

WARHAMMER[®] 40,000



— DEATHWATCH 1 —

ONE BULLET

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Ben Counter

Donatus slid into the cover of a ruined devotional cogitator bank, letting its bent and bullet-riddled frame shelter him for the moment it took to switch ammunition.

The rest of the Sternguard were weathering the storm of heavy-calibre fire stuttering around the chapel interior. Brother Adelmo was backed against a pillar and Felidus had dived into a side shrine as explosive fire tore up the floor slabs beneath him.

Donatus rejected the Hellfire round, too rare and precious, its core a reservoir of bio-reactive acid. The Metal Storm shell was also dismissed – against unarmoured flesh it could wreak carnage that a regular bolter shell could not, but in this situation it would be a poor choice.

Donatus ejected his bolter's load and replaced it with a single Kraken round from the clip at his belt. These were rare, too, and Donatus had only a single magazine of them in total. They were not to be fired off lightly.

'Keep moving and flank it!' commanded Sergeant Tatianus, the Sternguard squad leader. The sergeant bolted from cover and sprinted across the aisle between the chapel's stone pews. Explosive fire followed him, filling the air with shards of hot stone. Felidus hefted his heavy bolter and rattled a volley of fire at the enemy, while Adelmo ran, head down, for the cover of the altar.

'No effect!' shouted Felidus over the vox. 'The damn thing's armoured like a tank!'

Donatus put his head above the wreck of the cogitator. The enemy was in the centre of the chapel, laughing bestially as it sprayed an endless torrent of fire at the Sternguard, mocking their attempts to bring it down.

Donatus had learned to hate the greenskins simply by virtue of being human, albeit a heavily modified one. The orks were the enemy of the very concept of humanity. They tore down the order mankind built around it to survive. They toppled the empires that men raised to bring sanity to a galaxy of madness. They were anarchy personified.

Donatus compressed his hatred into a thread that wrapped around his limbs and steadied his aim. He peered through the preysense sight of his custom bolter, leaning into the extended stock.

The enemy was a greenskin specialist. Some orks were leaders, others psykers, others pilots or vehicle gunners. The creature fighting the Sternguard was an ork engineer, one of the insane inventors that built their ramshackle war machines and unpredictably explosive weapons. It wore what Donatus guessed was its own creation – a massive suit of armour, powered by a smoke-belching power plant on its back, with dense plating that had turned aside every bolter shell the Sternguard had thrown at it.

The ork was armed with a pair of rapid-firing cannons, one mounted on each arm. Hissing hydraulics powering its limbs gave it the strength to heft the enormous weapons and keep up a withering wall of fire. Even as Donatus took in the sight, sizing up the greenskin's armoured mass for avenues of attack, Brother Adelmo broke cover again and ran into a blind spot created by a heap of fallen masonry.

'I'm making a detonation run!' Adelmo voxed.

'Go for the joints!' replied Sergeant Tatianus. 'They are the most vulnerable!'

Adelmo ran straight at the ork. He had a Krak grenade in his hand, an explosive with a small radius but a high-powered charge designed to rip open armoured vehicles. Placed correctly, it would split the ork's armour open and leave the xenos inside ripe for killing.

The creature saw Adelmo before he got close enough to plant the grenade. It swung one of its cannons and slammed the length of it into Adelmo's chest. The Space Marine was hurled across the width of the chapel and crunched into the wall, dislodging chunks of broken stone as he tumbled to the floor.

The ork laughed again, the metallic sound issuing from the steel faceplate. Its metal mask was in the likeness of an ork, with red-lensed eyes and a huge grinning, jagged maw.

Donatus played his preysense sight across the ork. The sight picked out body heat and motion, lining the armoured ork in red and yellow, and the heat billowing from the power plant. The cannons glowed white hot and the hydraulics were edged in cherry red. The crosshairs etched onto Donatus' lens hovered over the ork's chest, where beneath the armour plating the alien's heart had to beat.

Not even a Kraken round, with its shaped reactive charge to punch through ceramite and plasteel, would get through the armour there. Donatus needed another way.

The ork wheeled around to face Tatianus, who was still trying to outflank it. The sergeant rolled out of a volley of fire, but the shockwave of the chain of explosions threw the Sternguard sergeant off his feet and sent him sprawling behind the chapel's altar.

The ork's power plant was facing Donatus now. He had, he guessed, two ways through the ork engineer's armour, and the power plant was one. It did not have the same armour plating as the ork's body and there was a good chance a penetrating shot would create secondary detonations or cause the armour to fail.

He weighed up the chances in his head. At times like this, with a target in his sights, Donatus' mind could hurtle through a series of probability equations that a scribe would need days to write down. He made his decision and pulled the trigger.

The Kraken shell speared through the brass-cased cylinder between the smoke-belching exhaust stacks. From the neat hole and larger exit scar shot a whistling plume of steam.

No explosion of fuel blew the armour apart. The ork didn't slow down. It turned to face Donatus, suddenly aware of the fourth Sternguard in the chapel.

But there were *two* ways through the armour.

Donatus slid a second Kraken round into the breech of his bolter, and felt the click as it fitted into the firing chamber. His crosshair found the red lens over the ork's right eye. A reflex action kicked in, and he fired.

The Kraken shell shattered the lens and bored right through the faceplate. It punched through the ork's real eye and the bone of the socket. The armour covering the back of the skull held and the bullet rebounded inside its head, sending a shower of gore spraying from the ruptured lens.

The cannons fired a few more rounds as the ork's hands clenched the firing levers reflexively. Then the guns hung limp at its sides and the whole contraption slumped, the head hanging low, the cannon barrels resting on the floor.

Tatianus picked himself up. Adelmo was on his feet, too, the deep blue of his Chapter livery caked in white dust from the pulverised stone of the chapel. His armour had been repainted upon his return from service with the Deathwatch, and it had made him look like a new recruit. Felidus had mocked him for it at first, but now Adelmo looked as battle-worn as the rest of them.

‘A good kill, brother,’ Tatianus commended Donatus, approaching the ork to check it really was dead. A trickle of gore from the punctured lens suggested there was little doubt of that.

‘Not so good,’ said Adelmo. Though he wore his helmet, crowned with gilded laurel leaves, Donatus could tell that he was smiling. ‘It took two rounds.’

Chaplain Cassius took to the pulpit as if he was born to it, the ruddy sunlight edging his polished black armour with dull fire. Behind him rose the industrial mass of Skemarchus, the manufactoria city belching smoke and flame in vast columns that reached the steel-coloured sky.

‘Brethren,’ said Cassius. ‘On the eve of battle we turn our thoughts inwards, towards the strength we shall call upon tomorrow. A million orks hold Skemarchus. We are but eighty. And yet, we shall win.’

