

WARHAMMER
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ENDURANCE

A DEATH GUARD STORY

CHRIS WRAIGHT

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ENDURANCE

By Chris Wraight

They are coming again now, stumbling out of the sulphurous night with their demented grins and their glowing eyes. Lystra is a hive world, populated by billions. Contact has been lost with most of it, indicating that the majority have been turned or are turning, and so the crowds are endless.

Brother Sarrien does not use his bolter. The last ammunition for it ran out three weeks ago, and it has been stowed reverently in the Thunderhawk *Votive IX*, which will lift off, piloted by serfs, when the last wall is broken. He fights on the walls with his power sword and his gauntlets, slaying like a warrior-king of his old home world. His limbs are heavy and flooded with lactic acid, and it feels like powering through deep water.

He is positioned at the jutting salient of a long, south-facing bastion. This is manned by the hastily amalgamated regiments of the surviving Lystran Proximal Guard, who are exhausted down to their marrow. Far off, chem-works are burning, making the horizon smoulder and the freezing air taste like gall. The spires at their backs glow with a million points of fading, flickering light.

He chants as he fights. If he were fighting with his own squad he would have been roaring war cries or calling out tactical movements, creating the auditory hell that daunts the enemy and propels his battle-brothers to greater feats, but his battle-brothers are all far away with their own contests, and so he chants now, in the manner of a Chaplain, to inspire the Guard.

‘Stand fast, for Him on the Throne!’ he shouts, smashing his fist through the neck of a grasping stumbler.

That is the word they use to describe them: ‘stumblers’. The euphemism hides the horror of it. It says nothing of their rictus faces and their awkward splayed limbs, their grey flesh hanging from yellow bones and the hot glow behind their

bloodshot eyes. They are climbing up the high walls now, hoisting themselves atop piles of their own dead, limping blindly into the path of lascannon stations. Once they crest the parapet's edge they start killing, grinning the whole time.

'Remember your vows!' Sarrien chants, swinging the bloodied stump of one stumbler-corpse into another, sending both sailing over the edge. 'Endure! Remain steadfast!'

The defenders would have collapsed by now, if he had not been there to keep them fighting. They are staring into the twisted faces of those that were once men and women. Perhaps, every so often, they come up against those they knew, and have to cut them down. Killing one of them is not difficult, for they make no effort to evade the las-fire. Killing hundreds is back-breaking, and every time a mistake is made and one gets through the gap, then the slaughter is prodigious.

'Keep on your feet!' Sarrien shouts, breaking the spine of a stumbler, kicking out to upend another, slicing his blade around to take out two more. His hearts are thudding out of sequence – they are becoming dangerously swollen. He is perspiring too much despite his dehydration. His hands are bleeding freely within his armour – the product of fighting the long retreat for weeks without respite. 'Stay firm! *Endure!*'

The world of Lystra will fall. All but the blindest of the blind see that now, and even the baseline troops are beginning to disbelieve their commissars. Sergeant Cleon of Sarrien's squad knows it too, but he will not order evacuation. The orders remain the same as they were when first given – hold the line, make the enemy pay the maximal price. Distant minds on peaceful worlds have determined that it is worth the sacrifice of a single squad of Imperial Talons to keep Lystra out of the enemy's hands for another month or two, perhaps longer.

Orders, orders. Discipline. Resolve.

For now, the defenders respond to his injunction. The walls are held. The lascannon turrets spit metronomically into the seething dark. Lystra Primaris remains inviolate, an island of purity within the gloom.

But they keep coming, more and more of them. Their deranged smiles become maddening to witness.

He hates them. He hates what they are doing to him. He hates that he will be ended by one of them – a foe without honour or stature – and not some champion worthy of his attention.

Sarrien's voice becomes hoarse.

'Remember your vows!' he cries again.

The attack ship swaggers through the void. It has no need of subterfuge, for it is a predator gliding within a sea of prey. It is not large – by Imperial standards, it might be destroyer class – but there is little in this volume of space that could stand against it and so the designation hardly matters. The great warships are all gone, pulled into the wars that engulf the Carrion Empire and sap its strength. Out here in the wilds, there is only chaff and fodder, only grist to the ever-grinding soul mills.

Dragan takes some pleasure in that. One day, greater battles will call him. One day, the Lords of Silence will convene again for something mighty, but until then he has learned to enjoy the licence. This is leisure for him – a casual slaying, a little light slaughter between so-serious campaigns.

