



WARHAMMER
40,000

DOOM FLIGHT



A DOOM EAGLES SHORT STORY
BY CAVAN SCOTT

Table of Contents

[Cover](#)

[Doom Flight - Cavan Scott](#)

[About The Author](#)

[Legal](#)

[eBook license](#)

DOOM FLIGHT

Cavan Scott

The city was ablaze.

Sergeant Kerikus pushed down on the stick and the *Wrath of Aquila* dropped into a dive, the baleful roar of the gunship's engines echoing through the blasted streets. Ruined buildings stretched up on either side like a canyon, debris from below whipped up in the Stormtalon's wake.

Flying this close to the battle-ravaged streets was risky. The slightest miscalculation would bring certain death. A bank of burned-out towers rushed towards him. If Kerikus did not pull up soon the Stormtalon would carom into their blackened shells. Even a split second of hesitation would be fatal. Behind his battle-helm, the sergeant's cold grey eyes narrowed. He was a Doom Eagle. There would be no hesitation, no indecision. No second chance.

The hulking land transporter thundered ahead, thick barbed wheels churning up the already ravaged road. He had spotted the dense smoke belching from its engine from a kilometre away, his mouth instinctively curling in disgust. He could almost smell the foul reek of the scum hanging from the rust-eaten plating and hear their stupid cries of alarm as his Stormtalon swung around behind them.

The orks were swarming over the truck now, trampling over each other to reach the oversized gun turret that was bolted haphazardly to the transporter's uneven roof. Others had produced crude hand weapons, almost tumbling from the racing vehicle in their eagerness to bring him down.

'Not this time.'

As stubber fire danced across the Stormtalon's nose, an automatic rune flared on Kerikus's helm-display, side-mounted lascannons locked and ready to fire. Kerikus thumbed the trigger and the transporter immediately erupted into a ball of incandescent flame. The Stormtalon tore through the sudden inferno, the heat of the blast scorching the *Wrath's* silver undercarriage. Kerikus pulled up sharply, simultaneously rolling to the right. The gunship banked, rushing towards a gap between the oncoming buildings – an exceptionally tight gap. If

Kerikus belonged to any other Chapter he may have stopped to question the wisdom of running such a space. If Kerikus had belonged to any other Chapter he would be dead.

The Stormtalon sped through the gap with inches to spare.

No hesitation.

Kerikus only breathed again once the *Wrath* had climbed to a safe distance. The manoeuvre had been dangerous – foolhardy even – but it had also been necessary. The stinking creatures crammed into that transporter would have bolstered the ork defence. Some would argue that a few less greenskins would not make any difference, that the capital of Quadcana had already been lost. They would also probably misinterpret his determination for a death wish. While the Doom Eagles accepted, and even embraced, their mortality, they did not long for death and glory.

Death was inevitable. What mattered was your service to the Emperor in the years, or even seconds, before you breathed your last.

Kerikus came about, soaring above the city limits. He glanced at the tactical display, activating a status report with a blink. The entire squadron had been lost. On the screen, a solitary signal flared on the map of the city: the *Wrath of Aquila*, the last gunship in the air.

The battle had been swift and brutal and the outcome painfully predictable, signals blinking out of existence on the map with every fresh kill.

The sounds of their defeat replayed over and over in Kerikus's mind, accompanied by a pict-feed of bitter memories that he would not soon forget.

He could still hear Malika's curse as they dropped into Quadcana's atmosphere to witness the scenes of total devastation on the surface, Captain Relyn reeling off the atrocities one by one across the vox. *'Five billion dead. Defences completely routed. Temples desecrated. This cannot stand. Sergeant?'*

Kerikus had picked up the briefing, even as the squadron fell into position, two hundred kilometres from the hive world's capital city.

'We are to take back Quadcana Prime,' Kerikus had stated before Relyn's voice had cut back in.

'Or ensure that the city is utterly uninhabitable. Even for a hive world, the level of production here is astonishing. The weapon manufactories in Quadcana Prime alone would give the orks an advantage for years to come, decades even. While there is even the smallest chance of victory, we must fight.'

We *will* fight, Kerikus had thought automatically. He had given the command, even feeling a rush of pride as the Seventh Squadron had split into attack

formations.

‘Can we expect reinforcements?’ Malika had asked as soon the captain’s group had broken off. Techmarine Tyrus had provided the reply.

‘Not for three days.’

‘So it’s down to us.’

‘Isn’t it always?’ Kerikus had snapped in response. They should have been focusing, not stating the obvious. When the call from the Quadcana central administration had reached the Order, the surprise was not that the orks had invaded the planet, more that it had taken them too long. Either way, the auspex was already bleating, ork fighters screaming in to meet them.

Kerikus had begun to give orders, when the captain’s voice has broken over the vox.

‘Enemy engaged. Never seen so many. Require immediate assis–’

The rest of the sentence had been lost in an explosion and an ear-splitting shriek of static. At that moment, Kerikus had become squadron leader. The operation was in his hands, along with the lives of his battle-brothers.

Brothers who were now dead.

The *Wrath* continued circling the smouldering outskirts of the city. The skies above Quadcana Prime were still swamped with enemy fighters.

If he went back he would be shot out of the sky in seconds. A grim smile flickered across Kerikus’s dry lips.

We are Doom Eagles. We are dead already.

Opening the throttle, the *Wrath of Aquila* thundered towards the heart of the city.

Tracer fire strafed across the *Wrath*’s wings. Kerikus had expected to be picked up much earlier. It was not as if the greenskins were mounting a citywide defence. He was but one gunship. And yet, the sergeant knew all too well the perils of underestimating xenos scum. What they lacked in intelligence, they more than made up for in tenacity. They would not peel off until they had made the kill or died in the attempt – or sometimes both.

