

WARHAMMER
40,000

BLOOD DEBT



'War-torn tales of loyalty and honour.' – SFX

JAMES SWALLOW

A WARHAMMER 40,000 STORY

BLOOD DEBT

Blood Angels - 00

James Swallow

(An Undead Scan v1.0)

Author's note: *This story takes place several years before the events of Deus Encarmine and the Third Armageddon War.*

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, bioengineered super-warriors. Their comrades in arms are legion: the Imperial Guard 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 relearned. 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.

They abandoned the groundcar at the port gate when blood began to drool from the ventilator grilles. The machine grunted and sighed, the glass in the windows popping as it shifted and changed shape. The two of them ran, boots hammering across the road, shouldering their way through the swarming throng of terrified people.

The woman surveyed the crowds with care. It was not the first time she had been in the thick of a frightened mass, and she knew the capricious nature of a mob's animal mentality. With the right demonstration of force they could be cowed, but just as quickly they might turn murderous. These screaming, weeping, scrambling hordes were heavy with fear. They wanted so desperately to live, and yet she knew that to a man they would be dead or dying before sunset.

She threw a glance over her shoulder and her companion gave her a frown. He had never once looked back at the city they were leaving behind, not from the moment that they had embarked on their headlong flight. In the distance she could see where some of the taller hive towers had collapsed, parts of their structure altering on the molecular level, steel skeletons running like melted butter as the changes touched them. Buildings that had stood proud and defiant in the most Imperial manners were now shambolic, tattered things, flayed of stone and bearing their iron ribs to the sky. Dots ducked and wove in the air overhead—perhaps carrion birds, or maybe men and women like the ones she had killed to get the car, humans with newly sprouted wings still wet with amniotic fluid.

Hot exhaust fumes threw a sudden curtain of spent-fuel stink over them as a transport thundered upward, the spitting engines vibrating and complaining. She watched it struggling to gain height the cargo pods clustered beneath dangerously overloaded with refugees. Something inside broke with a cough of grey vapour, and the craft dipped sharply toward the ground. She grabbed her companion's cloak and pulled him into the lee of a blockhouse just seconds before the ship crashed. The concussion blew down the crowd like felling timbers, and for long moments her hearing was replaced by a low, hissing whistle.

He stood first, his mouth moving even though his voice was lost to her.

“This way. Keep going.”

She nodded. Acrid chemical smoke pooled around their ankles as they ran, the rough winds across the landing fields catching the hems of their cloaks and flapping them back like sails. They wore the simple robes of pilgrims, the clothing common to the endless migrations of penitents that came to Orilan to visit the tombs of the Faded Lords; but no pilgrims carried the combat webbing or weapons holsters that they wore underneath. Other ships passed over them, climbing on spears of white fire toward the high clouds. The horizon was full of fleeing silver darts, desperate to escape the horror engulfing the planet.

In the first few hours of the outbreak, the vox-casts had described the effect as a virus, warning people to stay in their homes and avoid large congregations; but it quickly became clear that the changes were not the creation of some malignant micro-organism, nor were they limited to humans.

Animals, insects, even plants began to shift and mutate. New forms arose on every corner, disgusting and loathsome things that sprouted horns or festoons of lapping tentacles. And then the inert and inorganic fell prey to the creeping aberration, as iron, stone and plastic warped beneath its touch. Some of the hysterical bulletins spoke about night-dark shadows wafting through the canyons of the city, leaving surreal and unnatural malformations in their wake. Sanity itself seemed to have fled Orilan, allowing things that were once corralled in nightmares to run wild in the cold light of reality.

She shook her head to clear it and blinked. Her companion stabbed a finger at a shifting cluster of people clinging to the edges of a boarding ramp.

“That one,” he said, “yes?”

“Yes,” she replied. Atop the ramp was a planetary lighter, an orbital shuttle of a crude but quite speedy type. Similar ships were employed across the Imperium and she knew that if circumstances required, she would be able to pilot the craft herself. The lighter wore the logo of a freight haulage agency that carried cargo and passengers from platforms in the orbital rings, to the surface of the planet and back again. She estimated that with enough reaction mass and a good course, the ship might get them to Orilan’s outermost moon. Where the ramp ended, a large servitor drone was blocking the open loading hatch, picking figures from the swarming

throng with rough metal grippers. Valuables and items of all sorts, from coin bags to barrels of amasec and musical instruments, lay in a pile near its clawed feet. There were perhaps a hundred and fifty people between the two of them and the servitor. Her face set in a grim mask, the woman's hand dipped into the slit in the folds of her cloak, fingers touching the careworn butt of an old but steadfast stubber pistol. She scanned the people, looking for a target that would make the most disruption when she hit it.

“Wait.” His left hand touched her elbow, and she saw that his right was also swallowed by the mass of his robes. He had that look in his eyes, the misty; slightly vacant glitter that came on him when he was reading people. “Be ready.” The words had barely left his lips when a commotion began in the heart of the crowd. A peculiar ululating scream flew from the mouth of a gangly dockworker in a coverall. The unfortunate threw himself about, crashing into other people, screeching as he collided with them. Those around him struggled to get away, sending ripples of motion through the crowd. Figures at the ramp's edges were pushed off and into the sheer well of the exhaust pit below. Ripping sounds came from inside the man's clothing, and dark fans of blood discoloured his torso. From places on his chest and face, forests of needle-like spines erupted, tearing out of him. He jerked wildly, a puppet pulled by pain. The mob cried out in shock.

She watched the change take the dockworker with grotesque fascination. Since the morning, she had seen it occur more than a dozen times, but each riotous mutation was different from the last, horribly watchable in its repugnant display.

“Now!” said her companion, and her fascination snapped like a thread. He was springing forward, the ornate shape of a master-crafted lasgun filling his fist. She fell into the confusion behind him, drawing her own weapon. It was less fancy than his, but just as elegant in its lethality. They reeled from him as he moved. He laid hands on them, brushed them with his fingers, and people recoiled as if they had been burned. Sweat beaded his brow despite the cold air, the effort of it straining him.

Amid the screams and howls, they forced their way through the crowd as ocean predators would knife through a shoal of fish. She felt her gut tighten as the ramp shuddered; the cargo hatch was beginning to descend, preparing to seal the shuttle.

“Two more. Two more,” grated the servitor, taking the coat hems of a merchant gentleman and his mistress, dragging them forward. “Last ones. No more.”