The battle-brothers of the Third Company stood ranked up in the middle of the Ultramarines' landing zone, surrounded by the command and sensorium buildings that had been dropped from orbit. Nearby were the Stormraven gunships and Rhinos that would take them into the storm that awaited them in Skemarchus. The eight squads stood hooked by Cassius' words, the young Chaplain fixing each one with a look as he spoke. He did not wear the traditional skull-faced helm of his position, relying instead on his own face, not yet marked by battle, to relay the intensity behind his words. Most Ultramarines gave decades of service before they could be elevated to the ranks of the Reclusiam and wear the black armour of the Chaplain – Cassius was exceptionally young to serve in such a role.

In spite of his youth, and the fact that most of the Ultramarines now

listening to him had more battlefield experience than he did, Cassius' words seemed to lock the congregation in place. His very presence demanded that he be heard.

'What is it that makes a single Ultramarine worth ten thousand of the enemy, and more?' began Cassius. 'Is it wargear from the forges of Macragge? The bolter and the chainsword, and the blessed power armour, are more than the equal of anything the greenskins can field. Is it the wisdom of the Codex Astartes that guides us in war, flowing from the hand of the Primarch Guilliman? Is it the augmentations within us all that make us more than men? No. All these things make us strong, but not victorious.'

Donatus watched the sermon from the passenger compartment of the Stormraven that had brought the veteran squad back to the Ultramarines staging post. Having fought the greenskin mek and so needing to observe their wargear rites, the veterans had been excused from attending the sermon with their other battle-brothers. Donatus opened up the casing of his bolter, cycling the weapon to check the smoothness of its action.

'He has a way with words,' said Brother Adelmo, who was forcing out the dents that the greenskin had left in his armour. 'I'll give the boy that.'

'Just because we count ourselves as First Company veterans,' said Sergeant Tatianus, 'that doesn't mean he has nothing for us to hear.'

'It was not flowery words that bade me fight,' said Brother Felidus. 'The Codex gives any of us reason enough. Is this what the newly-blooded among us react to, though? Sermons and exhortations? Just knowing the orks exist should be enough.'

'You were like them once, Felidus,' Tatianus muttered. 'You were not born into the galaxy a fully-formed Sternguard. Cassius is young, but he deserves our respect.'

'And he's right about one thing,' said Adelmo. 'There are a *lot* of greenskins in that city.'

'You're not bored with killing orks?' asked Felidus mockingly. 'I would have thought the Deathwatch had fed you your fill.'

Adelmo tapped the silvered skull that hung among the purity seals and battle-honours on his chestplate. 'The first lesson the Deathwatch taught me, brother,' said Adelmo, 'is that there are *never* enough dead xenos.'

Donatus watched Chaplain Cassius spread his arms, brandishing his

crozius arcanum, the short club-like power weapon topped with gilded eagle's wings. 'Yes, brothers – it is our fury that makes us victorious!' he exclaimed. 'Our rage! The unrelenting fruits of our hatred! This is what makes us the equal of an army of orks. Drink deep of that ocean of fury within you. Let it drive your arm, your bolter and your blade, into the hateful corpse of your enemy!'

The Chaplain pointed to the Sternguard. A dozen heads turned to regard them.

'Witness the slaying of the greenskin mek by Brother Donatus of the First Company! It was with rage and hate that he brought the alien low. Learn from such examples and turn your own fury into a weapon deadlier than a whole army of xenos!'

'Behold the rage of Donatus,' said Felidus, smirking as he cleaned the chapel dust from the eye lenses of his helmet. 'Grab a handhold, brothers, lest the storm of his anger blow us all away...'

Donatus shot him a look. He let his bolter's action slide home and shut the casing.

It had not been fury that had brought down the ork mek. It had been a cold, level-headed and thorough approach to war. A suppression of his anger, not a release of it.

'If that is what they need to hear,' said Donatus, 'then let him say it.'

'Let the greenskin stand before us!' Cassius continued. 'For we shall mow him down! Let the ork defy us, for we shall scorch him in the flames of our rage! I give thanks for the battle almost upon us, for we shall sweep away the greenskins on the great storm of our fury!'

The Ultramarines clapped their fists to their breastplates in a warrior's salute. In the distance, beyond the Astra Militarum encampments and motor pools, the ork-lit fires and smokestacks of Skemarchus billowed their smoky foulness into the sky.

This planet was a already place of smothering heat, but within hours it would be completely aflame.

Atmospheric silicate dust rained against the lower hull of the gunship, forcing it to pitch and yaw as the pilot wrestled against the fierce up-draughts. The shifting expanses of molten rock below welled up from the planet's mantle, belching the raw geothermal heat of the core into the air.

Donatus held onto an overhead handle and watched through the armoured gunport as the Stormraven headed in low beneath the level of Skemarchus' streets. The city was built on a series of enormous platforms, its foundations sunk deep into the lava flow. Vast furnaces stood among heaped-up tenements and machine shops, part solid and fortress-like, part ramshackle death trap, all baked in the merciless heat hammering up from beneath. The sky over Skemarchus was smudgy darkness, fed by the foundry smokestacks and the new fires that consumed whole districts.

Even from a distance, the city was a torn and agonised wreck. Towers were toppled. Whole foundry-fortresses were torn open, laying bare their steel entrails to the sky, riddled with flame. One of the main platforms had sunk into the lava and was slowly being consumed, a brick and girder at a time.

'The greenskins despoil even that which they can turn to their use,' said Felidus, watching through the gunport beside Donatus. 'Like some in-built allergy to civilisation, they have to tear it down.'

'There's enough of Skemarchus left for them to repurpose,' replied Sergeant Tatianus. 'If we don't dislodge them they'll turn the place into a factory for their war machines. That thing we fought at the chapel was just one of their meks – this place has drawn a thousand of them and their warbands.'

'Orks are vermin,' spat Felidus. 'They won't surrender. They're too stupid to give up.'

'Do not dismiss the greenskin mind,' said Adelmo. 'A single ork is bestial and crude. But in sufficient numbers they show a cunning that too many of the Emperor's armies have underestimated. Underestimating the intelligence of the alien will get you killed. I saw that much in the Deathwatch – we lost many good brothers who failed to learn that lesson.'

'I know well how dangerous the ork can be,' said Felidus. 'I am saying they will not break like an army of men. We're going to have to kill them all.'

'*One minute!*' came the vox from the pilot, Brother Otho. From below the edge of the nearest city-platform, it was possible to see the spaceport, a wide expanse of rockcrete overhanging the edge, the underside festooned with fuel pipes and coolant ducts. Control towers and comms-aerials rose over the landing pad, and as the gunship rose over the edge of the pad the

scattering of ork emplacements came into view.

‘They’re holding it in force,’ said Felidus.