Kerikus checked the rear display, noting that his pursuer was gaining fast. The *Wrath* bobbed around burned-out towers, weaving through masts and spires. There was no time to think, only to act, to rely on the instincts that had kept him from joining the names in the Hall of the Fallen. Never stay level. Remain unpredictable. Leave the enemy guessing.

An unearthly wail of static burst through the cockpit’s speakers, disturbing

Kerikus's concentration for a microsecond – enough time to kill him. He pulled the *Wrath* into a skid, narrowly avoiding a jagged communication relay.

'Dakkajet! Dakkajet! Dakkajet!'

The gruff voice ranted over the vox, accompanied by the percussive report of autocannons. Not taking his eyes from his flight path, Kerikus reached over, instinctively knowing where to find the operational runes without looking. His helm-display flashed up confirmation; the brute had somehow managed to hack into the Stormtalon's vox system, overriding the Imperial channel. Kerikus thumbed the control, attempting to shut off the ork's manic chant, but to no avail. Re-routing the system would be fatally distracting, but there was more than one way to silence the infernal babble.

'Dakkajet! Dakkajet! Dakkaj–'

Kerikus's fist slammed into the vox control, sparks flying over his clenched gauntlet. The ork's cry distorted and was lost in a screech of white noise. Kerikus pummelled the dashboard until the speakers fell blissfully silent.

'Better,' Kerikus snarled as the savage unloaded another salvo into the *Wrath*. There was no precision in the attack, no finesse. The ork's overriding strategy was to point itself at the Stormtalon and start firing. That's what made it so dangerous.

All it would take was one lucky shot.

Switching to repulsor systems, Kerikus slammed on the air brakes, throwing the Stormtalon into a flat half spin. It was an old trick, one of the first his flight instructor had taught on Gathis. Turn straight into the attack, putting your enemy on the defensive. Force them to react, to panic.

For a second, Kerikus thought he had made a mistake. The ork held its position, firing indiscriminately.

'It's going to ram me,' Kerikus said out loud, realising the brute's suicidal intent. He opened the *Wrath's* assault cannons, but still the ork did not pull away.

Then, at the last possible moment, the ork pilot threw its jet into a spiralling climb. Instinctively, Kerikus yanked back on the stick, the Stormtalon vibrating with the unadulterated power of its twin thrusters as he gave chase, rocketing into the leaden sky. The ork was racing for the sanctuary of the storm clouds high above.

'No escape for you that way, alien.'

Warning klaxons sounded as he hung on the ork's tail, climbing almost vertically now, dangerously close to a stall. The question was what would cut out first, the engines or his brain? Despite the best efforts of his Lyman's Ear, the

extreme pressure of the crushing gravitational forces was almost too much. A human pilot would have blacked out by now, but even his enhanced physiology was struggling to cope. His peripheral vision was failing, what little colour he could still see bleached grey as his brain was starved of oxygen. He was shutting down, the scream of the repulsors flattening, losing their immediacy, Time was becoming elastic, stretching away from him. Seconds became minutes, minutes became hours. He could hardly feel the stick gripped tight in his hand.

‘Give in to it,’ he yelled, hardly recognising his own slurred voice in his ears. ‘Why won’t you black out? Why won’t you—’

Metallic hail clattered against the Stormtalon’s canopy, forcing Kerikus to focus.

The ork was drilling back down towards him, raining solid shot from above.

‘Impossible.’

Kerikus pulled hard on the column. The gunship rolled to port, the horizon lurching back into view as the fighter zoomed past, inches from his rear-rudder.

No time to consider how close that had been. Kerikus did not need the inclinometer to tell him how hard the *Wrath* was banking as he pulled her about, his eyes searching the sky.

‘Where are you?’ A beam of weak sunlight glinted off a canopy at three o’clock.

‘There.’

Unbelievably, almost miraculously, the ork had turned and was streaming back towards him. It was a wonder that the accursed heap of metal could even fly, let alone pull off such an impressive manoeuvre. The jet looked as if it was about to fly apart at any second, ragtag iron plates bolted randomly across a seared hull studded with high-calibre cannons.

This would end now. Kerikus had not survived this long to be outmanoeuvred by an ork opportunist.

Gunning the engines, he closed in, crosshairs appearing on the canopy’s head-up display as the assault cannons locked on target. Armoured fingers squeezed around the trigger and cannon fire danced across the air, raking the side of the ork’s precious jet. There was a flare as one of his rounds found a bomb nestled beneath the jet’s blood-red wing, followed by the satisfying billow of inky, black smoke. The ork veered off to the right, trying to get away, but Kerikus was not giving up that easily. He swung about, almost tasting the kill. All it needed was one more salvo to—

Kerikus’s head snapped up as sparks danced off the reinforced canopy, the

Stormtalon's auspex kicking in just a few seconds too late. A second fighter was bearing down on him, peppering his sensor array with stubber fire.

'Two of you,' he growled, realisation finally dawning. 'Two of you all along.' The second bird must have been waiting to swoop the moment the first had pulled up into a climb, taking advantages of Kerikus's momentary disorientation. This was not a newcomer – it was the plane he had originally engaged.

'Clever, clever greenskins.' A grim smile played across Kerikus's lips. 'But not clever enough.'

Rudder hard to the left, Kerikus wrenched the stick to the right, skidding out of the way of the diving enemy craft. The bomber passed so near that Kerikus could almost make out every rivet in its grimy undercarriage.

Gambling that the fighter would struggle to pull out of such a violent dive, Kerikus looked for the other plane. It had peeled off, heading further into the city.

'Running for cover.'

The Doom Eagle opened his throttle and powered forward. More risk. When is the best time to take down an enemy? When they are concentrating on blowing another target from the sky. He would have to be quick, before the second jet came around.

