



C Z DUNN

SHIP OF THE DAMNED

A LEGION OF THE DAMNED SHORT STORY





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An Agentha of the Fractured Cipher Tale

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Agentha looked out across the chapel, her gaze returned by dozens of pairs of glazed eyes. Clad in filthy rags, the unwashed horde remained silent, their motionless forms held rapt by the woman in the rust-coloured robes addressing them from the raised lectern. Agentha removed her eyeglasses and cleaned them, being careful not to cause further damage to the cracked left lens, before replacing them and pushing them up the bridge of her nose. She cleared her throat.

‘Somebody?’ She surveyed the room as she spoke. ‘Anybody?’

As her eyes fell upon them, many of the children averted their gaze, looking to the ground or up at the corroded roof of their makeshift schola. Others put fingers to pursed lips, feigning deep thought while some made no attempt at forming a response, instead choosing to cockily chew their nails or yawn out of disinterest.

‘Not a single one of you can tell me the date of the Feast of the Emperor’s Ascension?’ Agentha spread her arms, palms held open and upwards in a gesture of exasperation. The heavy fabric of her sleeves rustled gently under the influence of the vibrations from the ship’s sub-warp engines. Receiving no response, the Sister Dialogous tried a different tack.

‘Seelia. Was your home world so far from the Emperor’s light that you neglected to honour the anniversary of the sacrifice he made for the good of all mankind?’ The girl Agentha addressed made a face like a small rodent caught in a searchlight beam, and her cheeks began to turn from an unhealthy white that had not seen sunlight in years to pale crimson. ‘No wonder then that you and your family chose to seek passage on a pilgrim

vessel. Perhaps once you have seen a few of the holy wonders of the Imperium and the monuments and worlds raised and settled in His honour, then you might return and enlighten the heathens you left behind.’

Agentha knew the lie in her words. The pilgrim vessels that slowly traversed the sub-warp space lanes of the galaxy very rarely made return visits to worlds. Those ships fortunate enough to avoid pirates, xenos attacks and other void-bound predators and survive long enough to complete their round trips often found themselves back where they started hundreds, if not thousands, of years later. Turning her attention from the now sobbing Seelia, Agentha made eye contact with another of the girls in the class, a slight, raven-haired figure who swallowed nervously once she realised she was next to face the Sister’s questioning.

‘Ephrael. You have celebrated at least thirteen Feasts on board the *Herald of Piety*. Surely you must remember the date upon which it is celebrated?’

The girl stared at Agentha with big, dark eyes. Ephrael was void-born, one of the many children whose existence had begun on board and who had never set foot on the surface of any planet or moon. Having never been exposed to any form of natural illumination and living in the artificial twilight of the habitation decks, her eyes had grown large to drink in all available light and her irises were only a thin sliver of blue. In spite of this, Ephrael still looked human, unlike some of the third and fourth generation void-born offspring where the sclera had disappeared entirely to be replaced by inky black. Those not killed at birth by appalled parents and who survive through childhood often ended up in the bowels of the vessel, choosing to live with others who had been similarly shunned.

‘I don’t know, my lady,’ Ephrael answered through a chewed lip.

Agentha smiled warmly. ‘Thank you for your honesty, child.’ Her smile melted away and she peered out over the top of her cracked eyeglasses. ‘But how many times do I have to tell you – all of you – to address me as “Sister” not “my lady”?’

It had been over a year since Agentha had secured passage on the *Herald of Piety* but the awe of having a Sister of the Adepta Sororitas on board – even one from a minor Dialogous order – had yet to pass. Ever since the moment Captain Keifmann had eagerly agreed to transport her as far as the next world with a reasonably sized spaceport, those around her had

treated her differently, preferentially. The captain had offered her the choice of the officer's cabins and even suggested he would vacate his own billet should she so desire. Agentha vehemently rejected these offers and instead chose to live out her journey in the spartan priest's quarters attached to the *Herald's* main chapel.