He stares out into the void, at the stars swimming across blurred viewports. His ship, the *Incaligant*, does not have a soul. Not like *Solace*. It is merely a machine, albeit one riddled with cankers and growths. Its weapons fizz with bacteria, and its old phosphex launchers have developed intriguing viruses within the decayed canister-barrels. Its decks run with rust and there are phages fermenting in the infested bilges.

Death Guard, the enemy calls them. That is an irony. The Legion is more alive than anything left in this stagnant galaxy, albeit in ways not entirely in concordance with nature. Its days of glory are within spitting distance now. After a long time nursing grievances spawned at the dawn of the Imperium, the Death Guard are strutting. They are powerful, they are united. Only the Despoiler's mongrel Legion of vagabonds and strays surpasses them in numbers, and those turncoats have their own problems. One day, Dragan is sure, the last doors will be blown open and the Eye's borders will become irrelevant. Until then, there is killing in the emptiness to be had, and that is a fine enough thing to be going on with.

Dragan's eyes narrow. The *Incaligant's* bridge crew respond. Something has strayed into sensor range.

'Show me,' he orders, his words grinding out from a rust-clogged vox-grille. His fingers, stiff from eroded cartilage, curl around the terminals of a verdigrised command throne.

'Imperial,' confirms his master of sensors, a man in a grease-streaked apron and a pox-red face who cannot leave his seat due to gurgling tubes inserted at regular intervals. 'Running hard, plasma drives only. It can be taken.'

Dragan nods. 'Agreed. Come about.'

The *Incaligant* swings towards the enemy. At this stage the ships are many

thousands of kilometres apart, mere specks on the face of the void, but both of them know the score. More data comes in, streaming across cracked and blurry pict-feeds. It is a troop carrier, slow, armed only to the standard level required by the Navy. It should have escorts, but does not. So this will be easy.

Dragan reflects that victories are coming more easily than ever before. Fortune seems to favour them. Every move they make results in triumphs. Perhaps the long-promised turn is coming quicker now. Perhaps they will break the back of the Carrion Empire even before the millennium ends.

‘Full burn,’ he commands, remaining seated.

It does not take long to catch up. The transport is a typically uninspired thing – a hunk of dirty grey metal as long as it is high, all riveted slabs and heavy blast-plates. It has overloaded its engines trying to get away, and they are sputtering now like half-snuffed candles.

The ship is disabled quickly – a scatter of shots across its bows knocking out its weaponry and blowing the void shields. Then Dragan sends the boarding parties in, composed of his battle-brothers and their slaved adjutants. He lets them slaughter for a while, leaning back in his throne and listening to the cries over the ranged comm. It amuses him to watch the silent, tranquil outline of that ship while knowing the carnage is taking place within it.

Then he moves. He gets up, feeling his disease-thick bones creak. He does not reach for a weapon – his taloned gauntlets are enough for this. He stalks his way down the dank corridors towards the miasmatic hangars staffed by hunch-spined servitors, and takes an encrusted shuttle out across the gulf. He lands it in the corresponding intake hangar and thuds down the ramp and into action.

Dragan never hurries. The decks around him are already filthy with clotted matter – body parts slapped on the metal grids, blood pooling with oils and coolants into a viscous slime. He can hear screaming and shouting from far off. The main lumens have been smashed by bolter fire, but he can see all he needs to.

He kicks through the debris of his brothers’ attack, making for the hatchways beyond. He can smell the antiseptic barrenness of the original ship, now overlaid by altogether more vivid aromas. Soon he is nearing the bridge, and ascends a tight set of meshed-metal stairs, ducking under a lintel designed for smaller bodies than his.

He meets his first resistance there – serfs in flak jackets carrying solid-round weapons. He does not break stride, but walks straight through the light dusting of impacts, feeling his armour absorb and spit out the bullets as they come. He

reaches out to seize the closest of them, breaking her neck and flinging her to one side. Then he works through the rest, his mind only half-engaged on the task.

They are absolutely terrified of him. In brief snatches of focus, as he breaks their helms open or is struck by a distinctive bodily reaction, he inhales raw, crippling fear. That means very little to him. He does not revel in it, nor does it distract him. It is just the way of things – he is strong, and they are weak. The weak have always been purged, creating room for the strong to flourish. To the extent Dragan has a creed, that is it.