Realising the targeting cogitator would take too long to lock on, Kerikus switched to lascannons and squeezed, his machine jolting as the weapon unloaded. Twin bolts of azure energy lanced forward, slicing into the fighter's rear stabiliser, cleaving it away from the tail. The stricken craft immediately spun into a nosedive. Kerikus banked, craning his neck to see the kill. He would never understand orks. Even as it fell, the pilot opened up every gun mounted on the craft's snaggletoothed nose, firing in desperation at the ground. Perhaps it was frustration, or maybe the idiot actually believed that he could blast the planet out of the way. Either way, the jet disappeared in a searing ball of orange heat when it made contact.

The crash had taken seconds, but by the time Kerikus had levelled up, the secondary fighter was back on him. The ork fired, but was out of range, the hail of bullets dropping off before reaching his tail. Now was his chance. Pulling back on the stick, Kerikus forced the *Wrath* into a tight climb, gravity slamming him back into his harness.

'Stay awake,' he willed himself. 'Stay alive.'

The Stormtalon inverted, the ground now beneath the cockpit. As he reached the zenith Kerikus rudder hard, rolling out. The perfect half loop. The jet that

had been tailing him was now in his sights, his enhanced eyes narrowing as he saw the ork pilot bellow in impotent fury as the *Wrath* came in to strike.

‘Dakkajet?’ Kerikus sneered as he reached for the trigger. ‘Dead jet.’

The Space Marine never made the shot. The auspex sounded a second before the gunship bucked, throwing Kerikus against his restraints.

The *Wrath* dropped into a dive, damage reports scrolling across his helmet display. A direct hit from below. No time to work out how. He needed to get the nose up, pull the Stormtalon out of its dive. Below him, wrecked Imperial tanks smouldered on the streets. He would not join them. Not like this. Not today.

Dense smoke poured into the cockpit, stinging his eyes. The acrid smell of electric fires followed a second later, so strong he could taste it, bitter against his tongue. Grating alarms clamoured for his attention, but he could not risk the distraction. All he cared about was the stick, yanked back so far he feared it would snap beneath his fingers.

Slowly – too slowly – the gunship began to respond, righting itself to the shriek of overreaching engines. Kerikus pushed himself back into his chair, as if a few more inches between him and the cracked roads would make any difference, and visualised roaring back into the sky. Nothing else mattered. Not the sound of the ground-to-air guns that had got a lucky hit and almost brought him down, or the ork fighter that was no doubt coming about to finish him off.

‘Not now,’ he hissed, his teeth clenching so hard they hurt. ‘Not. Now.’

Throwing up a bow wave of detritus, the *Wrath of Aquila* streaked forty metres down the ravaged street and, finally, climbed back into the fray. Anti-aircraft shells whistled past the canopy as Kerikus screwed the Stormtalon into a spiral and the warning runes blinked out one after the other.

He glanced at the auspex. No essential systems had been damaged in the strike. Internal fires extinguished. No fuel lost. The only concern was the port vector engine. It was only functioning at eighty-nine per cent efficiency, still within safety parameters, but a weakness all the same. He would have to adapt tactics on the fly, only attempt manoeuvres that favoured the starboard engine. Hardly ideal, especially with an ork that had tasted blood closing in.

Blazing shots streamed past the canopy like angry fireflies. The fighter was back and, according to the rounds zinging off the *Wrath's* armour plating, close at hand. Kerikus slewed to the left, his opponent looming large on the rear display, every barrel emptying into the Stormtalon. Kerikus tried to shake it off, but the fighter hung to his tail, matching his every move. He would have been impressed if his assailant was not a vile, stinking greenskin.

A warning rune flashed in the periphery of his vision. He was pushing the port engine too far, too fast. There was a real danger of failure if the chase continued much longer. It had to finish one way or another.

He pulled about, rolling back on himself, trying to force the ork to overshoot, but the maniac threw itself straight into the *Wrath*'s vector. It was going to ram him, to plough straight into his tail. He caught a glance of the pilot's hateful face, its lips drawn back in a rictus grin against the rushing air.

The ork's head exploded behind its cracked canopy screen and the fighter dropped, tearing past the *Wrath*, its stabiliser scoring the gunship's undercarriage. The *Wrath* bucked with the contact, but maintained course. Kerikus twisted to see another gunship screaming in from above, following the pilotless fighter down. Another Stormtalon, resplendent in the silver and red livery of Doom Eagles. Instinctively, his eyes flicked to the status report. There was no identification rune on the map, no indication that it was in the sky at all – but Kerikus's eyes did not lie. He had thought he was the last, and yet here was another survivor of the Seventh. No, Emperor be praised, two survivors. A second Stormtalon was dropping down from the clouds even as the doomed ork fighter tumbled out of the battle.

There were three of them. Doom Eagles fought to the end, no matter the odds, but the odds had just considerably improved.

The first Stormtalon, the one that had saved him, threw itself into a climb and came level, flying wing to wing. Kerikus reached for the vox-bead, pausing only as he recalled his fist slamming into the controls. As the secondary Stormtalon dropped into formation, Kerikus tapped the side of his helm, miming that his vox was out. The pilot to his right waggled his wings, indicating he understood, and then gestured forwards, out of the city. The message was clear. Get out of the danger zone and regroup. Kerikus tapped his fuel gauge with a gloved finger. One fuel cell was already spent and he had been in the air for over an hour. His battle-brother was right. Plans needed to be made.

Dipping his wing to show his agreement, Kerikus settled the *Wrath* into the skein and allowed himself a wry smile. The day was not over yet.

The cloying stink of burning buildings hung heavy in the air – a sickening reek of charred rubber, plastek and meat. They'd found a disused airstrip on the edge of the city, weeds already sprouting through the cracks in its thick landing pads. A sweep of the area had told them that the vicinity was free from ork infestation. The greenskins were converging on the heart of the city. There was no sport for

them this far out. No weapon factories, no supplies, no one left to slaughter.

In the distance, Kerikus could see infernos spreading unchecked. His stomach clenched at the thought of the thousands of corpses being engulfed in the flames, bodies blackening, souls wasted, slaughtered on the altar of war. So many pointless deaths.

