

TALES FROM  
THE ARCHIVE



# PLAGUE SHIP



JIM ALEXANDER

A DOOM EAGLES SHORT STORY

**WARHAMMER**  
40,000

## **Table of Contents**

[Cover](#)

[Plague Ship - Jim Alexander](#)

[About The Author](#)

[Legal](#)

[eBook license](#)

# PLAGUE SHIP

Jim Alexander

Brother Captain Torrus awoke as if from a shimmering dream. He crouched low, swinging his bolter around in a wide arc, watchful for danger and alert to his comrades as they materialized around him. He winced as a loud, dull boom reverberated around the tight confines of the corridor. The wall to his left seemed to quiver, as if something of tremendous power had collided with it on the other side. Torrus's heart sank. He had seen this happen once before: one of his brother Doom Eagles had teleported directly into the ship's hull.

'Abort the teleport! Confirm! Can you confirm?' Torrus had no idea if he still had vox contact with the Doom Eagles' strike cruiser, *The Mournful Passage*, from where he had teleported only seconds earlier. In his ear he could hear nothing but an insect buzz of static. Something was playing havoc with both teleporters and comms. All he could do was hope that his message got through.

He blanched at the thought of another group porting into the wrong place and being slammed out of existence. The crackle in his ear cleared slightly, he could just make out the words. 'Mess re- Mess- ed...' Torrus filled in the blanks: *Message received*. No more Marines would be sent in. Torrus closed his eyes and gave silent thanks to the Emperor.

Three Marines stood around him, bolters trained down the empty, featureless corridor: Ulcaca and Vidus, and the apothecary, Makindlus. The drab interior of the Imperial Navy troop transporter, *The Deliverance*, weighed down on them.

Torrus broke the silence. 'We're on our own,' he said. 'It's not safe to send anyone else down.' He was aware that their minds would be on the fifth man in their number, whose molecules now made up part of the ship's super-structure. It would have been a quick death, but unworthy for such a brave warrior. Torrus knew he could rely on his men not to dwell on it. They were battle seasoned, frontline troops who'd seen action at close quarters. Plenty of unmarked ork graves could testify to that.

'Sir, what about the first squad?' Ulcaca asked.

‘They are on board,’ Torrus replied. ‘But not here. The transporter malfunctioned and vox contact is down. Our target is at least a kilometre away, possibly more. Let’s get moving before every plague zombie on board realises we’re here.’

Deeper inside the ship, the second group of Doom Eagles made ready to undertake the mission. Brothers Stellus and Balbolca trained their heavy bolters down the length of a vast room and Brothers Althulca and Nibus stood to one side, the pilot lights of their heavy flamers casting a blue glow onto the grey walls. Techmarine Callinca stood behind them, taking stock of their situation. Lines of crates stretched for what seemed like forever in front of them. Their sides had been seared by las-bolts. ‘Has someone been hunting for rats?’ Stellus enquired dryly.

‘Perhaps,’ Callinca said. ‘Or maybe it is evidence of the last stand of the hunted.’

It was deathly quiet and still. Stellus levered open a crate and peered inside. ‘Medical supplies,’ he said.

‘We’re in one of the holds. I’d say all of the crates in this section hold medical supplies. Another will hold provisions, and so on. All intended to follow the drop-ships down once the Imperial Guard had set up base in Cadia.’ Callinca was aware of the others’ restlessness. He wasn’t a leader of men by choice. He preferred detail. ‘We know another group of Marines ported in with us, but they aren’t here, and something’s blocking communications.’ He paused, considering the implications of his next words. ‘We’re alone – for now, anyway – but we’re both heading for the same location.’ He looked directly upwards. ‘Which is that way.’

Balbolca gripped his heavy bolter, Althulca brought his flamer to attention.

‘Right,’ Callinca said, checking that his bolter, knives and explosives were secure in their holsters. ‘Let’s find the logic array.’

Torrus’s squad had been slowly negotiating the cramped trans-porter’s corridors for almost half an hour when Vidus broke formation.

‘What is this?’ Vidus strode over to where a black slimy substance had gathered on the ship’s walls. The motors in his armour whined and clicked. They seemed very loud against the silence.

The apothecary, Makindlus, joined him and scraped some of the substance into a dish. Spindles of slime stuck to the top and bottom, lending it an unnatural

elasticity. As was the case with all Doom Eagle apothecaries, Makindlus's expertise extended to disease and contaminants.

'Conjecture?' Torrus prompted.

'A taint of some kind, a dark infection,' Makindlus said, his voice betraying his distaste. 'At the very least it has a foothold on this ship. I would not be surprised if such forces are responsible for the disruption to our teleporter.' He dropped the dish and fired a controlled burst from his flamer at it. 'There is something on this ship that requires cleansing.' The slime bunched into a ball and began to shrivel and smoke.

'It is our appointed task to make this possible,' Torrus said. His men nodded, aware of the import of their mission. Torrus's face hardened with a grim smile. They were ready.

Vox contact had deteriorated. The crackling inside Torrus's helmet had given way to feedback, a strangulated shriek – the sound of dying. Torrus turned it off. The four of them were on their own now. He hoped the Emperor would be kind, that they would meet up with the first group and complete their mission in good time.

The Marines stalked down the corridor, leaving only silence in their wake.

Callinca put his finger to his lips as he halted his squad at a junction in the corridor. The other power armoured figures instantly stopped dead and, with a sixth sense earned over decades of service together, assumed a holding formation, all weapons trained to provide covering fire for their techmarine sergeant should the need arise.

The five Marines stood motionless, their enhanced senses probing for any sign of danger.

*Skkkttch!*

In unison the Marines' eyes all swept towards Callinca. There was an uneasy pause as the Astartes awaited further orders.