Had it been necessary, her companion could have communicated his intent to her with a brief thought; but they had been together for so long, faced so many situations such as this one that neither of them needed to consider their next move. The two of them raised their guns and shot the gentleman and lady through the backs of their skulls, blowing brain matter and bone across the servitor’s carapace. The machine-slave obeyed its programming automatically and dropped the dead bodies.

“Two more,” it said. “Last ones.”

Some people understood what was transpiring and tried to push forward, but by then it was too late, and the woman and the man were ducking to get under the hatch, followed by the stooped servitor, its manipulators full of swag. Fresh blood still dripped from it as the helot worked the locks. Fists tang on the hull, dull thuds resonating into the cargo bay.

The bay’s interior was a web of netting and spars, to which dozens of Orilani had attached themselves, terrified that they would be torn out of their escape vessel before it made lift-off. She saw the servitor lock itself into an acceleration couch and grabbed at a loose curl of webbing.

Below their feet, the rocket motor spat out flame, burning alive the people they left behind as it rose into the air.

The lighter presented its blunt prow to the sky as it lifted away from the chaos of the starport, sweeping across the edge of the city. The engines laboured to hold the vessel on course, but by the Emperor’s grace there was fuel enough in the tanks to burn the boosters hot. The ship clawed into the air, threading through thin streaks of cloud and the sooty plumes of burning buildings. Something in the haze of corruption moved in a way that windborne smoke never would have. By turns and heartbeats, a black glitter of movement came falling towards the sweating, groaning ship. It was ephemeral and gauzy, a shimmer on spoiled waters, a glow from the wings of an insect swarm. It touched the vessel’s fuselage and coated the hull like wet paint rolling in coils across the metal fuselage, down and about. Searching. Feeling. Seeking a way inside. As the vessel rose into Orilan’s upper atmosphere, the inky shroud at last found a microscopic

flaw in the hull. And with a controlled, fierce will, it poured itself in through the gap.

Vonorof felt empty and sick, as if the g-forces pushing him into the pilot's couch were leaching his very life essence away. As the blackness of space unfolded across the cockpit window, the pestilent sights he left behind still dogged him, replaying over and over in his mind's eye. The tree outside the chapel as it turned about its length to present a maw of teeth. The roadway that melted under his feet. His daughter wailing as her eyes fell from her head, her face sprouting tendrils and cilia. As hard as he tried, Vonorof could not shake the images away. He blinked.

He was still crying. He had been for quite some time now. The hatch behind him irised open and he gave a start. Panic rolled around made him and he steeled himself, at last daring to turn and race the figure that had entered. A pilgrim, his face haunted and drawn. About his neck pooled a rough-hewn hood, framing a bald head dominated by an electro-tattoo of the Imperial aquila. In one ear glittered a single purity stud of old pewter. Vonorof suddenly found his voice. "You shouldn't be up here! This is a restricted area—"

"Not to me," the man's voice was flat with fatigue, but it brooked no argument. He pushed into the cockpit and the pilot glimpsed another figure behind him in the gangway, another pilgrim hanging back. "Change course," said the bald man. Vonorof felt a peculiar tension around the thick brass sockets in the base of his neck, where the sinuous mechadendrites of the lighter's command chair connected directly to his brain. A subtle pressure, pushing on his will. He tasted a greasy sensation in the stale recycled air of the cabin. In all honesty, he had not given a lot of consideration to where he would go when he lifted the ship, he had half-expected not even to get this far. The vague, animal need to escape the insanity on the planet had been driving him with its directionless energy. "Where to?" he asked, slipping into a position of inferiority before he was even aware of it. The man pointed; in the distance, starlight glittered off the hull of a vessel in high orbit. Direct machine code feeds from the lighter's cogitators told Vonorof that it was a Gladius-class frigate, a warship of a kind only employed by the Emperor's Space Marine legions, the Adeptus Astartes.

“Approach that craft.” A flood of panic seized the pilot. The frigate was the colour of old blood, a red scar in the sky, and even from this distance he could see the clouds of debris that remained of craft that had strayed too close to it.

“A blockade ship,” the words spilled from his lips in a rush, “they’ll destroy us, even if there are no infected on board!”

“There is no disease,” said the pilgrim, the weariness hollowing his voice. “Do as I say.”

Vonorof glanced from the viewport and made eye contact with the man. Instantly any arguments died in his throat and the pilot found his head bobbing in a wooden nod. The pilgrims will overpower him easily, and he turned the transport with quick motions, bringing it on a direct intercept course with the frigate. On some level, a small part of Vonorof’s mind rebelled at the sudden compulsion that had come over him, but it was a weak and feeble voice that railed against the man’s dominating presence.

He wiped a sheen of sweat from his head and licked dry lips. Retreating from the cockpit, he found his companion waiting in the anteroom, watching him with a level gaze. He saw accusation there, a telltale so subtle that only someone who knew her as well as he did could notice. He ignored the flicker of irritation that coiled inside him and sealed the hatch, leaving Vonorof to fulfil his orders.

“You are putting us at risk,” she told him. “The Astartes will surely obliterate this shuttle.” The woman threw a nod in the direction of the frigate. “You saw the hull livery. The Blood Angels. They’re not known for their mercy.”

“Fortunate for me then that I do not seek it.”

She shook her head. “We should attempt a stealthy approach to the outer lunar colony and then—”

He held up a hand to silence her. “Marain, I know what I am doing. Trust me.”

Her eyes narrowed and an unspoken emotional charge passed between them. The issue of trust was a raw wound, a chasm yawning wide between them. After a long moment, he pushed past her, a new kind of weariness in his bones.

Marain watched the man pick his way through a mass of hastily stowed possessions, rooting in the depths of an equipment locker. "You are so sure of yourself, Ramius." She studied him with different eyes; curious that he could have that effect on her, not once or twice, but over and over. The first time Marain had laid eyes upon him, she had been afraid of Ramius, although her training forbade her to show even the slightest inkling of it. The man she had feared that day differed from the person she had learnt to respect; in turn, that man was different from the Ramius who had bedded her and shown her love of a sort, for a while; and again, that man was not the man she saw now, drinking from a water pack, pressing at his face as if the skin on it were a poorly-hung mask. "Your soldier's eyes," he said quietly, the ghost of a smile on his lips. "Watchful."

"It's what I am," she retorted. "What I do."

Ramius turned away. "There's no war here."

"You're wrong," Marain told him. "There's always war. If there were not, you would have no need for someone like me."

He peered through a porthole. "You are more than just a protector..."