The sergeant raised his face to the heavens and closed his eyes, renewing his pledge to the Golden Throne for the thousandth time. When his death came it would count for something. It would make a difference.

Heavy boots crunched over the gravel behind him. Opening his eyes, he turned to see the imposing figure of Brother Malika striding towards him. Even for a Doom Eagle, Malika was formidable, a pocked scar stretched over his shaven head.

‘Brother Tyrus is nearing completion of his work,’ the Space Marine reported, his voice a deep rumble.

Kerikus glanced over to where the Techmarine was ministering to the *Wrath of Aquila*. Clad in his traditional rust-red armour, Tyrus was standing stock still, a hand pressed against the gunship’s plasteel skin, head bowed, as in prayer, although Kerikus had seen the Techmarine perform the same ritual time and time again. A lifetime ago, when growing up on Coan, Kerikus’s uncle had claimed to be able to communicate with the horses by pressing his palm against their flanks, sensing what they were thinking from his touch. While he was sure his uncle had been deluded, he had no such doubts about Tyrus. The Techmarine was the best he had ever met. Solitary and taciturn he may have been, but his gifts were far more valuable to the squadron than his conversation. Kerikus knew many viewed the Techmarines with distrust, wary of their loyalties, but not he. When you spent so much of your service relying on a machine to survive, you blessed those who maintained your craft.

‘What is the verdict?’

A rare glint of humour flickered over Malika’s eyes. ‘Let’s just say that he wasn’t pleased with the way you treated your vox. What was the word he used? Blasphemy? I can’t remember.’

Kerikus half-smiled. To Techmarines, equipment used in service to the Emperor was sacred, from the simplest round of ammunition to the largest warship. He could imagine Tyrus’s face when he seen the ruined controls on the *Wrath’s* dashboard.

‘It was a necessary evil rather than a lack of respect. But is it fixed?’

‘The *Wrath’s* machine-spirit is appeased and – more importantly –

communications have been restored. You'll no longer be cut off from the world.'

'I thought I was alone in the world,' Kerikus admitted, still not quite believing he was standing talking to a battle-brother. 'That you were lost during the second strike.'

'We were outnumbered.' A shadow passed over Malika's dark face, the silver service stud above his right eye dropping into a crease with his frown. 'Our formation smashed in the first wave.'

'But you escaped.'

Malika's eyes flared and Kerikus immediately regretted his choice of words.

'I *survived*. Thanks to Tyrus. We regrouped and planned our next move. I wasn't willing for our deaths to be meaningless. We needed to be sure that when they came, they cost the enemy dearly.'

Spoken like a true Doom Eagle. Kerikus acknowledged the sentiment with a sharp nod.

'And the adaptations to your gunship's sensor readings... Impressive.'

'Tyrus feared that the orks may try to bastardise equipment from one of the wrecked Stormtalons, to use the squadron reports to find us.'

'So he removed your responders. Silent running.'

'We needed an element of surprise if we were to succeed.'

'Your attack on the main munitions dump.'

'According to intel, the orks have been gathering weaponry together in the centre of the city. We planned to take it out—'

'Or die in the attempt,' Kerikus interrupted.

'If that was the Emperor's will.' Malika visibly bristled. 'If we could reduce their stash before the reinforcements arrived—'

'If reinforcements were coming they would be here by now,' snapped Kerikus, unnerved by Malika's naivety. The Space Marine had a century's experience behind him. It was not as if he was a Scout, new to battle. 'Besides, the orks now control the best weapon manufactories in this sector. Do you really think they have ceased production just because they've salvaged more armaments than most Guard units see in a lifetime?'

Malika glared at his superior officer, but if he considered responding to the rebuke, his training at least told him to hold his tongue. This was not the time for argument. It was the time for action. Malika respected the chain of command enough to realise that.

'Apologies, sergeant, I—'

Kerikus raised a gauntleted hand. 'We have a new target. Come.'

He strode towards the *Wrath*, power armour whining with every step. Malika immediately fell in behind, although Kerikus could feel his glare boring into the back of his head. It did not matter. He knew Malika of old. The Space Marine would use his frustration, redirect it towards the enemy.

As they neared the gunship, Tyrus turned, fixing the sergeant with a glowing bionic eye.

‘Both your vector engines are fully operational,’ the Techmarine reported without being asked. ‘I have recalibrated your altimeter and repaired the vox controls.’ The disapproval in Tyrus’s voice was impossible to miss. ‘Fuel cells are in a regenerative cycle, although power levels are seriously depleted.’

‘They’ll be enough for what I have in mind,’ Kerikus commented, hauling himself up to the cockpit and retrieving a data-slate from where it was stowed beside his flightseat.

Jumping back to the launch pad, he thumbed the slate. A map of the city appeared, glowing emerald against the obsidian screen. The sergeant rested the device against the *Wrath*’s gun housing and Malika peered closer.

‘This is our new objective,’ Kerikus declared, a statement, not a topic for debate. ‘The central power complex. Over a hundred linked plasma reactors powering every factory and domicile in Quadcana Prime.’

‘Control that and you control the city,’ Malika observed. Kerikus let the comment slide, zooming in on the power plant. Data scrolled down the side of the slate’s screen as the target was set. Shield generators. Entry points. Weaknesses in the defence grid. The complex was a hundred and twenty kilometres from their current position, to the west of the massive conurbation. No more than four minutes away, at top speed.

‘Expect heavy resistance, from the ground and the air. We need to fly in high and drop down. The ork’s ground defences are short range—’

‘They will have fighters patrolling the area,’ interjected Malika.

Kerikus nodded, his mouth a grim line.

‘Estimated enemy numbers at the target location?’ asked Tyrus, his one remaining organic eye scanning the station’s schematics.

‘Unknown, but we cannot risk sending in a scout. With a full squadron, an exploratory flypast would be an option, but...’