Though the Ecclesiarchy preacher on board had died of some unspecified contagion that had ravaged the ship decades earlier, the chapel had been better maintained than other areas of the aging vessel. Laymen from among the passengers had led congregations in daily prayer and the few on board with a modicum of education had used it as a place of learning, imparting what little they knew to the pilgrim children. Though Agentha could not serve the Emperor in the way she had been trained until she made it back to the convent of the Order of the Fractured Cipher, that did not mean she could not serve Him at all. She had taken over both preaching and teaching duties within hours of coming aboard.

It had not been without its problems though.

For a ship that could comfortably transport five thousand pilgrims – and uncomfortably three times that figure – the chapel was tiny, capable of holding no more than a few hundred souls. The first time Agentha held a prayer meeting almost the entire ship, crew included, tried to attend. The ensuing riot took two days for the ship's militia to quell and resulted in the deaths of close to a hundred souls. It was only when Agentha addressed the pilgrims over the shipwide vox promising to hold multiple prayer sessions each day in various parts of the ship that the violence abated.

Her lessons too did not commence without incident. Accusations abounded that parents had forcibly evicted other pilgrim families from the decks closest to the chapel in an effort to enrol their own children under Agentha's tutelage and several men and women above the age of the majority tried to pass themselves off as minors in an effort to learn to read and write. Again, Agentha mediated and found a workable solution. Younger children would be taught for a few hours each morning with older children taking lessons in the afternoon. Any adults wishing to better themselves could attend in the early evening before Agentha started her rounds of the ship to lead the various congregations in reverence of The Emperor.

Though the Sister Dialogous found the attention and adoration she had attracted unnerving, she understood the reasoning behind it. The *Herald of Piety*, like all pilgrim vessels, was not capable of warp travel, and as it slowly wended its way towards Terra it would make infrequent stops at shrineworlds and other holy sites. It could take decades to make the journey from one planet to another and so many on board had never experienced the rapture and fervour of setting foot on the same ground the Emperor had once trod upon or beheld a relic that was once within his grasp. Being of the Sororitas order – a bride of the Emperor as some called her – Agentha was regarded as having a direct line to the Golden Throne and was therefore venerated by the pilgrims.

Despite understanding the reasoning, she still went to bed in the early hours of every morning praying to the Emperor that she might be granted just a little more sleep.

Agentha stepped down from the lectern and placed herself on the same level as her pupils. Agentha moved along the aisle between the pews, walking past a crude statue of the Emperor, which looked as if it had been carved by somebody who had been told what the Emperor looked like by somebody who had *also* been told what the Emperor looked like by somebody with a severe case of cataracts. Heads turned away and eyes looked towards the ground as her booted feet trod the metal deck. Halfway along the ranks of functionally constructed benches she stopped and stood over a blond youth who was whistling under his breath in the vain hope that if he ignored the sister, she would ignore him.

‘Constantin Urfmeier, surely you must know the date of the Feast of the Emperor’s Ascension?’ From what Agentha could gather, the boy – though he was well on his way to manhood – had received some education prior to coming aboard the *Herald* and despite spending all of his afternoons in lessons would be present at several of her prayer sessions each night. What he gained in knowledge and piety was matched by his shyness, always reluctant to volunteer answers in front of his classmates.

Agentha never did find out if Constantin Urfmeier knew when to celebrate the Feast of the Emperor’s Ascension, or if indeed – as she suspected he also knew – that the exact date was the subject of contention between various factions within the Ecclesiarchy and other branches of the Imperium. At the exact moment he found the courage to part his lips in

preparation to speak, a commotion from the front of the chapel rendered Constantin silent and drew everyone's attention.

'That's mine! Give it back!' yelled a small boy. A much larger boy was looming over him, holding aloft what looked like a black ball out of the younger child's reach.

'Or what, Dolgan? You'll tell your filthy refugee mother on me?' the older boy scoffed.