The unspoken remainder of the statement made her lip curl. "Once, perhaps, but not now. That road is dosed to us." Ramius turned swiftly to face her. Was that hurt in his eyes, some flash of betrayal? Had he expected Marain to take his side in all of this? She held away any reaction, keeping her aspect utterly natural.

He read her thoughts in her eyes; he could have laid them bare and known her mind inside out if he was prepared to expend the psychic effort, but Ramius was spent from tension and, although he hated to admit it, guilt. Marain's accusing face, her tawny skin framing a hard line of lips and dark eyes, arranged in judgement of him. In reproach of his mistakes, his folly.

She blamed him for it all, for the madness on Orilan. He could not dispute her. The truth of it was, his curiosity and arrogance would cost a world its life.

Marain came close to him, and he felt a surge of adrenaline as her lips spoke at his ear in a hushed murmur, too low to carry beyond the intimacy of the anteroom. "You must atone, Ramius. Admit your errors and ask for forgiveness." For all the quiet of the whisper, it was as loud a demand as a shout. He pulled away, unable to cover the sudden, naked fear on his face.

“I... I cannot,” Ramius husked.

Marain’s disappointment coloured her words. “You will die at the hands of the Blood Angels, along with everyone else on this scow. You have until then to consider your repentance.” She left him there to muse on her words, dropping back into the tunnel to the lighter’s cargo decks.

The ship had one compartment that could be considered to be “luxury” accommodation, at least by the standards of comparison to the rest of the craft. The addition of some threadbare acceleration couches retrofitted from a fire-damaged starliner and a broken entertainment holosphere were all the lighter offered. The cabin was full of people, every seat taken, every inch of uttered carpeted floor filled with human traffic. The air was thick with body odour as the ventilators laboured to handle the miasma generated by the refugees. Under other circumstances, fights might have broken out as people jockeyed for more room; but not this time. The passengers who had bribed or cajoled their way on to Vonorof’s shuttle were too afraid to do anything other than watch one another for signs of the change. A dead woman lay in one of the aisles, her skull crushed by the boots of her neighbours. Just prior to lift-off she had begun to writhe, and as one they had piled upon her and murdered her where she sat, terrified that the mutations would burst from her body and turn upon them. Fear drove them, none of them caring if her palsy was caused by something else. No one dared to cough or to speak. None of them wanted to be next. The compartment adjoined an engineering space. Running the length of the ship, it was filled with pipes for breathing gas and conduits labelled with arcane symbols that only Mechanicus adepts understood. Through this cluttered artery the darkness moved like liquid, flowing across every surface. When it passed the cabin wall it paused. It sensed life in there, very close. Very afraid. The black form drew the gossamer edges of itself together into a ball of diamond hardness, fashioning a blade-point. A flicker of motion forced it into the metal and a finger-thick hole popped open, directly behind the shoulders of a corpulent, sweaty man. Held in place by the press of flesh, he could only flap his hands and wail as the shape punched through his spine and bored through his torso. His dying act was to tear the shirt from his chest; and then the darkness erupted in streams from every pore of his skin, turning him inside out.

People either side of the fat man warped like flowing candle wax, growing fans of teeth or eyes that popped open from boils. Everyone reacted at once, screaming, scrambling, a mass of humans all trying to force themselves through a narrow hatch and away from the tide of changes. The blackness swooped, kissing them with corruption and shredding their bodies. It formed a rudimentary maw from thin streams of matter and contorted, pressing air out of its makeshift mouth. The squeal of noise distorted until it became a recognisable word. "Ramius."

Marain heard the horrible voice and her blood ran cold. The name tolled like a bell, the ghostly moan resonating down the tunnel. Where the bare skin of her hands clasped the rungs of the access ladder, she felt the metal under her fingers grow warm and pliant turning fleshy. The air in the conduit became damp and breathy with the bouquet of rotting meat. The tunnel began to undulate and move, growing ribs and coils of cartilage. The sound of bone cracking spurred her into action and she let her weight carry her down to the cargo deck level. Wet trickles of stringy spittle followed, pooling at her feet in frothy puddles. She threw a quick glance up; the tunnel was turning into an open throat some giant mutant oesophagus. Marain's gun was in her hand as she sprinted forward, shoving blank-faced refugees out of her way.

Ramius detected the psychic spoor of the dark-thing moments before his physical senses registered the stink of rended flesh. Inwardly he cursed; he had tired to the point that his weir honed warning senses had let him down. Tendrils like aerial roots crawled up the walls of the antechamber probing and tasting. In the places where they touched objects, the tentacle things split to reveal toothed lips, enveloping each new discovery like a snake eating a rodent. Ramius' gun shrieked, ozone sealing the air as laser bolts shrivelled the invading probes. The shots beat them back, but it was only a temporary respite. With cold honesty, he understood that his mistakes had come to gather him to their breast, understanding that his hopes of escape and denial were childish and unrealistic. From below, the mutation hooted its terrible rendition of his name once again.

The clinical aspect of his nature assumed control. Based on his experiments, he had a rough approximation of the time it would take the change to sweep the shuttle. He imagined that outside now, the sleek metal

lines of the lighter were slowly turning into swathes of skin and scale. Ramius forced open the hatch to the cockpit, holstering the gun and discarding the pilgrim robes as he did. The pilot's face was fligid; he would be the worst off, Ramius mused, wired into the vessel, feeling each moment of warping as the ship was transmuted. It would not be long before the man would become subsumed into his console, meat and pseudo-flesh merging together, and so time was of the essence. "Hail the frigate."

"Wh-what is happening-?"

Ramius slapped him hard across the face. "Hail them!"

Vonorof worked a set of glyphs and the tinny hiss of a short-range vox issued from a transceiver.

"They won't answer. They'll kill us!"

The cloak fell about his ankles, revealing the ceramite-plate battle jacket beneath, the vest of fine Phaedran silks. He drew an icon from inside the folds where it hung on a thick chain and gripped it. The object responded with an inner fire, lighting the black eye sockets of the skull carved upon it. Vonorof knew the shape of the thing instantly; a thick gothic letter "I" adorned with runes and chasings.

"Astartes, hear me," intoned the bald man, "know my name and purpose. I am the Inquisitor Ramius Stele of the Ordo Hereticus. My agent and I are trapped aboard this vessel and we require rescue. I carry the Emperor's divine sigil. I must have passage!"

The pilot's lips trembled. Inquisitors were things spoke of in hushed whispers on Orilan; in the streets of the unremarkable outworld. Vonorof had heard stories of men who had actually seen them, but they were more myth than fact, spun with lies and mad truths. He gaped at Stele as the man ignored him; all his attention on the growing shape of the frigate. It was too much for his simple parochial mind to accept.