‘... there are only three of us,’ stated the Techmarine, his face betraying no emotion.

‘We stay together. When we are engaged, employ standard swarm tactics.’

Malika nodded. ‘Regularly switch targets in strict rotation.’

‘Never concentrating on one. Stay on top of them. We want them as low as possible so we have all the advantage...’

‘... and they have none.’ Tyrus’s voice was as impassive as his aspect. Kerikus extinguished the data-slate. He knew he could trust this last remnant of their once proud squadron. In the midst of battle there would be no time to recall tactics anyway. In the theatre of combat, an aeronaut did not have time to think, just react. Malika and Tyrus would do their duty. They might even achieve their goal. If not, he knew what he had to do.

Resting the slate on the cannon stack, Kerikus brought his hands up to his chestplate, spreading his fingers to form the aquila.

‘The Emperor is our protection,’ he intoned, his men mimicking the gesture, Tyrus bending his fingers to make the sign of the cog favoured by members of the Cult Mechanicus.

‘The Emperor is our guide,’ they responded.

Kerikus let his hands fall back to his side. ‘And we shall be his teeth.’

Tyrus had done a fine job. The *Wrath of Aquila* was responding well, even better than before.

Kerikus lead the formation, the other gunships at his four and eight o’clock. A suspicion nagged at the back of the sergeant’s mind. Perhaps he should have outlined the entirety of his plan, taken the battle-brothers into his confidence, but would the knowledge have affected their decisions in the heat of battle? There was still a chance they could take the complex. That had to remain their primary objective. The alternative, no matter how inevitable, would remain just that until all other avenues were exhausted. A choice to be made when the moment arose. No doubts.

No hesitation.

The Stormtalons thundered across Quadcana Prime, staying at four thousand metres, the tortured cityscape stretching out in front of them.

‘Two minutes to target,’ Tyrus reported over the vox and Kerikus instructed the others to hold their positions. They had yet to be engaged but...

‘Sir, enemy at two o’clock.’ Malika’s voice was primed with eagerness, ever ready for combat. The sergeant turned to see a swarm of ork fighters flying in what laughably could be called a formation. While they were still forty kilometres away, they were closing fast, flashes already erupting from the front gunships. Incredible. Even though they had not a hope of reaching a target at such range, the gunners were already firing.

‘Turn into them,’ he commanded, banking towards the incoming storm, his battle-brothers mirroring his manoeuvre. They surged forward, crosshairs automatically picking out targets. The plan was simple. Appeal to the orks’ bloodlust, distract them from whatever loose strategy they were employing, encourage them to make mistakes.

Forty kilometres.

Almost immediately the fighters fanned out, four – no, five, six – similar to the pair he had faced earlier. But they were not alone. In their midst a larger, more daunting craft hung in the sky. While the standard fighters were armed with simple stubbers, the crimson bomber’s wings were festooned with all manner of missiles and bombs. Emperor knew how it even got off the ground.

‘*Death Deela,*’ Malika all but snarled over the vox.

‘Who?’ Kerikus asked, switching his guns to lascannons and dropping the *Wrath* back into formation.

‘*The scourge of the skies,*’ came the response, Malika’s voice dripping with sarcasm. ‘*All but worshipped by his kind. More kills than any other fighter.*’

‘Let’s make sure he doesn’t add to his tally today. Defensive split on my mark: three, two, one – mark!’

Twenty kilometres away all seven aggressors opened fire, screaming in for the kill. Malika and Tyrus immediately peeled off to the sides while Kerikus inverted, throwing himself into a loop. The gambit immediately paid off. The orks scattered, forced into chasing multiple targets, a couple of fighters almost smashing into each other in their haste.

The world turned upside down and Kerikus was rushing down at the overshooting fighters, negative g-forces pressing him back into his chair. An ork had veered up, but could not match the *Wrath’s* vector. The Stormtalon’s las-fire sliced through its fuselage, finding a fuel tank. The fighter unfurled in a ball of flame and Kerikus barrel rolled through the blast, bringing himself up, another target in his sights.

The scarlet fighter had mud-brown smoke flowing erratically from its wing and was being bombarded by Malika’s heavy bolters. As he sped past, Kerikus unleashed his cannons again, cutting into the enemy’s tail, but came about leaving Malika with the kill. There was plenty to go around.

Ahead Tyrus was chasing a lone fighter, spiralling up to the clouds.

Kerikus scanned the horizon. ‘Where are you, scum?’ he hissed. They could not afford to let him out of their sights. A missile shrieked across his line his vision, coming from behind. He glanced at the rear viewer. Two fighters coming

in at four o'clock. Death Deela, flanked by a wingman.

'There you are,' Kerikus hissed, slamming on his speed brakes and pulling starboard, flying straight across the ork's path. The fighters overshot, Kerikus coming hard around, planning to pick up their tail when he spotted Malika was in trouble. He was chasing down a fleeing fighter but had another hanging off his tail, stubbers blazing.

Kerikus viffed his engines, levelling up, and toggled his guns over to assault cannons. On his helm-display, the glowing crosshairs had already locked onto the pursuer. The ork had made a fatal error. It was so intent on bringing down Malika that it was flying straight and true – an easy target. The *Wrath* juddered as the cannon hammered, shrapnel dancing up the aircraft's hull towards the open canopy. The pilot jerked like a grotesque marionette in its seat as the shells ripped its body apart, the plane instantly screwing into a death-spin.

Kerikus pulled a crisp turn, coming up behind Malika just as a missile launched from his battle-brother's port array and took out the fighter ahead.

That made four by his reckoning. The odds had evened, but what of Death Deela?