‘Of course they are,’ said Adelmo. ‘Like the sergeant said, they’re not stupid.’

‘They’re standing in our way,’ said Felidus grimly. ‘That’s the most stupid decision they’ll ever make.’

The gunships had come in low to avoid any anti-aircraft capacity the orks had at the spaceport. Along with the Sternguard Stormraven, another pair of gunships carried a force from Third Company led by Chaplain Cassius. As they crested the level of the landing pad, fire stuttered towards the strike force, ill-aimed but heavy volleys that traced burning chains between the gunships.

Donatus felt the Stormraven banking, and the view of the landing pad and the foundries behind it tilted as the gunship swept in towards the designated landing point.

The landing pad was covered in ork fortifications and firepoints, and the gunships would be hard-pressed to make a safe landing. With all the orks and their fortifications cleared away, the landing pad would be capable of receiving much larger ships, from bulk cargo craft to troop transports. That was the purpose of the Ultramarines’ mission – to seize the spaceport, and open up a way for the Astra Militarum to land their troops directly in the centre of Skemarchus. Already units of soldiers were grinding into the edge of the city, supported by the rest of Third Company, but it would take them months to make headway fighting room to room through the outskirts. With a spaceport under Imperial control, armies could be sent into the heart of the city to begin forcing back the orks on multiple fronts.

If the spaceport was captured. If Chaplain Cassius and the Sternguard could break the greenskin hold, and open up the gates of Skemarchus.

The Stormraven swept over the landing pad. Scurrying orks shot by in a blur as they ran to take up firing positions. A few anti-aircraft rounds thunked into the hull and the Stormraven bucked.

‘*Ten seconds,*’ Otho’s voice came again. ‘*Deploying ramp.*’

Donatus felt the Stormraven rearing and slewing under Otho’s control – the pilot had trained with the Chapter’s Techmarines, and his skills on the controls were as honed as Donatus’ behind a bolter. Donatus felt a spark of

admiration for him, for though he might not be named in Cassius' sermons he was needed just as keenly if the Ultramarines were to wrench victory from the greenskins. As the Third Company's best pilot he had been assigned to transport the Sternguard, the most resilient and disciplined of the First Company's veterans.

The rear ramp of the passenger compartment swung open. The fuel-heavy air of Skemarchus swirled in with a roar. Brother Felidus hefted his storm bolter and fixed it to the mount on the open rampway, aiming the weapon out of the back of the gunship. The pilot tilted the gunship onto its tail as the front retros fired and Felidus opened fire at the greenskins running for cover, stitching explosive bolts across the stained rockcrete of the landing pad.

'We're down!' voxed Sergeant Tatianus.

'*We are moments behind you,*' replied Chaplain Cassius over the strike force's vox-net. '*Heed the word of Guilliman! As it is written, so it shall be!*'

The lower edge of the ramp touched down. Brother Adelmo was first out, firing as he jumped down onto the landing pad. Donatus and Tatianus followed, ducking low, Felidus' heavy bolter fire hammering above them.

The nearest cover was a massive steel docking clamp covered in bright ork graffiti, with a clutch of severed heads hanging from a crossbeam. A grimacing ork vaulted over the clamp and Donatus ran right at it.

A normal soldier would run from the enemy and seek safety, but a Space Marine knew that fleeing was the best way to give the enemy a chance to kill him without worrying about a return shot. Donatus raised his bolter, leaning into the stock as he ran, and let a tight cluster of shots fly. Three bolter shells smacked into the ork, ripping through its patchwork armour of blue-painted steel and detonating inside. The ork's chest was burst open and the xenos pitched face-first onto the rockcrete, dead before it hit the ground, lungs blown out through its back like shredded crimson wings.

Donatus slid into cover beside Adelmo. Behind him, Felidus was hauling the heavy bolter towards them.

'*There's too much fire,*' Otho voxed. '*I'm covering from above, where I can go to evasive.*'

'We wish you clear skies, brother!' Sergeant Tatianus replied.

In battle the Sternguard served as an anchor point, a walking fortification,

that would hold the whole line intact while the rest of the Ultramarines prosecuted the battle plan. Roboute Guilliman had seen the need for such Space Marines to be organised together and deployed as one to maximise their effectiveness, and thus the doctrines of the Sternguard were found in the pages of Codex Astartes. Now they were the first down, the Ultramarines battle line would form.

The other pair of Stormravens touched down and the Third Company Ultramarines jumped out, spreading their fire in all directions, stuttering disciplined volleys at any ork in sight. Cassius landed just as a group of greenskins charged at the Ultramarines, the aliens eager to reap the glory of cutting down the intruders.

Half of the orks died as they leapt the barricade they had been sheltering behind. One was blasted to crimson mist by a burst of heavy bolter fire from one of the Stormravens. Others were shredded by bolter shells. Cassius ran forward, crozius in hand, and slammed into the lead ork.

The greenskin was an oversized brute clad in armour scraps and tattered xenos hides. Its left forearm had been replaced with a huge claw with blades like a set of industrial shears. The claw jabbed forwards and Cassius met it with his crozius. The weapon's power field discharged and the claw shattered, its blades spinning off, broken and scorched. The ork bellowed and Cassius rammed a fist into its mouth, splintering its teeth.

Cassius brought the crozius up into the ork's ribs. Another greenskin tried to get behind the Chaplain but the Ultramarines were spreading out around Cassius and one of them put a bolter round through the ork's spine. Cassius tore the crozius out again, bringing entrails and shards of broken rib with it, then slammed the weapon down to hit right between the huge ork's eyes.

Donatus heard the cheer that went up from his battle-brothers as the front of the ork's face caved in. It slumped to its knees, and Cassius smashed the crozius into the side of its head. The recharged power field discharged again and the upper half of the ork's skull was obliterated, spilling brains like wine from a chalice.

More anti-air fire was streaking overhead, dangerously low. It was too high to threaten the Ultramarines on the ground but the Stormravens were in danger of being picked off. The pilots took them up higher where they could weave out of the orks' gunsights and support with strafing runs from

the air. The Ultramarines made for the cover near the Sternguard, continuing to fire on the few orks that showed themselves.

‘He could have stood back and let the bolters take those greenskins down,’ said Donatus. ‘No need to risk himself.’

‘But then, what would we have to cheer?’ replied Adelmo.

Cassius ran over to the Sternguard. Donatus saw he was already liberally spattered with orkish gore. ‘Sergeant Tatianus! We have our foothold. Now we must exploit it.’

‘Your plan?’ asked Tatianus.

‘We must not lose momentum. Keep pushing forward. Advance and sweep the greenskins from this spaceport.’

‘If we establish a firebase here then we can capture the spaceport point by point,’ said Tatianus. ‘Use our heads. Break them down a piece at a time, capture the pad then move on methodically. If we charge ahead we could become surrounded.’