"Brother-captain," said Simeon, "A development." Tycho glanced up, the glow of the pict-plate map beneath him casting a sinister light across the half-mask covering the right side of his face. In the sullen glow of the warship's tacterium, the haze of hololithic light from the consoles ranged around them gave everything a baleful aspect.

“Speak,” he demanded, the ever-present edge of irritation in his tone, “I tire of culling these infected wretches, brother. I hope you have something more challenging for me.”

Simeon nodded. “A signal from this ship,” he tapped at a moving dot on the map. “The codes are present and correct. It would appear that an Inquisitor of the Imperial Church is aboard. A man of some import and rank among the Ordo Hereticus, so it would seem.”

“Indeed?” said Tycho. “Unfortunate. Be certain to have a servitor take his name so that his death will be duly noted.” Simeon shifted slightly. “You misunderstand me, captain. The man demands assistance. He calls for a rescue.” Tycho raised an eyebrow at the temerity of the statement. “Nothing is to leave Orilan alive, Simeon. Those were our orders. The gunners have the ship in their sights, so bid them to fire.”

“With respect, lord, those orders are open to your interpretation.”

The other Blood Angel frowned. “Captain, this is a direct command from a member of the Ecclesiarchy. We cannot simply ignore it.”

Simeon’s commander ran a hand over his chin; his eyes narrowing. “We risk contamination if we enter the craft,” he said, thinking aloud. “A great hazard.”

“There will be mutants on board,” Simeon added. He knew Tycho well, having served under him for many decades. He could almost see the turn in the captain’s mood as it rolled forth like a storm cloud across the sky. Moments earlier, Tycho had admitted to his distaste at a mission better suited to a picket ship of the Imperial Navy; Simeon did not for a moment believe that the rescue would be a hard sell to his commander. They were Blood Angels, after all. They craved the cut and thrust of close-in action, not this paltry stand-off battle. He pressed the issue a little more. If the vox-casts from the planet are anything to go by, organics and inorganics will be changing into predatory forms. “I would measure me inquisitor’s life span in minutes, lord.” A thin line of amusement pulled at Tycho’s lips, and his hand twitched. There; that was the choice made, then. “Perhaps we should respond. It is only right.” He stood up and strode away from his command dais, Simeon turning to watch him go. “Have a skirmish force of men meet me in the teleportarium. Tell them to arm for a close quarter engagement.”

Brother Simeon took a half step after Tycho. “Captain, there is no need for you to go in person. I would gladly take the—” Tycho silenced him

with a look. "There is *every* reason for me to go." The eagerness to taste battle, even something as brief as this, danced in the captain's single human eye. "Tell this Inquisitor that his salvation is on its way." A slight smile flickered on his lips and was gone. "You have the bridge, Simeon."

Marain.

She could tell by the weakness of his mind-touch that Ramius was at the limits of his mental reserves. The telepathic message was a ghostly caress, and she almost missed it in the melee. She broke off the neck of a howling, eyeless mutant child with the butt of her gun as she fumbled out a fresh ammunition pack for the weapon. Marain ignored Stele's entreaty as she reloaded, allowing him to see through her eyes. She gave him freedom to touch her surface thoughts; it was far easier than framing a verbal answer.

Attend me, quickly. The Astartes are coming. Leave these people they are already dead. Her face twisted in a grimace. "Get to the saviour pods!" she yelled at the untainted ones, "Leave everything and go!" Marain bracketed the shambling, warped things with gunfire, but the more she killed, the more they recruited from the ranks of the panicked Orilani. It was a losing fight.

She forced an elderly man into the nearest pod with an angry shout, trying not to dwell on the logic of her actions. Marain's conviction was fuelled by guilt and responsibility, even as part of her tried to forget that the passengers were just as likely to mutate in the saviour pods as anywhere else. Even if the pods actually launched, what good would it do? Drifting in space, the escapees would suffocate or be shot down, and if by some miracle they made it down to the surface what would be waiting for them but more new kinds of death?

Ramius was still in her head, leafing through her thoughts as if he were thumbing the pages of a book. She showed him her intent to stay, at least until these poor wretches had escaped this death ship. Ramius tugged on her memories, on the threads of loyalty that she had for him; with a savage mental swipe she cut them off, heat building in her cheeks, hot tears prickling her eyes. Marain tasted his shocked understanding as he realised she had rejected her unswerving fealty to him. The guardian's sense of duty had been outstripped by Stele's perfidy.

He saw things he had never dared to search for, as she showed him her hidden self, the doubts and fears she had concealed from him. Her training had acquitted itself well, and never once had the Inquisitor suspected that Marain would harbour such ill will toward him. The woman had known all along about the nature of his research, the arcane prohibited experiments that he had been conducting. She had known and said nothing, such was her allegiance her dogged dedication to him.

But now that had changed: Stele had gone too far, and Marain would be silent no longer. He saw her intentions, to reveal him to the Ordo Hereticus, to disclose the whole sorry story of his transgressions. If she lived, she would expose him.

Marain felt him leave her mind in a gust of psychic cold, a melancholy, sad wind fading away.

Ramius staggered with the impact of what he had sensed and bumped into the cabin wail. He felt hollow. Marain, the one unchanging rock in the seas of his doubt, and she had elected to betray him. He shook his head. *Could she not understand? He had never intended things to get out of control!* He had only wanted to learn, to understand. Was that so hard for her to comprehend? Did the quest for knowledge make him a traitor? He felt sick inside as he realised that for Marain, the answer was yes.

The pilot slumped forward, dying along with his ship. Stele ignored him, ignored the growing wetness in the atmosphere as the shuttle's metallic slowly turned into fleshy stomachs and stinking gut-chambers. He felt an overwhelming sense of despair that blocked out everything else. Everything was going wrong, and now she rejected him. As quickly as it appeared, the emotion in him became hot anger. *How dare she? How dare a mere soldier sit in judgement of Ramius Stele?*

That she has been his lover gave her no right to castigate him or his methods. So be it then. She had deserted him and he would do the same to her. Let her stay on this ruined barge and die with the rest of these unfortunates.

Distracted by his own thoughts, Stele's attention wandered and he did not see it until it was too late. Vonorof's twitchy body did something unspeakable and lightning-fast bones snap-cracking as they reversed in their sockets, new lines of mouths opening in fanged maws. The pilot-mutant sprang at him, and Ramius drew back, but there was nowhere to go.

