.

Aeroth gripped one of the rails above his head and fired another volley of shots from his grav-cannon out into the maelstrom. Iova stood to his side, back against the compartment wall, both heavy bolters blazing into the mist. They were at the rear hatch of the craft.

'This is useless, brother,' grumbled Iova over a closed channel. 'All we're doing is scratching the paint.'

'Do you have any better suggestions?'

'Not really. But complaining makes me feel better.'

'I'm so happy for you,' said Aeroth through gritted teeth as he let go of the rail and leaned out to follow the path of a Hell Blade, sending a pulse of gravitational energy in its direction. He saw the craft's engine casing crumple with the impact, and it seemed to pause for a moment as one thruster ceased working.

'I've killed the starboard engine on one of them,' he put across the general vox.

'I see it,' answered Isachaar. 'Tracking.'

Isachaar slewed the *Fury* around sharply, following the damaged Hell Blade. It was slower, its movements easier to track, but even then the targeting cogitator was struggling to keep up. He hammered las-fire towards the stricken craft, scoring deep gouges in the hull. Absently, he noted that they looked like cuts in flesh, red-rimmed and leaking a fluid that might have been blood. The true horror of Chaos, he had often thought, was that it could take something with the purity of the machine and imbue it with organic weakness. Well, he would put the machine-spirit of this craft out of whatever misery it was trapped in.

The targeting systems finally caught up and Isachaar released the safety on one of the stormstrike missiles slung beneath the *Fury*'s wings. It flew straight and true, and obliterated the corrupted vessel in a storm of fire. Isachaar allowed himself the organic indulgence of a smile.

It would be the last time he would ever do so.

Sentina stood in the middle of the passenger cabin, mag-locked to the floor, turning to observe each of the Centurions as they continued to track the foe. It made him proud to call them brothers. Though their effectiveness against the enemy would be slight, and the danger they faced by exposing themselves at the hatches was great, not one of them flinched. It was not quite true that Space Marines knew no fear. They knew it, but at their best they mastered it and used it to propel them forward. That was what

Aeroth, Iova, Lentulus and Oenomaus did now. And through their efforts, one of their attackers was already destroyed.

'By your efforts shall we defeat this foe,' he intoned across the vox.

The rest of what Chaplain Sentina had been going to say was lost when a third Chaos fighter, that had been hiding lower in the mist, emerged vertically and fired a slew of autocannon rounds straight through the *Fury of Gallicus*'s cockpit.

A few seconds later, the Stormraven gunship exploded.

'Incoming!'

Alia's voice rang through the central area of the small town, and the group of men and women clustered in small groups around the large, open area snapped to attention. She skidded to a halt and shouted again. 'Dead incoming!'

A figure pushed his way through the crowd that began to develop around her, a small man, portly, wearing ragged green robes, his ruddy face crowned by a greying tonsure of dark hair.

'Are you all right, child?' he asked.

'Fine,' she said. 'There are dead following, father. At least three, but maybe more. There were others, but we lost them.' She was breathless, and babbling, she knew.

'Rose, Bragg.' The priest nodded to a pair of men who stood clutching makeshift spears, grim expressions on their faces. One was tall, his hair long and dirty blond, the other short, a ragged beard emphasising his balding crown. They shared a first name, and so were referred to by their surnames. 'Did you hear young Alia?' Father Andronicus continued.

'Aye. We'll set up a perimeter in the direction she came from, and keep an eye on the other exits to the square,' said the shorter one.

They nodded and set to it, looking faintly ridiculous next to one another as they started to organise a cordon.

'I wish you wouldn't call me "young Alia",' she muttered as the priest returned his attention to her.

'Ah, but you are, child,' he said, pulling a battered canteen from within his robes and offering it to her.

'I'm older than at least ten other people here,' she protested, grabbing the canteen and unscrewing the top. She took a swig and nearly spat it back out. The liquor was strong, burning her throat. She coughed.

'Oops.' Andronicus smiled broadly. 'Wrong drink.' He rummaged in his robes again, and Alia shook her head.

'No, that'll do,' she gasped. She heard a shout and turned her attention to the group of men Rose and Bragg were organising. They stood in a rough line, spears pointed at the group of three walking corpses Alia had exhorted to follow her. As she watched, the trio of creatures pounced, desperate to get between the wall of spears and tear into warm human flesh. All three were impaled, but seemed not to notice, continuing to pull

themselves forward even as their innards unravelled, smearing the shafts of the weapons with blood and pus.

The three men whose spears had caught the creatures - Rose and Bragg amongst them - shifted apart to allow another group through. These were armed with axes, and Alia looked away as they set to hacking the heads from the monsters. She didn't want to watch. Monsters or no, they had been human once.

'You said there were more?'

'There are. Lots more.' Keevan pushed his way through the group of blood-spattered men who were dragging the corpses of the undead away.

'At least a hundred. And they're acting as a pack. And coming this-'

He was cut off by an immense explosion that echoed around the square and beyond. It seemed to come from all about Alia, and above. She looked up to see, in the distance, the aftermath of a great flash blazing fiercely through the greenish mist.

'Ah...' breathed the priest, his head also turned skyward. 'At last.' Then he turned and raised his voice. 'Everyone, gather together and prepare to move on.' He offered no further explanation.

'Again?' groaned a voice from somewhere in the crowd of bodies. Alia recognised it as belonging to Pieta, a lad from a village they had passed through the month before. They had found him hiding in the basement of his family home. Of his parents and brothers, there was no sign. He was eight years old, and had lived in relative luxury, the son of a scholam instructor and a nurse at the local medicae. He hadn't adjusted to life on the run yet, and every time they found a new settlement, he was the first to voice the hope that this might be a clear town, that they might be able to settle here.

It was a fool's hope, Alia knew. She had dared to express it herself in the early days, but cynicism had soon set in. Part of her hoped it would do so in Pieta as well. His constant hope annoyed her. But then she saw him, so like little Felip, and she hoped that his dreams stayed alive. Maybe they would even come true, if the priest was right and they found help at the distant edifice of Fort Garm.

'Again, Pieta,' boomed the priest. 'I know, I had hoped for longer here as well, but we must accept that the God-Emperor is pushing us onwards to Fort Garm, where salvation awaits.'

A general grumbling met the priest's words. No one really believed that there would be anything at the ancient fortress other than more death. Andronicus was an outsider. He didn't know the stories of Fort Garm, and its counterpart on the northern continent, Fort Kerberos.

'Come on now!' bellowed Keevan. 'Gather everything together. Are we missing anyone?'

People started moving with purpose, Keevan amongst them. Alia caught his arm.

'Did you find a gun?' she asked.

Keevan grimaced. 'Yes,' he said. 'Empty. Looks like he used his final round on himself.' He pulled away and delved into the crowd, shouting orders. Crestfallen, Alia clutched the leather pouch around her neck, squeezing it and feeling the solid shape within. Her fingers brushed the crude wooden eagle as well. She looked into the crowd and caught a glimpse of Pieta. For a moment, he looked just like Felip. Just like her brother.

### *Thirteen thousand years ago*

*The tide of monsters stretched to the horizon, and beyond. From his vantage point atop the Hill of Beginnings, Kharanath could see little but a roiling mass of ever-changing flesh, the raw stuff of the otherrealm become real. Everywhere he looked, it formed bodies that looked wrong, with too many joints, impossibly rippling muscles and bone-like blades that jutted directly from skin. When they were struck by one of the eldar in the small - and shrinking - knots of defenders, the flesh split, deformed, then reknitted, sometimes the same, sometimes in a completely different configuration. The things couldn't die. The warriors of Meldaeen had held out against them for weeks now, awaiting reinforcements in vain. Now only one hope remained.*

*'The mon-keigh have a word for them,' whispered a voice in his mind. 'A name from their most ancient myths. Daemon.'*

*Kharanath snorted in amusement. 'We have words for them as well, Elthaenneath. Neverborn, soul thieves, darktide, bloodwights. A million names, for the million or more forms they take.'*

*He had to admit that the word did fit though. 'Daemon,' he repeated softly. It was a surprisingly simple word to encompass such complex creatures with their seemingly infinite variety, but it had a good weight to it.*

*'They believed that creatures such as these were the servants of evil gods, that they existed to steal souls and put them to eternal torture.'*

*The psychic conversation with his brother helped to keep Kharanath focused. His arms ached, his body protesting after days of near-constant battle. His spear was harnessed on his back now, his pistol long since discarded for want of ammunition. Further down the slope, his Seventeen Swords - or 'Nine Knives' as Kotris, the eternal joker, had dubbed them, with regard to their remaining number - fought against the front-line troops of the foe, tall and rangy beasts with crested and horned heads, and backwards-jointed legs. They gripped great brass blades in their claws, and their lean bodies seemed soaked in gore. The smell of them infused the battlefield.*

*'Battlefield,' he said ruefully. 'All of Meldaeen is a battlefield now.'*

*'Not for too much longer, my brother,' came Elthaenneath's voice, whispering through his senses. 'The ritual nears completion. The seals take shape.'*

*Elthaenneath stood far beneath Kharanath's feet, deep in the tunnels beneath Meldaeen. He was no warrior, his brother. While Kharanath had studied the arts of battle, the way of the blade, his twin had toiled to become an artisan, learning how to sing wraithbone into shape.*

*That was what he was doing in that chamber far below, crafting a wraithbone capstone with which to seal the rift in the otherrealm that had opened in the heart of their world. Another bonesinger was doing*

*the same on the other side of Meldaeen. When their work was complete, the horde of monsters - daemons - that surged across the world would be banished. Or so they hoped.*

*Of course, that assumed that the eldar lasted long enough to complete the seals and end the incursion. The death toll had been horrendous, the damage to the population of the previously idyllic world incalculable.*

*'I wonder if the doomsayers in the coreworlds have a point, my brother,' he said.*

*'In what way?'*

*'You have heard the tales of the excesses in the heart of the empire, the orgies of bloodletting, the festivals of indulgence. What if they are disturbing the fabric of the otherrealm? What if those who claim farsight are right, and a blade is coming through the darkness for us? What if this is its leading edge?'*

*Elthaenneath had no response.*

*Kharanath returned his attention to the battle below. The knots of eldar warriors - brave men and women who had taken up blade and rifle to save their world, though they had lived long lives of peace and luxury - were getting smaller, and the enemy host was undiminished. He sighed, and began the climb down the steep hill, picking his way sure-footedly through clusters of loose stones and skipping across the eldar dead from the last time the daemons had broken through the lines of the Seventeen Swords and made it partway up the hill.*

*'We can't even bury our dead,' he muttered bitterly. The creatures were relentless, their assaults ferocious, and each time they pushed forward, they came closer to overwhelming the exhausted eldar entirely.*

*'And the living cannot hold out much longer,' said a voice from behind him, soft and feminine.*

*'No, we can't,' Kharanath agreed, not turning. Althya was his shadow, his protector, the only one of his Seventeen Swords not guarding the slopes below. She was sworn to keep any threats from reaching Kharanath. Ultimately, he knew, she would fail, unless Elthaenneath and his fellow bonesinger completed their work. 'But if we fall, we fall as heroes, Althya. It is time for our last stand.'*

*Drawing his tall spear from its harness on his back, Kharanath stepped forward and thrust the weapon into the air. It sang as it sliced, a long, low keening that would have pierced the souls of his foes, had they souls to affect.*

*'Seventeen Swords! To me!' he bellowed, his voice carrying across the clash of blades and bestial sounds of the unnatural monsters below. He broke into a run, feeling Althya following, and leapt into the fray. Allowing his training and deadly instinct to take over, Kharanath started to kill.*

*As his blade cleaved through infernal unflesh, spilling corrosive black*

*blood that stained the soil, he cast his mind back to his brother.*

*'Elthaenneath, how goes the ritual?'*

*He was vaguely aware of his remaining guards gathering around him, each performing mighty deeds that would be commemorated in song and story, should any who saw them survive long enough to record them.*

*Here, Alandris the Deathshaper leaped high into the air, carving his way through the pilot of a flying chariot that burned with blue flames, before skipping his way across a flight of manta-like beasts that followed in the chariot's wake, stabbing each with one of his paired mirrorblades as he bounded from their predatory forms.*

*There, Althyra slipped from shadow to shadow, her skills defying mortal comprehension, bringing herself closer to a towering, disease-ridden warrior who directed the march of a host of smaller creatures ten thousand strong, each clutching a misshapen sword dripping with virulent fluid and oozing blood and pus from a dozen wounds across their bodies. The creature didn't see Althyra coming. She appeared behind it, coming from the shadow cast by a great flapping banner marked with sigils that made Kharanath's soul itch. With a single line of monofilament wire, Althyra took the enemy leader's head from its shoulders. It was to little avail - there were a dozen more to take its place, and the march of the plageridden soldiers continued unabated.*

*And all the while, Kharanath slew, his spear driving through enemy chests, bursting from their backs in showers of corrupt blood and slicing limbs from bodies. And all the while, he waited for a response from Elthaenneath. But there came none.*

*'Elthaenneath?' he sent again, allowing concern and a touch of panic to colour the message. Still nothing. He spoke aloud. 'Althyra, I have lost contact with my brother. We must get below. If he is lost, we all are.'*

*She was suddenly at his side, clenching and unclenching the fist that controlled her monofilament wire spinner. 'Then we go, my lord. The other Swords?'*

*Kharanath hesitated. If the daemons had overwhelmed Elthaenneath's guard, the Seventeen Swords would be of immeasurable use. Yet they were direly needed up here. He shook his head. 'They stay.'*

*Althyra nodded. 'Then let us go.' She bounded away towards the hidden entrance to the caverns, some kilometres distant, away from the bulk of the fighting. Kharanath followed. He didn't look back. He couldn't.*



## Three

The wind rushed around Sentina, deafening and dizzying. There was no up or down as he fell, no sense of location, time or distance. He remembered - barely - an almighty explosion, immense heat and deafening noise, and the Stormraven losing control. He remembered dropping, and being grabbed by a great fist. Oenomaus. The young battle-brother had pulled him onto his huge shoulder guard. And now they were falling, the wind buffeting them as they tumbled through the mist. The Chaplain heard - barely - a bleat over his vox-link and blink-clicked the volume to maximum.

'...ryone... ke it... plan...'

It was Aeroth's voice, and the Chaplain struggled to hear what the sergeant was saying. 'Repeat, sergeant!' he shouted, his voice booming but still almost lost to his ears as the wind rushed and whipped against his helm.

'...aid...ve a plan...'

Sentina growled. Aeroth had a plan. How very reassuring. He focused all his efforts on locating the other Centurions. His helm display blinked with their transponder icons, though it was clearly struggling to keep up with the pace of their descent, altitude markers flicking digits quicker than even his enhanced eyes could follow.

He struggled to make sense of where they were in relation to him. Three-dimensional navigation was, he believed, something better left to pilots. As best he could tell, they were all within twenty metres of one another horizontally, but at differing altitudes. He shouted into the vox again.

'Your plan had better be good, sergeant, or this is going to be a short and painful mission.'

Aeroth couldn't make out exactly what the Chaplain had shouted over the vox, but he caught the general idea. He muttered a quiet response, knowing it would never be heard.

'I hope it works as well, Manet...'

The plan was simple, but not exactly one that was Codex-approved. For some reason, the wisdom held within that mighty tome didn't include what to do to survive a fall of several kilometres without jump packs, so some

degree of improvisation was required. If the worthies of the Chapter objected, Aeroth would simply be glad to be alive to hear it. Assuming the plan worked and whatever waited for them on the surface of Orath didn't kill them.

With a thought, Aeroth brought the controls for his grav-amp up on his helm display. The arcane piece of technology that was built into his left arm had no function on its own; its purpose was to enhance and regulate the gravitational effects of the cannon slung under his right limb.

Grav-weapons fired a focused graviton beam that created a temporary increase in the Newtonian force around a target, crumpling armour and mangling organic tissue. The grav-amp allowed the user to increase or decrease the power of the created anomaly.

Or reverse it.

Aeroth manipulated the controls with a series of gestures and blinks. What he was doing wasn't quite what the weapon was designed for, but it would work. It would have to.

As he completed the adjustments, warning lights blinked red on his display. He was sure alarms were sounding as well, and he silently thanked the Emperor that he couldn't hear them. He dismissed the warnings and, with a grunt of effort, forced his right arm to move against the onrushing wind, pointing directly down. He did some calculations, aiming at a point past Brother Iova, who would be the first to know - in spectacular and messy fashion - if the plan failed.

He closed his eyes and fired, holding down the trigger and sending a steady stream of gravitic particles towards the rapidly approaching ground.

All of Sentina's attention was on the rapidly spooling numbers on the altimeter. It took him almost a full second to realise that they were slowing. And if the numbers were slowing, so too was their descent. They slowed further as they approached zero. The rushing of the wind lessened and details began to resolve. He could see the ground coming closer, but as though they were falling through the low gravity of an airless moon. He didn't know what was causing this, but he wasn't going to complain.