‘Hold back, and become swamped with reinforcements? The Codex is clear, sergeant. We must not hand the enemy the initiative.’

‘Reinforcements are exactly what we should be worried about, Chaplain,’ Donatus interjected. ‘If we are caught in the open when they arrive, we will be done for, and we are fools if we think the greenskins do not have them close to hand.’ He pointed over the steel bulk of the docking clamp, towards the far edge of the landing pad past control towers and refuelling stations. ‘See? That factorium is lit up. It’s at full capacity, I can feel its fires from here. The orks have had weeks to build their war machines. The Sternguard tactic is sound in this situation, Chaplain: win each patch of ground and ensure we are not exposed to the counter-attack.’

‘You speak out of turn, brother,’ said Cassius. ‘I am the commander of this strike force. I know the Codex as well as any here and it is Guilliman’s own fury that will win this battle, not a slow and tortuous advance that invites the greenskins to strike back.’

‘It only takes a single bullet to turn a battle,’ said Donatus. ‘A round well placed can do what all our anger cannot. Find the right target and the greenskins will crumble.’

‘Then until you find that target, brother,’ replied Cassius, ‘this battle will be fought my way.’

The Chaplain turned to the Ultramarines sheltering in the cover of the

docking clamp, sniping with their bolters at the greenskins trying to outflank them. 'Brethren! With fury and steel the greenskin shall be swept aside! Give them not one second to gather their strength! With me, brothers, and show these vermin what rage burns in the sons of Macragge! Charge!'

Cassius jumped up onto the leg of the docking clamp, and for a moment he was silhouetted against the fires of the forge across the landing pad. The Ultramarines followed him, vaulting out of cover and breaking into a run as Cassius led the way.

'Damn,' spat Tatianus. 'Sternguard! Advance and support!'

The Sternguard followed the bulk of the force out of cover. The landing pad was an open space of battered rockcrete broken up by makeshift orkish defences. Some were barricades of fuel drums and rubble, others were based around the control towers and the structures that studded the landing pad. The cityward side was bounded by an enormous foundry, a glowering fortress that flared orange in all its windows and cavernous doorways. It was bad ground to take, covered by overlapping fields of fire from the orkish strongpoints. As the Ultramarines charged, the ork gunfire fell, spraying showers of rockcrete shrapnel, pinging off power armour and streaking from all sides.

One of the Stormravens swooped low, anti-aircraft fire pinging off its hull. It strafed one of the ork fortifications, knocking broken xenos bodies from the jagged battlements before a heavy burst of fire threw sparks from its underside and forced the pilot to pitch the nose upwards and out of the firing arc.

Cassius led the charge into the ork stronghold, using the seconds the pilot had bought him to take the fight to the orks inside. He scrambled up the welded metal detritus that formed the front wall, the bolter fire of the Ultramarines behind him raking across the battlements. One of the Ultramarines carried a missile launcher and he dropped to one knee, took aim and loosed a missile that ripped a sizeable bit out of the top of the fortifications. Cassius swung himself up into the gap and Donatus could see the flash of the Chaplain's crozius as he battled the orks inside.

'Watch our backs!' ordered Tatianus as the Ultramarines followed the Chaplain onto the battlements. Donatus glanced behind them to see a cadre of orks running from between cover, hoping to leap on the Ultramarines

with cleavers and cutting weapons that looked like oversized welding torches.

Donatus raised his bolter. He didn't have time to swap ammunition – regular bolter shells would do. Eight or nine orks were in the force charging at the Sternguard and if they got among the veterans they could overwhelm them.

Donatus fired into the fuel tank one of the cutter-armed orks carried on its back. The tank exploded and liquid fire blossomed orange, flowing over the orks. Donatus let loose another volley, cutting down an ork who had avoided the worst of the flames, as Felidus' heavy bolter hammered fire into the remainder.

'Keep moving,' voxed Sergeant Tatianus. 'Don't get left behind.'

In a few moments the Ultramarines had seized the position. The orkish fortification was little more than a ring of makeshift barricades surrounding a noisome fire pit and heaps of bedding. It wouldn't hold. Donatus ran up to the front side and joined the Ultramarines that were finding loopholes and firing positions among the wreckage.

'Brother Otho!' voxed Donatus. 'What do you see?'

'It's like an ants' nest,' replied Otho through the crackle of the vox. From his point of view in the Stormraven, the Third Company pilot could see far more than the battle-brothers on the ground. *'Greenskins swarming everywhere. I can't come down low, they've got Throne knows what mounted around the control tower. Talon Beta has already lost an engine.'*

Donatus recognised the call sign of Cassius' second Stormraven. The three gunships overhead were being mauled by the greenskins' anti-aircraft fire, and were struggling to keep up with the Ultramarines as they charged across the landing pad.

'Watch the forges,' replied Donatus. 'Stay high.'

'We cannot tarry here, brethren,' said Cassius. Donatus guessed a fair portion of the ork corpses littering the fortification had been claimed by the Chaplain's crozius and combi-flamer. 'These walls were put up by greenskins and they will not hold.'

'Take down those guns,' said Donatus. 'We cannot afford to lose our gunships.'

'Such aggression from the Sternguard?' asked Cassius. 'Are we not to burrow in and wait for the orks to come to us?'

‘I have no less fury than you, Chaplain,’ replied Donatus. ‘Now you have brought us this far, we cannot go back. We must press on, for all it costs us.’

‘Brother Donatus!’ snapped Sergeant Tatianus. ‘This is not the time to—’

Tatianus’ words were cut off by the screech of a rocket exhaust. A split second later the explosion hit home, the shockwave hammering into Donatus as the side of the stronghold caved in. Flame burst and the blackness of churned rubble ripped over the Ultramarines, blotting out the reddish light of the weak sun.

Donatus came to rest on his back, his autosenses fighting against the sudden darkness. Edged in the greys of his augmented darkvision, he could see a good chunk of the fortification had been blown in, scattering welded plates everywhere. Ultramarines were picking themselves up and running to take aim at this new threat. Donatus got to his feet, running through the mantra he had been sleep-taught as a novice to check himself for injuries. No bones broken, no organs torn, no penetrative wounds piercing his power armour. He still held onto his custom bolter, and held its preysense scope up to his eyepiece.

A short way across the landing pad was an orkish ammunition dump, well-stocked with crates of rockets and bullets. The scope painted bright reds and yellows around the muzzles of the heavy weapons toted by the orks holding the ammo dump – rocket launchers and a heavy shoulder-mounted cannon, scavenged and repurposed from the defenders of Skemarchus who had fallen when the orks invaded. The Ultramarines’ charge had brought them into the range of the greenskins’ big guns and now the cannon opened up, raking the breached fortification with massive-calibre fire.