The creature's attack knocked the lasgun from his fingers, and before he could muster a spark of psyker force it was on him, battering his skull against the decking. It screamed and gibbered, words turning into a mush of slurred sound.

Spirals of colour lit behind Ramius' eyes and the breath left his lungs, blood trickling into his vision. He was dimly aware of something else entering the cramped chamber, something larger and deadly. His mind briefly touched the edge of a cool killer's intellect.

The chattering mutant reared up, ready to tear out his throat; and just as quickly it exploded in a wet gout of purpled matter.

Ears ringing, his vision tunnelling, Steele barely manage to slide free of the mutant's steaming torso as a huge figure hove into sight. He wiped contaminated blood from his eyes to see shimmering greaves of brass and crimson filling his vision. Atop the tower of armour was a face that was half pale flesh, half gold mirror. A sneer coiled on the lips of the lofty figure. "Bring him," it rumbled. "There are others still alive on the lower decks of the lighter." The second voice came from a red giant standing at the hatchway. "What is to be done, lord?"

"Save what you can," said the half-face, the words following Ramius into the darkness of unconsciousness. "Cull the rest."

His mind floated in an ocean of crystal voids, sharp jags of memory and sensation ripping into him, needles of recollection tearing across the inquisitor's psyche. On some level, he understood that his corporeal body was teetering on the edge of coma and within, his psionic essence was undirected and broken, wandering the caverns of his soul. He sensed the boil and churn of the empyrean out there just beyond the real, the realm of warp space where unknowable things lived. Even as he feared them, there was much of Ramius Steele that coveted the knowledge of these creatures, of how and what they were.

He knew that emotion all too well. It was this drive in him that had brought ruin to Orilan.

There was laughter. Cruel and mocking, amused at his plight. Steele tried to shy away from it, but it found him wherever he hid.

"Look what you have wrought," The words were the breath of corpses. *"Do not hide from it, Inquisitor. See it. Know it and own your deeds!"*

Against his will. Stele's mind reeled back to the library once more, forced down through the years to the point where it had all begun.

Always the library, the place where he had first glimpsed the great potential for himself. It had been on Ariyo, after the burning of the Simbasa Heretics; there as the guardsmen put the torch to the storehouse of unhallowed texts, Ramius had dared to read from a volume that fell open at his feet. It had been an accident just a small thing. He had looked, just dared to look. And what he read, glimpsed even...

What he saw there planted seeds of fervent interest nurtured by the radicalism already seated in his heart. As the years passed, as he grew more disenchanted with the decrepitude of the Ecclesiarchy and the lackwits among his superiors, Ramius concealed his disgust while he sought out more forbidden knowledge and plumbed the greater depths of psyker witchery.

"Do you remember the day I spoke to you?" The voice was enthralling just as it had been the first time. *"You thought I was a dream. But I was the wind of change upon your limited mind. I opened you, Ramius. You welcomed me."*

Perhaps this was an illusion, he wondered, some product of his injuries. *"You know better than that!"*

And then he tasted the name of the creature in his mind. Malfallax.

"Yes." A hot pressure shoved Stele's memories to the secret chamber beneath the old temple on Orilan. To the place where the death of the world had begun, hours ago now, days past.

"You were unready. Too eager. Look what it brought you."

The inquisitor watched the events unfold as if he were a passive observer, merely an audience member at some gaudy theatre play; he struggled fruitlessly, as if he could somehow throw a warning back in time to himself not to begin the Rite of Binding. He had made a mistake. It was so clear to him now in retrospect; one single ritual syllable spoken incorrectly, the emphasis on the rising glottal stop instead of the failing fricative...

A small thing. But enough to uncage the Tzeentch-thing he had called to the chamber.

Stele watched it happen again, sensing his tormentor taking amusement from his squirming. He saw himself walk through the drawing of the circle

and the eightfold star within. Then, the lengthy and brutal murder of the vagrant to grant the blood sacrament. At last, the coming of the funnel of swarming shadow shaping into form in the middle of the stone basement. His rapt expression of delight—and then the sudden turn to terror as it struck out, metamorphosing the rock and metal into gnashing teeth, ripping out past the feeble wards he had been sure would hold it. Into the city, hungry for sustenance.

Screaming.

Fading.

Free.

Weak denials formed in Ramius' mind. *How could I have known? It was an accident!* He had never intended to unleash the thing, only to capture and study the monstrosity so he ought gain insight into the nature of the Change Lord.

Malfallax smiled. *“You delude yourself, Stele. Deep in your heart, you wanted to let it go. There is a part of you that hates the old order, the staid and the static. You lust for change and metamorphosis.”*

When he tried to find a way to frame a retort, Ramius discovered his thoughts frozen by the damning truth in the warp creature's words.

“If this is not what you wanted, you could have stepped back from the brink. You chose not to. The willingness to sacrifice the woman is all the proof I require. You want this. You desire to know the way in which Malfallax overpowers you.”

Stele's psyche recoiled beneath the awful, unstoppable reality. *“And with your own longing you make yourself my willing cohort.”*

The laughter faded and he let the blood-warm darkness swallow him.

The Blood Angels marched the survivors into the frigate's launch bay, forcing them into a huddled group in the middle of the deck. Medicae servitors probed and examined them while Space Marines with loaded bolters walked in steady watchful orbits around the poor wretches. They had all expected to die on the shuttle, but to be rescued by these crimson-sheathed giants was like the hand of the God-Emperor himself reaching down to scoop them from the jaws of death. Panic and terror had been replaced with a different breed of fear, one borne of reverence and a lifetime of awe.

A hatch in the wall irised open to admit one of Simeon's officers, a taciturn codicer in blue armour, his grizzled face lined with age. The Space Marine took a few steps and stumbled to a sudden halt, his jaw dropping open.

One of the Blood Angels guarding the refugees caught sight of his reaction and approached him. "Brother Varon? Is something wrong?"

"*Daemon!*" Varon suddenly shouted the word, his finger stabbing out at a nondescript woman in a tattered evening dress, rocking gently side-to-side amid the rescued. Corded muscles stood out on the psyker's neck as his preternatural senses tasted the psychic stench of something monstrous hidden inside the cowl of her flesh.

The other survivors threw themselves aside as the woman sighed, each of them all too familiar by now with the ways of the change.

Her body twitched and deflated, crumbling in on itself. A swarm of black motes issued from her eyes, her nostrils, ears and mouth. The Blood Angels opened fire on reflex, cutting down those too slow to get out of the way, laying a spread of bolt shells into the host-corpse. The dead woman flew apart in wet hanks of fast-decaying flesh, but the dark-thing was already free. It looped around like a streamer of liquid shadow and threw itself at the psyker Space Marine becoming a glistening spear.