'Both of you, sit back down this instant,' Agentha scolded, purposefully striding back down the aisle towards the two squabbling boys. Understandably, when so many people from vastly different backgrounds were placed together in such a small environment, cliques had formed among the pilgrims – not just the children but the adults too. Sharing a home world was obvious common ground, but even within groups with the same planetary heritage splintering often occurred along regional and racial boundaries, or within their affiliated sub-branch of the Imperial creed. Dolgan belonged to one of the smaller but newer groups on board the *Herald* but, despite having had months to integrate with his classmates, had barely spoken to anybody outside of those he had come aboard with.

Both boys ignored Agentha.

'Give it back to me right now, Stevan. It's mine. I picked it up when the Space Marine dropped it,' Dolgan spat. He pulled his arm back ready to throw a punch but another boy, a few years older and a head taller than Dolgan, jumped up from the pew and grabbed his arm, preventing him from striking Stevan.

'Be quiet,' the other boy hissed. His hair was a similar light brown, curly mop to Dolgan's and they shared the same near-albino skin tone. 'We're not supposed to say anything.'

Agentha stopped in her tracks. Dolgan and the other boy, Yurkan, had not come aboard in the same way as the other pilgrims. Rather than joining the *Herald* at a shrineworld or one of the many supply stops along its seemingly endless journey, the two boys, along with fifty or so other refugees, had been found drifting in deep space, their shuttle emitting a weak distress signal that Captain Keifmann had picked up. Because none of the refugees spoke Low Gothic, Agentha had been called upon to act as interpreter, but had not managed to glean much information from the

castaways. They claimed their home world, Sertis, had come under attack – a not uncommon occurrence in the Draconis sector – and that they were the only survivors. When pressed on how they alone had survived not one of them would answer.

In the months since, the few children that had been among the Sertisian refugees had attended class every day and seemed to be making good progress with learning Low Gothic, but the adults had made very little effort to either integrate or even gain the means to communicate with their fellow passengers. Of their means of escape, no more had been said but now Dolgan was talking of Space Marines. Could it have been Castellan Kaleb and his Black Templars who had come their aid? It had been a little over a year since Agentha had been left behind on the shrineworld of Stern's Remembrance by the Castellan and it was likely that they would still be operating within the sector. If it was the Black Templars then why would the Sertisians be so reticent to talk about it?

'You're a liar. A filthy refugee liar,' Stevan taunted. 'You've never seen a Space Marine and you didn't get this from one. This is a totem that you and your heretic mother use to perform witchery.'

'That is enough!' Agentha boomed with such force that it silenced not only Stevan but the near two hundred other souls in the chapel who had began murmuring in speculation as to the true purpose of the dark sphere. She stamped over to where the two Sertisian boys were facing off with the much brawnier Stevan and stepped between them. 'Accusations of heresy are not to be tossed around lightly, especially in the House of the Emperor. Do I make myself clear, young man?'

Stevan's chin sank into his chest and he stared at the floor. 'Yes, my lady. I mean Sister. Yes, Sister.'

'I'll take that,' Agentha said, impolitely snatching the orb from Stevan. Dolgan started to protest but Yurkan held his friend in check once again.

Agentha turned the object over in her hands, marvelling at the smooth surface covered in a fine, intricate tracery that seemed to have been painted or printed on rather than carved. Though its cold surface suggested it was made from some form of metal, it felt light in her hand. However, when she tapped it with one of her unkempt fingernails, the ball was solid rather than hollow.

‘Where did you really get this from, Dolgan?’ she asked kindly. The boy had been through so much already in his short life – his father had been killed during the flight from Sertis, that much Agentha had been able to establish – and hectoring the boy was unlikely to yield positive results.

Dolgan looked up at the orange-robed sister, tears welling. ‘But it is true. The Space Marine in black armour dropped it.’