He kills the last of them with an absent-minded backhand, just as his second in command, Glask, emerges at the entrance to the bridge. Glask is a bloated creature, his armour blistered as if thrown into some heat-sink and left to stew. Glask's lone eye glares from a wet helm-face, and his trailing left leg limps.

‘All done, brother?’ Dragan asks.

‘All done,’ says Glask.

‘What’s the tally?’

‘A few thousand,’ says Glask. ‘The brothers will be busy for a while.’

A few thousand troops heading at speed into the void, unescorted. That indicates a degree of desperation. Perhaps a last throw of some dice.

Dragan shuffles over to a command post, wheezing thickly. The cartilage issue seems to be spreading to his other joints, and he moves stiffly. That might mean that a true Gift is emerging, pushing its way through his body as a benison from the god he's supposed to worship. Or it might mean he's getting old.

He punches depressors on a bronze-lined cogitator face and calls up a trajectory skein. It's hard, for a moment, to remember how the Imperium represents void-volumes – that curious mix of archaisms and high technology, never truly understanding what they're playing with – but then he gets what he's after.

‘Might have been heading here,’ he says, pointing towards a blot of phosphor with his grimy thumb. ‘Lystra. Heard of it?’

Glask shakes his head.

The word means nothing to Dragan either. Then again, there are so many worlds and so many battles that very little stands out, his memories a long fog of patient hunting and slow corruption.

‘We'll head there next, then,’ he says, turning away from the column. ‘Should be fun.’

He has been alone for a long time now. Cleon left to spearhead the defence of the

main land-gate, far to the north. Talis and Kerenon are roving through the underhives, knee-deep in sewage. The rest of his battle-brothers are dead, their gene-seed lost to this rabble-world.

That angers him more than anything else. For Sarrien, for all of them, that is the sacred part, the thread that binds the Chapter to itself and to its distant progenitor. An individual brother might die, the spark of his life might be ended, and that is accepted. But to have the immortal remnant lost... that is infuriating. They have saved so little of it during this wearying campaign, and there is no guarantee that the last gunship will even make it back to safety.

It feels futile. It feels like a decision has been made by tacticians a long way away, with no understanding of what priceless assets they are allowing to be cast into the wind. Does it really matter that Lystra stands for another month? What was the purpose of that order – to genuinely buy time for other, more strategic conflicts, or to burnish the ledgers of some scholar in a strategium on Terra?

But Sarrien is a creature of command. He will follow an order or die in the attempt. His personal fury, his individual fatigue – these are irrelevant things. He cultivates the qualities taught to him by Chaplain Geracht: defiance, steadfastness, sacrifice to the will of the Throne.

The southern walls of the city are overrun. They are fighting street to street now, making the stumblers suffer for every spire-crown they swarm through. They are beset by eruptions of plague at their backs, as well as the hordes closing in on them from the front. What is left of the Proximal regiment comes with Sarrien on his long retreat, and together they bolster what they can.

He speaks to Lieutenant Voorn, the most senior soldier remaining in his segment of the city.

‘You had word of incoming relief forces,’ Sarrien says. ‘Before the long-range comm-net went down.’

‘I did.’ Voorn used to treat Sarrien with a kind of awestruck timidity. Now, like all of them, he is too damned tired for anything but grey-faced mumbling. ‘Nothing further.’

That is that, then. The brief hope that the sector authorities had managed to scrape together reinforcements proves as illusory as every other half-glimpsed snatch of redemption. Perhaps nothing was ever sent. Perhaps something was, and it never made it.

Sarrien looks around him. The command chamber is an old chapel, barricaded with piles of rubble and smashed woodwork. Clusters of Guardsmen sit on the stone-piles, cradling their guns, some drinking from near-empty canteens, others

staring blankly at the floor. They will not be able to assist him this night – they need at least an hour’s rest before they will be good for anything.

‘I will hunt, then,’ said Sarrien, reaching for his blade and activating the power. The weak energy field throws pale, shifting light across the chapel floor. ‘Remain in position until I return.’

Voorn salutes, even though he can hardly lift his arm.

Then Sarrien is moving again, slipping out of the chapel and into another seamy night. He glides almost silently, making use of his capacity for stealth as he has done so often over the past months. He looks up and sees artillery positions among the hab-units, still manned. He knows there are a few more stationed further back – clusters of lascannon teams behind barricades. They wait in the stinking gloom, knowing what comes for them.