Oenomaus had obviously caught on, orienting himself so that his feet were to the ground. It was still going to be a rough landing, but the Centurion warsuits were made for combat deployment from a hovering gunship. They could survive this.

The impact rattled every bone in Sentina's body. He felt teeth crack as they ground together and his helm display flashed up with damage runes.

He scanned and dismissed them. Nothing that would impair him too badly.

He felt another impact as Oenomaus released his grip on him and he fell from the Centurion's shoulder guard to the ground. For a moment, he lay there. His enhanced physiology allowed him to avoid the worst effects of dizziness and nausea, but his head spun nonetheless.

'No weakness,' he muttered and pulled himself to his feet, muscles

protesting. He pulled up a medical analysis on his display. It reported some minor bone fractures, already healing, and some torn muscles and ligaments. He would be in pain for a while, but he would live. He looked up, and saw stars falling to earth. No, he corrected himself, not stars. The remains of the gunship. It was gone then. Isachaar was likely dead. The rest of the squad, though...

He opened the vox. 'Squad Aeroth, report.'

There was an almost imperceptible pause before the responses came. Iova, Aeroth, Lentulus. They had been separated by the fall, landing some distance apart. Only Oenomaus was silent. Sentina looked around, taking in his surroundings. He was in a field, the crops rotting and dying. A green mist emanated from them, from the ground itself, rising upwards, obscuring vision beyond a few metres. Nothing his helm's sensor suite wouldn't be able to compensate for. The younger warrior's Centurion suit stood silent and motionless beside him.

'Oenomaus,' he said, using his external vox-casters. 'Brother, are you-'

'Present and correct, Brother-Chaplain,' boomed the Centurion's voice. 'My apologies. The impact reset my systems. The warsuit is powering up now.'

'No apologies necessary, brother. Are you capable of doing your duty?'

'I will be in a moment.'

'Then do so. That is all the Emperor requires of us.'

'*And we can start now,*' came Iova's voice over the vox. It was tinged with something unusual for a Space Marine. In a lesser being, Sentina might have called it panic. '*Hostiles converging on my position.*'

Sentina was already moving as he asked for details, his helm display showing Iova's location relative to his own. 'Plague victims?'

'*Negative, Brother-Chaplain. I can confirm daemonic presence on Orath. Repeat, confirm presence of daemons.*'

Sentina broke into a run, sprinting in the direction of the heavy bolter fire that now echoed through the green mist shrouding the plains. That was where Iova was fighting. Daemons, he had said. The situation had obviously deteriorated rapidly on Orath if the immaterial servants of the Ruinous Powers were able to force their way across the veil. He activated his crozius arcanum, the crack of the energy field igniting and the hum of the generator as reassuring a sound as he could imagine. With the threat of daemons ahead, the eagle-headed maul was something solid he could hold onto. More solid than his faith in himself anyway.

As he ran, he tried to raise the second Stormraven, which carried the other half of Aeroth's squad. There was no response. Out of range or, more likely, destroyed. And with the rest of Captain Galenus's warriors half a world away, Sentina's small force of Ultramarines could expect no help now.

He heard the slow, crashing footsteps of Centurion warsuits behind him, and the heavy bolter fire was so close he could almost feel the explosions

of the mass-reactive shells. A horror from beyond nightmares loomed out of the mist before him, long, gangling arms clutching a wicked-looking cleaver in both hands, holding it in front of a hideously bloated stomach that seeped gases from several ruptures. One bulbous eye was set deep into the head that lolled atop a slender, bubo-covered neck, a head crowned with a single long horn. He swung instinctively, the crozius thudding into the daemon's midriff and bursting through it, trailing rotting viscera. The creature staggered on, atrophied limbs reaching for Sentina. He pulled himself to the left and swung again, obliterating the daemon's head. It fell.

He ran on, taking his crozius in a two-handed grip as he forged ahead through the greenish murk. He broke through the mist and came into a clearing, where the tall and bulky form of Iova was twisting left and right, sending bolt-shells scything through putrid flesh. Where the rounds exploded, gore splattered over more daemons as they shambled towards the Centurion. In the skies above, more of the daemons, one-eyed monstrosities wielding dripping blades of corroded steel, their skin rent and broken to reveal hideously rotten innards and oozing, unnatural fluids, clutched onto the backs of gigantic mutated flies. Sentina felt nothing but disgust for them.

'Brother-Chaplain,' boomed Iova. 'I could use a hand dealing with the creatures above.'

Sentina nodded, paused for a second, pulling himself back and deactivating his crozius, and then sprinted towards the Centurion, who ducked ponderously down. Nimbly, the Chaplain jumped onto the rumbling heavy bolter arm even as it continued to spit shells at the daemons massing on the ground. From there, he climbed up onto the broad shoulder guard and, gathering himself once again, made a massive bounding leap from the back of the straightening Centurion.

The daemons didn't see him coming. He grabbed the rear claw of one of the immense rot-flies. It was like sinking his hand into putrid meat, but he gripped onto the bone and bodily swung himself up, reigniting the power field on his weapon as he did so and driving the maul into the daemon's gut. The swing brought him level with the one-eyed creature perched on the broad back of another fly. He kicked it from its mount and it plummeted to the ground below, landing with the sickly sound of flesh and bone being sundered.

Sentina paused for a second as the fly bucked beneath him, almost losing his balance even as the immense weight of his power armour drew him into the warp spawn's pallid flesh. He pushed down, hearing the crack of the beast's spine breaking and launched himself off again. He passed another and thrust his crozius deep into the rider's ribcage. And then he was falling - again. For a brief moment, he was staring upwards at the warp rift in the sky. Clearly, it was not confined to the sky above Fort Kerberos, half a world away. And, impossibly, it looked bigger than it had

before.

He landed on a plague daemon, gore and pus soaking his armour as it was pulverised by the impact. For a moment, he lay there dazed, sharp agony coursing through him, before his armour administered pain suppressants and his enhanced body began repairing the damage. He groped around for his crozius, ignoring the sickening mess in which he lay. His fingers closed around the haft and he pulled it towards him and rolled, activating it and battering it into the plague daemon that loomed over him, sword raised. He was rewarded with a low moan and a shower of stinking viscera. Shrugging it off, he pulled himself to his feet and looked around for more enemies. Seeing a knot of them in the distance, he began to sprint. Aeroth, Lentulus and Oenomaus advanced, laying down bolt-shells, las-beams and grav-blasts with every ponderous step. The warsuits were slow, but the firepower they could muster was formidable indeed.

'This is the joy of life, Oenomaus!' said Lentulus. 'We are as gods of war in these suits, even more than we are with power armour and boltgun. Revel in the tally we reap of these unnatural fiends.'

The younger battle-brother grunted, his attention on piloting the Centurion suit and maintaining a punishing rate of fire. He wasn't picking targets so much as spraying rounds across his field of vision, such as it was in the infernal murk. Aeroth's voice sounded across his personal vox.

*'Careful, brother. You'll exhaust your ammo reserves at that rate, and I suspect this won't be the last fight we see on this world.'*

'Aye, sergeant,' he replied, the words clipped and frustrated. 'I shall endeavour to maintain fire discipline.'

*'It's understandable, Oenomaus,' said the sergeant. 'Lentulus is pompous and overblown, but he's not wrong. These warsuits are mighty indeed. As are their machine-spirits and their lust for battle - don't let yourself be overwhelmed.'*

Oenomaus thought back to the first time he had stepped into the warsuit and placed himself in its embrace, both physically and mentally. He had felt the machine-spirit as a presence in there, both reassuring and somehow malignant. He knew that the sergeant spoke the truth.

The tech-thralls who had helped him to interface with the suit had whispered of joinings that went wrong, where the machine-spirit was too warlike and too powerful, taking over the mind of the novice pilot and rampaging through arming chambers, though such events were rare and the damage limited as a first joining was never attempted with live weapons on the warsuits.

He had survived without that happening, though he fancied he had felt the spirit of the suit probing at his mind, seeing if it could push itself into him. He would have to remain wary of that happening in the field as well.

'Thank you for your concern, sergeant,' he said as he focused his targeting array on a group of shambling plague daemons and loosed a

short burst of bolt-fire that scythed through them, tearing them apart with controlled explosions. 'I shall remain wary.'

Sentina rammed his crozius through the distended gut of a daemon, swaying aside to avoid the strike of another and tearing the mace out of the first. It slumped to the ground, acidic blood running in rivulets across the hard-packed dirt.

This was where his strength lay, the Chaplain knew. In the heat of battle, facing the foes of mankind and bringing death with pistol and bludgeon. And yet, he knew that he fulfilled only half of his duty on the battlefield. His role was to lead, as well as to kill, to inspire his battle-brothers to feats of heroism.

That had never been his forte. One to one with a battle-brother, he could divine what troubled a soul and provide an answer, but oratory, implacable leadership... He had been able to at least make the outward appearance convincing, though he had always felt his words to be hollow, but since Varos, he had been unable to muster the strength to even pretend.

Another pair of daemons advanced ponderously towards him, their single eyes glowing malignantly. Their rusted swords were raised, ready to strike a blow. The fluids that coated the blades were virulent and corrosive. Sentina had seen warriors fall to such weapons and knew that not even the genhanced physiology of a Space Marine would be proof against the toxins and contagions that would spread through his system if he were to be so much as nicked.

He twisted, swinging his crozius in a disarming blow. It struck one of the daemons on the wrist, shattering bone and pulverising flesh. The creature's entire hand came off, sword with it. The plaguebearer continued its relentless movement, heedless of the wound, lunging for him with its intact arm and broken teeth. His backswing crashed through its neck and as it fell, Sentina was already moving towards the second. He swung low, rewarded with a satisfying crack as the mace struck its knee. As the fiend stumbled, he pulled his pistol from its holster and fired a single round into the daemon's skull, ending its existence. As brains and daemonic flesh splattered against the earth, the Chaplain turned, looking for more targets. There were none.

The sound of gunfire had ended. Sentina opened a vox-channel.

'Are there any more?' he asked.

'Clear,' replied Aeroth after a moment, swiftly followed by similar acknowledgements from the rest of the squad. The Chaplain ordered them to regroup on his position and pondered the attack.

'It seems... convenient that they were so close to where we landed,' opined Aeroth, echoing Sentina's thoughts.

'Our very presence may have summoned them,' said the Chaplain. 'They are creatures of the immaterium. If this world is in the grip of the Ruinous Powers, as it surely is, then the veil could be drawing thin.'

'Why are there not more of them, then?' asked Lentulus. 'If we brought them here, why not an endless tide to overwhelm us?'

'If there are daemons appearing across the planet, perhaps there is only so much energy that can be expended in one place,' suggested Iova.

'I wonder what Captain Galenus's forces are facing on the northern continent,' said Aeroth thoughtfully. 'It may be that the enemy focus upon Fort Kerberos, as do our brothers. We are but a scouting party - perhaps our foes were also.'

'It is not for mortals to try to understand the ways of Chaos,' said Sentina sharply. 'To do so invites madness and ruin. Let it be enough that we have defeated them. If we encounter more, we shall do so again.'

'The Chaplain is correct,' said Aeroth. 'We must make for Fort Garm and secure it.'

The Ultramarines set off, the ponderous footfalls of the Centurion warsuits shaking the earth with every tread.



## Four

The group of men, women and children - around forty, all told, made their way through the narrow streets of the small town, moving as quickly and quietly as they could manage. At their head, Andronicus strode through the churning mud, murmuring under his breath. Prayers to the Emperor, Alia assumed. She'd never had much time for worship herself. She paid lip service to the Imperial creed, of course. Everyone did. But the farmstead had contained no temple - barely anywhere on Orath did, since the Ecclesiarchy of the Imperium chose to have no permanent presence on the world. But when wandering priests passed through - men like Andronicus - they would gather the folk and hold devotions in barns or out in the fields. Alia knew that she was supposed to find these events uplifting. She always hoped for a spiritual experience, to feel the love of the Emperor fill her and move her like in the old stories, but she usually just ended up wishing that she could get back to work.

Andronicus had been no more inspirational. And for all that she liked the old man, Alia didn't trust him. He was an outsider.

And now, no rousing speeches about the light of the Emperor could make up for the fact that the sky itself had been torn apart, an oozing, cataracted eye staring down day and night, even through the hellish green fog that swathed the world. The... thing opened and closed seemingly at random, and it had brought death with it.

Keevan pushed his way past her. He had been at the rear of the group, chivvying them along. Alia moved forward a little in his wake, eager to hear whatever he had to say to the priest. The group came to a gradual halt as the two men stopped to converse.

'Father Andronicus,' Keevan said. 'We need to speed up. They're getting closer, and I think they're moving in from the sides as well.'

'Yes,' the priest replied quietly. 'I can hear them, their infernal song, all around us now.' He raised an eyebrow. '*All* around us.' Alia didn't understand his point for a moment, then it hit her. The song. It was coming from in front of them as well. They were surrounded. Keevan realised it too.

'Everyone!' he shouted. 'We need to get to defensible positions. Get up onto the roofs of the buildings, women and children first.'

Like many men on Orath, Keevan was... *old-fashioned*. He believed that women were to be protected. Well, she'd be damned if she was going to be coddled. Anarchy followed his words, as people panicked, running for the buildings and trying to find handholds to climb up. Children started to cry. Alia saw one little girl - she didn't know her name - standing alone, bawling her eyes out, a threadbare stuffed grox in one hand and a spreading puddle of urine around her feet, soaking into the mud.

Alia ran over and scooped the girl up.

'Shh,' she soothed. 'It's okay, we'll get you safe.'

She carried the child to one of the buildings a short way back, where several children had already been lifted up onto the roof. A pair of men were helping to lift a pregnant woman up, struggling beneath her weight, and another pair leaned over the edge of the roof to pull her up, huffing and puffing as they hauled her upwards. When the men on the ground were free of their burden, Alia shouted over to them.

'Little girl here to go up!'

The men looked round, and relief filled the face of one.

'Emperor's mercy!' he exclaimed. 'Janae! I thought I'd lost you, sweetie.' He ran over and Alia pushed the weeping, sodden girl into his arms. 'Thank you,' he said, his face expressing his thanks better than any words could. 'She's all I have left.'

'Get her to safety then,' Alia said, the words coming out harsher than she intended. The man bristled and pulled away, heading back towards the building. The child - Janae - screamed and thrust her arms towards Alia. Alia turned back to see if anyone else needed help and saw, about twenty metres away, half-immersed in the mud of the narrow street, the girl's toy.

'It's just a toy,' she muttered, but from behind her she heard the girl's screams increasing in volume and ardency. She had a sudden flash of a family trip to the Holborn farmstead, dinner beneath the stars. Filip had been a baby, younger than Janae was now, she reckoned. He had a toy, a wooden horse that their pa had carved for him. They'd left it behind, and as he'd been asleep when they left, no one noticed. The next day, when he found he no longer had it, he screamed for seven solid hours, only stopping when he wore himself out and returned to his slumber. When he woke again, the screaming continued. Pa had ended up carving another horse for him just to shut him up.

The girl deserved her toy. Alia ran towards it, stopping and bending down to scoop it up. She straightened, and looked down the street. What she saw stopped her in her tracks and grabbed her attention entirely.

That was why Alia Blayke didn't see the once-human flesh-eater loping from the alley behind her. She didn't even have time to scream as it lunged towards her and its teeth closed on her neck.

'Chaplain Sentina, there is a settlement ahead.'

Sentina snapped out of his half-sleep at Iova's words. He had engaged his cataplectic node as the Space Marines marched, falling into a state of semi-awareness that allowed his brain to rest while keeping him moving and functioning. He would need the scant rest it afforded later, he was sure. The Centurions did the same, one staying at full alertness while the others rested, switching every hour.

'What sort of settlement?' he asked.

'A village, small. Perhaps two hundred buildings.'

Sentina nodded, recalling the reports on Orath. 'That is moderately large by the standards of this world,' he said. 'Most of the people live on farmsteads and agrarian collectives.' They had passed a few such scattered dwellings on their brief journey. None had seemed inhabited. 'What signs of life are there?'

'Sounds, Brother-Chaplain. Sounds of battle.'

'Then we make haste,' ordered Sentina. 'If there are Imperial citizens alive in that settlement, our duty is to deliver them from whatever terror assails them.'

Sentina's armour lacked the more sophisticated augury arrays of the Centurion warsuits, but it was only a few minutes before he too heard the distinctive sounds of combat. Gunfire - he could discern the *crack-whine* of lasguns and the sharp bark of autoguns and shotguns - echoed through the twisting streets of the small village, along with shouts and screams, and an eerie moan, almost rhythmic. For all the world, it sounded like a song, a wordless, tuneless dirge.

He had heard its like before. It meant only one thing.

Death walked.

As they approached the source of the noise, Sentina ordered the small squad to disperse and approach from different angles. The strange green mist shrouded them from sight and dampened the sound of the Centurions' heavy tread. Whatever unnatural horrors fought in the village wouldn't hear the Ultramarines coming.