*Skkkttch!*

The noise was louder this time; its source was moving ominously closer to the Doom Eagles' position. With his squad's eyes still firmly transfixed on him, Callinca motioned first towards Balbolca and then towards the intersecting corridor. The heavy weapons operator gave a slight nod and, muttering a quiet prayer to the Emperor to bless his aim, sprang around the bend and trained his weapon on the target.

His brother Marines reacted and began to move into the gap vacated by

Balbolca but checked themselves when the familiar report of his weapon was not forthcoming. Callinca thought for a moment that the Marine had frozen there in terror. The arch-enemy employed horrors that could strike fear into even the most faithful of the Emperor's servants.

'Rats!' Balbolca said, a grin forming on his lips as he lowered his heavy bolter. 'It was just a couple of rats.'

A palpable wave of relief washed over the squad.

'It may have just been rats this time but stay alert, brothers,' Callinca said, also bringing down his weapon.

Then the corridor roof above them gave way, spewing forth a tide of unholy abominations.

Standing at a doorway, Captain Torrus tried to make sense of the flickering shadows on the wall, before finally deciding that they were just that, shadows. He motioned his men forward with his plasma pistol. They followed him into a cramped cabin. Bunks were riveted onto the otherwise bare walls and blankets were strewn on the ground. A lamp lay smashed on the floor.

Makindlus noticed scratch marks on the floor. He stooped down and picked up a broken fingernail. 'Either somebody was dragged out,' he said, 'or something crawled out.'

They moved back out into the corridor. More black slime was forming on the walls and oozing down to form brackish puddles on the floor. Lamps flickered erratically. 'This is a ghost ship,' Vidus said. The remark was greeted with silence. He rounded a corner and halted. He held up his hand. 'Bodies.' He edged forward cautiously.

The nearest one was lying in a crumpled heap, arms outstretched. Vidus could not see its face. Makindlus moved forward while Vidus kept his bolter trained on the body. He dropped to one knee and examined it. 'Note the overalls. It's Imperial crew standard,' he said. The smell of decaying flesh sought to overwhelm the apothecary's senses. Years of training blocked it out. 'Subject has been dead for days, perhaps weeks.' He removed a scalpel from his armour. 'Let's see...'

He turned the corpse over. The face – what was left of it – was a silent scream of agony. He cut away the uniform and made an incision from below the chin, down to the chest. Thick, brown liquid leaked from the wound and the stench of death worsened. 'The body shows no sign of desiccation.' He held the scalpel over the pilot light on his flamer and placed it close to the black slick. It bubbled

and popped. Makindlus turned to his comrades, letting the body fall back onto the floor.

‘It’s impossible—‘

At his feet, the corpse rolled over and sat up, its eyes snapped open and with a chilling groan emanating from its slack jaw, it wrapped its arms around Makindlus’s helmet, ragged fingers scrabbling to pull it off. Makindlus let out a cry of surprise and grabbed his attacker by the hair. It came away in his hand. He stood up and knocked the creature onto the floor. He backed away as the other Marines formed up around him.

‘Plague zombie,’ he said.

The undead thing turned to face Makindlus. The overalls had been torn away in the fight and its body was visible. It pulsed, and whole sections of skin burst like overactive pupae from their cocoons. The zombie was riddled with wounds which leaked mucus and pus; skin hung loose like ancient parchment. Its lips smacked open, exhaling whatever air remained in the lungs. The loud rasping sigh of the undead. It lurched forward, lopsidedly shambling towards the tight knot of Marines. Behind it, other bodies scraped and staggered into life.

Bolter shells punctured through the zombie’s chest and mouth sending it crashing into a storage crate; diseased crooked fingers tried to protect an orifice that was no longer there. Techmarine Callinca stood over the creature that lay quivering at his feet, he snarled in distaste. A shot to the head and all movement ceased.

So far resistance had been light with only small groups of zombies that the squad despatched quickly. But all were mindful of the growing danger. The deeper they moved into the ship, the more likely it was that they would meet concentrated packs of zombies. After a tense, fifteen minute march they reached the end of the corridor. A lift, closed off with metal shutters stood before them. Callinca examined the door mechanism. ‘Power is on standby,’ he said, ‘but it’s on a relay. Calling the lift will open the shutters.’

The sound of scratching and tapping emanated from the other side of the doors.

‘They’re in the shaft,’ Callinca said. ‘If we call the lift the shutters may open and we run the risk of losing our sterilised environment.’ There was a moment’s contemplation. ‘Of course, we’re here to do a job.’ He pressed the button. Far above, the lift platform began its slow descent, protesting all the way. A red light blinked on above the doors. ‘They are on a timer. Be ready’

The squad levelled their bolters at the door, expecting them to open at any second, unleashing whatever monstro-sities lurked in the lift shaft.

The sound of the approaching lift grew louder. Callinca kept his eyes on the red light.

The tapping on the other side got heavier. The lift screeched on its runners.

There was a wet, cracking sound and the tapping ceased. The light turned green and the doors slid open. Althulca and Nibus swapped quizzical glances.

‘It’s not very big, is it?’ said Althulca.

‘Only room for two at a time,’ Nibus added.

‘Lack of time is the essence of the problem,’ Callinca said. ‘We must make do.’ He motioned to the two heavy bolter Marines. ‘Stellus and Balbolca, you first. Your orders are to secure the area, then clear a path to the logic array.’ Callinca hesitated as he gathered his thoughts. There was something else he wanted to say. ‘Just watch each other’s back.’

The two Marines nodded before stepping into the lift. It trundled noisily into life, but progress up was as painfully slow as it was down. Callinca, left behind with Stellus and Balbolca, glanced at the lights over the shutters. Still red.