Sergeant Tatianus ran through the eruptions of fire, through the smoke and darkness. ‘Leave this place!’ ordered the sergeant. ‘Eastwards, and find cover!’

Donatus followed Tatianus and the other Ultramarines leaving the shattered fortification. Another rocket streaked by, wayward in its aim, detonating against the far side of the fortification and throwing another shower of dust and wreckage into the air. Debris boomed and clattered down. Donatus paused to help another Ultramarine who was supporting a battle-brother – the wounded warrior’s leg was twisted at an unnatural

angle and even through the darkness Donatus could see the sheen of blood pouring from his knee.

The three made it to the nearest cover looming through the dust cloud – a series of raised coolant pipelines, already well ruptured by gunfire. Viscous coolant sprayed from the pipes and pooled around Donatus' feet. The wounded Ultramarine was placed against a solid-looking pipe junction.

Donatus had familiarised himself with the other battle-brothers in the strike force. The wounded Space Marine was Brother Scevola, being aided by Brother Vibius. Both were from Squad Senekus of the Third Company.

'It's just my leg,' growled Scevola. 'Two good trigger fingers and a mouth to curse the enemy, that's all I need.'

Half the strike force, including the Sternguard, had made for the cover of the pipe junctions. The other half had headed in the opposite direction to a series of half-collapsed machine sheds. Among racks of decommissioned shuttle parts, Cassius and the rest of the strike force were organising themselves into a firing line to suppress the orks still firing rockets and cannon fire at them.

'We still need to take that control tower,' said Donatus as he rejoined the Sternguard. He saw Brother Adelmo was not with them. The Deathwatch veteran had been separated from the Sternguard squad, or had fallen.

'And silence those damned big guns,' said Felidus.

'Cassius!' Tatianus shouted into the vox as another volley of rockets howled overhead. 'We cannot push forwards. The enemy has the field and he can bring fire on us from every direction. Consolidate and move by sections, one side covering the other. If we charge on, we'll be torn apart.'

'The greenskins will swamp us if we hold back,' came Cassius' reply. *'It is the fury of Macragge that will win this day!'*

'If the orks try to cut us off then we will mow them down,' replied Tatianus. 'If we charge again, we will leave the fury of Macragge bleeding on this landing pad!'

Donatus glanced up above the coolant pipes. More gangs of orks were sprinting across the open space, hauling heavy weapons and ammo boxes towards the command tower and ammo dump. The Ultramarines could use the split in their force to their advantage, one side moving to the next patch of cover while the other suppressed the worst of the ork fire with

bolter volleys. It would be tough and bloody work for every step, but it was better than charging across the expanse of rockcrete again.

But Donatus was not in command. He was not the spiritual guardian of the Ultramarines, with a duty to preserve the wellbeing of their souls as well as secure victory. This was not his choice to make.

‘If the greenskins want blood,’ Cassius cried out, transmitting to the whole strike force, *‘then we shall give it to them! We shall leave this whole place swimming in it! But it is not the blood of mankind that flows this day. Drown Skemarchus in xenos blood! Smother its fires with greenskin flesh!’* The Chaplain leapt clear of the cover of the machine-shops, the volleys of ork gunfire leaving him untouched as if he were charmed.

Donatus admitted to himself it was inspiring to see the young warrior leading from the front, brandishing his crozius like a standard raised high for the rest of the Ultramarines to follow. He could feel those fires in himself stoked by Cassius’ example, too, in spite of all the passages in the Codex exhorting him to stay calm on the battlefield.

He felt the pull, as if there were a chain attached to his body that was being hauled on by Cassius. Donatus wanted very much in that moment to sprint into the open, to get face to face with the greenskin and deliver to it the justice of Macragge.

Among the Ultramarines massing behind Cassius was Brother Adelmo, who had been split off from the Sternguard and was now ready to join Cassius’ charge. Donatus felt a twinge of envy, for Adelmo could let himself be dragged forward by the pull of Cassius’ words, he could abandon the prohibitions that came with serving in the Sternguard and fully indulge his hatred for the greenskins.

‘Back him up!’ ordered Tatianus. ‘Keep the greenskins’ heads down, but do not expose yourselves to fire!’

‘Who will spurn the fight this day?’ cried Cassius as he ran, an ork rocket spiralling past him. *‘Who will wish his armour clean of xenos blood?’* The strike force followed him, firing as they ran, the storm of ork fire hammering in return almost hiding them from Donatus’ sight.

‘Eyes north, brothers!’ came Brother Otho’s voice, distorted by the gunfire and the whine of his gunship’s engines over the vox-net. *‘The forge opens!’*

Donatus spotted the gunship overhead, weaving between columns of fire.

The orks had fortified the landing pad with far more firepower than the Ultramarines had anticipated, and it had robbed them of their support from the air, but at least Otho had been able to use his eyes even if his guns were quiet.

Donatus ran to the end of the cluster of pipes, leaning around to look towards the northern edge of the landing pad, the cityward side where the forge walls rose like the bulwarks of a fortress. A massive set of doors was swinging open, and the ruddy glow of its fires bled out.

A vast shape was silhouetted in the opening doorway. It was a barrel-shaped machine, easily twenty metres tall, that crunched forwards on a set of enormous tracks. Even at this distance, above the storm of gunfire, Donatus could hear the throb of its engines and the awful grinding of its tracks. Diminutive greenskins scrambled all over its surfaces or scurried out of its way.

The machine was a bizarre representation of an ork, like an idol of some savage greenskin god. On top of the body was a leering face of sheet metal with open portholes for eyes, and banners and totems stood in a steel forest across its shoulders. Its body was covered in blackened armour plates filthy with the smoke of the forge, and greenskin riggers still hammered the rivets which held it all together. One of the machine's arms was a gigantic claw with each of the three fingers covered in spinning cutting blades. The other arm was a cannon so big it was a miracle that the whole machine did not topple over. More skinny greenskins slave-creatures worked the ammunition hoppers on its shoulder to load a man-sized artillery shell into the breech.

'It's a gargant,' voxed Donatus. 'The greenskins have a gargant. Cassius! Brothers! Fall back, they have a war machine headed your way!'

The Ultramarines had fought the orks since the glorious days of the Great Crusade, for the greenskins were one of mankind's oldest and most persistent enemies. The orks possessed, in spite of their apparent savagery, some natural talent for engineering, as evidenced by the heavily armoured specimen Donatus had killed in the chapel. Their finest engineers flocked to major war zones like Skemarchus, and would pool their skills to forge enormous war machines such as the one now grinding its way across the spaceport's landing pad.

That was why the orks had taken Skemarchus – to create machines such

as this one. The Imperial war effort was to take the city back before the orks could repurpose its forges, but at this one at least, they were too late.