Despite this advantage, the Chaplain advanced slowly and cautiously. Orath was in the grip of Chaos, and anything could be lurking in the infernal fog. As he edged forward, the mist parted before him and he beheld a scene of bedlam.

People were running and screaming, climbing buildings and desperately trying to avoid the clutches of the dread creatures that assailed them. A few brave men and women waved flaming torches at the horrors, rotting corpses that lumbered towards their living counterparts. They were trying to hold the walking dead back, to stop them from getting to the knot of desperate survivors who were trying to climb to safety, but they were being driven back, step by step, as the flesh-eaters grabbed at them and snapped mouldering jaws.

Several men crouched atop houses, firing at the beasts, but it wouldn't be enough. Poorly aimed and from weapons of minimal power, they were dropping pitifully few of their attackers, who were swarming towards the sounds from every direction.

Sentina opened a vox-channel.

'Plague victims sighted, brothers. Attack at will. Put the afflicted out of their misery, in the Emperor's name.'

Aeroth acknowledged the Chaplain's order and advanced. His warsuit was slow, but still faster than the walking dead, and his reactions were far quicker. He was on them before they could turn. He wouldn't waste grav-fire on them, but the mighty fists beneath which the cannon and grav-amp were mounted were more than capable of crushing the frail, rotted bodies of the enemies. With each step, he lashed out, shattering skulls, breaking ribs and grinding fallen bodies to dust beneath his feet. He was death incarnate in the warsuit, and he knew that the chances of any of the dead penetrating the Centurion suit or his armour with their frail, subhuman nails and teeth were practically nonexistent. This wasn't battle. It was slaughter.

'People of Orath!' he bellowed from his vox-caster. 'Fall back. Let us deal with these creatures. Get yourselves to safety.'

He saw humans scrambling to obey him, stepping backwards hastily, still waving their crude torches to ward off the enemy who had not yet turned to face the walking death that assailed them. He watched as one man fell, dropping his makeshift weapon, which was extinguished in the churning mud. The man scrambled back, but one of the beasts grabbed for him, holding on with preternatural strength. It fell upon him, and Aeroth heard the man's screams. He hesitated for a moment, then pushed forward and stamped down, crushing both attacker and victim.

It was a mercy.

The Emperor's mercy, he thought ruefully.

The flesh-eaters were easy prey. Sentina scythed through them like a farmer in the field, the energy-shrouded head of his crozius arcanum returning them to blessed oblivion with every heavy stroke. It was a mechanical act, the beasts unable to stand against him. He passed through a horde of them with barely a scratch to the paint of his armour and came out at the end of a wide avenue.

It was clear of the dead. At the far end, a group of humans were helping one another up to the roof of a sturdy-looking dwelling. As Sentina watched, one woman, tall and broad, handed a crying child to a relieved-looking man before looking around. Evidently, she'd spotted something in the churned-up mud of the street, because she dashed out. As she did so, one of the rotting creatures lurched from an alley. The woman didn't see it, her head down as she reached for whatever she sought. She was on a collision course with the dead thing. If it so much

as scratched her, she would be infected, doomed to die and rise again as one of the keening creatures, driven only by the desperate need for human flesh.

Sentina reacted in a heartbeat, pulling his bolt pistol from the leather holster at his hip, priming it and firing a single shot. The bark of the weapon firing rang out, and it seemed that everything and everyone on the street froze and silence fell.

The creature's head exploded even as its rancid jaws closed on the woman's neck. It fell, its body jerking.

The human fell as well, crashing down into the muck. Sentina started towards her, hoping that the powerful explosive blast of the bolt-round hadn't killed her too.

He had sixty-seven needless deaths on his conscience already. He didn't need or want another.

Alia looked up through pain-filled eyes into a visage of death. Staring down at her was a skull-faced spectre, huge and black, adorned with bones and gold filigree. Where its face should have been was a skull, red light glowing from the eye sockets. In one enormous hand it gripped a rod of black metal with a golden eagle at the head, wings spread, both heads seeming to stare right at her. The other hand clutched what looked like an oversized pistol, boxy and smoking from the barrel.

'Are you wounded?' it asked, the words blaring mechanically from a grille beneath the skull.

'Am... Am I dead? Have you come to take me?'

She knew it was a stupid question, but it was all she could think of. The red eyes bored into her and she couldn't look away.

'You are not dead,' boomed the grating voice. It looked down at her. 'You were hit by shrapnel. A superficial injury.'

'What are you?' she asked.

The immense figure slid the pistol it was carrying into a leather holster at its waist and reached up to its skull-head. With a long hissing sound, it twisted the skull free and lifted it. Beneath it was a broad face with skin the colour of mahogany, a face that was scarred and pitted and looked as if it had never smiled and wouldn't know how.

'What am I? I am a Space Marine.'

A Space Marine! One of the legendary defenders of the Imperium, the Emperor's angels, so the tales said. For the first time in many long months, Alia allowed herself to feel emotion, because for the first time there was an emotion to feel other than terror.

'Are you here to save us?' she asked, relief flooding her.

'Yes,' said the Space Marine simply.

Sentina stared down at the girl for a moment.

'*Mortals,*' came Lentulus's voice over the vox.

'She was brave,' said Sentina absently. 'She was retrieving something.'

Something someone had lost.' He bent down and picked up the mud-caked object she had dropped. It was small in his palm, some sort of child's plaything. He dropped it again and looked up at the other people who were gaping at him, open-mouthed.

'Take me to whomever is in command here,' he said. The words seemed to break the mortal from her stupor. Two men, one tall and rangy and the other short and stout, ran forward to help her, but she brushed them off. Sentina nodded to them and they followed her towards the knot of civilians. 'Let me through,' came a voice from the crowd. It sounded old, wheezing and soft. An elderly man pushed his way out of the throng and stamped through the mud towards Sentina. He stood in front of the Space Marine and stared up at him. The man wore tattered robes the colour of Talassar's oceans in summer, covered in long flowing parchments and icons. His hair was tonsured and greying, his ruddy face streaked with mud and blood. A chainsword was slung across his back, and around his neck a book hung on a frayed string. He was no more than half Sentina's height, but his eyes blazed with fervour.

'It's about time,' he said. 'I've been waiting forever for reinforcements.'

'Reinforcements?' repeated Sentina, bemused.

'Yes. As possibly the last remaining Imperial authority on Orath, I have been waiting for the forces to arrive that will deliver the world back into the bosom of the God-Emperor.'

'And what Imperial authority do you represent?' asked Sentina.

'What are you, simple?' said the old man. 'Look at me. I'm a missionary of the Adeptus Ministorum, charged with bringing the God-Emperor's light to worlds without a permanent church presence. Worlds like...' he spread his arms wide, 'this *delightful* place.' He paused, then looked over his shoulder before lowering his voice. 'It's a bit of a backwater, but it's home to them, of course. Don't want to offend them. That would be... what's the word? *Impolitic*. Might cause a nasty incident. That's one of the tenets of the Missionaria Galaxia, you know. Keep the locals happy. Unless they're mutants or worshipping something unsavoury.'

Sentina stared impassively down at the babbling old fool. 'What is your name, missionary?'

'Oh, you can call me Andronicus. And you, Brother-Chaplain?'

'I am Sentina. You know my rank, missionary?'

'I've been around,' said the priest. 'I've seen a Space Marine or two. And we're told all about you lot in the seminary. About how you're actually heathens, not believing that the Emperor is a god, all that. Technically, I could denounce you as a heretic, you know.'

'*That* would be impolitic,' said Sentina. 'Especially if you want us to save this world.'

'Yes, about that,' said Andronicus. 'Orath is being overrun by Chaos, Chaplain Sentina. It's going to require a hell of a leap of faith to save it.'

Are you the man to make that leap?

The priest peered up at Sentina in a way that made the Chaplain feel quite uncomfortable. He turned and looked around at the hulking shapes of the Centurions. 'We shall see,' he said. 'But first, we need to get to Fort Garm.'

'What a coincidence,' said the priest. 'Just where we were going. You can come with us if you like.' He leaned in closer to Sentina and dropped his voice to a whisper. 'Between you and me, you'll probably be safer with us by your side.'



## Five

Between the ponderous pace of the Centurions and the dawdling of the half-starved and terrorised civilians, the journey to Fort Garm was painfully slow. More than thirty of the humans had survived the attack in the village, and in the two days since, they had shown remarkably good spirits, despite crossing the rotting fields of their home.

The warsuit-clad Ultramarines marched in pairs on either flank of the group, keeping watch for the enemy. Twice, they saw small groups of the walking dead in the distance, but never close enough to be a threat. Of the daemons, there was no sign. And in the sky, far above the mist-shrouded plains of Orath, the great rift seemed to wink, visibly waning.

Aeroth and Lentulus travelled together, and the latter spent the journey making plain his objections to his sergeant's actions bailing out of the Stormraven. In frustration, Aeroth left his battle-brother to walk alone and stamped to the front of the group, scared-looking civilians moving hurriedly out of his path as he clanked through their huddles.

'Brother-Chaplain,' he said as he pulled close to Sentina. The Chaplain walked alone at the head of the party. 'I tire of Lentulus's censure. Would you care for company?'

'I've not long managed to get that irritating priest to leave my side and tend his flock,' replied Sentina. 'But your company is more welcome, Darin.' Aeroth fell into step beside the Chaplain and the pair walked together in silence for a time.

'What troubles Lentulus?' asked Sentina eventually.

'My use of the grav-cannon to cushion our fall,' said Aeroth.

'He would have preferred that we were killed?'

'I think he would consider that preferable to breaking the tenets of the Codex, yes.'

Sentina shook his head. 'He knows as well as any that the Codex is but a guideline.'

'Not something I expect to hear from a Chaplain. Isn't your role to enforce discipline?'

'I am not a commissar of the Astra Militarum, Darin. My role is to ensure

the spiritual wellbeing of the company. I leave decisions of doctrine to those more qualified.'

'Such as?' pressed the sergeant, looking down at Sentina from the cradle of his warsuit.

'Such as the Masters of the Chapter.'

'Men like Galenus?' scoffed Aeroth. 'He is a vainglorious fool, as this expedition shows. We should have a company at our backs, not a squad.'

'That is not for us to decide, sergeant,' cautioned Sentina, his voice hard.

'Or have you learned nothing from your demotion?'

Aeroth was stung by the comment, but held his tongue. Riling the Chaplain would serve no purpose. 'What do you know of my shame?' he asked.

'That you angered the First Captain. A fool's move, if ever there was one.'

'You know what I did?'

'No,' said Sentina. 'What was done matters not, only what resulted from it.'

'It should matter,' said Aeroth thoughtfully. 'I refused a direct order from the First Captain.'

'Not something Agemman would take kindly,' said the Chaplain.

'We were fighting rebels on Alakash,' said Aeroth, remembering the events all too vividly. 'The First Captain wanted to lead the assault on the enemy command post.'

'And you deemed it too great a risk?'

'I did, as is... *was* my right as the sergeant of his command squad. He... disagreed.'

'He led the attack?'

'No. By the time he knew that I had ordered Sergeant Caeros to spearhead the attack in his stead, it was already under way. Severus was... furious.'

'I can only imagine. His temper is legendary. What happened in the attack?'

'Heavy casualties. Caeros died. Had Agemman been in his place, he would have fallen. I am certain of that. And without him to strategise, the war would have been lost.'

'You don't doubt your decision, even given what resulted?'

'I do not. I was demoted, but I serve still. And so does the First Captain. That is all that matters.'

'And we survived the descent onto Orath,' said Sentina. 'That is all that matters. It might do for Lentulus to be reminded of that.'

'Aye,' said Aeroth. A thought struck him. 'You asked if I had learned anything from my demotion. You did know what happened on Alakash.'

'Of course I did,' said Sentina. 'But sometimes you need to come to a realisation by yourself.'

Aeroth grunted and fell back to return to Lentulus's side. If the battle-brother began his harping again, Aeroth would consider the Chaplain's advice.

Another few hours brought them to the gates of Fort Garm. It was an imposing edifice, a central keep stretching into the murky sky, with a great ring of stone encircling it. There were no signs of life.

*'No enemy targets identified,'* reported Iova, who had been sent in close to get accurate augury readings.

*'And no other signs of life,'* chimed in Lentulus. *'Wasn't there supposed to be a garrison?'*

'Five battle-brothers of the Doom Eagles,' said Aeroth. 'Iova, any vox-traffic?' *'Nothing,'* said the Centurion after a brief pause. *'Fort Garm seems dead.'* 'That doesn't mean what it should on this world,' muttered Aeroth to himself.

The four Centurions approached the fort first, marching in lockstep, weapon arms raised and primed. A lack of augury readings didn't mean a lack of foes, especially with the thrice-damned fog potentially fouling the systems.

Nothing marched out to meet them. No enemies stood upon the walls, weapons ready. And when Aeroth banged on the gate with a great ceramite fist, it opened easily.

He was almost disappointed.

Inside, Fort Garm was as empty as it appeared from the exterior. Silence blanketed its wide stone corridors, the heavy footfalls of the Centurions echoing loudly through the structure. Aeroth thought back to scant hours before when he had looked upon silences as an ideal. What he would give now for some good noisy enemies to kill.

As well as the main keep, the complex contained a large hangar, which upon inspection contained several Rhinos and Stormtalon fighters, and a smaller building, constructed on a human scale, rather than the larger, wider, more open architecture of the buildings designed for transhuman Space Marines. Chaplain Sentina had taken a party from the civilian group into that building, while the Centurions searched the keep.

Aeroth had passed several storerooms, in which were kept weapons, ammunition and ration packs, as well as replacement parts for power armour. For a distant listening post, the fort was certainly well stocked.

'I'd estimate that there are enough supplies here to withstand about two weeks of siege,' said Lentulus as they quickly examined yet another small, packed chamber. So far, all but one had been mostly full.

'Whatever happened to them, the Doom Eagles left most of the supplies,' Aeroth replied. 'Curious.'

*'Even more curious,'* crackled Oenomaus over the vox. *'I've matched the manifest to the vehicle pool. All that's missing is a single Stormtalon.'*

'Not enough to carry a combat squad,' said Lentulus.

*'All Rhinos accounted for,'* added Oenomaus. *'Wherever they went, they went on foot, or hanging on the back of a gunship.'*

*'And they seem to have left no records, nor set a distress beacon,'* said Iova, who was in the cramped command centre at the top of the fort,

skimming through records.

'So we have a squad of Doom Eagles who disappeared,' said Aeroth.

'And what about the serfs?' asked Lentulus. 'According to the briefing, there should have been upwards of thirty of them keeping the place in order and serving the Space Marines.'

'Perhaps the Chaplain can shed some light on that,' said Aeroth.

'Quiet,' hissed Keevan, glaring back at Bragg and Rose. He couldn't say that he was impressed with their stealth skills, but they were handy in a fight, and the Space Marine leader had asked for a few fighters to accompany him into one of the low stone buildings around the main keep. The building was some sort of servants' quarters, and it was deserted.

'Not exactly luxurious,' muttered Rose as he peered into a spartan cell, a bare cot and small desk the only furnishings. 'But then, I suppose service is its own reward, and all that.'

'I'll take a warm bed and warmer embrace over service, thanks,' said Bragg. 'Or a world not crawling with dead men who won't stop moving.'

Keevan glared at them again, but he couldn't disagree. He had hoped that, somehow, the arrival of the Space Marines would presage an end to the horror, that they would turn up and fix everything. Ridiculous, he knew, but he was glad that he could still hope.

Ahead of the trio, the Space Marine Chaplain, Sentina, pulled off his grotesque skull-faced helmet and looked around.

'I see,' he breathed.

'See what?' asked Bragg, peering past the massive black-armoured figure. Keevan did the same and saw a long wall. Most of it was smooth stone, machine-cut if he was any judge. But in the centre was an area of bare bricks, haphazardly laid.

'Something's been blocked,' he said.

The Space Marine turned and looked at him, his piercing eyes showing something that might have been approval.

'Stay behind me,' he cautioned before breaking into a run. He barrelled directly at the bricks, and burst through, showering dust into the room beyond, and onto a pile of human corpses.

The smell was tremendous, even compared to the ever-present stench of rotting plants and bodies that now permeated the air. Keevan gagged.

'Why would they wall up the serfs?' the Space Marine murmured. He backed up and turned to look at the humans. 'We need to clear this out before your party can sleep in this building,' he said. 'Set up a detail to dispose of the corpses.'

Keevan wiped tears from his eyes and looked up at the Chaplain. Then he looked past him, at the shambling horrors that were picking themselves from the pile and advancing towards the Space Marine. He didn't even have time to shout a warning before the huge warrior was in motion, his heavy maul spinning to take the head from one creature before

disembowelling another with the backswing. Keevan looked away. Hearing it was bad enough. After a few seconds, the noise stopped. He let out a breath that he hadn't realised he was holding and turned back to the Chaplain.

'The others may attack as well,' said the Space Marine, unfazed by what had just happened. 'They must be beheaded and burned. It's the only way to be sure. See to it.'

'L-lord-' Rose started to say, but Sentina cut him off.