She was about to ask him about the Space Marine when the huge wooden doors of the chapel were flung open abruptly, the sound of them slamming against the metal bulkhead bringing everybody to attention. Three uniformed figures, each carrying an autopistol holstered at their hip, entered. Agentha recognised them all from the nightly prayer sessions she ran for the crew – Aswald, Vorchek and Bukwald of the ship’s militia. The latter, the highest ranking of the three, approached her while the other two remained on the threshold.

‘I beg your pardon for the intrusion, my lady,’ Bukwald said, removing his cap and giving a slight bow. Agentha slipped the metal sphere into one of the pockets of her robe. ‘The captain is asking to see you right away.’

‘Did he say why he wants to see me, Armsman Bukwald?’ Agentha asked.

Bukwald looked nervously around the room at the children and then back to the Sister Dialogous, his eyes saying more than his next few words. ‘I’d rather not say here, my lady.’

‘Very well, armsman. Lead on.’

Agentha turned to look back at the three boys who had disrupted her afternoon class. ‘I’ll deal with you tomorrow. Class dismissed,’ she said before pushing her eyeglasses up the bridge of her nose again and following the three armsmen out of the chapel.

‘And it has been broadcasting the same message ever since you first picked up the signal?’ Agentha asked, leaning over the cobbled-together vox array. Exposed circuit boards and bare wires crackled and sparked as the ancient unit relayed the same faint words over and over, occasionally punctuated by the sound of a bell chiming.

‘There has been no variation whatsoever, my lady,’ said Captain Keifmann, his voice dry and scratchy. ‘Just a man’s voice saying the same

words on a loop and that infernal bell.’ Keifmann was advanced in years, certainly nearing a century, and every year was delineated in the lines and wrinkles of his face. He had been the captain of the *Herald of Piety* for over half his life and was the twelfth generation of his family to have commanded the pilgrim vessel.

‘Is there any way you can boost the signal? I can’t make out what he’s saying,’ Agentha asked, leaning in even closer to the tarnished brass speaker grille. She was suddenly overcome with a sense of déjà vu, memories flooding back to her of being on the bridge of the Black Templar’s vessel and listening to a similar, static-laden vox message.

A much younger man, Brynla, one of Keifmann’s many, many grandchildren, answered. ‘I’m sorry, my lady. The long-range vox is barely operational as it is. I’m surprised we’re picking anything up at all.’ His arm was gripping the captain’s elbow, supporting his frail grandfather as both men puzzled over the signal.

Agentha gave a weak smile in return. The *Herald* had been plying the subwarp pilgrim routes of the Imperium for thousands of years and, though its structure was as strong as the day it left some long forgotten orbital shipyard, its systems – those that remained operational at least – were held together by repair tape and blind faith. ‘Is it being broadcast on a distress channel?’

Brynla looked to his grandfather, who returned the look with equal bemusement. ‘I... I don’t know, my lady.’ Just as the ship’s electronic arrays and sensors had degraded down the centuries, so too had the knowledge of the crew to operate them. Essential systems like the air and water purification filters and the engines were maintained along similar dynastic lines to the ship’s bridge; knowledge passed down from father to son, mother to daughter, so that the *Herald* could traverse the stars for all eternity if need be. Less vital systems, such as the vox and heating, had not been properly looked after for years, only enthusiastic amateurs attempted to keep them operational in the absence of a skilled crew.

‘What do you think it is?’ asked Keifmann, pulling his elbow away from Brynla’s grasp and moving nearer to Agentha.

‘I’m not sure,’ she replied, ear still close to the speaker. ‘I don’t understand what is being said but I recognise the urgency in the voice.’

Whether this is being broadcast on a distress channel or not, it sounds as if somebody was in trouble.'

'Was?' exclaimed Keifmann.

'Yes. This message could be decades, even centuries, old. You don't think...'

The old man had put one hand down on the console array to steady himself but was stroking his chin in contemplation with the other.