Behind them a door began to shake on its hinges.

‘They’ve found a way around,’ Stellus said tonelessly. ‘Let’s hope the lift keeps working.’

‘Step back, Makindlus.’ Torrus, Ulcaca, and Vidus moved forward, a solid line of armour, filling the corridor width. They took aim and opened fire. ‘Shoot them in the head,’ Torrus ordered.

Sustained gunfire ripped into the zombies. The first to fall was the one examined by Makindlus. Shells ripped into its cheek and cranium, piercing its brain. Torrus’s plasma pistol hissed wildly, puncturing the walking abominations and boiling their innards. A shot to the eye downed one in an explosion of brown mucus. The zombies advanced, ignoring the withering fire that was smashing them apart. The last was blasted to fleshy pieces barely a metre away from the bolter muzzles. Silence descended. Smoke drifted. First contact with the crew had been made.

Makindlus surveyed the bodies and broken limbs that carpeted the floor. ‘Corrupted by the machinations of Abbadon’s Black Crusade,’ he said. ‘Fallen to the Plague of Unbelief. These men were weak-minded and short of faith in the Emperor. This is their reward...’ The apothecary aimed his flamer. ‘They were waiting for any fresh flesh to come their way.’

‘I’d say they found us a touch too fresh.’ Torrus reached out and stayed Makindlus’s hand. ‘Don’t waste your flamer on them; let’s save what firepower we have.’

The corridor led Torrus and his men to the ship’s canteen. Inside were a dozen crewmen, seated, heads slumped over, struck down by the contaminant without warning or prejudice. The uneaten remains of their last meals lay before them.

‘Under the circumstances, I’ll forego the customary inspection,’ Makindlus said.

Torrus raised his hand and they all fell silent. Above their heads a scratching sound broke the quiet. Torrus followed the noise, gesturing for his men to spread out. It was coming from the ventilation shaft. The Marines aimed their weapons. The scratching got louder. The grate fell open and clattered onto the ground. Torrus and his men trained their guns at the darkness of the opening, muscles coiled.

‘If you can understand me,’ Torrus said, ‘show yourself.’

Something was tossed out of the shaft. It landed at Torrus’s feet. ‘A rosarius,’ he said. ‘Hold fire.’ The Marines relaxed, all eyes on the ventilation hatch.

Torrus’s command was premature. All the crewmen in the room rose up as one; chairs tipped over. Two lurched towards Vidus, mouths braided with thick saliva yawned open. With hollow rasps both emptied their stomachs at him. Columns of grey projectile vomit splattered onto the Marine’s chest plate. The hot steaming liquid ate into the armour. Vidus tried to wipe away the acid, his hands scrabbling furiously. Ulcaca stepped in with bolter blazing, blasting the zombies into oblivion.

More zombies descended on Makindlus. ‘I’m standing my ground on this one,’ he said, as great plumes of fire poured out of his flamer. The inferno stripped the little flesh from the zombies’ decaying faces. It enveloped bone and organs that burst in hissing fountains.

A trio of zombies staggered towards Torrus. Three plasma shots – three twitching zombies at his feet. There followed a reflex action as a gnarled hand grabbed his ankle. Torrus stamped on the arm with his other leg, cracking bones.

It was over in seconds. Vidus stood in the corner, checking his armour. He looked up and nodded that he was fine; the vomit had stopped short of eating through to the skin, but he was more vulnerable now. The Imperial aquila had all but gone, and his chest plate steamed hot vapours.

A rough cough sounded from the ventilation shaft. The Marines snapped back into combat stances. ‘Whoever you are, show yourself or we will open fire,’

barked Torrus.

‘No! I’m not one of them!’ a voice, raw and taut, said. ‘Thank the Emperor you’ve found me!’

‘We are Sixth Company of the Emperor’s own Doom Eagles.’ Torrus said. ‘I request you show yourself, or suffer the consequences.’

There first appeared a filthy hand, then an equally unwashed man’s face. Humanity sparkled in the eyes. ‘Emperor be praised, I am pleased to see you!’ he said.

Ulcaca and Vidus helped the man down. He scurried towards the rosarius on the floor and picked it up, kissed it, and placed it inside his robes. Torrus’s gaze never left him, studying him for any tell-tale signs. The Plague could strike at any moment.

‘Who are you?’ Torrus enquired.

‘My name is Shota Klos, ship’s chaplain,’ he said. He patted his chest. ‘This crest is my mark of faith,’ he explained. ‘I mean you no kind of harm.’

‘Well, chaplain,’ Torrus said, as he stood amongst the dead and disjointed plague zombies littering the canteen floor like so many puppeteers’ cast-offs, ‘it would seem you have lost your flock.’

The chaplain stared at a fallen zombie. A thick paste trickled down the hole in its forehead. Its eyes were as lifeless and its mouth as slack as they had been when it was on its feet. ‘That it has come to this,’ the chaplain sighed. ‘It was two weeks ago – on our first day of transit. Some of the crew and Imperial Guard investigated a disturbance in one of the drop-ships. When they came out again they were not... themselves.’

‘Something of an understatement,’ Torrus remarked.

‘A drop-ship, you say?’ Makindlus assumed the role of chief negotiator.

The chaplain bowed his head. ‘Yes,’ he said gravely.

*The Deliverance* accommodated an entire regiment of Imperial Guard and their own drop-ships, kept in the hold. When the time came for battle, the Guardsmen would board the ships ready for ejection down onto the planet’s surface. They would form an integral part of the war effort for the liberation of the Cadian system. That had been the plan, at least.

Makindlus grasped the implications. ‘If this transporter continues on its course it is set to crash into the Cadian system. If it strikes an inhabited world, the zombie army would be free to infect the planet’s population.’