Soon he is beyond the regions still in nominal Imperial control, and out into the no-man’s-land beyond. He ghosts through craters filling with brackish liquid, and skirts the soundless, grave-dark silhouettes of bombed-out buildings. He smells the enemy before he sees them. He detects the faint buzz of flies, and hears the patter of vermin through the heaps of stone. His body twinges involuntarily, a disgust-response that he should be able to better suppress.

He nears the skeleton of a manufactorum-unit, still hot from its bombardment, and scans body-signals within. There are fifty-seven, at least as far as he can detect.

Sarrien takes a breath. Those numbers would not have troubled him at the start of this campaign, but now he is weaker, deprived of adequate food and rest for a very long time, and must go warily.

He leaps up, grips the lip of a window and swings himself through it, smashing the last shards of glass across a rockcrete floor. Figures turn in the gloom, startled. Before they can react he is right in among them, slashing and punching. Two are bifurcated instantly, another three fall before the next heartbeat. Then he is fighting hard, cutting them down as they shriek and swing at him. He smacks away crude machine-tool weapons and veers out of the path of poorly aimed las-blasts. He slices, switches, feeling the effort drag on his raw muscles.

He is quickly panting. He feels old wounds open up. He slips, and nearly lets a whirring saw through his guard. After that he works harder, punishing himself, taking out his exhausted anger on those before him. His retinal lenses become translucent slicks of blood, and still he has to kill, for they do not run. They never run. It is as if they welcome release for what fate has made of them, despite the demented smiles.

Sarrien hurls a snake-armed brute into the far wall and rips the throat out of a green-eyed stumbler. He breaks into a narrow chamber, lined on either wall with dormant, semi-smashed machines. The buzz of flies becomes pervasive, as does the soup-thick stench. The air seems syrupy, as if time itself has become sluggish in there. He feels dizzy, and pushes back harder against the signs of bodily weakness.

A man lurches into view, huge, his bare skin taut with muscle. His head is bald and studded with iron ingots. He has green eyes, and a tattoo of death's heads suppurating on a leather-hard, lumpy chest. He might be as big as Sarrien, out of his armour, which is astonishing.

Sarrien moves to kill him, but his muscles do not respond readily to his command. He feels like his gauntlets are pinned down by lead bars.

'Enough now, lad,' the man says.

Light-headed, Sarrien drops to one knee to catch his breath, gripping his blade tight lest he lose it. The rest of the stumblers seem to have melted away. Has he killed them all? It's hard to be sure.

'You're killing yourself,' the man says. 'That seems wasteful.'

Sarrien pushes himself up from the floor. Blood splatters against the inner curve of his helm as he exhales. He thrusts his blade against the man's neck and drives the metal into the flesh.

'Silence!' Sarrien hisses.

The man bleeds freely. 'Yes, that's the thing.' He licks his scabby lips, and the sinews of his neck slip over the crackling sword-edge. 'He's very close now. He's coming. The Gallowsman.'

Sarrien wants to push the blade in further, to finish the task, but he can't. He looks into the man's eyes, and suddenly feels tired. So, so tired.

'It's over, lad,' the man says, and a black line of blood bubbles down over a blotchy chin. 'He's almost here now.'

At that, Sarrien feels fire kindle again. He cries out – a wrenched sound of mingled anguish and defiance. Strength returns and he hauls his sword clean across, severing the neck. Flesh parts, bone cleaves, and the huge man subsides into a leaking heap.

Sarrien swings around, breathing heavily, looking for more of them.

He is ankle-deep in corpses, but none of them are moving. His boots slip on the gore, making him stagger. He feels suddenly cold, chilled to his core, and starts shivering. Despite that, he is still sweating too much.

He starts to walk. He needs to get out of this place, to get away from the stench,

to draw purer air into his lungs.

All he can see is the man's sympathetic expectancy.

He's coming.

Sarrien keeps walking, not hearing the crack of bone under his boots, struggling to keep the blackness from narrowing his vision into nothingness.

'Endure,' he whispers, little more than a croak from blood-raw lips. Then he says it again. And again.

Dragan looks down at the world he will kill. He and Glask stand on the observation deck and take in the flickering scan-feeds. From far below, he can feel the heavy clunk of lander-pods being lifted into position.

'A hive world, Gallowsman,' Glask says.