A rocket burst just behind Cassius, throwing two Ultramarines off their feet – Donatus was sure that Adelmo was one of them. The Chaplain was almost at the control tower, bringing the rest of the force in his wake. He looked up at the war machine now advancing from the forge, and at the cannon being levelled right at him.

‘Do you see their blasphemy, brothers?’ cried out Cassius. *‘They fear the divine right of mankind, and to face us they have crafted a graven image of—’*

The cannon roared.

A split second later, a huge shell slammed into the base of the control tower. A blackened plume of debris and smoke ripped out of it as the lower floors were pulverised by the explosive impact. The ork gunners and their anti-aircraft artillery were swallowed by the explosion and the tower toppled, its shattered windows like the black eyes of a skull.

Cassius and most of the strike force were swallowed in the wash of smoke. Secondary explosions crackled through the impact zone as ammunition cooked off.

‘Chaplain!’ Tatianus shouted into the vox. ‘Speak, brother! Do you yet live?’

‘Adelmo!’ called Donatus. ‘Brother Adelmo, speak!’

There was no reply from his fallen squadmate.

Donatus saw gunports opening up all over the ork gargant’s body. Heavy mounted guns stuttered fire upwards, replacing the anti-aircraft guns lost moments ago.

Donatus leaned around the corner of the pipe junction and lifted his preysense scope to his eye. The multi-spectrum sight picked out fires burning in the smoky darkness, and hot shards of shrapnel studding every surface. Sundered corpses lay scattered around, their body temperatures registering as a fading glow – the remains of orks caught directly in the explosion. A few forms in the familiar shape of power armour lay on the ground while others moved through the darkness, retreating in good order back towards the machine sheds.

Ultramarines were disciplined. It was that which defined them. When even the bravest men and women of the Astra Militarum would be ruled

by confusion and panic, the Ultramarines were still soldiers. That was what kept them alive as the orks tried to capitalise, the greenskins firing their heavy weapons at random through the smoke.

‘There,’ said Donatus, focusing on a figure that wore no helmet, propped up on one arm as it tried to get to its feet. ‘The Chaplain’s alive.’

‘He does not answer,’ said Tatianus.

‘I see him,’ said Donatus. ‘His comm-link must be down. He’s injured.’

The surviving orks were emerging from the ruin of the control tower. Dozens of them had survived, and more were running to the centre of the battlefield. Orks loved violence and destruction so the flame and smoke were magnets to them, promising them dying and wounded humans to kill.

Sergeant Senekus was taking the lead, forming the Ultramarines up into firing parties. Within seconds, bursts of bolter fire were scything into the orks, blowing limbs from bodies and ripping torsos open.

‘Firebase, brothers!’ ordered Tatianus. Felidus and the sergeant were up on the pipework, lending their own volleys to the crossfire that cut down the orks trying to charge through the blast zone.

‘Who will bring in the young Chaplain?’ asked Felidus between bursts from his heavy bolter.

‘I will,’ said Donatus. ‘I can see him in my scope. The greenskins, too.’

The gargant’s savage junk metal face loomed above the billows of smoke. The greenskin riggers were fighting to reload the cannon, forcing out the massive spent shell to load a new one. One of the gargant’s eyes was thrown open like a hatch to reveal the ork driver, its gurning face surmounted by a pair of crude bionic eyes like mismatched goggles. It leaned out, clearly trying to get a better view of the battlefield. Then it pointed down at the Ultramarines sheltering behind the coolant pipes and yelled an order to its unseen subordinates.

‘Displace!’ ordered Tatianus. The Sternguard and the other Ultramarines around them ran from behind the pipework as the cannon swivelled to face them. Brother Vibius supported Scevola again, Scevola blasting fire at the orks as he leaned on Vibius’ shoulder.

A few scattered chunks of wreckage lay nearby, offering little more shelter than a soldier’s foxhole. It was the remains of a crashed lander, brought down in the early days of the invasion. A band of fleeing citizens must have died inside as ork fire brought the shuttle down, leaving

scorched sections of its cockpit and passenger compartment smouldering on the landing pad.

Donatus slid into the cover of the shuttle cockpit as the gargant's cannon erupted. The pipework disappeared in another burst of flame and smoke, and a mane of coolant spurted up high into the sky. The shockwave shuddered the rockcrete floor and gobs of coolant spattered down like greasy rain.

The smoke was clearing from around the tower. The tower had fallen completely, the length of it a sprawl of shattered rubble spilled across the landing pad. A scattering of Ultramarines lay unmoving, the blue of their armour masked by the dust of pulverised rockcrete, and Donatus recognised the battle-honours clustered on Brother Adelmo's chestplate. Chaplain Cassius was similarly caked in dust, but he was propped up on one arm. His bare head glistened crimson with blood.

A chunk of masonry had landed on his leg, pinning him in place. Cassius was trying to tear himself free but the weight wasn't budging. A dazed ork wandered out of the smoke and Cassius put two rounds into its chest without aiming. Another ork loomed forwards carrying a heavy blade with whirring chain-teeth along its leading edge. The Chaplain blasted a gout of flame from the nozzle beneath the bolter's barrel and the ork howled, stumbling as it tried to bat out the liquid fire engulfing its body.

Donatus broke cover. He ran towards Cassius and jumped into a shallow crater. The rockcrete was hot and smoking beneath him as he ducked beneath a volley of ork fire. Everywhere was bedlam and smoke, and only the discipline of the Ultramarines forged any order from the madness. Felidus' heavy bolter chattered behind him, forcing the orks to take cover, keeping a few more guns off Donatus as he advanced.

He made it to the length of the fallen tower, the crumbled masonry offering him solid cover against the orks. Cassius was a short sprint away, but the shadow of the gargant's cannon passed over him and he realised it might as well be a thousand miles. Adelmo lay further beyond, still unmoving.

More orks advanced on Cassius. Donatus shot one down with a round to the throat and Cassius shot another through the knee. The greenskin fell and was finished off by a second round from Cassius' bolter.

The gargant levelled its cannon at Cassius. The riggers had almost

finished reloading another shell into the red-hot breech. Cassius tried again to force the weight off his immobile leg, but it would not budge.

‘You told me that one bullet would turn the battle,’ called Cassius, glancing over at Donatus. ‘I will show you how one can turn a war. The veterans of the Sternguard think they have seen all of battle, but you still have much to learn. See how one shot stokes a fire in the hearts of our brethren that will never go out!’

Cassius pushed himself up to a sitting position and aimed his bolter at the steel cliff face of the gargant’s hull.

‘Defiance, brothers!’ he yelled. ‘Thus, do I spit upon the works of the alien!’