A flash overhead made Kerikus look up. Another ball of fire had illuminated the fast-darkening sky, but this time there was no cause for celebration. A blazing gunship dropped from a hundred metres above them, crossing their flight path. He heard Malika curse over the vox. That was no ork. Tyrus's Stormtalon sprayed debris as it dived to its destruction, its engines burned out. High above, Death Deela threw its bomber into a celebratory roll, another scalp to add to its count. As it turned, Kerikus spotted marks scored into the jet's undercarriage, one for every kill. How many were fresh, added on this very day? How many of them represented his own brothers?

Of the fighter Tyrus had been chasing, there was no sign. Maybe he had been successful, maybe not. Either way there was no time to honour his passing now. The fight had driven them off course and while Death Deela and its wingman were circling, Kerikus and Malika could press on.

Kerikus swung about, Malika falling back to his trail and the twin Stormtalons soared back towards the east, towards the power plant. They opened their throttles, trying to put as much distance between them and the ace as possible, but they were not alone for long.

'Targets at eleven o'clock,' Malika reported. 'Approximately eighty kilometres. Four fighters in two elements.'

Kerikus's eyes flicked to the position, spotting the approaching aircraft, flying

in two staggered rows. This time he did not have to give the order. They turned into them instinctively, gun batteries ready to fire.

'Hold steady,' came Malika's urgent voice as they rocketed forwards. *'I've got them.'*

As soon as they were in range, a single missile shrieked over Kerikus's port wing, slamming into the leading fighter. The ork did not stand a chance. The aircraft all but disintegrated, bathing its wingman in a blazing shower. The fighter tried to evade the wreck but was struck by debris, its starboard wing ripped clean from the fuselage. Two kills with one shot. Impressive by any standards.

As the fighter dropped, the rear flyers broke formation, peeling in opposite directions. Kerikus was not about to let them swing around and retaliate. Dipping his wing, he curved away, taking after the fighter to his left, a glance at his rear view confirming that Malika was doing the same with the other.

His eyes narrowed into slits behind his helm. This one would be for Tyrus.

Leaning forward against his straps, Kerikus came out of the turn to see the ork dropping two hundred metres to dive between the towers of the city below. Nose down, Kerikus dropped in pursuit. What was the ork thinking? Dip down to pick up energy and increase airspeed, or simply try to lose him in the artificial canyons of Quadcana Prime?

Either way, Kerikus was not sure how well its fighter could perform this close to the deck. Its turn had seemed laboured, but now the ork was weaving between the buildings with ease. As the fighter dipped even lower, Kerikus saw flashes ahead. Ork war trucks racing towards him along a long wide track of road, guns barking. A heavily-armoured tank was bringing up the rear, the prodigious missile on its back being prepped to fire.

'No you don't.'

Kerikus thumbed the trigger, ripping up the road with his assault cannons. He pitched up as his shells found the missile-launcher and the warhead ignited.

The fighter was still ahead, slinging itself around a half-ruined spar. Kerikus hit hard-right rudder, coming in front of the mast and running along a parallel block. As the building flashed by, the sergeant caught glimpses of the running fighter, saw it dip its wing and bank to the left.

The *Wrath* shuddered as Kerikus brought it hard to port, his slipstream shattering the windows in an abandoned tower that he only narrowly avoided. The ork was still bobbing and diving, settling on a long route out of the city.

Kerikus glanced at the fuel gauge. His primary cell was almost exhausted. If he had any hope of completing the mission he needed to end this.

Gunning the throttle, Kerikus slammed forwards, closing to a hundred metres, fighting the turbulence generated from being so close to the ground. He squeezed the trigger, but amazingly the ork dumped its nose further still, screaming closer to the ground than ever.

In an instant, it all became clear. The fighter was trying to lure him close to the deck, in the hope that he would not be able to control the Stormtalon and crash. Letting out a grunt of derision, Kerikus viffed the engines, gaining altitude before raking the ork's engines with bolter fire. The fighter dropped, the pilot ejecting from its deathtrap before the craft broke apart against the ground. The body howled past Kerikus's canopy, smashing into his starboard wing and slicing it clean in two. Kerikus pitched up, roaring out of the gorge of buildings, his eyes already searching for Malika. While Tyrus's stealth measures were clever, they did not exactly help identify each other in a hurry.

Turning back towards the plant, Kerikus saw another craft racing towards him. Large, menacing. His fingers hovered over the lascannon's trigger.

The incoming plane wiggled its wings and Kerikus relaxed. Malika. His battle-brother's voice crackled over the vox.

'Target eliminated. Are we going to do this?'

Kerikus pulled left, as Malika banked in to join him on his wing.

According to the auspex they were two minutes away from the power plant. The end was in sight.

'Affirmative,' Kerikus confirmed, knowing that the moment had come. Full disclosure. He took a breath, but Malika cut in.

'Excellent. And don't try to tell me that we're going to try to take the complex by force. Emperor knows you're a good pilot, but—'

'Our orders were to secure the city—'

'Or to render it uninhabitable. Sergeant, the former is untenable. It has been from the moment we took to the skies.'

Death is inevitable.

'We cannot allow Quadcana Prime to remain an ork stronghold,' instructed Kerikus, his hand gripping the stick. 'Destroy the power complex and we can take out half the city. What the firestorm doesn't incinerate...'

'...the resulting radiation will cripple. Deny the enemy victory by removing the prize, I understand.'

Kerikus hoped that Malika would be remembered for his courage. He jabbed

at the operational runes on his tactical display.

‘Transmitting schematics. There are three targets. Hit any of these with force and it will trigger a chain reaction that will detonate the plasma reactors.

Everything within the blast zone will be—’

‘*Targets sighted,*’ Malika cut in. ‘*Eight o’clock, high. Moving in fast.*’

Kerikus spat an oath. They were so close.

‘*Sir, it’s Death Deela.*’

The sergeant craned his neck, seeing the crimson bomber swooping in, a fighter in its wake.