It was the worst-case scenario, but entirely plausible. Torrus was listening intently. ‘A ready-made invasion army of the Black Crusade,’ he said.

Makindlus addressed the chaplain. ‘That rosarius may mark you as one of the Emperor’s representatives on board the ship, but are you a pious man?’

‘My faith in the Emperor is what has kept me safe in this terrible time,’ the chaplain said. ‘But that is not really what you are asking me, is it, apothecary?’

Makindlus got to the point. ‘It would perhaps be of assistance if you could explain how, in these past weeks, you have avoided being ripped to pieces?’

The chaplain took a long, steady breath. His face seemed to change as he did so, ageing and becoming tired. ‘I have seen so much atrocity. The ship’s crew were like kindling to feed a raging fire, and the abominations were everywhere.’ He swallowed. ‘Such savagery, such terrible cruelty. I survived by hiding and playing dead when the zombies were near. I took whatever sustenance I could and used the ventilation system to move around.’

Torus held the chaplain by his shoulders. ‘Chaplain – if that is who you truly are – look at me!’ The captain’s gaze burned into the chaplain’s for several seconds. ‘I am satisfied that you have not succumbed to plague. Not yet. But be warned, as Doom Eagles, our vigilance is unsurpassed. If you show any sign of contagion, we will not hesitate to eliminate you.’

Torus released the chaplain, who closed his eyes in silent prayer. ‘My faith in the Emperor’s eternal wisdom has never wavered. I knew help would arrive with a means to cleanse this ship of all dark taint. And now you have come!’

‘We are the means to that end, but not the end in itself,’ Torrus said. ‘The logic array is on this level but a kilometre away. We will have to negotiate the accommodation decks.’

The chaplain opened his eyes and smiled. ‘There is a better way,’ he said.

Callinca listened as the lift, far above, ground to a halt. They all waited. Nothing happened. He was about to speak when the angry bark of a bolter ricocheted down the lift shaft.

‘Battle has been joined,’ he whispered, punching the button to recall the lift. ‘We must join our brothers as soon as we can.’

The storage lift began its torturous descent. The staccato report of repeated bolter fire continued to echo from the level above, and something was interfering with the vox link. The banging on the door increased. The Marines looked up as one. Clearly discernable under the screech of the lift and the sound of gunfire were the war cries of Stellus and Balbolca.

In the momentary distraction the door burst open revealing a plague zombie mob. They hurled themselves at the Marines. Such was the weight of numbers

that they threatened to overwhelm them. For a moment, Callinca stood transfixed, not able to keep his eyes off them. He could see Imperial Guard uniforms among the writhing, volatile mass. Rotting hands grabbed, pushed and clawed.

Behind them the lift doors ground open. Althulca and Nibus hesitated, unwilling to get in.

‘Securing the level above is the only priority – you both go now!’ Callinca shouted, part of him surprised at the conviction in his voice. He might become a leader of men yet. Callinca pushed them into the lift and hit the button. The doors closed.

Now very much alone, the Techmarine steeled himself for what was to come. The zombies were staggering forwards, intent on ripping him to pieces.

They were relentless. The Techmarine discharged one round after another, doing all he could to keep the horde at bay. When his gun emptied, he drove it with such strength as to skewer an oncoming zombie’s gullet.

Above the noise he heard the lift reach the upper level, pause, then begin the slow journey down.

He had no choice but to handle them at close range. A zombie bared its broken teeth. Callinca pushed his bolt pistol into its mouth and squeezed the trigger. Another two drooling creatures lunged at him. The Techmarine plunged his long knife at such an angle as to impale both heads. Both twitched violently, the spasms jolting up Callinca’s arm. He twisted, and a stream of slick splatter splashed onto his shoulder.

Time stood still. Another head shot, another felled zombie, but Callinca was down to his last pistol round. Flying vomit narrowly missed his visor. He could see another zombie mob heading his way. He was running out of time, and he knew it. He cursed under his breath. As a techmarine, he was the one holding the charges. A shower of acid vomit splattered onto his chest plate and helmet. He could feel the skin tighten around his cheekbones – the acid had eaten through parts of his helmet. He was exposed. He rode the pain, primed the charges and lobbed them into the advancing rabble. The zombies in the blast radius pirouetted and separated into wet slabs.

Callinca was grabbed around the neck, he ploughed his knife through the top of the zombie’s skull. It released its grip and collapsed, convulsing, to the ground. Still there were more. Screaming his defiance, knives in both hands, he sliced in wide frantic arcs to keep them at bay. His back was against the lift doors. He spread out his arms for leverage and kicked a zombie away. He heard

a clang as the lift platform arrived. He backed into the lift, his scrambling fingers stretching to hit the button for the lift doors. They began to slide shut.

He drove both knives forward, which sank into the melee. A zombie's arm thrust through the gap, jamming the doors. Callinca grabbed it and wrenched it from the socket. The doors shut and Callinca began to ascend.

Exhausted, he slumped to the floor. Mindful of the risk of more vomit chunks eating through his helmet, he took it off. For a moment he wondered how close it had been to eating through to his brain. Pain bore through his face. The sound of bolter fire had stopped. Callinca lifted himself unsteadily to his feet. He had no weapons. His hand hovered over his servo arm and the one piece of equipment he had left. All he could do was brace himself for what lay in wait on the other side of the lift. Althulca and Nibus were either dead, or had managed to clear the area. Callinca stood with his back pressed against the far wall of the lift. The lift ground to a halt.

The doors opened.

'This ventilation shaft leads to the ship's logic array,' said the chaplain. The Marines followed him in. It was the first of two, which would lead them to the heart of the ship's guidance system. The surroundings were cramped but so far clear of the living dead. A grate at the other end was in sight. As they approached, they could hear the sound of loud chewing.