Cassius fired a single shot. It pinged off the gargant’s armour. An act of pure defiance, a final insult to the foe. Even at the moment of death, Chaplain Cassius was inflaming the rage of his battle-brothers. Every Ultramarine there would remember that shot, that defiance. They would speak of it, write of it, have the artisans of Macragge work it into chapel windows and the illuminators ink it into the Chapter’s volumes of battle-lore.

Cassius was right. Donatus had much to learn. He had never before heard a cheer like the one that went up over the vox as the Ultramarines watched the Chaplain curse the orks with his single, futile bolter shell.

Donatus vaulted over the section of the broken tower. Orkish gunfire spattered and cracked around him. He lead with his shoulder as he ran, taking two rounds on the shoulder guard and another on the armour of his thigh.

He grabbed one of the magazines mag-locked to his waist as he ran. He rejected the Kraken penetrator shell, even though it might have punched through the weaker armoured eye-hatch of the gargant. It might have found the driver, or some critical system – a fuel cell, a reactor shield – to set off a chain reaction. It was possible, but unlikely.

The Metal Storm shells were perfect for ripping through exposed ork flesh, but the riggers on the cannon had finished loading and, even if they were reduced to a gory mist, the gargant would still fire.

Instead, Donatus took out a single Dragonfire shell and loaded it into his bolter. He backed against the slab of masonry that was pinning Cassius to the ground. The barrel of the gargant’s gun was aimed right at him,

forming a staring black eye with a pupil of fire.

‘Sometimes, Brother-Chaplain,’ he said, ‘defiance is not enough.’

Donatus took aim, the preysense scope cutting through the haze of smoke and dust.

An army of orks possessed a cunning that had slain far too many of the men who had underestimated it. The greenskins had, after all, taken Skemarchus and turned its forges to their own use, churning out war machines to continue their conquest of this planet and the sector beyond.

But that was an army. An individual ork was stupid.

Such an ork had built the ammunition dump where the xenos heavy weapons were stationed. It had done so ignorant or uncaring of the fact it was right beside one of the Imperial port’s main fuel pumps, where the reservoir of promethium beneath could be tapped to feed the engines of a landed spacecraft.

Such an ork had then laid the heavy fuel hoses leading from the pump to the forge, to fill the gargant’s fuel tanks. The same greenskin had jammed open all of the safety valves to send a constant torrent of fuel into the war machine, and the pump’s joints and seals still leaked a greasy film across the rockcrete. Hoses had been torn free by the war machine’s advance, and greenskin riggers were hammering at the valves with wrenches and lengths of iron pipe to close them again.

What had been a fuelling system sturdy enough to withstand a shuttle crash was now little more than an unexploded bomb thanks to the impatience and crudeness of the greenskins.

The Dragonfire shell was an incendiary, its core loaded with fast-burning explosives to turn the eruptive power of a bolter shell into an expanding ball of flame. The Kraken would have been certain to penetrate, but there was no guarantee the promethium would detonate as the bullet shrieked right through the machinery of the fuel pump and out the other side. The Dragonfire had to be aimed more carefully, at a weak point where one component joined another, but it was sure to have the desired effect.

Donatus pulled the trigger. The weapon bucked in his hand but he held it fast, the stock clamped against his shoulder.

In that moment, his world seemed to fall silent as the shot streaked through the air towards its target.

The shell punched into the side of the fuel pump. The promethium inside

ignited instantly and ripped the pump apart in a burst of dirty orange fire. The flames washed through the ammo dump, silencing the orks who had been cheering Cassius' imminent death.

The dump exploded, a thousand detonations going off at once as the unstable munitions went up. Every safety precaution the builders of the spaceport had made was rendered irrelevant as hundreds of explosive rounds ripped through the unsecured fuel lines into the rockcrete beneath the ammo dump. Multiple steel skins were ruptured and incandescent shrapnel tore into the main body of the fuel reservoir beneath the landing pad.

It took less than a second, but Donatus could follow every link of the chain. The fuel reservoir ruptured and near-tectonic ripples ran across the landing pad as the rockcrete rose up in fracturing waves. Gouts of flame lashed up high into the air. The underside of the landing pad gave way and the upper surface caved in, plunging what remained down towards the lava river below.

The hole grew as more and more shattered rockcrete fell. The burning stump of the control tower fell in and brought the chunks of fallen rubble with it. The slab of masonry pinning Cassius to the ground slid into the growing maw and Donatus grabbed the Chaplain by the shoulder guard, dragging him away from the chasm.

The edge of the collapse reached the track of the ork gargant. The riggers were leaping off the war machine's shoulders, their bodies breaking against the rockcrete as they chose to jump rather than face what was coming. The ork in the eye-hatch panicked as it tried to clamber out, but before he could haul his bulk towards safety the whole gargant tilted as its track tipped over the edge of the chasm.

The collapse halted as it reached the massive supporting beams that shored up the landing pad. The gargant was caught on the edge, one track hanging over the abyss, its metal hulk lit by the blood-red glow of the lava rushing past beneath. Vast masses of fallen rubble and machinery were disintegrating in the superheated flow to be submerged and swept away. Donatus could not help but stare down into the churning lava as he helped Cassius back away towards the machine sheds.

The gargant was immobile for a moment, the ork clinging to the front of its junk metal head grinning with relief as it sensed safety. Then its face

fell as the edge of the collapse crumbled a little more and it slowly, painfully, tipped towards the hole. Artillery shells fell from the open hopper and loose tools and components rained from the open hatches. Riggers too cowardly to jump moments earlier dangled from handholds on the gargant's jagged armour, one screaming as it lost its grip and tumbled into the scalding air billowing up from the lava.

The gargant's fall sped up as the ground continued to give way beneath it. With a roar of twisting metal and fracturing rockcrete, it tumbled into the hole and its vast, ponderous bulk plunged into the lava. It hit hard, the top half buckling in the impact against the surface of the lava, the orks and countless tonnes of steel vanishing in plumes of oily flame. The rest of it was drawn slowly downstream, the metal warping and stretching in the heat, pulling the war machine apart like a body on a rack.

Cassius forced himself to his feet, leaning against the bullet-scarred wall of the machine shed.

'One bullet,' the Chaplain said over the vox. *'One bullet is all it takes... and we have a thousand bullets to spare! The greenskins cower and grovel in despair. They beg for the silence of death. Let us indulge them, my brethren! The fires have consumed their god, and now let the fires of our vengeance consume the alien!'* Cassius limped a couple of steps on his wounded leg, combi-bolter and crozius in hand, before Sergeant Senekus ran forward to support him.

Donatus knew that the Sternguard should lend fire from the back line, but he felt the fire that Cassius spoke of within himself too, now. The Chaplain was right – the loss of their idol had broken the will of the orks and they would never be more vulnerable. The Ultramarines had to hit them hard, relentlessly, breaking them and sweeping them from the spaceport before they could regroup and pin the strike force down again.