‘*I’ll hold them off,*’ came Malika’s voice, even as his Stormtalon banked between the *Wrath* and the incoming craft. ‘*You follow the objective.*’

Kerikus did not argue. He ruddered right, the plant finally in sight, priming his lascannons. He would come in low, fixing the target and give it everything he had got. His engines roaring in his ears, he dropped down, the gravitational forces he was pulling pushing his helm tight against his face. Over the vox he heard an excited voice. ‘*The fighter is done. Repeat, the fighter is—*’

The rest of the sentence was lost in an explosion, Malika’s scream cut short as the vox-link severed.

Kerikus had started this mission believing he was alone. Now he knew it was true.

He gunned the engine, dropping his nose, powering towards the plant. He did not need the proximity alarm to tell him Death Deela had him in its crosshairs. A missile screeched past and detonated harmlessly against a nearby block. The next would not be so easy to dodge. Death Deela was firing from a position well out of range, but the moment he drew nearer...

Solid-shot clattered against the underside of the *Wrath’s* nose like the buzzing of angry swamp-wasps. The ground-to-air defences. Enemies to the front, a predator at his tail. He would never make it flying head on. Pulling back on the throttle, Kerikus turned wide, throwing the Stormtalon into a wide loop. He would circle the power complex, evading the ground-to-air missiles and swoop in from the east, coming in low and striking hard.

As he came about, black orbs dancing in front of his vision, the flaw in the stratagem became obvious. Death Deela was flying straight at him, incendiary missiles already away. Kerikus dipped his wing, a rocket passing so close the canopy shook, but could not roll fast enough to avoid a second.

The missile smashed into his starboard engine, erupting into flame and ripping away the plasteel wing. The gunship spun, tumbling out of control, the horizon

whipping out of sight. He was going down. There was no way of stopping it now. Reaching down to grab the chainsword he kept by his side, Kerikus slammed a fist against the canopy release.

The glassite enclosure shot away and the ejector rockets fired, propelling his flightseat through the now open gap. He could not look up, could not see what direction he was heading. All he knew was that it was not up. Kerikus barrelled into something hard, his power armour hardly absorbing any impact. Kerikus barely noticed when his pilot's seat disappeared beneath him. He hit the ground and rolled, every jolt fracturing another bone, paring off more battle armour, his world consumed in noise and pain. *Use the pain*, he told himself as he finally came to a stop. *Make it your anchor. Stay alive to finish the mission.*

Even as stubber fire raked against his remaining armour, Kerikus yanked his smashed helm from his head, feeling the cold night air against the gash in his forehead. There were inhuman cries to his right, the thrum of an engine. An ork biker, barrelling towards him, a gunner on his backplate bringing a heavy stubber to bear. Bones scraping against each other, he rolled onto his feet, feeling strangely unsteady. His balance was off, his Lyman's Ear struggling to compensate. No matter, the Larraman cells swarming through his bloodstream would deal with that. The bike roared closer, shots ricocheting off his armour. He threw up an arm to protect his exposed head, looking around for a weapon, his chainsword lost in the crash. A twisted length of plasteel from the *Wrath* lay at his feet. His faithful craft would serve him one last time. He snatched it up, twisting his body around, swinging the plasteel like a club. The shard connected with the ork rider, knocking it howling into the gunner, the bike skidding out beneath them. The rider's kinetic weapon flew from its hand and skittered across the ground. Kerikus scooped it up and fell back as he twisted towards the lumbering ork, squeezing off a volley. The biker's head exploded in a spray of blood and gristle, the bolt slamming into the gunner's shoulder, dropping both orks in one.

Kerikus did not wait to see if the greenskin got back to its feet. To the east, a bomber was flying in fast. Death Deela had overshot when the *Wrath* had hit the deck and was on the return, ready to complete the kill. There was one last chance.

Spinning around, desperate to gain his bearings, a blood-stained smile spread across the sergeant's face. The cooling tower. Limping badly, Kerikus raced for a metal ladder bolted into the tower's side. An ork appeared to his left, but was felled by a shot through its neck, foul blood erupting from the exit wound. All

the time, the Doom Eagle could hear Death Deela's throbbing engines draw ever closer, hear the report of its stubbers.

Not long now.

He half stumbled into the ladder, throwing up his left hand to grab a rung. The left hand that was no longer there. That was why gaining his balance was proving so difficult. His left arm had been ripped from its socket during the crash, the wound already closing, sealed by fresh scar tissue. His body would repair, but not even a Space Marine could grow back a limb.

Kerikus turned, facing the incoming bomber, the ground around him churning beneath stubber fire. At the end it all depended on how much Death Deela wanted the kill, how much it longed for glory, for another notch on its bomber's undercarriage.

The sergeant hefted the ork's cumbersome weapon and fired indiscriminately into the nose of the bomber, praying that the last show of defiance would fuel the ork's bloodlust.

'That's it,' he muttered, never taking his eyes off the jet. 'Keep coming, keep coming, finish me off. Dakka dakka.'

A missile screamed forward, streaking past the cooling tower, detonating somewhere behind. Rubble and dust bloomed all around. The bomber filled Kerikus's vision, the pilot – Death Deela itself – sat hunched over its controls, glaring hungrily down at the Space Marine.

There was no chance of pulling up now. The bomber was moving too fast. He doubted the idiot even realised what he had done. It just knew it did not want to lose, to let the kill slip by. Kerikus prayed that the impact would be enough, that the resulting explosion would rip through the power station beneath his feet, trigger the plasma reactors. Make his sacrifice count.