Varon marshalled all his ability at once and channelled his Quickening into a mental shield; for an instant he thought it might have been enough.

The force of the daemon's murderous attack shattered his ephemeral defence like brittle glass, melting into the ceramite armour protecting his chest and tearing him inside out like a long and bloody streamer of meat. The shade came around, trailing Varon's blood and viscera, and beheaded a screaming Chapter serf with callous abandon, playing with the disorder it was creating.

In the frigate's chirurgery. Stele bolted awake. He reeled up from the examination table where he lay, scattering trays of instruments and knocking aside the medicae servitors tending.

"It's here," he spat, "aboard the ship!"

The shadow-creature warped the flesh of human and Astartes alike murdering them by forcing unholy new shapes from their bodies. Some

perished as their bones and organs were forcibly altered into eight-pointed stars and hate glyphs. The daemon enjoyed this recreation, but it was secondary to the real reason it had come this far.

With a breathy sigh, it left its toys behind and the creature gathered up enough sustenance from the shrivelled dead. It surged down the corridors of the frigate painting taint and corruption where it passed. It left a few survivors here and there to speak of what it had wrought; there was no sense in creating such great an if no one lived to witness it.

Down through the deck shunting and flickering dodging through barricades and the hastily-erected psyker wards of Tycho's librarians, it fell through microscopic cracks in the metal and ceramite tasting power in the air, moving toward it.

In the beating heart of the ship, past the locks made of heavy, poisonous phase-iron and the pitiful spirit deflectors, the shadow at last entered the holy chamber of the frigate's stardrives.

Tech-priests who had never ventured beyond the confines of the drive core scattered, babbling prayers to the Omnissiah or weeping blood. Engineers brandished tools as weapons and died screeching where they stood.

The daemon made itself into a vague man-shape and drifted to the huge cylinders of the warp engines, stalking forward on pointed, glassine legs.

Beneath the casings of the mighty drives, technologies almost akin to magic seethed and roiled, great powers capable of remaking the laws of the universe barely held in check by weakling organic men with little comprehension of their true potential. The creature smiled and spread itself thin, touching the matter of the engines and changing them by degrees. Slowly it gathered in flesh and metal, and began to build itself a nest.

Captain Tycho came to him eventually, as Stele knew he would. He watched the sullen light of the floating glow-globes caress the finely-tooled mask across Tycho's cheek and he wondered about what the Astartes hid beneath it. He had picked rumour and hearsay from the minds of the Chapter helots in the medicae chamber—something vague about a disfigurement caused in combat with an ork psyker. If it were true, then little wonder that the brother-captain hid his mutilation. The aesthetic sensibilities of any Blood Angel would be offended by such a sight. On

another day, if Stele were not so fatigued from all that had transpired, he might have been able to pluck the whole story from Tycho's mind itself; but Ramius was unwilling to risk such an intrusion, not when his life depended on the goodwill of the Sons of Sanguinius.

The captain wasted no time with preamble and fixed him with a hard eye. "What is this monstrosity that has come aboard my ship, inquisitor? Tell me what madness unfolded on Orilan that it could spawn something so aberrant?" His face—what Stele could see of it—was locked in a hard grimace.

Ramius measured his every gesture with the skill and care that had been drilled into him since his days as an interrogator-apprentice. One hint of a lie and he knew he would be vented to space Tycho would be able to do it and claim Stele was consumed by Chaos; he doubted any of the captain's men would leap to the defence of a servant of the Ordo Hereticus. *They respect only brute strength*, he reminded himself. *I will have to display some measure of that in order to sway them.*

He gave a sigh of remorse, calculated to be long enough and deep enough to seem real.

"Captain Tycho, if only you had seen what I have seen..." He shook his head sadly. "A nest of cultists infesting every level of the hive city. I regret... my own caution led me to them too late. By the time I arrived in their concealed lair, they had already summoned the creature."

In reality, Stele had fabricated evidence to cover his own tracks weeks before he had arrived on the planet, inventing a dozen false identities and faked verification that "proved" the presence of a cult of Tzeentch in Orilan's capital hive. "I killed them all but it was a hollow victory. The damage had already been wrought."

Tycho watched him, the stony cast of the Space Marine's flesh as immobile as the brassy mask on the other. "You brought it here." It was a statement, not an accusation. The Blood Angel seemed to sense the inquisitor was lying about something. It was the nature of the ordos, after all; falsehood was to Stele's kind as armour was to Tycho's Chapter. "A number of my men, some of my serfs, an untold number of servitors... All lie dead and defiled by the hand of this... *thing*. Those that were not killed outright I have been forced to put down." He advanced a step and Stele thought he could smell stale blood. "Now it chews on the heart of this ship like a dog with a shank of meat." With a sudden shock, the Inquisitor

sensed Tycho's surface thoughts as the captain made his demand of him. "I want this fiend ejected from my vessel, lord inquisitor. *You* will assist me in achieving this end."

Stele clamped down on his reaction immediately. The last thing he wanted was to find himself in a room with the daemon once again; but to refuse outright would seem like cowardice and lose him the small measure of reverence his high office granted him. "Captain, with respect, this creature is one of the most powerful daemons I have come across. It is a most deadly enemy, the very essence of change and mutation. It thrives on disorder and—"

"*Chaos?*" Tycho snapped, his tone cracking like brittle ice. "I want it dead, Stele, and you will help with that desire." He could sense it clearly now, the blood-need in Tycho's mind. The unchained fury desperate for the battle to come. "Or should I assume that men of your ilk are as spineless in the face of the archenemy as I have been led to believe?"

Stele's eyes narrowed. *I must play the warrior's game, then.* "I warn you, captain, keep a civil tongue in your head. I am as staunch in the Emperor's light as you!" The lie glided from him like smooth glass, and inwardly Ramius felt ice form in his stomach. The pull of his oath to the Golden Throne waned with every passing day, conflicting him with the sweet nectar of the warp's promise. A nerve jumped beneath his eye; despite his fears, he still wanted to face the daemon, to *know* it.

"Good," said the Space Marine, glancing over his shoulder at his second-in-command. "Simeon, return the Inquisitor's lasgun, and prepare a squad."

"Your will," said the other officer.

The ghost of a smile returned to Tycho's face. "And be sure you lock the hatches behind us."

They began a decent into a freakish hell, into a passageway of nightmares.