They had lost battle-brothers on this landing pad. Brother Adelmo had vanished in the bedlam of the collapse. He had not been the only one. The grief was like fuel on the fire.

Donatus saw in his mind the bodies of the Ultramarines cut down by the gargant's cannon and the wounds dealt to his battle-brothers, and the burning towers of Skemarchus where thousands of the city's inhabitants had died fighting for their home. He imagined Adelmo's dusty body, perhaps still alive, sprawled on the rockcrete. He pictured the soldiers of

the Astra Militarum who had died already on this world, and those who would die in the days to come.

And he saw the greenskin savages who existed solely to tear down the works that generations of mankind had sweated and bled to create.

It felt good to let the rage consume him. Donatus slammed home a whole magazine of Metal Storm shells.

A few moments ago he would have preserved every one of the precious rounds, and cursed himself for each that he failed to return to the Chapter's armoury on Macragge at the campaign's end. But now he would seek punishment for every one not buried in a greenskin's body.

Donatus let the young Chaplain's words take him over. He joined the charge, following Cassius' lead as the Ultramarines ran past the enormous burning hole in the landing pad towards the bands of orks who had been strafing them with gunfire. He heard those orks crying out, bellowing panicked orders or simply jibbering nonsensically.

The strike force crashed into them, despatching greenskins with bolters and combat blades. Cassius was aided by Sergeant Senekus as he drenched one ork in flame from his combi-weapon and drove his crozius into the back of another's skull. The Ultramarines moved on from each knot of orks, leaving the barricades and makeshift firepoints draped with ork corpses. Donatus hammered a volley of shredding shots into a trio of orks trying to flee, and they vanished in a mist of gore.

He let the rage drive him on, as the Ultramarines cut their way through a wall of greenskin flesh to open the doors of Skemarchus wide.

He would make the xenos pay.

A heavily modified Chimera drove a mass of smouldering wreckage towards the edge of the platform with its dozer blade and pushed it off, sending it raining towards the liquid fire several storeys below. It was gradually clearing an area large enough to land one of the Astra Militarum dropships, which would ferry hundreds-strong units of infantry into the centre of Skemarchus. It would be a long time before the spaceport could receive bulk landers with its primary landing pad in ruins, but it would soon serve as a makeshift airfield for the Astra Militarum.

Another Chimera, the roof removed from its passenger cabin, was serving as a corpse wagon. It was heaped high with ork bodies, likewise destined

to be thrown over the edge. Field engineers were fixing makeshift fuel tanks and laying power cabling under the supervision of Adeptus Mechanicus engineers.

The Ultramarines meanwhile held the picket, covering all ways in with overlapping fields of bolter fire. A few orks had ventured out of the shadows of the enormous foundry only to be trapped between the dead ends of burning forges and the guns of the Ultramarines. Those few greenskins that had shown their faces since had been shot down with precision fire from the Space Marines.

Donatus finished his post-battle wargear rites, strip-cleaning his bolter and taking a tally of his ammunition. He had fired off all of his Metal Storm shells and half his regular bolter rounds. His Dragonfire magazine was down a single shell. He looked up from the flak-weave barricade of the Ultramarines' command post as Brother Otho's Stormraven swooped overhead, banked to slow, and came down to rest on the surface of the platform. Chaplain Cassius, his leg shored up with a temporary bracing splint, limped over to the gunship as the cockpit door swung open. He was still as fresh-faced and unmarked as a novice, though the weight of perhaps a few more years seemed to darken his eyes.

'Any sign of the fallen?' he asked gravely.

Otho swung himself out of the cockpit. 'None, Chaplain.' He stepped through the heat haze rising off the lower hull of the gunship. 'I took the squadron on three passes but there is precious little that hasn't sunk into the lava. We surveyed what we could before the heat and silicates became too much for the engines. They are not there. We have lost them.'

'I see,' said Cassius. 'My thanks, brother.'

'They are gone?' asked Donatus as Cassius turned away from the gunship.

'They are.'

The Codex Astartes required the battle-brothers killed in the battle for the spaceport to be recovered so their wargear and the geneseed that controlled their augmentations could be returned to the Chapter. But the bodies of many had fallen into the hole in the landing pad that swallowed the ork gargant, and had been incinerated in the lava.

Donatus had not known all of those Space Marines well, but an injury to one was an injury to all. Each Space Marine was the culmination of years

of training and the distillation of millennia of battle-lore, a rare individual hand-picked by the Chaplains to carry out the will of the Emperor. Each one that fell could never truly be replaced.

And Adelmo had been more than a mere battle-brother to Donatus.

The veteran of the Deathwatch had been his friend – an inspiration, reliable and relentless in battle yet somehow still light-hearted enough to remind Donatus of the reasons why the Ultramarines fought. It would be fitting, thought Donatus, if he could one day do his fallen brother the honour of following in his footsteps by entering the Deathwatch. Adelmo's geneseed might be lost, but his legacy was not.

'We will mourn them,' said Donatus. The words were not nearly enough to sum up what was inside him, but he had never been the most garrulous soul and he could think of no more to say.

'They will serve us still, in memory,' replied Cassius. 'They helped stoke the rage in you, did they not? In all of us. Those fallen brethren killed their share of greenskins this day. And they will tomorrow, too.'

'I felt the anger you spoke of,' said Donatus, 'and I followed it. In all my decades I have not ridden the wave of my rage as I did today.'

'And in all mine,' replied Cassius, 'I have not seen one bullet fell so many.' He paused. 'The same Codex leads us both. The primarch was a master of all forms of war, and so must we strive to be. I have my way and you have yours – so long as neither dies out, the Chapter will have a use for us both.'

An Astra Militarum staff shuttle descended onto an area just cleared by the engineers. It bore the laurels of a regimental commander, and carried the officers who would orchestrate the next stage of the campaign to retake Skemarchus. The opening moves of the battle had been made. Now the next stage was about to commence, and the Ultramarines would be at the leading edge of the advance. Soldiers rushed to secure the shuttle as it touched down and the ramps lowered, allowing a gaggle of ornamented and uniformed officers to emerge, heavy with medals and brocade, in the uniforms of several regiments.

'I must direct them,' said Cassius. 'They will ask much of us. I must ensure they play their part, too. We will have much to speak of when this city is won, Brother Donatus. For now, pray with your brethren.'

'I shall, my Chaplain.'

‘And thank your bolter for me.’ Cassius gave a smile, the first Donatus had ever seen on his face, and walked away to join the officers.

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Published in Great Britain in 2015 by Black Library, Games Workshop Ltd, Willow Road, Nottingham, NG7 2WS, UK.

Produced by Games Workshop in Nottingham.

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ISBN: 978-1-78572-094-9

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