'Burn them,' he repeated. 'I want it done by nightfall.' Pushing past them, he exited.

Alia stood at the entrance to a room at the top of the keep. One of the huge Space Marines in the great clanking armour had told her that she could find the skull-faced Chaplain here. She was terrified. It was ridiculous. She had travelled so far from home, fought walking dead, escaped depraved men, killed... She cut that thought off. She had been through so much. Yet she was scared of entering the room. She took a deep breath and stepped inside.

'I wondered when you were going to enter,' said the Space Marine. He stood with his back to her, working at some sort of cogitator panel.

'You knew I was there?' she asked nervously.

'Amongst the many enhancements of a Space Marine is improved hearing,' he said.

'Enhancements?'

'We are made... different from the humans we once were. In many ways. Physically and otherwise. We forget that at our own risk.' He turned, and all Alia could see was the depth of his eyes and the way the light of the electro-flambeaux played off his bald pate. 'How may I help you... I apologise. I don't know your name.'

'Alia,' she said. 'Alia Blayke. And I'm here to talk about the bodies.'

'Is it done?' he asked. 'I didn't smell burning.'

'No, well,' she began, 'that's what I'm here about. You see, we don't burn bodies on Orath. Ever. It's against our faith.'

'Against your faith?' he repeated.

'Well, you see, the way my dad told it, which is how he was told it, it's all about the crops. They're so strong because of the Emperor's blessing.'

'What does that have to do with not burning your dead?' Sentina asked.

'It pleases the Emperor when we don't waste anything, when we use everything we've got. That includes bodies. When they're buried, their spirits become part of the world, so they can join Him. If they're burned, then their spirits are burned too. Out there, they all think that if they burn the bodies, it'll make the Emperor angry, and we'll never get our world back.' She was quiet for a long moment. 'And we must have made Him angry already for Him to have done this to us.'

The Chaplain looked down at her. She couldn't tell what he was thinking.

He was both human and something very different, all at the same time.

'What do you hope for when this is over?' he asked, curiosity in his voice. Alia was surprised by the question, but considered it carefully before answering with a single word. 'Peace. To go back to our homes and farms and make everything right again.'

The Space Marine stared at her for a moment, his face impassive.

'Peace,' he repeated. 'I have often wondered what that would be like.'

'No you haven't,' she said, before realising that she had just contradicted a man who could kill her with a gesture. She hurriedly continued on. 'You've never considered it before.'

'Very perceptive,' Sentina said. 'You are quite right, I have never thought of peace. It goes against my nature. I am a tool of war, and that is well, because war is one of only two constants in this universe. Do you know what the other is?' He gazed at Alia, his deep brown eyes boring into hers, as if he could see into the depths of her soul. She found herself unable to speak, her voice having abandoned her. Eventually, she croaked an answer.

'Death,' she said, trying not to remember.

'Death,' the Chaplain repeated. 'Death and war. And we are at war, Alia Blayke. We will win, or we will die. To win, we do what we must. And what we - what you and your people - must do is to set aside your superstitions and burn those bodies, unless you want to risk having an enemy within this fortress, ready to rise up and attack.'

Alia shook her head. 'I understand, but it's a big thing to ask us. We've... *They've* already sacrificed too much.' She hoped the Space Marine couldn't see her hands shaking as she thought of all that she had sacrificed. She clutched on to the wooden aquila around her neck. Sentina's eyes followed her hands and he went down on one knee. Gently, he moved her hands away and cradled the aquila in his black-armoured palm. It looked absurdly tiny, like a child's. Of course, it was.

'Is this where you found the strength to come and talk to me, Alia?' he asked. She nodded, and he let it go and pulled himself back to his full height. 'It was a very brave thing to do. And if that icon gave you that strength, it can give you the strength to do what must be done, and to make the other Orathians do so. I am curious though,' he said. 'Why did you come? Why not one of the men, or the priest?'

'The old man doesn't understand,' said Alia. 'He's not one of us. He's nice enough, but he's not from Orath. He doesn't know what it's like to fight for your world, and to watch everything you know and...' She swallowed awkwardly. 'And everything you love turn to ruin.'

'I know what it is like to watch friends - family - die, Alia. I know what it is like to suffer tragedy and loss. That it is what I am made for, and that it is expected, does not mean that I do not feel it. So I understand.'

She nodded dumbly.

'I also understand the reality of what we face. We will save your world, Alia Blayke, but when all is done and we depart, it will not be the same world it was before. It has been touched by a darkness deeper than you can imagine.'

'Why?' she asked.

'Because the universe is random and capricious, and bad things happen for no reason. No matter what you believe, that is a simple fact. And the Emperor, be He a god or simply the greatest man to have ever lived, has no power over that. Now, return to your people. Tell them that the bodies must be burned, and that the Emperor will forgive them. They will please Him by doing what they must to defend themselves and their world. Remind them that He helps those who help themselves.'

She nodded and swallowed. 'I will. Thank you for listening.'

'You were very brave to come here, Alia. And it will be brave of you to stand against the beliefs of your fellows. But I do not think you lack bravery or strength. And I think that you will need those again before this is over. So whatever that symbol you wear means to you, keep it with you and stay strong. Stay brave. We shall all need to be so when the storm that is gathering breaks.'

### *Thirteen thousand years ago*

*The tunnel wound down far beneath the surface of Meldaen, and Kharanath had to fight for every step. His weapon was in constant motion. Before him was a pack of bloated creatures, their pallid green flesh dripping with corruption and covered with open sores that wept pus and other vile fluids. As he lopped off an arm that carried a battered and misshapen sword, he saw the blood that oozed from the wound burn into the stone of the tunnel floor with a soft hiss.*

*'Don't touch their blood,' he called to Althyra. 'It is corrosive.'*

*'Their very being is corrosive,' she said, twin blades flashing as she split a pair of the plague-beasts apart, sending their bodies slumping to the ground. 'Can you not feel the way their existence pushes at the boundaries of reality?'*

*It was true. The daemons didn't belong in the material realm, and the act of pushing their way into reality warped it. The longer they stood upon Meldaen, the more it would be altered and corrupted, and Kharanath doubted that it could ever be cleansed.*

*He heard a noise behind him and spun around, spear sweeping low. It was met by a pitted blade that swung up impossibly fast. He reversed his strike and parried the blow then threw himself to the side, ducking beneath the slow swing of a cleaver that dripped with stinking black ooze. He punched his spear through the head of the daemon with the cleaver, the tip piercing its single rotten eye. He tore the blade back out and continued the motion, cutting clean through the neck of another creature.*

*'There are too many,' he told Althyra. 'We need to keep moving.'*

*'You go,' she said. He looked around and saw her smiling grimly at him even as she parried blows from a group of the beasts. 'I'll hold them here. Get to your brother and stop these things. Preferably before they overwhelm me.'*

*Kharanath wanted to argue, but knew that she was right. If they both carried on, the daemons would simply follow and they would be overrun. He also heard the hollowness of her last words. She would not survive, regardless. The daemons were too many and she was just one warrior, however skilled. He nodded. 'Khaine be with you,' he said.*

*Turning, Kharanath swung his spear in a wide arc, forcing several of the daemons back against the tunnel walls. Swiftly, he ran through the gap he had created and headed deeper into the heart of the world.*

*Oddly, the tide of twisted, unnatural creatures lessened as he approached the small chamber where Elthaenneath was working. After the plague daemons, he had encountered only smaller groups of the creatures. Given that the chamber contained one of the openings of the great rift that ran through the heart of Meldaen, he would have expected quite the opposite. It did not bode well.*

*He dismissively hacked down another pair of the creatures as they stumbled towards him. 'So slow and clumsy,' he said. The blood-soaked warrior-beasts out on the plains seemed far more of a threat. He wondered what sort of hierarchy or structure guided the creatures, or if there even was one.*

*The tunnel widened and opened out into an irregular enclosure. Around the walls were banks of arcane devices tended by white-robed priests. They would maintain the wraithbone seal that was being sung into existence by...*

*Elthaenneath. He stood in the centre of the chamber before an orb that was composed of both darkness and colours that Kharanath could not name, colours that made his eyes itch and his soul ache.*

*The chamber was free of daemons. Kharanath didn't understand why, but he wasn't going to argue.*

*'Elthaenneath,' he said, reaching out to his twin. 'You are safe. When you stopped talking, I-'*

*His brother turned, and the look of sadness on his face broke Kharanath's heart.*

*'You should not have come down here, brother,' he said. 'I wanted to spare you this.'*

*'Spare me what? What are you talking about?'*

*'The ritual, the song. It has power, but so does the darkness beyond,' said Elthaenneath, gesturing to the orb. 'The powers of the otherrealm have...' He paused, as if searching for the right word. '...certain weaknesses,' he finished. 'They are reflections of reality, of emotion and thought. If done in particular ways, and with particular intentions, mortal actions can stop them from being able to manifest in our world.'*

*'What sort of actions?' asked Kharanath. 'What are you planning, brother?'*

*'Sacrifice,' said Elthaenneath. 'Goodbye, my brother.'*

*And he stepped into the orb of darkness.*

*Kharanath howled. It felt as though half his soul was being torn away. He doubled over as agony coursed through him, and through his grief and pain he heard another scream as well, the pain-shriek of something that lurked behind creation.*

*And then it was over. The dark orb was gone, and Elthaenneath with it. Kharanath was alone.*



## Six

Alia stood with her back to the wall, shivering, and watched the pyre, the flickering flames dancing and sending sparks into the night sky. Keevan and another man were throwing the last of the bodies onto the fire. The job done, Keevan came and stood next to her. They were silent for a long time.

'It was the right thing to do,' Keevan said at last. 'We couldn't risk more of them coming back.'

'I know,' she said. 'Doesn't make it any easier though.'

'Nope. It doesn't. But life doesn't always give you a choice. And when we do something that goes against our beliefs, all we can do is make our peace with the God-Emperor and carry on.'

Alia considered that. 'Do you think this place, this fortress, has a shrine?'

'It might. I don't think these Space Marines worship the Emperor like we do, though.'

She looked beyond the fire, up to the walls where the Ultramarines Chaplain stood, staring down at the fire. 'No. I'll take a look anyway.'

She turned and entered the keep, passing through the huge, forbidding archway. A long passage stretched before her, more huge doors at regular intervals marked with stencilled script. They led to arming chambers, barracks, storage rooms. No shrine.

Alia heard a sound, like soft shoes on a hard floor. From the corner of her eye, she saw something move, disappearing round a corner.

'Hello?' she called, turning. 'Is somebody there?'

There was no response, just the sound again, and something else, like the laughter of a child. 'Hello?' she said again. Maybe it was the little girl she had lifted to the roof back in the village, Janae. Dimly, she wondered what had become of her stuffed grox. She rounded the corner and saw a small figure running away from her. It wasn't Janae.

It was a child, a boy with shock of dirty blond hair. His clothes looked oddly familiar, and in his hand he carried a wooden horse.

'Felip...' breathed Alia. 'Oh, Emperor, no. Felip?'

She broke into a run, following the impossible form of her brother as he

delved deeper into the fort.

Chaplain Sentina stood on the walls and watched as the old priest, Andronicus, passed amongst the civilians. Many of the humans stood sentinel around the immense fire, watching as their fellow Orathians burned. Despite himself, Sentina felt some sympathy for them. Going against their beliefs could not be easy, as necessary as it was. Andronicus was offering words of comfort, blessings and other such things. It was the same thing the Chaplain himself did in the quiet moments before battle began. That had always been where Sentina was at his best - one on one, giving a battle-brother some inspirational words. Until...

He made his way down to the courtyard and passed by the fire. Where he walked, humans shied away. Whether they were scared of his size and the visage of death that he wore as a badge of office, or simply angry with him for making them work against their primitive beliefs, Sentina neither knew nor cared.

He approached Andronicus. 'Father,' he said. 'May we talk?'

The priest looked up at him. 'Yes, Chaplain. When I am done ministering to these souls.' He turned back to the woman who knelt with him, head bowed, lips pressed to a small icon of the Emperor on a chain. Sentina stood for a moment, awkwardly waiting. Andronicus sighed and looked up again. 'Very well. I'm coming.'

The priest stood, steadying himself against Sentina's greave as he did so. They walked away from the fire, round the keep towards the hangar. Neither of them spoke for some time. It was Andronicus who eventually broke the silence.

'You seem troubled, Chaplain Sentina.'

'Yes, I... Yes.'

'Do you have sins you would like to confess in sight of the Master of Mankind?'

Sentina looked down at the priest. 'My faith is not the same as yours, human. Do not mock me.'

'I wasn't mocking,' said Andronicus earnestly. 'We all have things to confess, Chaplain. No man can go through life without concerns weighing upon his soul, and you are so much more than a man. I can only imagine that your concerns are greater than any ordinary man's.'

The old priest paused. 'Even we who hear the confessions of others need someone to talk to now and again. And who better than a fellow man of the cloth?'

'I... don't know where to begin,' said Sentina.

'Tell me when it changed,' said the priest. Sentina looked at him sharply.

'Oh, I've seen it before, boy,' Andronicus said. 'Not in a Space Marine, right enough, but the signs are there. You're going through the motions, but you don't *feel* it, am I right?'

Sentina's silence spoke volumes. The priest nodded.

'What happened?' he asked. 'You can tell me.'

'You see the skulls on my armour, human?' he indicated to the tiny skulls that peppered his battleplate. The priest peered at him myopically.

'Oh, are they skulls? I thought they were just studs. How... macabre.'

'They are necessary,' said Sentina darkly. 'Each of these skulls is crafted from the bone of a dead Ultramarine. Each one is a constant reminder of a brother who died because I failed in my duty. There are sixty-seven of them.'

Silence fell again, only the Chaplain's heavy footfalls breaking it.

'Have you heard of the tyranids, Andronicus?' asked Sentina at last.

The priest shuddered. 'I have heard dark rumours, and they were enough. Some sort of aliens who devour entire worlds, I believe?'

'Yes,' said the Chaplain. 'They are a horror unimaginable. When they fall upon a planet, it is like death given form. A seething tide of monsters, large and small, devouring all that they touch. They have been... an especial nemesis for my Chapter. It is not widely known, but they landed on Macragge itself. They brought much death. Two centuries and the wounds are still to heal.'

'Was that when...?'

Sentina shook his head. 'No. I was not yet born when the Battle of Macragge took place. My shame came only a few years ago. A splinter from one of the aliens' hive fleets fell upon Varos, a world that is protected by the Ultramarines. We responded. Many mighty deeds were performed that day, and we were ultimately victorious, but I made... a mistake. It was my first command, a task force assigned to hold a crossing. If it were to be lost, the aliens would have had easy access to the planetary capital. It was a glorious duty, and I performed it with zeal and pride.'

'Ah, pride,' said Andronicus. 'Many a wise man has fallen victim to that foe.' Sentina felt that comment like a stab wound. It must have showed on his face, because the priest waved for him to continue, looking abashed.

'I was given discretion to abandon the crossing if necessary. We had other forces moving into place to stop the advance. But I was sure that my warriors could stop the xenos filth there. We would be the saviours of Varos.'

'What happened?'

'The aliens attacked in waves, each more powerful than the last, as if they were testing us. Perhaps they were. They have some great and evil intelligence behind them. In any case, I didn't listen to those beneath me who had fought the tyranids before. I let my pride and my arrogance blind me to the truth that we could not hold out against the sheer volume of the foe.'

Sentina stopped moving. His voice was low and sepulchral, laced with the pain he felt. Talking about Varos was akin to reliving it.

'We weathered many attacks. After each, the sergeants advised me to fall

back. And then came the last assault. Monsters the size of buildings, priest. You cannot imagine them, masses of flesh and chitin and claw that could face a Warlord Titan and have a fighting chance of victory. And their weapons... I will spare you the horror. Suffice to say that we were overwhelmed. I watched the warriors under my command die, Andronicus. They fought to the last, every one of them. They fought and died as Ultramarines, humanity's finest. But they didn't need to die.'

'How did you survive?' the priest asked.

Sentina laughed hollowly. 'That is the worst shame. I was the only survivor. The last I remember, I was locked in combat with an immense warrior-beast. I fell, and awoke in the apothecarion. I was alive. No one else from my force was. Sixty-seven Space Marines dead. And worse, their genetic legacy lost.'

He didn't elaborate on that, and the priest didn't ask.

'And since then...' Andronicus prompted.

'I was absolved of blame,' Sentina said bitterly. 'The Masters of the Chapter judged that I had performed my duty. We held the foe for long enough that reinforcements arrived from the Astra Militarum, tens of thousands of soldiers who turned the tide. By the sacrifice of my brothers was Varos saved.'

'It sounds like you did the right thing, Chaplain,' said the priest gently.

'For the wrong reasons.'

'Is it not the result that matters?'

Sentina looked at him. 'You know as well as I that it is weakness of spirit that opens a man up to the lures of the Dark Gods,' he said.

'Is that what you think has happened?'