The things lurking inside the corridors of the drive decks dwarfed the stomach-turning mutants Stele had seen on Orilan. Shapes made of skin and bone coated the walls, stretched to impossible heights, pulled thin and taut. Horribly, many of the fleshy forms were still alive, some moaning others weeping.

Ramius moved amid the towering armoured forms of the Blood Angels as they walked forward with lockstep, stoic caution. As well as returning the lasgun, Simeon had also had Stele's body armour cleaned and patched. It felt heavy and warm on his shoulders, and he fingered the edge of the ceramite plate where it sat beneath his silken vest, knowing that it would not save him from any sort of direct attack.

His gaze moved over the remains of the engineers, fascinated by the strange inventiveness of the display. The daemon was getting better at what it did like an artist learning the strengths of a new medium, able now to uncoil better horrors from the sculpted flesh of its victims. Stele wanted to know how that was done. He wanted to understand how a man might take living flesh and mould it so, or sift it through his fingers like dry sand. Some of the remnants—Ramius found himself thinking of them as such—were still ambulatory, and they crowded toward the Space Marine squad. Tycho led the way through them, rending their warped forms with flares of killing fire from his combi-weapon, the melta gun flashing, catching the ones that got too close with ruby threads cast by lasers in his gauntlets. They screamed and died, boiling to death as they cried out for mercy. The Blood Angel captain's face was grim. Stele sensed his surface thoughts as Tycho forced away any recall of the men these things had once been.

The moist, blood-warm halls were red like raw flesh, and around them steel had turned into arcs of wet bone. Weak orange light spilled in radiant pools. Tycho's metallic armour made him seem like a bronze statue one that had grown bored with standing atop its plinth and stepped down, away to seek foes to kill.

Deeper they went, and the freak show grew more nauseating. The mutants attacked in small groups, then in waves that came back and forth. Perhaps they craved pain or just the nothingness of release; Stele folded closed his mind to them, searching instead for the pulse-beat of the daemon itself. Searching and finding.

All about him the Blood Angels fought with ruthless, passionate fury, gunning down creatures, who had been their Chapter serfs only hours earlier. The inquisitor kept his lasgun close, pressing it to his chest like a talisman of protection, now and then daring to venture a shot at something that caught his eye.

They passed through flaps of rubber that resembled the valves of a heart, and then they were inside the core. Obscene geometry and ranges of bony spars spread out above them, glistening with new change. The shapes of the drive chamber were subsumed under undulating sheets of skin, the remains of a dozen engineers flayed and merged together; it was impossible to see where the frigate ended and the monster began.

Concentrating, he let his preternatural senses sweep the chamber. And there it was, resting inside a nest of bones. Stele found the heart of the creature with his second sight inherently sensing the collection of clouded, alien thoughts inside a rough bole of flesh atop the primary reactor dolmen.

Tycho watched his reaction and read what he needed from it. “There!” he shouted, pointing upward. “Fire for effect!” The Blood Angels unleashed shot and shell against the daemon, and in return it extruded sinuous arms with teeth and barbs, slashing in scythes at the Space Marines.

Stele broke from the group and sought cover as Tycho’s men died, cut into pieces or beheaded; others were quicker, ripping at the claws with power fists, blasting them with bolters. Black, oily blood jetted across the undulating deck and the Tzeentch-thing screamed.

Ramius aimed his gun but hesitated, his finger frozen on the trigger. He found himself enraptured by the unbearable shapes of the monster above. That such things could be done—and this was only a *servant* of the Malfallax, which in turn was only a princeling daemon. Stele did not see chaos of order; he saw only incredible power, enough to remake the galaxy if one could only master it. He lost himself in it, the fight ranging around him unnoticed. A helmet with a Space Marine’s head still within it bounced to a halt at his feet, and Tycho’s bronzed form blurred toward him, shoving the Inquisitor aside as a spidery thing on nerve tendon tethers clawed and snarled. The Blood Angel killed it with a crash of bolter shells and Stele blinked, returning to the moment.

“What are you dithering for?” Tycho snarled, “My men are dead, only we still stand! Work your witchery, psyker, or you are useless to me.”

Distracted for only an instant the brother-captain missed the approach of a blunt hammer of fatty meat. The flesh-club struck him in the head, and Stele, rooted to the spot saw Tycho spin away like a discarded rag. The

Blood Angel warrior careened off a piece of steel plate and fell to the deck with a massive crash of stressed metal.

Stele ran to his side, panic rising in him. Tycho was the only thing that could protect him from what he had unleashed on Orilan; without the Blood Angel, he had nothing, no armour, no defender... "Captain!" Ramius shook the Astartes, but Tycho did not respond. The warrior was insensate, but his chest still rose and fell in shallow breaths. Unconscious then, but still alive.

He saw Tycho's combi-weapon lying on the floor and took a half-step toward it. The idea of taking it up himself died in this mind; the gun was so massive he would never have been able to lift it.

Icy fear and tingling adrenaline flooded Stele's body. He looked up, searching for a means of escape, and instead found a nest of eyes blinking at him from the topmost tiers of the warp towers. It sent claw arms down toward him, slow and steady. The sinuous limbs wandered around him, tapping disinterestedly on Tycho's armour, scraping at the floor. Ramius saw that they were made of human flesh; he saw a bondsman's tattoo visible on one elongated stabbing arm.

"Human," said the daemon, the voice echoing with the resonance of its distant master. "What will you do now?"

Across some great vastness, the Malfallax was working the shade-thing like a marionette, talking through it to him. "If fear is all you have, then your life ends here. If not..."

Ramius had the sudden impression that he was being offered something.

"I am afraid," Stele said aloud, "but I am more hungry than fearful. Hungry for knowledge."

Dark laughter boomed off the shivering walls. "Such greed. Your species has an almost infinite capacity for it." Part of the eye cluster detached from the large mass, transforming into a wispy shadow as it drifted down to approach him. "The path branches before you, Stele. Defy me and perish, or take my blessing and walk the Way of Change." When Ramius hesitated, the shade congealed before him, becoming vaguely human in shape. "You want to *know*, don't you?" The question made his mouth fill with saliva. "There is no better way than the one I offer. Take it, and your mind will be opened to sights you never dreamed of."

Stele closed his eyes and felt himself nodding. Had there ever really been any doubt? Now that the offer was there before him, had he ever really considered refusing it? *No*.

Ramius felt the frigid, exhilarating rush as a tiny fraction of the essence of the Malfallax entered him, and made itself a nest inside his mind. A hard seed of blackness formed in the core of his psyche, and in a strange way, he felt free. *Marain*. He banished her as his last regret, the last connection that held him to humanity. She had been the voice of his conscience for so long... but now he understood that such a thing only held him back from greatness.