Dragan snarls at him – he hates the title, a typical piece of Barbaran whimsy, and he is no Barbaran. He can't even remember where he heard it first, or how it got attached to him, but he's never been able to shake it off.

'There,' he says, gesturing to the greatest area of conurbations, a huge tangle of interlinked hive-spires high up on the northern continent.

'Already under attack,' says Glask doubtfully. 'Invested, cut off. Can we add much to this?'

Dragan finds he has a certainty about this place, more than is generated or explained by his usual excessive confidence. He stares into the scanner.

'Not just filth down there,' he says, blink-summoning his honour guard and issuing follow-up orders to the rest of the Plague Marines in his war band. 'Adversaries worth our blades.'

The two of them head to the pod-bays, where they rendezvous with the rest. The *Incaligant* has a single Dreadclaw lander, salvaged somehow from the ancient wars and still in working order, plus a brace of more cumbersome ways of getting down. Centuries of contiguous service with Death Guard war bands have seen the Dreadclaw's sides break out into pulsing sacs and its metallic spines erupt with bony outgrowths. When they get into it, gripping on to glistening tendrils strung from the spiny roof, the floor flexes under them.

'Are you... all right, Gallowsman?' asks Glask uncharacteristically, and bravely.

'Do not call me that,' Dragan says.

Then the Dreadclaw unlocks, and the dizzying descent begins. They are thrown about, slammed into the pod's yielding innards. For a few moments there is nothing but the internal roar of the engines, but then the greater boom of

atmospheric burning surrounds them. The speed builds and builds, reaching a crescendo just before the retros fire and the plummet ends in the familiar bone-jarring crash of planetfall.

Dragan is first out. He lumbers into a cityscape ravaged by the close attentions of his Legion's god – spires hollowed out into rusted lattices, great black vines strung between rotting nutrient processors. The air is humid and rot-sweet, the ground crawling with blowflies. It is raining in a steady torrent, the drops as viscous as mucus. The Dreadclaw has driven a crack into the rockcrete, and it is already filling up with a sticky swell.

‘Good place,’ Glask says, lurching into shattered streets.

Dragan hesitates. He lets his warriors go ahead of him. He looks up at the distant pinnacles, mobbed by specks that look like crows but are in likelihood something altogether stranger. He breathes in the torpid atmosphere, detecting the familiar strains of sickness and flesh-decay. Rain runs down his armour, streaming in rivulets over his many corruptions.

He starts moving, stirred by the sound of distant munitions. Fighting is taking place here, despite all the signs of deep and ingrained corruption. His war band heads towards the heart of the mouldering city, passing under the thin shadows of skeletal hab-structures, and sees the first poxwalkers lurch out from under cover. Those wretches are, as ever, happy to see Plague Marines, and begin to gibber. One comes close to Dragan, simpering, and has its spine snapped.

‘They have been here a long time,’ Dragan remarks, casting a troubled gaze across signs of deep-set corrosion. ‘What still fights them?’

The Plague Marines stalk through the steady downpour, gathering a train of limping poxwalkers behind them, who paw and gurgle like domesticated cattle. Some carry shocking wounds, barely caked over by the regenerative powers of their many diseases. Glask remains at the forefront, and the others begin to fan out. Their helm-lenses shimmer with pale green light in the murk. Dragan has a sensation that he cannot name and cannot shake, humming behind his eyes, nagging like an insect he cannot swat.

Then he smells it. Even under the fug of festering organics, ceramite armour has a certain odour, carried by lubricants and ritual oils.

‘Be wary,’ he voxes, extending rust-flecked talons from his gauntlets. ‘A serious enemy is here.’

They do not hurry. They never hurry. They stalk their way deeper into the rain-soaked plague-city, cloven boots splashing into the claggy mire, neither hiding their approach nor advertising it. As they have done on a thousand battlefields,

they gauge the threat, they measure their strength against it, they close in on it. Soon they are pushing their way under the looming shoulders of streaming spires, burned black and dripping with stringy lines of pus. Their tactical displays, smeared and thick with condensation, pick up heat-markers, and they head towards them. The poxwalkers come with them, more every moment, flocking around the lords they revere and wish – futilely – to one day become.

Glask is first into battle. As he limps down a snaking transitway clogged with the carcasses of charred transports, the first bolt-round cracks out, punching a hole in his right pauldron. He reels, keeping his feet, then returns fire.