'No. I remain pure. But my faith has waned, priest. I speak to my brothers, advise them, counsel them, and the words turn to ashes in my mouth. I am diminished. I am weak.'

'Your doubts are normal, Chaplain,' countered Andronicus. 'We all have them.'

'I am a Space Marine. I know no fear, no doubt, no dismay.'

'You are a man. Far removed from the common herd, perhaps. Altered and changed in body and mind, absolutely. But a man, nonetheless, and no man is free of doubt, no matter what they tell you. Take your lord Marneus Calgar, for example.'

'What of him?' The Chapter Master of the Ultramarines was a paragon, a shining beacon of duty and glory for all Ultramarines.

'If you were to ask him, and if he were to be honest, he would tell you that he has suffered the same doubts and fears about himself as you, Sentina.'

'Impossible.'

'It is the human condition. Space Marine or no, doubt is universal. *You* have survivor's guilt. Well let me tell you something: survival is no sin. In

fact, in this misbegotten galaxy, it's more or less the only real victory we can have.'

The priest paused, as if to collect his thoughts.

'Sometimes the path of light is obscured by darkness. Darkness of the soul. The only person who doubts you is yourself, Chaplain. If your commanders did, you would have been removed from duty. If your brothers did, they wouldn't follow you. What happened on that battlefield was not your fault. It was the tyrannids that killed your warriors, not you. Don't blame yourself. Blame the universe that spawned such horrors. And don't punish yourself. Take revenge. Turn the pain you feel outwards. Make the enemies of the God-Emperor pay.'

Another silence.

'You speak sense, priest. I shall think on it.'

'Of course I speak sense. I have some experience, you know.'

'You have suffered a crisis of faith?'

'Of course I have,' said the priest with a smile. 'I'm only human, aren't I?'

Alia passed around corners and along passages, but the little boy remained frustratingly out of reach. Finally, she passed through a tall archway. Before her was an immense stone aquila, its wings spread and merging into patterns that continued across the walls and down onto the floor, where they flowed into a spiral design that went to the centre of the chamber.

Her brother was gone.

'Felip?' she said. Her voice sounded weak and childish in the huge room. 'Felip?' She knew she was being foolish. He wasn't real. He couldn't be. And yet, hope had flared in her heart. Maybe the Emperor had delivered a miracle. Maybe...

She heard a noise behind her, a rustling and what might have been an echo of a child's laughter. She spun, and saw him running towards her. It was definitely Felip. His smile widened as he saw her. He dropped the horse, which hit the ground with an echoing *thud*, far louder than should have been possible for a carved wooden toy. The boy ran towards her, arms outstretched. She crouched, tears filling her eyes and spilling down her face. This was impossible. He couldn't be real, he couldn't, but...

He wasn't. As he reached her and she leaned in to embrace him, he passed right through her, sending a chill up her spine. She turned and watched in horror as he crossed the immense chamber and stood before the great stone eagle. He reached up, standing on tiptoes, stretching as far as his tiny body would allow, and touched the great eagle on its wing. Then again, above one huge claw, and once more on the other wing. Then he turned, smiled, waved... and was gone.

Where he had touched, bloody handprints marked the marble of the aquila. Aeroth was in the command centre of the fort, searching cogitator records, hoping in vain to find some sign of the vanished Doom Eagles. He knew it was a fool's errand, but until they had some idea of what had happened

to the garrison, Fort Garm would remain a mystery.

And Darin Aeroth hated mysteries.

'Is all well, brother?'

Aeroth turned slowly to see Sentina striding towards him. The Chaplain looked absurdly tiny from the perspective of the mighty Centurion warsuit, particularly given the size of the corridors and chambers of the fort, based upon an STC design large enough to drive Rhinos through the passages or accommodate the bulk of a Dreadnought chassis.

'It is, Brother-Chaplain. There is still no sign of what happened to the sons of Gathis.'

'Most perplexing,' said Sentina. 'They cannot have vanished. And yet...'

'Indeed,' replied Aeroth. 'Iova reports that the stores have been emptied of certain ammunition.'

'Of what type?' asked the Chaplain, leaning forward, his face a mask of interest.

'Bolt-rounds, in the main. Power cells for chainswords as well, and flamer fuel.'

'Did they leave, then?'

'No vehicles are missing from the hangar, other than a single Stormtalon gunship. Enough for one person, no more. If the others departed, they did so on foot.'

Sentina shook his head. 'There is more here than we understand. Something we are missing.' He paused and looked at Aeroth. 'Darin, may I ask you something?'

'Of course, Manet,' said Aeroth, intrigued.

The Chaplain slumped into a chair before one of the cogitator consoles.

'Do you ever doubt yourself? Your command abilities?'

Aeroth raised an eyebrow. 'Of course I do. Why do you ask? Is this about what happened with Agemman?'

'No. I-'

Whatever the Chaplain had been going to say was cut off as the girl Alia burst into the room. She was in tears, babbling incoherently. Sentina pulled himself up and strode to her. Kneeling, he grabbed her arms and stared into her face.

'Alia,' he said gently. 'What is wrong? What has happened?'

She tried to answer, but her words were cut off by huge wracking sobs. Sentina leaned in and whispered something to her that the sergeant couldn't hear. Gradually, she calmed, the tears subsided and her breathing returned to normal.

'It's my brother. I... I saw him and he ran through me and left bloody handprints on the eagle and-'

Sentina spoke over her. 'I don't understand, girl. What does your brother have to do with anything?'

The woman looked up, staring at the Chaplain through tear-streaked eyes.

'He was here. But he can't be.'

'Why not?'

'He's been dead for months.'

Alia hurried to follow the Space Marine through the twisting corridors of the towering fortress, struggling to keep up as she told her story.

'It was my dad that got sick first,' she said. 'He fell over in the fields. We brought him in and put him to bed. He had a fever and got pale. And then my mam got it too. And the farmhands, and then... Felip.'

'Felip,' repeated the Chaplain. 'Your brother?'

'Yes,' she said. 'I didn't get sick. I don't know why. I looked after them all, but they just got worse and then they died, one by one. And I was alone. And then...'

'And then they got up,' said Sentina grimly.

She nodded, then realised that he was focused on the route to the shrine and couldn't see the motion. 'Yes,' she said. 'I was so happy for a moment, until Dad went for me. He was trying to bite me.'

'You fought him off?'

'Yes. I'm strong, you see, from working the fields, and he'd been sick and was weaker. I pushed him away and ran out. Got to the barn where he kept his rifle. And...'

She didn't want to tell him the rest.

'You did the right thing,' said the Chaplain, stopping and looking down at her. 'You were in danger and you ended it. Like burning the bodies of the dead serfs here.'

She shook her head. 'You don't understand. I didn't. I couldn't. I tried, but I couldn't. I couldn't kill him. Felip. I had one bullet left after... after the rest. But I couldn't. I got out and ran. Just ran.' She paused for a moment and then confessed the last. 'I still have the bullet. Just... Just in case.'

'You survived. You continue to survive. That is the first and greatest thing that the Emperor demands of us, Alia. Our lives. Our service.'

They continued moving, and Alia fell silent as she struggled to keep up. They came to the shrine chamber, with the great spiral on the floor and the aquila on the wall.

'You see?' she said. 'I followed him in here, and he touched the eagle in those three places and vanished. See the blood?'

'I see only a stone eagle,' said Sentina. 'Nothing more. No blood. No handprints.' He turned to leave. 'This was a fool's errand.'

'Was it?' came a voice from the doorway. The priest, Andronicus.

'There is nothing here, priest. Alia is overtired and hallucinating.'

'I'm not,' she protested. 'I saw him. I saw my brother.'

The priest shuffled over and put his arm around her shoulder. 'I believe you, child. The Emperor works in mysterious ways.' He guided her over to the eagle. 'Show us where the handprints are, Alia. Show us where your brother touched.'

Alia slowly reached out to the bloody smear on the left wing. Wincing slightly and closing her eyes, she touched it. It was cold and dry, just stone. When she opened her eyes again, the blood was gone, though the other two remained. She heard a noise, like stones scraping together.

'What was that?' she asked.

Sentina looked around, then down. 'It came from below,' he said. He looked at her, and at the priest. 'Touch the next handprint,' he said. She did so, and it vanished before her eyes, receding to nothing. Again, she heard the noise, sounding louder and closer. Taking a deep breath, she reached out and put her palm against the third tiny handprint.

'Goodbye, Felip. I'm sorry,' she said. The blood disappeared, and she heard a loud rumbling behind her. Turning, she saw the pattern on the floor falling away, each intricately carved section becoming one step in a gigantic spiral staircase. She stepped over and looked down. The steps stretched away into darkness. Astonished, she looked up at the Space Marine.

'What is this?' she asked.

'I do not know,' replied the Chaplain. 'It's not on the schematics for the fortress and not mentioned in any of the logs or reports.'

'The Emperor works in mysterious ways,' piped up the priest. 'I think you're about to find out what happened to your Doom Eagles friends, Chaplain Sentina.'

The Space Marine was silent for a time, though Alia thought she heard a clicking and low speech from within his helmet.

'My brothers are coming,' he said at last. 'You two return to the serfs' quarters. Get some rest. I'm going to find out what secrets Fort Garm is hiding.'

The priest took Alia by the elbow and guided her carefully around the great staircase. As they left the room, she looked back and saw Chaplain Sentina beginning to descend into the darkness.



## Seven

Akal Netesh ground his heavy boot down on the chest of the silver-armoured Space Marine.

'Your brothers are dead,' he gurgled gleefully. 'Your duty is over. You have failed. You have a choice. Join me and help me to bring this world to ruin... Or die.'

He looked down, and saw himself reflected in the lenses of the Doom Eagle's helmet. He saw armour that was pitted and cracked. Where once, a long time ago, it had been the colour of polished bone, bearing the proud heraldry of the Death Guard Legion, it now looked like rotten flesh. It was bloated and swollen where the body within had expanded and the majestic powers of Chaos had warped the battleplate to fit the glory of his new form. Vile liquids oozed from the various cracks, and a great hole torn in the side - the result of a bolter shell from this pathetic Space Marine's now-dead comrade - revealed flesh the colour of marble and bloody sores that dripped pus.

Truly, he was blessed by Nurgle.

He saw the great manreaper scythe that he gripped in one fist, its long ceramite haft adorned with arcane sigils and its blade enhanced with a power field generator. Once, long ago, he had carried another weapon, a relic of the office he had once held within the Death Guard Legion, but no more. The other symbol of that long-forgotten role though, *that* he still had, and it stared back up at him from his reflection - a helmet in the shape of a skull.

It wasn't the one he had been granted ten millennia ago, after the Council of Nikaea and the Chaplain edict. That had begun to decay and corrode like his armour after that dreadful period when the Lord of Plagues had stalked the Death Guard through their becalmed ships. No, that mask he had abandoned, unable to stand seeing it so corrupted. On Terra, he had hunted through the corridors of the Imperial Palace until he had found another Chaplain, of the VII Legion. He had killed him, and taken his mask. Pristine. Perfect.

It hadn't lasted long. It had been months, maybe, before the perfection of

the helmet's form had been marred in the same way as the first. Blood. Thin trickles of blood running from the lenses down the face of the skull. He couldn't stand it. When he took the helmet off and hung it from the armour racks in his chamber, as the ships of the Legion fled the wrath of the Emperor's forces, as they fled to the Eye, he couldn't look at it. Yet when he closed his eyes, it was there, haunting him. He had to get another.

In the Eye, as the Legions fought one another, none willing to take the blame for the loss, for the Warmaster's fall, he had abandoned his brothers and hunted other fallen Chaplains across the impossible, insane vistas of the worlds they now called home. He became a dark legend, the Skull Hunter. And every time he took one, eventually, it would weep blood. Sometimes it took mere days, sometimes years. Sometimes he couldn't tell, because time was different in the Eye.

Eventually, he heeded Mortarion's call and returned to the bosom of the Legion, what remained of it. They became bold, venturing back into the decaying Imperium. To Netesh's delight, where once there had been just twenty Legions - eighteen by the end - there were now an infinite array of Space Marine Chapters, all with Chaplains. For millennia, he had sought them out wherever the Death Guard waged war and killed them, taking from each their skull masks.

The last had been on Kulos, some whelp of Rogal Dorn's bloodline, from a Chapter who called themselves Invaders. Netesh had taken great delight in stalking their Chaplain through the ruined streets of the city, picking off his comrades one by one until he alone remained. Then he had taken him, broken his limbs and tortured him. He liked to break them before he took their helmets. He liked them to see the power of Chaos. This one hadn't broken, but he had died bloodily and messily, little resembling the warrior he had once been.

His helmet adorned Netesh's head now. And gazing down into the lenses of the Doom Eagle, he saw the thin trickles of blood running down the bone cheeks.

He needed another.

'You will not bring this world anything other than your death, traitor.' The voice boomed through the chamber, echoing off the strange alien instruments that lined the walls. Netesh looked up and almost cried out with joy.

The Ruinous Powers had brought him a Chaplain.

The descent had been long, the spiralling stairs opening onto a cramped corridor that wound its way down deep beneath Orath's surface. Sentina knew that whatever he faced down here, he would face alone. His brothers in their Centurion warsuits would not fit down the passageway, and once they left the cocoons of the suits, they would be unable to get back in them without the attentions of Techmarines and Chapter-serfs. With the

growing threat, their firepower would be sorely needed.

Eventually, the corridor opened out into a wide chamber. The first thing Sentina saw was a rough barricade made from pieces of power armour and ammo crates, crudely welded together. Next were the corpses. Three bodies, clad in the silver armour of the Doom Eagles, were arrayed behind the barricade. Sentina swore quietly to himself.

Finally, his attention was drawn to the light. It was emanating from the other side of the barricade. He pulled himself over the makeshift fortification and stared into the half-orb of energy that emerged from a great circular depression. He could feel it as much as see it, a baleful aura of menace that gnawed at his soul, whispering to him of death, blood and carnage, offering him all the glories he could imagine. It would only cost his soul. Shaking it off, he looked around. Arrayed around the walls were alien devices, arcane and ancient looking, crafted from something that looked like bone and looking more grown than built. Sentina had seen their like before, artefacts of the xenos race called eldar.

Then he heard a noise from the other side of the energy sphere. A voice, low and broken, gurgling as if coming from a throat filled with phlegm and other, fouler, things. Cautiously, pistol and maul in his hands, Sentina pulled himself into the shadows that shrouded the cavern walls and edged slowly along. He wanted to see what he was facing. As he came around the sphere, which was rippling with immaterial force, he saw the bloated, corrupted figure of a Chaos Space Marine standing over the broken form of a warrior in the colours of the Doom Eagles.

'Your brothers are dead,' said the standing figure. 'Your duty is over. You have failed. You have a choice. Join me and help me to bring this world to ruin... Or die.'

Sentina stepped out of the shadows and activated his crozius arcanum. 'You will not bring this world anything other than your death, traitor,' he said. As the figure looked up, Sentina saw that he wore a skull mask like his own. Had this accursed Chaos Space Marine once been a Chaplain? Blood dripped from the lenses of the skull mask, as if the helm wept at being worn by one so corrupt. Anger flooded Sentina and he leapt to the attack.

For all that the traitor's armour was swollen and cracked and broken, he was fast. He kicked the Doom Eagle away, the Space Marine hitting the stone wall of the cavern with a resounding crack, and pulled his great scythe around to deflect Sentina's blow.

'A new toy, a new mask,' the Chaos Space Marine gurgled. 'How the Grandfather rewards me for my service. And soon the rifts will meet and a new eye will open in the sky.'

Sentina ducked beneath a lazy swing of the scythe and lashed out with his crozius, smashing it into the traitor's knee. The power field melted armour and flesh alike where it hit, but the Chaos Space Marine barely seemed to

notice. Pressing his attack, Sentina swung upwards, catching the traitor a glancing blow on his helm. The skull on the mask cracked, a great fissure splitting it from jaw to forehead. Sentina's foe reeled back.

'You break this one, that's fine, Ultramarine. I'll have yours soon enough.'

Sentina said nothing, continuing to press forward, blow after furious blow deflected by the Chaos Space Marine's scythe or tearing into tainted battleplate and abused flesh that seemed to be one and the same. He was forcing the corrupted warrior back towards the great sphere of energy.

'Lord Nurgle,' screeched the enemy Chaplain, and at the sound of the infernal name, Sentina reeled, shaken as though he had been hit by a thunder hammer. The echo of the word crashed through his brain, bringing images of horror and decay. He felt his nose begin to bleed, and for a moment he lost control of his body as it shuddered in instinctive horror at the unnatural syllables and he fell to the floor. 'Aid me!' the traitor finished.

Sentina coughed, tasting the iron tang of blood in his mouth. 'You will receive no aid, traitor, only dea...' He trailed off as he saw shapes begin to emerge from the sphere of energy. They began as motes of power, crackling and breaking off from the sphere. Hanging in mid-air, they expanded, and took on a form that resembled humans in the basest aspect, but a broken, degraded form. Long, withered arms and legs jutted at awkward angles from bloated and swollen bodies, and large heads crowned with horns sprouted above the torsos. 'Emperor's mercy,' Sentina breathed as he recognised the forms of the plague daemons he had fought on the plains far above. Seven of them were created from the immaterial sphere.