And then there was the voice. “Ramius!” He spun on his heel, suddenly dizzy, dislocated from the world around him. A voice from the grave? Even as he banished her from his mind, he heard Marain’s words.

He stared incredulous, as she crossed the chamber toward him, her gun in her hand, tears streaming down her tan cheeks. For a moment he thought she was some apparition, perhaps a mind-ghost conjured by the daemon to taunt him; but in the next instant the raw energy of the seed the Malfallax planted inside him shot power through his psyche and he read her like a book.

Ramius understood instantly; she had survived—*how like her to do that*—and come aboard Tycho’s ship with those from the shuttle. But the joy that might have once touched him at the sight of her was gone, swallowed by his new master’s touch. His affection for her was absorbed, dissipated. Gone a surge of resentment rose and then fell under the weight of his new insight.

She aimed her weapon at him. Yes, he understood. She had followed the Space Marines down through the ship, stalking him. “Heretic!” spat the soldier. “It sickens me to think I laid with you! You have discarded everything you swore an oath for!”

Harsh and bitter laughter bubbled up from deep inside Stele’s chest. There was no humour in it, only a dark and terrible knowing of his own soul. “Marain, you do not understand. You are so limited in your sight, you cannot see—”

“I see enough!” she cried. “You are a traitor!”

The sinuous, rustling whispers of the daemon knitted in a blasphemous chorus over their heads. The inquisitor was aware of the Malfallax watching them both, enjoying the bitter hate radiating off the woman as if

it were some rare and delicate wine. The creature was doing nothing to intervene, content to let the moment play out as it might.

He spoke Marain's name again and took a step toward her. "There are none that know me as you do. There is no living soul that has shown me the loyalty you gave. Do not end that now." He extended a hand to her, and beneath the surface of the skin black dots of fluid swarmed and moved. "Cast off your doubts. Join me. We can discard the petty dictates of the Emperor and forge our own path. Together." Stele meant every word; he was standing on the brink of something incredible and to have her follow along with him... to share it would be glorious. There was a moment—he saw it there as bright as daybreak in her mind—when Marain allowed herself to consider accepting his offer, just for the briefest of instants. She teetered on the edge of agreeing to it, just to be with him again, just to fulfil the edict that had been drilled into her since birth; but then the colour of the thought faded into nothing and white-hot hatred unfolded in its place. The crude maw of her gun danced in front of him, and he had no doubt that she aimed it at a place where it would kill him with the fat shot. Marain swore a gutter oath that curled his lip in land. He had his answer, then. "Fallen whore of the Ruinous Powers," she shouted, "you dare to try to tear me from my God-Emperor! I will kill you!"

"Then do it," echoed the daemon voice, finally venturing to speak. "But she can't, can she? A man she has sworn her life to protect a corpse god she has sworn to obey, and now she must destroy you to appease the other." Every mouth of the Malfallax smiled. "What delicious pain."

"Marain—" Stele began, but her only reply was a face of rage and a storm of gunfire. "End you!" she spat throwing herself at him, stitching a line of incendiary bullets across his torso. Stele howled and tore his silken vest from him as it burst into flame. Shots that would have ripped him open before warped and deflected about him, the black power of the mutation inside him charging his psyche with monstrous force.

The inquisitor opened himself to the dark and embraced the rage. "You faithless bitch!" he thundered at her. "You are nothing to me!" Tears of anger and pain streamed down Marain's face as she emptied her gun into him. She drew her fractal knife and made to plunge it in his heart.

"No!" Stele shouted the word; perhaps it was a cry against her, or perhaps against himself, but the result was the same Conjured from the

warp itself, a haze of pure purple-white fire blazed from Ramius' fingers and enveloped the woman's shrieking body.

It was over in a split second. Marain twisted, became a charcoal sketch against the glare, then ashes.

Then nothing.

The daemon began to laugh, the voice growing louder and louder until it beat at Stele's mind, mocking him for his towering folly.

"Silence!" he spat out a scream that rended air and matter, the hellbolt that killed Marain magnified a thousandfold; for one brief instant the inquisitor became a tornado of psychic force, and with it he ripped the shade-daemon from existence.

As the power abated, he dropped to his knees amid the decaying meat and wept.

In the aftermath, Simeon came to the chambers they had assigned to him and gave a shallow bow. The Blood Angels treated him differently now; despite his commander's orders, Simeon had followed Tycho into the drive decks rather than seal them shut behind him. It was he who found Stele crouched by the brother-captain's body, while all around him was dead and disintegrating, the binding power of the shade-creature gone.

Tycho's wounds had been grave, and even now, days later, he still lay in a healing trance, but Simeon informed him that the Blood Angel would live to fight again, in no small part thanks to the Inquisitor's help.

He nodded, holding back a hollow smile. Ramius wondered; did the Malfallax foresee this turn of events? When the Blood Angels entered to find the daemoniac presence banished and only he and Tycho still alive, it was Simeon who assumed that Stele had marshalled his abilities to save their vessel. Had the Malfallax goaded him into obliterating its avatar, in order to cement a respect for him among these Astartes? He had no way of knowing; but Ramius had always been a man with an eye for circumstance and the knowledge of how to turn it to his advantage.

With Tycho in the depths of unconsciousness while Stele made his pact with the warp, no other soul that drew breath knew what had happened in the engine room, and they never would. Only Marain had been witness, and she... she was cut from his life.

His heart hardened. It was all he could do not to mock them when the earnest and serious Blood Angels praised him for his heroic act in saving the frigate. He listened intently, nodding in all the right places, as they told him that he would accompany them to their fortress-monastery on Baal. There the honour of a “blood debt” would be granted to him. Such gestures of respect and trust were rare. He said the right words and accepted graciously, while inside the privacy of his own thoughts he considered how he might use that misplaced confidence to greater advantage. Not now, perhaps, but one day.

From the bridge he watched storms of cyclonic torpedoes obliterate Orilan, erasing the last traces of his apostasy. In the fires he thought he saw Marain’s face, her dying image dragging away with it the last human part of his soul.

Eventually he left the Blood Angels behind, and retreated to his sanctum, peeling back the layers of his mind to touch the immaterium beyond space as the ship ventured into the warp. A malleable, ever-changing voice was waiting for him with plans and ideas and subtle whispers. Willingly, Ramius Stele followed it into the darkness, turning his face from the Emperor and opening a path toward the Ways of Change.

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