Reaching the end of the shaft, Vidus crouched down and peered out and saw a corridor with five zombies down on all fours. They were on top of something, but he couldn't see what it was. Vidus thumped his bolter against the grate and sent it clattering to the floor. He followed it down, landing in a crouch with his gun ready.

Vidus had disturbed the zombies from their meal and they all looked in his direction. It was a recent kill. Both of the victim's arms had been gnawed off, but the uneven bites into his torso and chest were still fresh. A rib stuck out of a cavity. The corpse had no eyes and little in the way of a face, but Vidus could fit together the agonised expression of the victim – he surmised that the zombies had set about him while he was still alive.

The zombies advanced on him. Vidus remained crouched and carefully shot each of their kneecaps in rapid succession. As they collapsed onto the ruined cartilage of their knees, Vidus put a shell through their heads for good measure.

Captain Torrus and the others dropped down from the shaft. Torrus kicked a zombie corpse to the side. 'Good work,' he told Vidus.

They looked at the t-junction at the end of the corridor forty metres away. This was where the second ventilation shaft was. 'Let's move,' Torrus said.

'What's that?' The iciness in Makindlus's voice stopped them in their tracks. They all heard a noise which sounded like a thousand fingernails scraping down metal sheets. Shota put his hands to his ears and silently mouthed a prayer.

Looming shadows, full of movement, were cast against the walls. Lured by the sound of Vidus's gunfire, abomination after abomination appeared from around both corners. Arms stretched, crooked, grotesque faces set in blood lust, twisted feet bent at the ankles scraping across the floor. All former intelligence was burned away by the plague, leaving only a mindless destructive fury in the dark void that now inhabited them.

Torrus remained unconvinced by the chaplain. Equally, he was painfully aware of the lack of numbers on his side. And Shota Klos was a better bet than the advancing hordes. 'Can you handle a weapon?' he asked him.

'In the defence of the Emperor, I can do anything,' the chaplain replied.

Torrus turned to Ulcaca 'Then give the man a gun,' he said. 'A rosarius can only take you so far.'

Grunting an affirmative, Ulcaca took a laspistol from the holding brackets on his armour, which the chaplain gratefully accepted. The four Marines and the preacher formed a line, Ulcaca and Vidus taking the flanks. 'Let the divine light of the Emperor aid us and make our aim true,' the chaplain said.

'Our route lies ahead of us.' Torrus straightened his arm, aiming his plasma pistol at the approaching rabble. 'We will not surrender any ground,' he said.

The zombies were almost on them.

Makindlus threw a small cylinder into the mob. Gaseous tendrils spouted from it. It hardened into a layer of ice, rooting the advancing front line to the spot.

'A freezing agent I picked up from the molten planet Arethar,' Makindlus explained.

'Emperor be praised!' the chaplain said.

The zombies were square in Torrus's sights. 'Know your enemy and never underestimate what they are capable of,' he said.

A zombie, both legs stuck fast, ripped one of its knees free. It wasn't a clean break. A jagged shinbone was sticking through as hot streams of crude ichor squirted from the stump.

'Fire!'

The Marines cut a swathe into the leading zombies. Shells hit heads, throats and torsos – again and again. Vidus fired round after round into dead eyes and

slack flesh. A thick spray of blood, bone and vomit was obscuring his view. He moved down to midribs barely a metre away from the gun muzzle. His shots tore through a half dozen rib cages at a time, and the carnage rippled and cascaded in front of him.

Balbolca's bolter created an orgy of destruction. Meeting him head-on was a wall of pus-ridden zombies, arms darting out. In their frenzy to get at him, the ones further back gnawed and tore at those in front. The Marines' fire sliced through the mob. Bits of abomination flew in the air like mud from a spinning tyre. Shards of bone flew off, embedding into other zombies. Yet still they came on. As they fell, twitching and writhing, more took their place.

A gap opened in front of the Marines and they stepped forward to fill it. For a few vital moments Ulcaca's progress was unimpeded, then a group of zombies swarmed around him. One was despatched without ceremony, its jaw flying off from the gunfire and smashing into the face of another. Two zombies got in close, and spewed their last meals. Hot vomit flew at him from all sides, eating into his helmet's eye visors. Blinded, Ulcaca lashed out, spinning and firing wildly. Nearby, Torrus and Makindlus ducked as they found themselves in the crossfire.

Instinctively the zombies sensed the weakness in the Marines' ranks. They all converged on Ulcaca. They pummelled, punched, bit and puked, forcing their quarry to the ground.

'Ulcaca!' Vidus cried as he ran to the mob, trying to fight his way through, grabbing and shooting zombies in the head and throwing them to the floor. But from every direction they swarmed around Ulcaca.

Torrus put his hand on Vidus's shoulder. 'Stand back,' he shouted. 'Regroup!'

Torrus, Makindlus, Vidus, and the chaplain all took a step back. The chaplain uttered a quick prayer. *'Though I walk through the realm of contaminant and disease, the Emperor will lay down my head and wash me of my wounds when my time has come...'* His words were drowned out by the incessant groans of the zombie mass.

Ulcaca was lost to them. The ventilation shaft was still some feet away. 'Know your enemy and never underestimate what they are capable of.' Torrus's words came back to him. 'For Ulcaca,' he said in a low voice as the group opened fire once more.

The four Marines stood in a tight knot. All around lay the twisted bodies of the zombies.

The bolter fire of Stellus and Balbolca combined with the purifying flamers had broken the enemy. The techmarine's men had control.