'Death, yes,' gurgled the Plague Marine as the daemons advanced on Sentina. 'But not mine, son of Macragge.' He took a step towards Sentina, scythe raised. Each of the daemons raised their rusted, pitted blades in juddering, unsynchronised movements, ready to bring them down and end the prone and motionless Sentina, who was pinned to the spot in horror at his impending fate.

A barking roar rang out and one of the daemons fell, a smoking hole where its single baleful eye had been. Whatever infernal spell had affected Sentina was broken, and he leapt to his feet, bolt pistol spitting shells into the daemons. He glanced around and saw the Doom Eagle on the ground, bolter held in shaking hands, providing further support.

The daemons fell, but more were emerging from the portal to take their place. The Traitor Chaplain moved forwards and bolter shells impacted against his armour, their detonations blowing chunks of ceramite from the plate. He crossed the chamber in a few slow strides and lifted the Doom Eagle bodily from the floor, batting the bolter aside with his scythe.

'Think you can stop me, little bird?' he screeched. 'See how you fly in the Eye!' He turned and hurled the silver-armoured Space Marine directly at the sphere - the warp rift.

'No!' shouted the Chaplain, rushing forward, but he was too late. The Doom Eagle vanished into the sphere of unlight, silhouetted for a moment against it like a bird against the sun. Then he was gone.

The Death Guard laughed, and the daemons made a demented, otherworldly sound.

'I will kill you, traitor,' Sentina vowed.

'You may try, Ultramarine,' said the Plague Marine, insanity gurgling from every word. 'Bring it'

He was interrupted by an indescribable sound from the warp rift. It was like nothing Sentina had ever heard, nothing that could exist in nature. Behind the Chaos Space Marine, the rift was expanding and changing, the colours shifting and warping, hues that defied the human eye to see breaking up and joining together to form patterns that sickened Sentina to the bottom of his soul.

He tore his eyes away from the infernal sight and ran. If the rift was growing larger, he had to escape it. Behind him, he heard the Plague Marine's rotten voice, squealing about revenge. He leapt the makeshift barricade and ducked behind it. Looking over, he saw that the sphere of immaterial energy had expanded to almost fill the chamber. Then, with a thunderclap, it shrank, going in an instant from dangerously close to Sentina's position to a tiny sphere floating in the centre of the chamber, above a large hole edged by the broken remains of what looked like bone.

Where the rift had expanded, the chamber was warped and changed. The alien devices had melted, strange materials running like water across the cavern floor.

And the Death Guard Chaplain was gone.

*'Brother-Chaplain? Sentina, do you read me?'*

Aeroth's voice crackled across the vox. 'I hear you, sergeant,' he responded. 'Things have taken a turn for the strange here. There is more to the situation than we realised.'

*'Quite so,'* agreed Aeroth. *'The rift in the sky has shrunk to almost nothing and we received a brief communication from Captain Galenus's force. They encountered heavy resistance from Traitor Space Marines in Fort Kerberos, including a daemonically altered warrior of the Death Guard. He was defeated, but Galenus was wounded. And whatever was happening at Fort Kerberos, it seems that the enemy were denied what they wanted. They may try again here.'*

'I just fought a warrior of the Death Guard here,' said Sentina. 'And there is a warp rift beneath the fort to match the one in the sky. And I think I know what they want.'

*'What?'*

Sentina's voice was grim. 'To expand the rifts, to join them and create a new Eye of Terror in the heart of Ultima Segmentum.'



## Eight

Within an hour, the rift in the underground chamber began to grow again, matched by the one in the dawn sky. It was obvious to the Ultramarines that the enemy would return, and likely in greater numbers, intent upon drowning the pitifully few defenders of Fort Garm beneath a tide of Chaos.

'The plan is simple,' said Aeroth. 'We remain up here and stop anything from entering the fort. Chaplain Sentina stays down there and stops anything from getting out.' He and his squad stood in the courtyard, the ashes of the fire still smouldering and the smell of burning flesh on the air. The civilians had been sent to the old serfs' quarters, there to remain in safety, as long as the Ultramarines could keep the enemy away from that building. Not that it was likely to be a target as long as the Space Marines and the fort remained.

'Simple indeed,' complained Lentulus. 'Also suicide.'

'Do you have a better plan, brother?' asked Iova, his voice the model of reason and moderation.

'We leave. Abandon this place, abandon this world and bombard it from orbit.'

'That won't stop the rifts from expanding,' said Aeroth.

'I don't see that anything will stop that,' retorted Lentulus. 'So if our mission is to fail, let us at least survive it, and we can face whatever comes with our brothers behind us.'

'He who expects defeat will engineer it.' They turned to see the Chaplain emerging from the fort's cavernous entrance. 'We shall prevail, Lentulus. And when we return to the Fortress of Hera, you will face censure for your doubt. Have you not faith in your brothers, and in yourself?'

Lentulus eyed the Chaplain for a moment, and Aeroth wondered if the battle-brother would be fool enough to challenge the skull-faced warrior. The moment passed, and Lentulus nodded. 'As you say, Brother-Chaplain.'

Sentina returned the nod. 'Sergeant, prepare yourself. The taint of the warp is in the air. It won't be long now. I shall be below, awaiting whatever comes.' Aeroth's vox crackled as the Chaplain opened a private channel.

*'Lentulus was not wrong, Darin. We stand a strong chance of failure.'*

'Then we fight to the end, Manet. Don't doubt this decision. You do your duty. We all do.'

*'Thank you, brother. Fight well.'*

'Courage and honour, Brother-Chaplain.'

With a nod, Sentina turned and strode back into the fort, heading to meet his doom. Aeroth primed his weapons and prepared to do the same. And within the hour, the Chaplain's prediction was proved correct, and the final assault began.

It started with a ripple in the great suppurating eye in the sky, and a sound like reality itself tearing asunder. The noise ground at Aeroth's soul as he ushered the humans into the serfs' quarters. Some of them wanted to stay and fight, but the scale of what was coming would be beyond them. Aeroth had seen mortals trying to fight the creatures of Chaos before. At best, they would be driven insane by the abominations they would witness. At worst, they might be corrupted and turn on the Ultramarines. They would be little threat, but killing them would be an added complication the embattled Centurions simply didn't need.

As the rift waxed, daemons started to appear, singly and in small groups. The Centurions fought back to back in the centre of the courtyard, covering every angle, trusting in their augmented battleplate and heavy weapons to protect them. Grav-blasts, explosive shells and lascannon bursts hammered into the materialising horrors, but it was as a drop in the ocean. For every daemon that fell, its body blown apart by mass-reactive rounds, pulped by gravitic force or disintegrated by high-yield lasers, another half dozen appeared to take its place.

They were more than just the plague daemons that had attacked the Ultramarines the day before. Aeroth knew a little of the Ruinous Powers, enough to know that their deluded followers believed in a pantheon of gods, each with their own orders of immaterial servants, greater and lesser. It seemed that all of them had come to Orath, intent upon wiping the defenders from the face of the planet and claiming it, and more, for their masters.

There was no rhyme or reason to their ranks, no ordered procession or blocks of like infantry. Red-skinned beasts, their heads long crests adorned with twisted horns, marched on backwards-jointed legs. Each of them clutched a long, brass blade in their talons, and vile crimson hounds loped alongside them, beside lithe, athletic figures, feminine in form, but grotesque in aspect. A tide of gibbering horror came in their wake. Many-limbed pink creatures cavorted across the courtyard, an ethereal fire burning around them. And of course, the plague daemons came on in their droves, from the sky and on the ground. The ones in the air were accompanied by great manta-like predators with long, lashing tails and fanged maws crowned by horns.

The whole cavalcade was accompanied by the smell of blood, as though

they were soaked in it. Certainly, as they were mown down rank by rank, those behind were splattered in the gore that flew from their fellows. Warping flesh and terrible corruption assailed the Space Marines as much as magical flame and long claws. Whispered temptations and snarled imprecations surrounded them, but they stood firm, untempted by the soft, yielding flesh of the daemonettes and unperturbed by the blood-soaked fiends and gibbering, flesh-spitting horrors.

The Ultramarines were eventually forced to split up to avoid being overwhelmed by the sheer number of the foe. Lentulus and young Oenomaus stamped their way through the tide of seething flesh, crushing daemons underfoot as they fought their way onto the battlements to rain fire down upon their foes from above.

*'This is like fighting an ocean,'* grunted Oenomaus across the vox.

*'It is an ocean, brother,'* said Aeroth as he lashed out, punching a temptress-daemon from her sinuous, long-bodied steed and stamping on her head, crushing it. *'An ocean of otherworldly malice.'*

*'No, not an ocean,'* chimed in Iova as he fired a burst of bolter rounds over Aeroth's shoulder, tearing apart a trio of shifting horrors that had been about to engulf the sergeant in flames. *'The Chaplain had the right of it. This is a storm.'*

*'Then we weather it,'* replied Aeroth, sighting on a cluster of blood-soaked daemons and crushing them with a bubble of high gravity.

*'For Macragge and the Emperor,'* roared Lentulus as he rained las-fire and missiles into the swarm. Every shot was a kill, for so tightly packed were the foe that it was impossible to miss.

It was the very embodiment of Chaos, or so it seemed, until something else appeared that made Aeroth revise that estimation.

There was an almighty crack, like thunder, only magnified a thousand fold. For a split-second, Aeroth could have sworn that he saw in negative, light and dark switching places. And then it was there. A towering figure, hovering above the daemon hordes, held aloft by immense fly-wings. It wore what looked like an immense and broken suit of power armour, in a sickly shade of green. The armour was swollen and cracked, and the flesh that extruded from it was pale and clammy-looking.

The daemon prince looked down at the carnage being wrought, and it laughed.

*'More sons of Macragge to kill,'* it said, and though its mouth didn't open, Aeroth heard the words echoing inside his head. *'And not a tank in sight this time. This will be fun.'*

It swept down, a great blade in hand, and a burst of lascannon fire smashed into its flank. Aeroth looked up in amazement to see the form of a Stormraven gunship flashing overhead to the other side of the fort. As he watched, four bulky shapes dropped from it, beyond the wall, out in the fields that seethed with daemons and dead men.

*'Combat Squad Beta reporting for duty, sergeant,'* crackled a voice through the vox. Aeroth smiled, feeling the first genuine happiness he had experienced for days. 'Carolus!' he voxed. 'It is good to hear your voice, brother.'

Whatever reply came was drowned out by a titanic angry bellow. A shadow fell over Aeroth and he turned to gaze up at the immense, bloated bulk of the daemon prince.

'You cannot stop the designs of the Plaguefather,' it boomed, its voice slow and thick with corruption. 'I have turned this world to the service of my dark master, and soon I will rule it in His name. So says Naracoth!'

'Not today, daemon,' growled Aeroth, firing his grav-cannon. The daemon rocked back as the blast of gravitic energy washed over it, but then took a step forward, shaking the ground.

'Die now, servant of the Corpse God,' it intoned.

*'Sergeant Aeroth, step to your right.'* The voice in his ear was that of Techmarine Kaelus, pilot of the *Aeonid's Lament*. Aeroth didn't question, throwing himself to the side as hard as he could within the Centurion warsuit. He felt the machine-spirit protest and a line of red warning lights lit up in his display. He looked back towards the daemon. Behind it, hovering in midair was the Stormraven. The daemon turned slowly, in time to see the two stormstrike missiles that were speeding towards it. Then the world was shaken by an almighty explosion that whited out Aeroth's vision. When he could see again, the daemon was gone. The Stormraven roared upwards and sped away again.

*'What was that?'* voxed Oenomaus.

*'The daemon mentioned in the report from Fort Kerberos, I'd venture,'* said Lentulus.

'Indeed,' replied Aeroth. 'And it will return. Good shooting, Kaelus, but keep your eyes open for it coming back.'

*'I think we'll notice,'* said Iova. *'Hard to miss.'*

With that, the Centurions returned to their bloody work, and Aeroth dearly hoped that whatever was happening below, Chaplain Sentina would be able to engineer a victory. If not, it was only a matter of time before they were overwhelmed and Orath doomed.

Alia almost cheered when she saw the huge, boxy flying machine fire missiles at the... the horror. It was impossible to describe, something that made her very soul sick, and she dearly wished that she had never seen it. She knew it would haunt her nightmares, if she survived long enough to sleep again. She shouldn't be out here, she knew. She had slipped out of the serfs' quarters. If this was going to be the end of her world, she wanted to fight. She gripped her autogun and made her way towards the entrance of the keep. Chaplain Sentina would be in there, and that's where she wanted to be as well.

Netesh emerged once more from the rift into the cavern below the Space

Marine fortress. He could feel his master's presence above, warping the very ground on which Fort Garm stood. Change was in the air. Change, and Chaos.

To the Plague Marine's delight, the Ultramarines Chaplain stood before him, his eagle-headed weapon held loosely in one hand. The eyes on the Space Marine's skull mask blazed with fury. Killing this one and taking his helm was going to be a joy.

'Hello again,' he said, gripping his scythe in both hands and stepping forward. 'Have you been waiting for me to come and kill you, little Ultramarine?'

The Chaplain said nothing. Instead he activated the power field on his weapon and took up a defensive stance.

'You shall not pass while I live,' said the Ultramarine quietly, his voice like stones scraping together.

'Brave. Foolish. Just what I would expect of Guilliman's sons.'

The Chaplain inclined his head. 'Brave and foolish of you to come alone, traitor,' he said.

'I knew you would be waiting. And I so want to kill you myself and take that delightful mask of yours.'

He leapt forward, and his manreaper fell to take the Space Marine's head. Sentina pulled his crozius up and blocked the blade of the scythe. The weapons sparked and hissed as their energy fields duelled, then they broke apart with a crack of discharge. The Plague Marine took a step back and began to circle. Sentina echoed him, crozius raised in a guard position, watching for a tell that the diseased warrior was about to attack. It came without warning, a low sweep of the weapon that the Chaplain jumped over, striking down with his maul. The Plague Marine twisted away and went back to circling.

'Are you going to defend, or attack, Ultramarine? No war was ever won by sitting back and doing nothing.'

Sentina said nothing. He wouldn't be distracted. He continued to move, eyes on the Plague Marine, gauging his stance, his movements, the way he gripped the haft of his scythe. All of it was information he could use to find a weakness. Frustratingly, he couldn't see one. Yet.

The Chaos Space Marine feinted forward, trying to draw Sentina out, but he didn't take the bait. The corrupted warrior laughed, a sickening gurgle that brought bile up in Sentina's throat.

'You have some skill, I'll give you that. But I have fought the Long War for ten thousand years. Do you really think you can defeat me?'

'I have killed greater than you, traitor.'

More laughter, and with it another attack, a slow roundhouse that would have split the Chaplain in twain had it connected. He jinked back, then forward again, swinging his crozius around to strike a blow to the Plague Marine's arm. His vambrace split, filth oozing out from the rent. They circled

again. This time, the Chaos Space Marine was silent.

Sentina took the initiative now. He had scored a hit and had the advantage. He pushed left, darting the maul out at the Plague Marine's leg. The traitor reacted, the scythe blocking the blow, but Sentina had been ready for that. He continued on, placing one armoured boot on the haft of his enemy's scythe and pushing down. The reinforced length of the weapon strained against the force, and for a moment that seemed to stretch into infinity, warp-forged alloys fought against the power of gene-forged muscle and holy ceramite.

And held.

The Plague Marine pulled the scythe up with all his strength, and suddenly Sentina was airborne. His crozius flew from his grip and clattered against the Doom Eagles' makeshift barricade. He landed on his back, and then the Chaos Space Marine was upon him, one rusted and corroded boot pressing down on Sentina's chest. He heard the crack of ceramite and felt pressure on the fused bones of his rib cage. His hearts raced and adrenaline flooded him, but he knew that it was too late.

The Chaos Space Marine reached up to his helm and pulled it free, throwing it away to lie next to Sentina's crozius. Beneath, his face was a mask of rotten flesh. Worms and maggots crawled over the ruined visage, and a twisted and misshapen skull, yellowed like rotting teeth, could be seen through suppurating wounds.

'A new helmet. A new skull,' he rasped, his voice strangely high and tremulous without the vox-filters of his helm. He knelt, putting more weight on Sentina's chest, and reached down to remove the Chaplain's helmet.

A gunshot cracked, the Plague Marine wailed, and the paralysing force was gone. Sentina was moving in an instant, pulling his gladius from its sheath at his hip, vaguely registering that as the corrupted warrior fell, the rift itself recoiled, shrinking and waning. He rolled and, without pause, drove the weapon through one of the traitor's wide, staring eyes and into his brain. The Chaos Space Marine thrashed in agony, and Sentina pulled himself away.

He stood up and looked round. In front of the barricade stood Alia, rifle in her shaking hands. She looked up at the Chaplain.