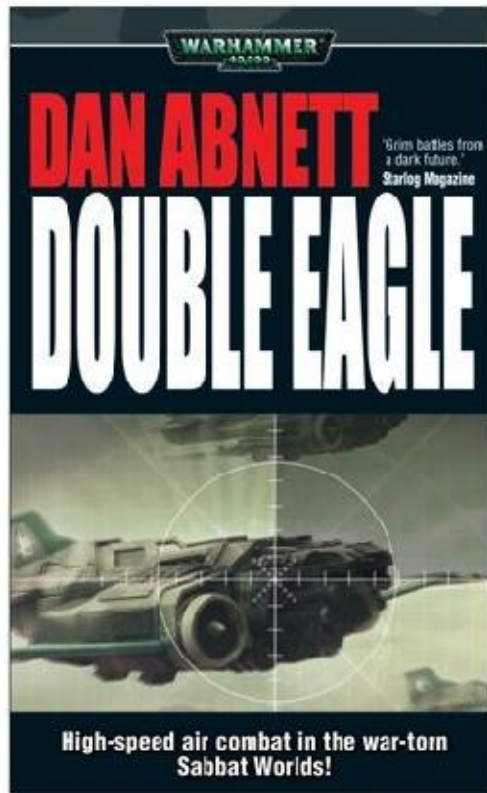
The last round shuddered from the ramshackle gun and Kerikus tossed it aside. It was amazing it had lasted so long. He was truly blessed.

The scream of the engines filling his ears, Kerikus threw his remaining arm wide, staring straight into the widening eyes of Death Deela and embraced death as he always knew he would.

No hesitation.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

CAVAN SCOTT has written novels, audio dramas, short stories and comics based on such popular series as Doctor Who, Judge Dredd, Highlander and Blake's 7. Recent short stories have appeared in Titan Book's *Encounters of Sherlock Holmes* and Snow Book's *Resurrection Engines* anthologies. He is currently working on a new fantasy trilogy.



More tales of aerial combat in the 41st Millenium.

Download now from blacklibrary.com



READ IT FIRST

EXCLUSIVE PRODUCTS | EARLY RELEASES | FREE DELIVERY

blacklibrary.com

A BLACK LIBRARY PUBLICATION

**Published in 2013 by Black Library, Games Workshop Ltd.,
Willow Road, Nottingham, NG7 2WS, UK**

© Games Workshop Limited 2013. All rights reserved.

Cover illustration by Pedro Nunez

Black Library, the Black Library logo, The Horus Heresy, The Horus Heresy logo, The Horus Heresy eye device, Space Marine Battles, the Space Marine Battles logo, Warhammer 40,000, the Warhammer 40,000 logo, Games Workshop, the Games Workshop logo and all associated brands, names, characters, illustrations and images from the Warhammer 40,000 universe are either ®, ™ and/or © Games Workshop Ltd 2000-2013, variably registered in the UK and other countries around the world.

All rights reserved.

A CIP record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN 978-0-85787-964-6

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise except as expressly permitted under license from the publisher.

This is a work of fiction. All the characters and events portrayed in this book are fictional, and any resemblance to real people or incidents is purely coincidental.

See the Black Library on the internet at

blacklibrary.com

**Find out more about Games Workshop's world of Warhammer
and the Warhammer 40,000 universe at**

www.games-workshop.com

eBook license

This license is made between:

Games Workshop Limited t/a Black Library, Willow Road, Lenton, Nottingham, NG7 2WS, United Kingdom (“Black Library”); and

(2) the purchaser of an e-book product from Black Library website (“You/you/Your/your”)

(jointly, “the parties”)

These are the terms and conditions that apply when you purchase an e-book (“e-book”) from Black Library. The parties agree that in consideration of the fee paid by you, Black Library grants you a license to use the e-book on the following terms:

* 1. Black Library grants to you a personal, non-exclusive, non-transferable, royalty-free license to use the e-book in the following ways:

o 1.1 to store the e-book on any number of electronic devices and/or storage media (including, by way of example only, personal computers, e-book readers, mobile phones, portable hard drives, USB flash drives, CDs or DVDs) which are personally owned by you;

o 1.2 to access the e-book using an appropriate electronic device and/or through any appropriate storage media; and

* 2. For the avoidance of doubt, you are ONLY licensed to use the e-book as described in paragraph 1 above. You may NOT use or store the e-book in any other way. If you do, Black Library shall be entitled to terminate this license.

* 3. Further to the general restriction at paragraph 2, Black Library shall be entitled to terminate this license in the event that you use or store the e-book (or any part of it) in any way not expressly licensed. This includes (but is by no means limited to) the following circumstances:

o 3.1 you provide the e-book to any company, individual or other legal

person who does not possess a license to use or store it;

o 3.2 you make the e-book available on bit-torrent sites, or are otherwise complicit in 'seeding' or sharing the e-book with any company, individual or other legal person who does not possess a license to use or store it;

o 3.3 you print and distribute hard copies of the e-book to any company, individual or other legal person who does not possess a license to use or store it;

o 3.4 You attempt to reverse engineer, bypass, alter, amend, remove or otherwise make any change to any copy protection technology which may be applied to the e-book.

* 4. By purchasing an e-book, you agree for the purposes of the Consumer Protection (Distance Selling) Regulations 2000 that Black Library may commence the service (of provision of the e-book to you) prior to your ordinary cancellation period coming to an end, and that by purchasing an e-book, your cancellation rights shall end immediately upon receipt of the e-book.

* 5. You acknowledge that all copyright, trademark and other intellectual property rights in the e-book are, shall remain, the sole property of Black Library.

* 6. On termination of this license, howsoever effected, you shall immediately and permanently delete all copies of the e-book from your computers and storage media, and shall destroy all hard copies of the e-book which you have derived from the e-book.

* 7. Black Library shall be entitled to amend these terms and conditions from time to time by written notice to you.

* 8. These terms and conditions shall be governed by English law, and shall be subject only to the jurisdiction of the Courts in England and Wales.

* 9. If any part of this license is illegal, or becomes illegal as a result of any change in the law, then that part shall be deleted, and replaced with wording that is as close to the original meaning as possible without being illegal.

* 10. Any failure by Black Library to exercise its rights under this license for whatever reason shall not be in any way deemed to be a waiver of its rights, and in particular, Black Library reserves the right at all times to terminate this license in the event that you breach clause 2 or clause 3.