The way was clear to the logic array room. 'We must hurry!' Callinca said striding forward. As he did so he stared at the burning pyres and scorched blackened shells around him with satisfaction. Then he noticed the black slime congregating on the walls. He knew, if a reminder was needed, that it was not over yet.

Inside the control room, Callinca dropped to his knees beside the array mechanism. From his servo arm he took a screwdriver and removed the array plate. Sweat from his brow leaked into his eyes and face wounds. The pain was fierce and relentless. Examining the array's insides, he could see the prerequisite cogs, transistors and wires that relayed instructions to the engines and propelled *The Deliverance* forward.

'I'm out of explosives. I had to use the charges,' Callinca said. Stellus aimed his gun. 'No, that won't do, either.'

Suddenly the grate from the array room ventilation shaft fell with a clatter. Flamers and bolters immediately went up, aiming at the shaft. 'Kill anything that moves,' Callinca ordered.

Rather than the expected deluge of corpulent flesh, a single, small item fell to the deck. Callinca recognised it immediately.

'It's a rosarius. Hold your fire!' Callinca said.

A voice came from the grate. 'Excuse the theatrics, but with the array so close, we had to be sure.' The head of Captain Torrus appeared. The squad dropped down into the room.

Torrus watched on as Callinca stuck his hand into the array and pulled out a handful of circuitry. The logic array shorted out.

Callinca looked up to the captain. 'Consider the array out of commission. The zombies will never be able to repair it.'

'Good work,' Torrus said.

As Makindlus tended to Callinca's injuries, Torrus briefed the reunited squads.

'I had *The Mournful Passage* back on line, though only fleetingly, This damned interference seems to be following us around. In the prevailing conditions we cannot teleport back to the ship. The back-up plan is to reach the landing bay where a Thunderhawk will pick us up. We have to cover another kilometre.'

The Marines exchanged glances. Makindlus grunted and said, 'I like a

challenge.'

The chaplain stared at the spooled wires of the array, which resembled the innards of some sacrificial animal. He placed his hand on the wall nearest to him and gathered his breath. He smiled contentedly. 'I am certain of the arch-enemy's displeasure,' he said before contorting into a coughing fit.

Every weapon in the room instantly drew a bead on him.

'Chaplain!' Torrus barked.

'Please. All this running and fighting. I just need a little time to catch my breath. I am not becoming one of them.'

None of the Marines as much as flinched.

'Perhaps not, but all the evidence suggests that eventually you will. Why should we take the chance that when you finally succumb you take one of us with you?' Torrus stepped towards the chaplain and placed the muzzle of his bolt pistol square against his temple. In response, Klos placed his rosarius to his lips, kissed it and began to recite a litany of faith.

There was an awkward pause filled only by the clear, high Gothic enunciations of the chaplain.

Torrus imagined pulling the trigger. He knew it was the correct thing to do. No, not the correct thing, the prudent thing. Yet this man, this faithful, pious man had given him no cause to question his actions. He holstered his pistol.

'The Emperor protects,' said Torrus.

'The Emperor protects,' the chaplain repeated.

The tension in the room dissipated.

'I can lead you to the landing bay,' the chaplain said looking up at hulking, armour-clad figure of the Doom Eagle captain.

'Please proceed.'

It took twenty minutes for the band to reach the vast doors that led into the landing bay. Resistance on the way had been light. The squad had split up and Callinca's group were several levels up from the docking level floor where the local generator was situated. With the logic array down, the generator had to be activated manually before the hangar doors could be opened. Callinca had his damaged helmet on. The vox link was back on-line. He contacted Torrus.

'Generator on,' he said.

Torrus was standing by the doors. They were airtight so no sound could be heard from the other side. The Marines were standing back, weapons primed, ready to deal with whatever they may find on the other side. 'Understood,' he

said. 'Opening the doors now.'

Callinca took a step back as the hangar doors on his level ground slowly open in front of him.

His comms link vibrated into life once more. 'We have increased zombie activity here,' Torrus shouted above the growing interference. 'I suggest you find another way down to the landing bay.' There followed a long whine of static. Callinca turned it off.

Something dripped onto Stellus's shoulder. Instinctively, he swiped at it with his hand. He looked down and saw black slime. Callinca and the others stalked onto the gantry. Ahead were metal stairs leading down to the bay floor, far below.

On either side of the landing bay there were Imperial Guard drop-ships, stacked one upon the other like giant eggs waiting to hatch. They stretched as far as the Marines could see. Callinca spotted Torrus's group below walking down a ramp towards the landing bay.

It was then that Callinca saw them. Emerging from their drop-ship mausoleums was the Imperial Guard, now surrendered to the filth spoor contagion of Chaos. An entire regiment was advancing out to meet them.

Zombies began dropping down from above, and enough were finding a hold on the gantry. Some still carried their lasrifles and they began to smash the butts onto Callinca's armour. Callinca blocked a blow with his arm before pushing two abominations off the gantry.

'Down!' screamed Balbolca as he unloaded his bolter both to his left and right. Zombies were knocked off in a shower of burst blood vessels and exploded cartilage. But more tumbled from the higher stacked drop-ships to replace them. Abominations, hands flailing, smashed repeatedly into the Marines. Callinca was doing all he could to stay on the gantry, and Stellus lost his footing.

'No!' yelled Callinca. The ends of his fingers grazed Stellus's outstretched hand, but he was too late. Stellus fell, taking a dozen scratching zombies with him. On the ground, a hundred grasping and grabbing corpulent hands stretched out in wait.

Callinca's head was forced back, he hung over the gantry, many hands gripping his helmet; the muscles in his neck were grinding, feeling immersed in fire. There was a rushing noise in his ears.