'I used my bullet. He was going to kill you,' she said simply. 'You'll save us. I know it. So I-'

Her remaining words died as an explosive round blasted her chest apart in a shower of viscera. Sentina twisted and saw the Plague Marine lying in a pool of blood and less savoury fluids, pistol in his hand.

'No one... will be saving... her,' he gurgled. In one move, the Chaplain surged forward and kicked the traitor, pulverising what remained of his misshapen skull.

He knelt by Alia, but it was too late. She was gone.

Fury blazed through Manet Sentina. He took his crozius from the ground

and activated it, smashing it down on the cracked and corrupted skull mask of the Chaos Space Marine again and again.

Aeroth fired a volley of missiles from his chest launchers, turning before he saw if they reached their target, a towering insectile fusion of metalwork and twisted daemoniac flesh. He aimed his grav-cannon at a knot of plague daemons and fired a salvo at them, then blocked a blow from an ornate blade wielded by a blood-soaked, horned monstrosity that fought from the back of a hulking brass steed. The weapon bit into the ceramite of his battlesuit and Aeroth wrenched his arm back, pulling the sword from the daemon's grasp. It bellowed in rage and leapt from its steed, landing on the sergeant's shoulder plate and grabbing for the handle of the blade.

'Sergeant,' shouted Iova from a few metres away, 'remain still!'

The battle-brother lumbered forward, pushing his warsuit to its limits, and grabbed the daemon from atop Aeroth, squeezing it until it burst in his gigantic fist.

'Really, sergeant, you should be more careful.'

The sentence was cut off as a great blade, dark as night, emerged from the Centurion's chest. Behind him rose the hulking figure of the daemon prince. It pulled the sword free and extended its other hand, wrapping fingers the size of human torsos around the power-armoured body of Iova and tearing him from the warsuit. Iova screamed, physical pain and the psychic trauma of being forcibly removed from the link with the machine-spirit of the Centurion suit combining.

'You get what you give, Ultramarine,' the daemon rumbled, and it squeezed. Even the ceramite battleplate was not proof against its warp-enhanced strength. The armour crumpled, the soft seals between plates splitting and a vile flesh soup spilling out. Aeroth turned ponderously and stomped towards the daemon.

'I will destroy you for that, fiend,' he shouted.

'You? No. Not you,' it said. 'I am Naracoth, and my destiny lies elsewhere.' It gestured lazily and a great cloud of flies materialised from the air and swarmed towards Aeroth. There were thousands of them, crowding around him. He loosed more missiles and fired salvo after salvo from his grav-cannon. By the time he cleared enough of the flies to see, the daemon was gone.

'Where did it go?' he voxed. 'Did you see?'

*'Into the fortress,'* said Lentulus. *'It's going for the rift down there.'*

Aeroth considered going after it, even as he blocked the swing of a plague-encrusted sword and punched through the stomach of its wielder. He opened a vox-link to Sentina. The Chaplain needed to know what was coming.

*'Manet, something is coming. Something big. A daemon prince. It killed Iova without breaking a sweat.'*

'I will be ready for it,' growled Sentina, looking down at Alia's broken body.

'We have lost enough this day. It is time for a victory.'

*'I will join you, brother. Between us, we can deal with the beast.'*

'No, Aeroth,' said Sentina. 'Lead your squad. Keep the daemons at bay above. What happens down here is for me.'

*'It is too powerful for any one man to fight. You will be destroyed.'*

'I have faith, Brother Aeroth,' Sentina said, and to his surprise, he realised that he meant it. 'I will prevail. And I think that if I kill this fiend, the architect of the horror we face, it will close the rift.'

*'How did you come to this conclusion?'* asked the sergeant, disbelief tingeing his voice. *'I don't see-'*

'It had something to do with the other rift, at Fort Kerberos. That seems clear, as it was there. And killing the servants of the Dark Gods seems to affect the waxing and waning. It may be a long shot, but it's the only one we have. And so I will prevail, because I must.'

Aeroth was silent for a time, and Sentina knew what he was thinking. 'Don't come down here, Darin,' he cautioned. 'Don't make the same mistake again. Follow orders, do your duty. For the Emperor.'

*'...for the Emperor,'* echoed Aeroth. *'Good hunting, Manet. Or goodbye.'*

The vox clicked off. Sentina took a deep breath and pressed the activation stud on his crozius. He heard a rumble of stone cracking and breaking. It came closer, and he realised that whatever the daemon was that was approaching, it was big. So big, and so strong, that it was warping the structure of the narrow tunnel to heave its bulk through. He gripped his weapon tightly, and in moments, he saw his opponent.

The daemon prince entered the chamber and pulled itself up to its full height. It towered over the Chaplain, its great bloated form fully thrice his height and many times his mass.

'Is this it?' it thundered, its words worming their way directly into Sentina's brain. 'Are you all that stands in my way?'

'I am enough,' said Sentina. He took a step forward. 'I am a warrior of the Emperor.' Another step. 'I am His force in this universe.' Another. He stood directly before the daemon now. 'I am His weapon, and His shield, and I will be your doom, creature of the abyss.' He raised his crozius arcanum and pulled it back, preparing to strike. The daemon did nothing.

*'For the Emperor!'* Sentina roared, and swung one-handed, putting all his strength, all his anger and all his hatred into the blow. The eagle head of the mace smashed into the daemon's armour above its knee and pulped flesh, passing straight through. Almost immediately, the wound began to knit.

'Is that your best shot, Ultramarine?' the daemon hissed.

'No,' replied Sentina, revealing the krak grenade he had been priming with his other hand as he struck. 'That was just creating somewhere to put this.' He punched the grenade into the healing wound and threw himself back as it detonated. The daemon's leg exploded and it toppled. Sentina rolled to avoid being crushed beneath its bulk. The daemon swung out with

its blade and caught him a glancing blow. He was thrown back against the wall. The daemon pulled itself up on one massive arm and looked down at its leg. A combination of blood, pus and dark, immaterial energy flowed from the wound, but it was already healing.

'Nothing you do can kill Naracoth, mortal,' it said. 'I have been blessed by my master for my faithful service. I am forever.'

'You are a tool of darkness,' said Sentina. 'And I am the Emperor's light.' The sword lashed out again, and Sentina stepped into the strike. The dark energy of the blade met the rosarius that the Chaplain wore on his chest, and the conversion field inside the arcane device activated, turning the force of the attack into a great blast of light. The dark sword shattered as the light hit it, a thousand pieces melting into thin air as if it had never existed. 'Impossible,' Naracoth screamed, and the word was like snakes writhing in Sentina's head. He felt his nose bleed again and struggled to stay upright as the creature's corruption assailed him.

'Nothing is impossible for men of faith,' said Sentina. 'And you do not have faith, fiend.'

'What need have I of *faith*?' spat the daemon. 'My gods are real. Yours is a cripple on a world half the galaxy away.'

'The Emperor is no god, fool. My faith is in myself. And that is why I.' Sentina swung his crozius again, and the daemon was thrown back. 'Have.' Another swing, another few metres. 'Won,' he finished, and with one final titanic blow, he pushed the daemon prince into the rift. It screamed - the universe screamed - and Sentina was thrown from his feet. He heard the daemon inside his head again and knew without a doubt that its soul, what remained of it, was being devoured by its master for its failure.

Then it was gone, and all was silence. He picked himself up, aching all over, and looked at the rift.

It was growing. In moments, it was the biggest he had seen it. And it kept getting bigger. Sentina backed away, and horror filled him.

'Thank you...' He heard the daemon's voice, weak and distant, echoing in his head. 'My first death broke the first seal and opened the rift. My second death opened the other and ensured my master's victory. Victory...' It faded away to nothingness, and Sentina's world turned upside down. He had done what the daemon wanted. He had not defeated it. He had aided it.

He had failed. Orath was doomed.



## Nine

The rift was expanding.

Sentina lifted Alia's body from the ground and stepped backwards, away from the growing unlight. He could see things forming in the event horizon of the portal, the impossible forms of daemons, in infinite variety. All the forces of Chaos waited behind there, ready to unleash themselves not only on Orath, but on the entire sector. He looked down at the dead girl in his arms and felt the shame of failure, and grief. Pure grief, such as he had not felt since the deaths of his brothers at the talons of the tyrannids. Alia had been brave and strong. She had saved his life, and it would be for naught. Her faith in him had been misplaced. He couldn't save her world.

'Emperor save me,' he breathed. 'I have failed. I killed the beast, and still I have failed.'

'Have you?'

The Chaplain turned. Andronicus stood beneath the immense archway that formed the entrance to the chamber. The priest looked calm.

Sentina flung out his arm. 'Look, priest. The daemon is destroyed, yet the darkness remains. It grows. It will consume us all, and much more besides. I have failed again, and more will die by my failure.'

'No, Manet. You haven't. Not yet. One last test stands before you. Fail that, and we will all be lost. But for now, there is still a chance.'

'You speak in riddles, old man. Come, we must leave here before we are consumed.' Sentina picked up the priest. Holding him under one arm and Alia's corpse under the other, he ran up the stairs.

The pause was over. Whatever had stopped the daemonic hordes in their tracks for an instant had ended, and their fury was redoubled. Aeroth fired volley after volley from his grav-cannon, each wave of gravitic force tearing unnatural bodies asunder or smashing rockcrete and blasting them from their feet. It was to no avail. They were endless, and the Centurions were few.

'On me,' he ordered, his voice booming across the charnel ground that the courtyard had become. Oenomaus blipped an acknowledgement, as did Lentulus a second later. He heard the chatter of heavy bolters and the

thunder of the titanic footsteps, and the young battle-brother came into view, his explosive rounds chewing up daemonic flesh with every step. Behind him was Lentulus. He wasn't firing, instead using his lascannons as melee weapons, battering aberrant monstrosities aside with each blow. The pair fought their way over to their sergeant.

'You have a plan?' asked Lentulus.

Aeroth laughed hollowly. 'No plan but to die as brothers, fighting side by side.'

Lentulus grunted. 'Not your best effort, sergeant. But it'll do.'

'For Ultramar!' shouted Aeroth, his words blasting from his vox-emitters across the din of battle. 'Courage and honour!' His brothers took up the cry as they opened fire on the daemons.

'Courage and honour!'

*'Brother-sergeant.'* Sentina's voice crackled across the vox.

'Manet. You yet live?' Aeroth couldn't keep the joy from his tone. He turned towards the keep, searching for Sentina, crushing a pack of daemonic hounds with a gravitational blast as he did so, and firing a volley from his chest-mounted hurricane bolters. The mass-reactive shells tore apart a trio of sinister and sinuous daemons with features that were horrific and long claws in place of hands.

By contrast, the Chaplain's words were tinged with darkness. *'Not for long, brother. The rift expands. It will consume us all. Fall back, get as far from here as possible.'*

'There is no falling back, brother.' He swung and fired another grav-blast.

'The enemy is everywhere. All we can do is go down fighting.'

By his side, the other two Centurions poured las-fire and explosive bolts into the teeming hordes of warp creatures. 'Is there nothing that can be done?' asked Oenomaus through gritted teeth. 'No way that we can close this portal and end this infernal invasion?'

'There is always a way,' replied Lentulus, launching a volley of frag missiles from his chest-launcher, sending shards of hot metal scything through a dozen twisted bodies. 'But we can't always see what it is.'

*"Fight always with one eye on your objective and one on the reality around you. That way you can see when the path twists." The wisdom of Thiel.'* Sentina's voice was thoughtful. *'Sometimes the path of light is obscured by darkness.'*

'I don't recognise that second quotation,' said Aeroth. 'What are you talking about, Manet?'

*'Something the priest said.'*

'That old fool,' spat Lentulus. 'He's senile.'

*'He may be wiser than any of us realise, brother. I have an idea.'*

'Is it a good idea?' asked Aeroth.

*'No better than any of yours, Darin.'*

'I was afraid you were going to say that. What do you need us to do?'

*'Keep fighting. And if this works, don't let Orath be abandoned. Don't let our sacrifices be in vain. Keep this world alive, brothers. In Guilliman's name.'*

'In Guilliman's name,' echoed Aeroth, instinct taking over. By the time he realised that Sentina had spoken of sacrifices, the Chaplain had cut the vox-link.

'What's he going to do?' asked Oenomaus.

'Something foolish and heroic,' said Aeroth. 'Let's go and help.' Turning slowly, the sergeant backhanded a blade-wielding, blood-soaked daemon so hard that its skull burst, and began to trudge through the press of bodies towards the keep.

'One last chance,' said Sentina. 'What did you mean, priest?'

They stood above the entrance to the tunnel, before the immense stone aquila. Andronicus rested against the sigil, leaning almost nonchalantly. He patted his robes and pulled out a battered canteen. Pulling the stopper out, he took a long swig before offering it to the Chaplain.

'I don't want a drink. I want answers. What did you mean? Is there still a way to stop this?'

'You seem different, Manet. Why is that?'

Sentina turned, frustrated, and punched the wall. Rockcrete cracked and dust billowed. 'Answers, old man,' he growled.

'I don't have answers. I only have the questions you need. Why are you different?'

The Chaplain pointed to Alia's body, small and frail-looking on the cold stone floor. 'She died saving my life. She sacrificed herself for me.'

'Why?'

'Because she believed I could save her world. Because she...' He trailed off.

'Because she had faith,' finished Andronicus.

'Yes.'

'And what of your faith, Manet?'

'What does that matter? Nothing has changed, and this is irrelevant. I need to close that rift. I need a... a weapon, or...'

'Or armour?' said the priest.

'Armour I have. It is of no use.'

'There is more than one kind of armour, Manet Sentina. What does your Codex Astartes have to say on the subject?'

'Armour... You are babbling, old man. This is pointless.' Sentina turned and strode from the chamber.

Andronicus watched him go. 'I have taken you as far as I can. The last step must be yours. Make the leap.' Then he followed the Chaplain out.

Sentina pulled his crozius arcanum from his belt as he stepped through the great archway into the carnage. Daemons were everywhere. The courtyard was simply a tide of them, as far as could be seen.

'Servants of the Ruinous Powers,' he bellowed, his vox-emitters magnifying his voice to deafening levels. 'Come and face thy doom.'

A trio of crimson-skinned warrior-beasts were the first to turn to him. They loped forward, hellblades gripped tight in taloned hands. They attacked as one, swinging the serrated swords to cleave Sentina apart. He blocked the first, ducked beneath the second and took the third on his chest. There was a flash as the conversion field in his rosarius turned the kinetic energy into a blinding glare.

'By the Emperor's light shall you know me, fiends. And by His wrath shall you fall!'

He activated the crozius and swung it two-handed, relishing the shudder that went down his arms as it tore through the chest of one blood-soaked daemon and took the head from the shoulders of the second. He faced the third and smiled beneath his skull-faced helm. 'I am His hand and I will be your doom. *For the Emperor!*'

He swung again, sending the daemon flying backwards. It collided with a group of vaguely feminine creatures with claws, who were knocked sprawling. Before they could stand, they were torn apart by a volley of explosive rounds.

'For the Emperor,' echoed the voice of Sergeant Aeroth, swiftly followed by those of Oenomaus and Lentulus.

'Brothers,' said Sentina. 'If we are to die this day, let us die as heroes.' He walked forward, and with each step, his maul swung, and with each swing daemonic flesh was rent, bones broken, corrupt blood spilled. Manet Sentina dealt death to the enemy as surely as the ancient myth his visage evoked. He fought his way to the Centurions, smashing through daemons great and small. When he reached them, Aeroth laid a huge hand on the Chaplain's shoulder plate.

'We may not save this world, or the sector, Manet. But we have done our duty.'

'And only in death does duty end,' replied Sentina.

'And here comes the end,' chimed in Lentulus, pointing. Sentina turned and followed his gesture. The archway entrance to the keep glowed with infernal energy. Balefire poured from it and the stone of the structure was warping and changing under the influence of the immaterial force. The rift was expanding up and out. Sentina felt a brief pang of shame. Alia's body had been in there and he had left it. But then, it would be consumed regardless, as would they all soon enough.

'Yes,' said Sentina. 'It ends here. But we have shown faith in the words of the primarch, brothers. We have fought to the end, and we shall fight on until death claims us.'

'Manet,' laughed Aeroth. 'It's been years since I've seen you so... fired up.' 'I am a warrior of faith, Darin. I always was. I just didn't always realise it until... until...'

And then he understood.

'Until? Brother, what changed?'

Sentina didn't answer. He was remembering the old priest's words.

*There is more than one kind of armour, Manet Sentina. What does your Codex Astartes have to say on the subject?*

'I didn't tell him my first name,' he said quietly.

'Who?' asked Oenomaus, swinging his heavy fists at a mass of flesh with too many heads and legs that was trying to stab long, pincer-like fingers into his armour.

'Armour...' said Sentina. 'Armour of faith.'

'The Armour of Faith?' grunted Lentulus as he loosed a lascannon round at a hulking bronze beast with a howling warrior-daemon on its back. It fell, a smoking hole through its middle. 'I haven't heard that passage from the Codex in decades. Allegory, isn't it?'