Dragan, a few paces back, scans for the source. He sees it – a hundred metres further up, under the cover of a tangled mass of steel wire and crumbled concrete, a lone warrior in unsullied battleplate clambering into view, firing as he emerges.

Then there are more of them, all in gunmetal-grey armour, emblazoned with yellow-and-black chevrons. A dozen, smelling strongly of engine oil and promethium. Behind them, something boxy, huge and wreathed in smoke is ploughing its way through rafts of detritus.

Dragan smiles. Sons of Perturabo. A serious enemy indeed.

‘Engage freely, my brothers,’ he commands, slowly lumbering into a ground-cracking charge, his talons crackling with strings of disruptor-charge. ‘Let’s see what they’ve got.’

The last lines are broken. Cleon is out of contact. As far as Sarrien knows, the sergeant and all the others are dead now. He gave the order himself for *Votive IX* to evacuate with the last of the sacred weapons and scarce vials of recovered gene-seed, but has no idea if the command made it through in time.

He has been fighting without any kind of pause for longer than he can remember. One leg is broken, and splinters of bone graze up against his armour cabling. He is nearly blind from the blood pouring down his forehead. His powerblade has finally extinguished, its energy unit smashed, and now he wields it like the mute blades of antiquity.

He is backing away from the hordes, slashing in weary, two-handed curves. All he can see is the ocean of corrupted humanity sweeping towards him, every one with that damnable grin on their stretched faces. The air is hot, dry and caustic.

‘For the Emperor!’ he cries out for the thousandth time that day, in defiance, his voice weak and liquid through a blood-filled throat.

Flies have got in through the rents in his armour, and they burrow into his flesh,

snapping and sucking. Foul gases burst up from the ground beneath him, lurid greens and yellows, old toxins now released into an already putrid atmosphere.

He is the last. He has watched all the others die, one by one, selling themselves for a world the Imperium has clearly forgotten. He has no idea if their sacrifice bought time for victories elsewhere, and no longer cares. He cannot remember his own name, nor the chants given him by the Chaplains. He can only remember how to fight, and those three words – *For the Emperor* – that have burst from his lips since before his ascension to the Chapter itself.

A flayed canine horror bounds towards him, its mouth open to expose concentric rings of curved teeth, and he wearily hacks it down. He is aware that stumblers are clambering in the scaffold above him, coiled ready to pounce, and can do nothing about it.

For the first time, despair rises to choke him. There is nothing noble to fight here, nothing to test himself against, just this hateful, *hateful* swell of twisted and destroyed flesh.

‘For the Emperor,’ he gasps, his body flaring with agony.

He staggers into a cavernous interior of a roofless cathedral, pursued all the way. A great stone aquila hangs from a broken archway, still suspended by corrosion-eaten chains. He fights his way towards it, panting, limping, feeling the insects burrow deeper into his skin. They get into his helm, suffocating him.

‘For. The. Emperor.’

Just as he draws closer, a blunt blade chops out his good leg from under him, and he stumbles. He hacks the blade’s bearer apart, but has to crawl now. The aquila is swaying, rocked by hot plague-winds gusting along the nave. Even as he watches, the chains break, and the mighty stone sigil crashes to earth. It breaks into three pieces, rocking amid the detritus of the altar beneath.

‘For. The...’

No breaths will come now. Every time he tries, more blowflies clog his throat.

‘For...’

He looks up. High above him, hidden behind a haze of dust and insects, the heavysset tattooed man is there again. A livid weal runs along his flabby neck.

‘That’s enough now, lad,’ the man says, ‘don’t you think?’

‘For...’

Sarrien is trembling all over. He can feel his body giving up. His organs are full, pulsing as if worms might burst from them. His sword drops from his trembling fingers.

‘You want to keep fighting, do you not?’ the man asks.

He struggles. All is going black.

‘There’s a better death for you. If you want it. You won’t even remember you were here.’

His head cracks to the ground, and he feels the weight of the stumblers as they land on him. Lice swarm up into his carapace, lodging deep within the interface nodes. His secondary heart bursts, and he feels the hot, wet pain within him.

He manages to look up, one last time. The tattooed man has come closer, and is squatting over him. There’s a strange breaking of the light over his green-eyed, bloodshot face.

‘So what do you want now, lad?’ the man asks.