The Thunderhawk streaked into the landing bay. It pulled up and hovered below the gantry not more than twenty metres away. Callinca knew he had one

chance. A zombie scrambled on top of him, a half eaten tongue trying to force its way through the holes in his helmet. He had to dig deep, one more momentous superhuman effort. He lifted his head and looked defiantly into the pock marked face before him. He grabbed its hair and snapped its head back with sufficient force to break the neck bone and threw its lifeless husk over his head, snagging other zombies and pulling them down with it. He jumped to his feet and shattered a zombie's arm to get to its lasrifle. Next to him was a mound of putrid squirming flesh. He fired the lasrifle into the writhing bodies until there was no power left, then put his hand into the heap, and pulled out Balbolca.

'One chance, Balbolca.' The Marines stood at the edge. Zombies swarmed around them looking to drag them back. 'We're in the hands of the Emperor, now.'

They both fell, and landed on the Thunderhawk with a thud. Zombies followed them down. Both Marines scrambled towards the hatch, kicking abominations away as they went. A fellow Doom Eagle appeared from the hatch to pull them in. Diseased hands lunged for and caught Balbolca's trailing foot; he wrenched it free.

Callinca and Balbolca were safe inside. Callinca could feel the Thunderhawk turning. He ran to the pilot. 'There are more of us down there!'

A procession of zombies dropped down from the upper hangars. The pilot was struggling to keep control of the ship and he shouted above the static, which flooded his comms link. The view from the cockpit was completely obscured by a blanket of thrashing, half-crushed diseased bodies. 'They are playing havoc with our instruments,' the pilot said. 'If we land the ship, we'll never get her back up again!'

The Thunderhawk dipped. 'We have no option but to blast free while we can!'

Callinca, accepting the inevitable, closed his eyes. 'It is the Doom Eagles' way. Dead or alive, we do not leave behind our own. Let the Emperor give witness that I will be at the front of the relief force. That I will return!'

Below, Torrus and his group had formed a tight circle. The flamers had kept the hordes at bay, but there were thousands of zombies pushing in, more than enough to snuff out even their brand of firepower. 'Arm and make ready,' Torrus told his men. 'Ammo is low, so choose your targets well. Cleanse as many of the abominations as we can.'

The chaplain mouthed a silent prayer. He'd fought alongside the Marines with great courage. He was the only one out of a hundred thousand personnel on *The Deliverance* who did not succumb to the plague.

‘I should never have doubted you,’ Torrus told him.

‘I remember no doubt,’ the chaplain said. ‘Only a selfless devotion to the Emperor.’

‘The Emperor have mercy on us.’

The Thunderhawk came into view. It was barely thirty metres above them. Plague zombies, caught in the engines, fell, engulfed in fire. But still the horde continued to pile on, trying to drag the flyer down. It was an awesome demonstration of strength in numbers. The Marines were being smothered on the ground and above.

Torrus willed the flyer on. It didn’t matter if vox contact was down, he yelled into his comms link anyway, ‘Go! For pity’s sake, go!’

As if in answer, the Thunderhawk roared its thrusters, and was gone.

The force of the blast from the Thunderhawk’s thrusters swept the writhing mass of zombies from the ramp. Torrus saw the opportunity.

‘Fall back! Head for the ramp!’ he yelled.

With Torrus laying down a screen of covering fire, his battle-brothers and the chaplain darted across to the base of the ramp, all five figures slipping and skidding in the thick layer of gore that now coated the hangar floor. Once they had disappeared from view through the doorway at the top of the ramp, Torrus himself made his way to join them, still blasting away with his bolter as he did so. Two zombies dropped down from the gantry above, impeding his progress. The first he shot through the face, the second – realising that his bolt pistol was now out of ammo – he despatched with a swift motion of his left arm. The zombie’s head rolled satisfyingly down the ramp.

‘Problems?’ Nibus said as his captain emerged through the doorway into a hold stacked from floor to ceiling with crates. All of them bore the mark of the Imperial eagle.

‘Nothing I couldn’t deal with. I am out of ammo though,’ Torrus said somewhat dejectedly, wiping pieces of zombie from his armour.

‘I don’t think we need to worry too much about that,’ said Klos. Torrus turned to face the chaplain who was now standing before him with a gleaming lasrifle in his hands. ‘This is a holding area where the arms and munitions are stored before loading onto the drop-pods.’ The chaplain thrust a power cell into the rifle and handed it to the Doom Eagle.

‘The Emperor truly protects.’ Torrus said, the hint of a smile appearing at the corners of his mouth. ‘It will be at least a week until our comrades arrive in

sufficient numbers to cleanse this transporter. There must be a thousand crates in here. A thousand last stands.'

The chaplain kissed his rosarius before placing it in his side pocket. 'Then we must give a thousand thanks to the Emperor.'

A mob of plague zombies hove into view. A thrashing mob of rifle butts, vomit, teeth and nails swayed towards them. Long days and nights lay ahead. Not all, if any, would survive the relentless onslaught. Still, they – the chaplain, Brothers Vidus, Althulca and Nibus and Makindlus – aimed and waited for the order. Captain Torrus breathed deeply.

He gave the command. 'Fire!'

### **Two weeks later**

Reinforcements had arrived. The cleansing and quarantine of *The Deliverance* had begun in earnest. Squads of Doom Eagles and Imperial Guardsmen moved in stages through the ship burning it clean of zombies and Chaos slime. All squads advanced on the landing bay for the final reckoning. There they would find Plague Zombies disorientated and ineffective as a fighting force. This tactic of methodically hacking away at the influence of Chaos throughout the ship was having the desired result.