'No,' said Sentina. 'It's salvation.' He turned back to the three Centurions. 'I can do it. It's all about faith, Darin. Alia's faith saved me. Now mine can save her world. I just have to make a leap of faith. Goodbye, brothers.'

He turned and strode slowly towards the expanding mass of the portal. Daemons flocked to him, as if drawn by what he was about to do. He wrenched his helm from his head and mag-locked it to his belt. He wanted to look his fate in the eye. He swung his crozius, again and again, and began to chant.

*'Clad yourself in full with the Armour of Faith, that you might take your stand against the foe.'*

A gaggle of ever-shifting beasts in all the hues of the rainbow, and many never seen in nature, loped at him, witchfire burning around them. As they reached for him, as they touched his armour, they burned brighter for a moment and exploded. Faith was his shield now.

*'For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the Ruinous Powers of the benighted warp and against the spiritual forces of evil in that infernal realm.'*

A huge plague daemon lumbered towards him, foul fluids dripping from its horns, rotten innards dragging along the ground behind it. The cruel blade clenched in its broken-fingered grasp hissed and bubbled with corruption, and tiny daemonlings capered around, on and even inside it. It meant to kill him before he could reach his goal. It would fail. Sentina ducked beneath its slow and clumsy swing and pushed forward, ramming the winged head of his mace into its stinking body and pulling upwards. The daemon burst apart in a shower of foul-smelling gore. Where it fell, it burned like acid, on stone and daemon alike. None of it touched Sentina, dissolving into vapour millimetres from his body. He strode on.

*'Therefore, clad yourself in full with the Armour of Faith, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground and after you have done everything, to stand.'*

He stopped before the rift. It was immense now, stretching into the sky. The one above was huge too, reaching down to connect with the other, to form a greater portal into the realm of the Ruinous Powers. Sentina turned briefly and sketched a salute to his battle-brothers.

'This is my stand,' he shouted. 'This is where the path of my faith has led.' He turned back and stepped forward to be consumed by the rift, quietly mouthing his last words.

'For Macragge. For the Emperor. For.'

As the Chaplain disappeared into the roiling vortex of dark energy, the universe itself seemed to scream. A collective wail went up from the daemons, every one of them, a million otherworldly voices crying out. Aeroth felt it rather than heard it. And in that moment, he knew that Sentina had done the right thing.

'Brothers,' he growled. 'In the name of Manet Sentina, let's destroy them.' He turned the gain on his grav-amp to maximum and began to fire. Each blast of his cannon tore daemons apart by the dozen. They seemed diminished, weaker, easier to destroy. He exulted in the carnage, in the catharsis it provided.

Oenomaus followed his sergeant's example. He checked the ammo counts for his weapons. Low, but enough to destroy a few more of the hellspawn. He stretched out his arms and began to fire, twisting left and right, pouring explosive rounds into the foe. He opened up with his hurricane bolters as well, the smaller shells proving no less destructive. He closed his eyes and let the feeling wash over him. Victory or death. This was what being a Space Marine was all about.

Lentulus shook his head at his young battle-brother's actions and crouched down to avoid taking a bolt-round meant for a daemon. He picked his targets carefully, aiming at larger daemons, allowing the high-energy las-blasts to hit vital organs and vaporise heads. He looked around at the other two Space Marines. For all that he had derided them both, they were his brothers, and nothing could stand against the three of them together.

The daemons were no exception. The bubble of seething Chaos that had been emerging from the keep was shrinking, falling back, and as it lessened, so too did the daemons lessen. They began to disappear, fizzling from existence like ice in the sun. When the rift vanished into the keep entirely, Lentulus turned his attention to the one in the sky. It was shrinking too. Smaller and smaller it became, until Lentulus could no longer see it with the naked eye. He looked around. The daemons were gone, or vanishing, their immaterial forms receding into nothingness as the energies keeping them in the real world dissipated. He ceased firing, cutting the power to his lascannons.

His brothers put up their weapons as well.

'Well,' said Lentulus, relief flooding him, along with the joy of victory. 'I think

we won.'

Aeroth passed warily through the corridors of the keep, alert for any sign of further threat. There came none, and with each step, he relaxed a little more. There was no sign of the corruption and twisting that the expansion of the rift had wrought upon the structure. All of the effects seemed to have been reversed. Almost all, anyway. Sentina was still gone.

Reaching the aquila chamber, he saw a body on the floor. Stepping over, he looked down at it. It was the girl, Alia. Her chest had been torn apart. 'She died saving your Chaplain's life,' came a voice from behind. He turned, grav-cannon arm raised, but it was only the old priest, Andronicus, standing in the doorway.

'She sacrificed herself for him?' Aeroth asked.

'Indeed. And that simple act gave him the strength he needed to make a much larger sacrifice. Funny how something as simple as faith can change the fate of worlds, is it not?'

'There is much in this universe that is "funny", as you put it, old man. Death is rarely one of those things.'

'It is also necessary, sergeant. We don't want to go living forever, after all. Let's leave that to Him on Terra.'

'What will happen now?' asked Aeroth.

'The Administratum will send adepts to survey Orath and see if it's worth reclaiming. If so, I expect the Ecclesiarchy will descend in force. Can't let a world that nearly fell to Chaos be without a Ministorum presence any more, eh?'

Aeroth didn't reply.

'I think it's likely that life on Orath will go on, Sergeant Aeroth. Heh, Orath, Aeroth. Perhaps it was your destiny to be here. But I digress. Life will go on, but it will never be the same. And that's good. Change is good. Time for a change for us all, I think.'

The old man stretched his arms out with an audible crack.

'It's been quite a day, sergeant. I'm going to check on my flock and then go to bed. I shall see you again before you leave, I trust.'

'Yes,' said Aeroth, looking around. 'I think we'll be here for a while.'

### *Two hundred years ago*

*It was a strange thing, to stand again in the spot where his soul had been torn asunder so many thousands of years before.*

*Kharanath looked around. The chamber was much as he remembered it - small, irregular, with a wraithbone seal in the ground. The sight of it sent a twinge of pain through him as he thought of his loss.*

*Well, today would see that rectified. It was time.*

*He had never really forgotten Elthanneath, though Khaine knew he had spent thousands of years trying.*

*His brother's sacrifice had saved Meldaeen, but it had never been the same. Living there without his twin, feeling the void where once he had been, was impossible. And so he had left. He had considered the core worlds, but the increasing omens of doom had driven him away - luckily, considering what had happened just a few hundred years later - and into the depths of the webway. He was flotsam on the tides of fate, and like all things drifting in the great transit system that crisscrossed behind reality, he had ended up in the port of Commorragh.*

*He didn't really remember much of the next few thousand years, but he had ended up a slave, and fallen in with a rabble-rouser called Vect. Another good move, all things considered. When Vect had risen up to overthrow the noble houses and claim Commorragh as his own, Kharanath had stood with him, and as a result he had ended up one of the lords of the Dark City, as secure as it was possible to be in that nest of vipers.*

*Building a kabal and ruling it with an iron fist, he inflicted torture after torture on any other living being who happened to cross his path. In part, he did this to stave off the embrace of She Who Thirsts, the warp god that the eldar had created in their fall from grace, but he also did it because it stopped him remembering.*

*Sometimes.*

*When he did remember, he sent out raiding parties to Meldaeen, or Orath as it was now known by the human filth who infested it. He never led them himself, and he never told those he sent their true purpose. They were content to slaughter and ravage their way across the sparsely populated world, never questioning why their master sent them there, simply enjoying that he did. And when they returned, he would question them, always furtively hoping that there would be evidence of the rift reopening. That there would be a chance of retrieving Elthanneath from the prison he had cast himself into.*

*Now was that chance. The latest party had returned earlier than expected, reporting that earthquakes had opened up underground tunnels, and that the humans had explored them, finding ancient eldar technology and removing it. That would have destabilised the makeshift barrier Elthanneath had sacrificed his freedom to erect. The rift would open*

again.

*And Kharanath would be there to enact the plan he had perfected over millennia. And now, so he was. He could taste the warp taint in the air. It was delicious, like the promise of glory untold.*

*'Soon we will be together again, Elthaenneath,' he said. 'And we can rule this world, as we were always meant to. Humans and eldar alike will bow before us, and we shall live as kings. Together,' he repeated, enjoying the taste of the word on his tongue. 'Together.'*

*Far above, the warriors of his kabal fought against the human elite soldiers, the blue-armoured nuisances who seemed to be everywhere in this area of their Imperium. It was of no consequence. All his warriors could die fighting them. All that mattered was retrieving Elthaenneath.*

*He knelt on the cold stone floor and carefully placed the bundle he was carrying atop the wraithbone seal. It was wrapped in the finest silks, and he slowly, with careful ceremony, unwrapped it one layer at a time. Inside sat a box, sealed with a word of power. Held within, carefully preserved in wards of anti-time, was a crystal vial, made from a piece of a farseer of the starfaring eldar kindreds.*

*When they reached a great age, the wise diviners of the future turned slowly into crystal, becoming living statues. It was said that they remained conscious in their crystal form, perhaps for eternity. Kharanath didn't know if that was true. He only knew that he needed something of such power to hold what the vial contained. And so he had obtained it. It hadn't been easy. He had visited a dozen craftworlds and asked them for a shard from a seer. Some had simply refused. Some, such as Ulthwé, Cait-Badd and cursed Iyanden, had become openly hostile. Eventually, he had been able to bargain with the shadow-slipping Mandrakes, who had retrieved what he sought. He hadn't asked them how, and he didn't yet know what the price would be, though it would doubtless be great.*

*Inside the vial was something that he had worked for millennia to perfect: a single drop of a substance that, when poured onto the wraithbone seal, would not only melt it away like snow in rain, but would reverse the act that had sealed it so many millennia before. It would reverse Elthaenneath's sacrifice and restore him to reality.*

*The liquid was an insane fusion of high technology and the basest of warpcraft. Magic, by any other name. It was possibly the most dangerous thing Kharanath had ever held in his hands, and its cost had been exorbitant.*

*And well worth it.*

*He unsealed the box and lifted the vial, marvelling at the way it caught the play of light and the colours in the chamber: the grey of stone, the crimson and black of his glossy armour, the off-white of the wraithbone, the cobalt blue of..*

*Cobalt blue?*

*He turned slowly, the vial clutched in one talon-like hand. At the entrance to the chamber stood a blue-armoured Space Marine, a high collar raised above his head, psychic energy playing about him like a halo.*

*'No-' Kharanath managed before the human raised the bulky weapon in his hand and fired at the archon. He felt pain, and he was falling, and he watched as the vial fell and shattered, and the precious liquid spilled out... onto plain rock.*

*And then he heard a voice. A voice he knew.*

*'Brother. At last. It has been such a long time, but I knew you would join me in the end...'*

*'Elthaenneath,' whispered Kharanath. They would be together after all, he thought as consciousness slipped away. That was something. That was something indeed.*



## Epilogue

### *Four Months Later*

Sergeant Aeroth stood in the courtyard of Fort Garm and watched as the Stormraven gunship came in to land. He was unarmoured, clad in a simple white surplice with the ultima stitched on the chest in gold. He stood in the shadow of the central keep as the downdraft from the flyer's powerful engines washed over him.

Oenomaus stood to his left and Lentulus to his right, both silent and grim-faced, and clad in the same manner as their sergeant. They were eager to leave Orath, he knew. Eager to return to Macragge and rejoin their brothers, and from there to take the Emperor's wrath to a new battlefield. Lentulus had said so often enough in the four months since the rift had closed. Aeroth felt the same. He didn't envy whoever was in that gunship.

As the cobalt-hued craft, casting an immense shadow over the golden glow of the afternoon sun, came to a halt and the engines powered down, the forward ramp slowly tipped open. Out came a squad of Ultramarines, their armour trimmed in the blazing orange of the Sixth Company. They marched in step, bolters held to their chests, before forming two columns, facing one another. All were helmeted and silent.

'Pompous arses,' muttered Lentulus.

Despite himself, Aeroth smiled. Captain Epathus's company were known for their love of precision drilling. 'They'll have lots of time to practise,' he replied.

He returned his attention to the Stormraven. A final figure was disembarking, also clad in blue battleplate, though of a different hue than the other battle-brothers. The armour was engraved with arcane sigils, marked with badges of office - books and scrolls - and crowned with a tall, curved hood that wreathed the Space Marine's head and crackled with ethereal energies that were reflected in the warrior's dark, deep-set eyes. He carried a tall staff, wound with wire and topped with a horned skull.

Aeroth stepped forward and bowed. 'Brother-Librarian. Welcome to Orath.'

'What remains of it,' added Lentulus from behind him. Aeroth turned and

glared at the warrior, who shrugged. He looked back at the Librarian.

'Thank you, Sergeant Aeroth,' replied the psyker. 'I am Koloth Lerys. I shall be the new castellan of this fortress.'

'A great honour, brother,' said Aeroth gravely.

The Librarian smiled. 'Perhaps. Or perhaps a great waste of time. I have read your report, Darin. I know that our brother's noble sacrifice sealed the rifts and stemmed the tide.'

'For now,' said Oenomaus, stepping forward. 'You must remain vigilant, lest the enemy return.'

Lerys turned his gaze to the young battle-brother. 'Yes, brother. Chief Librarian Tigurius agrees with that assessment. He has divined that this rift has existed for longer than the Imperium, and believes that it might be reopened some day. And so, I shall remain here, and brothers of our Chapter and our successors shall join me, and when I am recalled, or when I am no longer able to stand vigil, another member of the Librarius shall take my place. And so it shall be until the daemons return, or until the stars turn cold.'

There was silence for a time as Lerys looked up at the fort that would be his home.

'I understand that Fort Kerberos has been destroyed?'

'Aye,' said Aeroth. 'And as far as we can tell, the seal beneath it was destroyed also. If the rift is ever to reopen, it will be here, or up there.' He gestured to the ugly scar that split the sky. No longer an open sore, it now resembled a closed, puckered wound.

The Librarian nodded slowly.

'And the people?'

'Few survivors, but they are determined to rebuild. The Adeptus Mechanicus arrived two months ago. The Magos Biologis seem to believe that the contagion that blighted the crops didn't penetrate far into the soil. They think that within a decade, the land will be arable again. People will return and Orath will reclaim its status as the sector's breadbasket.'

'I look forward to seeing that,' said Lerys thoughtfully. 'My family were farmers.'

Aeroth looked round at his battle-brothers. 'If you will excuse us, Brother-Librarian, I would like to say goodbye to some of the civilians before we embark.'

'Of course, Darin. May you walk in the primarch's footsteps.'

Both Space Marines gave the warrior's salute, thumping their chests with a clenched fist, and Aeroth turned and headed towards the serfs' quarters. The survivors of the vicious fighting in the fort had all elected to remain, to help with the rebuilding and await the adepts of the Imperium who would decide the fate of their world. Over the months, Aeroth had grown quite fond of them.

He wandered through the courtyard, nodding to the humans. He had said

most of his goodbyes already, all but one.

'Have you seen the priest?' he asked a woman who was chivvying a group of children past. She shook her head and carried on. He passed through the serfs' quarters, empty and quiet at this time of day, and came to the cell that Andronicus had made home. The priest's few possessions were there, neatly arrayed on the small desk - a torn and tattered copy of his holy book, a few items of clothing and a battered canteen.

Aeroth frowned. He had never seen the priest without the canteen. He lifted it. It felt half-full and sloshed with liquid. The sergeant set it back down and walked back outside. He knew that he would never see the old man again, and some part of him, deep down, said that no one ever would.

Some mysteries, he thought, simply weren't meant to be solved.

Lerys watched the Stormraven take off and speed away into orbit. He looked around, taking in the crumbling rockcrete walls of the keep and the surrounding battlements.

'Fort Garm,' he said. 'Home.' He turned and walked inside, heading towards the command chamber. Inside were banks of cogitators and communicators, a desk and, on one wall, a carved stone memorial with a list of names. He reached out and touched them as he read the names aloud. 'Vabion, Melkan, Hura...'

He recited each in turn, until he came to the end. 'Iova. Sentina...' He paused. There was another name after the late Chaplain's. Where Sentina's and the others were laser-carved, precise and rounded, this last looked as though it had been scratched into the stone with a crude tool. It was little more than a series of shaky lines, but it formed a name. He wondered who the person was, what their story was. He wondered why they belonged on this wall of heroes.

He supposed he would never know. He read the name aloud.

'Alia.'

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## A Black Library Publication

*Plague Harvest* first published in 2014.

*Engines of War* first published in 2014.

*Armour of Faith* first published in 2014.

This edition published in 2016.

This eBook edition published in Great Britain in 2016 by Black Library, Games Workshop Ltd., Willow Road, Nottingham, NG7 2WS, UK.

Produced by Games Workshop in Nottingham.

Cover illustration by Kai Lim of Imaginary Friends Studios.

Internal illustrations by Paul Dainton and Kai Lim of Imaginary Friends Studios.

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A CIP record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN: 978-1-78572-509-8

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