Just as before, it seems as if it is just the two of them. He can still see the man’s features, but the rest is a blur. He can still feel the pain of his body’s disintegration, but the shrieks of the stumblers are muffled. The world shrinks around him like gauze over a wound.

‘*Resist*,’ Sarrien croaks, though his voice is coming from a long way off.

‘You could do.’ The face looms. It has an unhealthy pallor up close, grey-green like moss on stone. ‘You have done for months. You never broke. But then, you can resist anything, can’t you? Except, perhaps, pointlessness. This has all been pointless. That is the real torture.’

Sarrien feels the words penetrate like fingernails. Something within him uncurls, a tumour or a blight, flexing into birth. He sees the iron ingots on the man’s shaven head, and they look like elongated service studs. He sees the lumps under the man’s skin, and they look like the ancient, decayed remnants of a black carapace.

‘I killed you,’ Sarrien says.

‘You may do so again. And that, too, you will never remember.’

He has been fighting for so long. He has forgotten so much. The pain is unbearable. He knows nothing. He has been destroyed. All around him, the city is becoming a shrine. All it lacks is an offering.

‘What do you *want*?’ the tattooed man asks again.

Sarrien looks up at him.

‘To keep going,’ he says.

‘There’s only one way to do that.’

For a long time Sarrien makes no reply. It feels like he’s falling, tumbling into a cold well. He can hear someone screaming.

To ask the question is the beginning. He knows this. But that is the easiest way to set off, to soften the hard path ahead.

The green eyes never let him go.

‘What do you want?’

The *pain*.

‘More,’ Sarrien says.

Dragan takes joy in the fighting. The enemy is pushed back. They resist, and do well, for they are as stubborn and strong as the Death Guard, but this world belongs to the god and they are on foreign ground, and so they will lose in the end.

In truth, he does not know why there are poxwalkers in this city. They must have been here for years, corroding and infesting the entire planet in a slow vice of decay. He assumes they were spawned in some ancient war, and have since changed it from its cold Imperial template and transformed it, as they are wont to do, into a little mirror of the Plague Planet.

Dragan launches into the next adversary, plunging his talons into thick ceramite, relishing the Iron Warrior’s grinding death. A final death blow rattles his helmet, grating up against the swollen iron studs in his skull. Dragan seizes the dying Iron Warrior and hurls him aside. As he does so, his chest spasms with pain – the old flesh-cut tattoo over his ribcage is suppurating again.

He presses on, flanked by his brothers. They drive the enemy into the rotting shell of what might have been a cathedral, its walls heavily green with glowing vegetation and its floors spongy with saturated spores.

He sees the ruins of an old stone Imperial aquila, half-buried in the mats of rain-spattered fungus. It is in pieces, as if it fell from the open roof a long time ago.

That makes him pause. He freezes, and for a moment feels an old memory tug at him. When he blinks, for a split second he is looking down at a crippled, bedraggled fighter half-buried in the debris, as if they had been speaking, the two of them. A dim memory swims close to the surface, and he reaches out to it and almost gets hold of it.

But then there is a heavy crash, and Glask is forging ahead. The others are going with him. Dragan pulls back. He blinks again, and there is only rubble.

He shakes his head. He barks out a caustic laugh and starts walking again. He finds new targets and selects which ones he will end.

‘Gallowsman!’ Glask calls out merrily. ‘We have them on the run!’

Dragan glowers at him and takes up the slaying afresh.

‘Do not call me that,’ he mutters and strides across the broken aquila, grinding

what remains of its outline into the rotting dust.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Chris Wraight is the author of the Horus Heresy novels *Scars* and *The Path of Heaven*, the Primarchs novel *Leman Russ: The Great Wolf*, the novellas *Brotherhood of the Storm* and *Wolf King*, and the audio drama *The Sigillite*. For Warhammer 40,000 he has written the Inquisition novel *The Carrion Throne* and the Space Wolves novels *Blood of Asaheim* and *Stormcaller*, as well as the short story collection *Wolves of Fenris*. For Space Marine Battles, he has written the novels *Wrath of Iron* and *War of the Fang*. Additionally, he has many Warhammer novels to his name, including the Time of Legends novel *Master of Dragons*, which forms part of the War of Vengeance series. Chris lives and works near Bristol, in south-west England.

The Grey Knights are humbled on the plains of Kornovin by the daemon prince Mortarion, and reluctant Grand Master Kaldor Draigo is hurled towards a most unlikely destiny...



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