True to his vow Callinca was a prominent part of operations in the storage sectors. His familiarity with the area was proving invaluable, but there was another reason he was there. He would be the first to be informed if and when the bodies of Torrus and the others were found. This was his anointed responsibility, earned through fighting with them side by side, to ensure that the correct protocols were followed to guarantee his dead comrades full heroes honours back on their home planet of Gathis II. It was the Doom Eagles way. It was Callinca's way.

All was quiet. Callinca's squad walked past the personnel lift in the medical storage area. Imagery, both vivid and dark, came flooding back to the techmarine. There was the debris caused by the charges, the scattered zombie parts, but that which remained of the zombie mob that besieged him had moved on.

Sound rang in Callinca's ears. The rattle of las-fire resonating desperation, a last stand against impossible odds. Perhaps too vivid a flashback, Callinca thought to himself. Then, the register of shock and a glimmer of hope etched on Callinca's chiselled face as he recognised the sound of battle as real and in the distance.

Callinca's squad followed him as he ran past the opened shutters into the next storage area. There were crates that had been kicked over, with munitions inside. Thoughts raced through Callinca's mind. There were no other squads down here and the zombies didn't have the nous to fire a lasrifle. Callinca followed a trail of dead zombies and open crates. Surely, it could only mean one thing...

At the far wall their backs to Callinca's squad – a mob of very much alive zombies. From the other side, there was definite gunfire.

'Take them down,' Callinca said. The squad's flamers combined to unleash a fireball that engulfed the zombie mob. Those that turned around were picked off with consummate ease. The zombies combusted and peeled away to reveal a group of crates used as cover. Behind the crates were Torrus, Makindlus and Balbolca. All of them were badly beaten, with burns and missing fingers. Makindlus had lost most of his right arm.

He fell to his knees with exhaustion. The apothecary from Callinca's squad ran to his aid. 'From one apothecary to another,' Makindlus said, 'if I prove to be a bad patient, you have my permission to shoot me.'

'I wasn't planning on asking your permission,' the apothecary said. Makindlus smiled at this, his eyes flickering, turned heavy. He allowed the notion of sleep to flood his thoughts for the first in a very long time.

'You are the only survivors?' Callinca asked Torrus as he helped the captain to his feet.

'When it left the landing bay, the blast from the Thunderhawk's thrusters cleared a lot of the zombies from around us,' Torrus told him. 'With the Thunderhawk gone, we escaped back up the ramp and set base here. Long days and nights. We'd fight them off, change position, emptying crates of lasrifles and power packs.'

'And the chaplain...?' Callinca asked.

Torrus stared into Callinca's eyes. There was still defiance in Torrus's gaze; there was still fight. 'It was several hours ago. The zombies had outflanked us. The chaplain, lasrifle blazing, took them head on, punching a hole through enemy lines, but it left him isolated. Cut off from the rest of us.' Torrus looked away in case his eyes betrayed another emotion. 'He gave us the chance to regroup and rescue the situation. He sacrificed himself.'

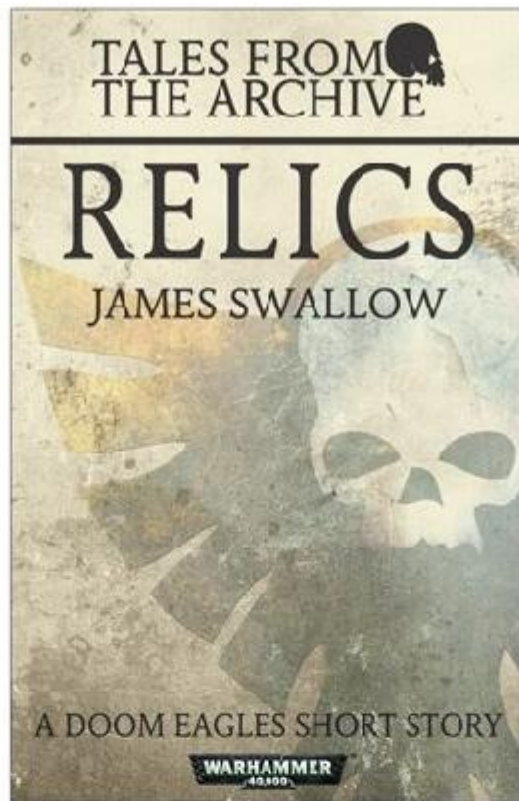
'Just moments before, he passed something to me,' Torrus continued. The captain was holding tight an object in his three-fingered hand. 'He fought alongside us with the courage of a Doom Eagle. The only one out of a hundred thousand personnel on this transporter ship who did not succumb to the plague.'

Callinca saw what Torrus had in his grip and understood. They had all been party to it. It was more than a fight for survival; it was all about faith.

‘We had to survive,’ Torrus said. ‘Our obligation, his legacy.’ It was the chaplain’s rosarius that Torrus held in his hand.

## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

JIM ALEXANDER'S work for Black Library includes short stories and various comics in *Warhammer Monthly* magazine. He is known for his work for major comic publishers in the US and the UK, where he has written for many beloved characters and franchises.



Out on the unforgiving desert plains of the planet Serek, a squad of determined novices of the Doom Eagles Chapter are undergoing a brutal training regimen.

Download now from [blacklibrary.com](https://blacklibrary.com)



**READ IT FIRST**

EXCLUSIVE PRODUCTS | EARLY RELEASES | FREE DELIVERY

[blacklibrary.com](https://blacklibrary.com)

**A BLACK LIBRARY PUBLICATION**

**Originally published in issue 40 of Inferno! in 2004. This version published in 2013 by Black Library, Games Workshop Ltd., Willow Road, Nottingham, NG7 2WS, UK**

**© Games Workshop Limited 2013. All rights reserved.**

**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 978-1-78251-059-8**

**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](http://blacklibrary.com)**

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

**[www.games-workshop.com](http://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.