'Oh,' said Agentha. 'You do.' Keifmann was a gentle soul, a rare optimist in a harsh, unforgiving universe. He had willingly given over his entire life in service to the Emperor, ferrying the faithful across the stars to venerate His name, knowing that he would receive no reward in his own lifetime. His greatest hope was that one day, many years from now, the *Herald* might finally reach Terra and his descendents cast their eyes upon the Imperial Palace, the Petitioner's City and other places from the lessons and scriptures. Provided his good nature didn't get him and everybody else on board killed in the meantime.

Agentha had a horrible sense of déjà vu again, this time to six months prior when the *Herald* had intercepted a similar message.

'I seem to recall your cautioning before we picked up the Sertisian castaways. Are you going to caution me again, my lady?' Keifmann said, the sparkle in his eyes belying his advanced years.

Agentha sighed. She had warned Keifmann against following a distress signal on the previous occasion on the likelihood that it was outdated, or worse, a ruse by xenos raiders. Fortunately for all on board the pilgrim vessel, as well as the Sertisian refugees, those fears had proved to be unfounded. 'We were lucky last time. The law of averages—'

'The only law I care about is the law of the Emperor of Mankind' Keifmann interrupted, though not rudely. 'If there are faithful adrift among the stars then I am compelled to come to their aid.'

Agentha had spent her entire lifetime studying not only linguistics and scriptures both human and alien, but also the tenets of the Imperial Creed and the Holy Word of the Emperor. She could not recall a single instance where the faith she shared with the captain had espoused compassion. From the look on Keifmann's face there was no telling him that. 'How long before the ship is close enough to be boarded?'

Brynla moved over to opposite side of the bridge and consulted an auspex screen. ‘Five hours. Perhaps six,’ he called back after bashing it a few times with the base of his fist.

‘Then I at least have a little time to decipher the message to determine whether this is folly.’ Agentha reached into one of the many pockets about her robe and pulled out a slender stick of charcoal. ‘Do you have something I can write on?’

The sudden sound of parchment tearing made her nauseous. ‘Here you are,’ said a helpful female voice from behind her. While the *Herald* was in transit between worlds, the bridge only required a skeleton crew to be on alert for the unlikely event of vox traffic or the auspex returning a reading. In a few hours time, when the ship was attempting a complex docking manoeuvre with the source of the mysterious signal, the entire Keifmann family would be at their stations. For now, it was just the patriarch, Brynla, and his twin sister Katylyna, who was standing before the Sister Dialogous with a tattered bound tome in one hand and a page torn from it in the other. Katylyna offered the loose leaf to Agentha.

‘Please, child. Have some respect.’ Despite the fact that Katylyna was the older of the two women, Agentha still addressed her as child, not only because she was so used to addressing her pupils as such but also as a hangover from her days in the convent. ‘That is no way to treat a book.’

Embarrassed, Katylyna replaced the book – some kind of manual from the look of the cover – carefully into the small, dusty alcove where it had likely sat since it had first been brought aboard. Then, almost reverentially, she pulled a frayed sleeve over her hand and swept away the dead skin and detritus of the ages that formed a layer around the now damaged book and similar volumes.

The scowl retreating from her face, Agentha leaned in as close as she could to the vox speaker and carefully transcribed the words she was hearing, each syllable carefully rendered in flawless High Gothic.

Leaving Keifmann and his progeny to rouse the rest of their clan in readiness for the docking procedure they would soon be carrying out, Agentha took her leave and returned to the chapel.

Agentha slammed shut yet another book in frustration, the noise carrying through the unusually empty chapel. At this point during the ship's cycle it should have been full of worshippers being led in prayer and devotions by the Bride of the Emperor. Instead, she was stood alone at the lectern poring over the small collection of books she had accumulated since being seconded from her order by virtue of a long-standing pact between her Dialogous order and the Black Templars.

Castellan Kaleb had gifted her a volume from the extensive library on board the *Inevitable Retribution* and though it was both a rare and impressive tome – *The Mirror of Smoke* by Gideon Ravenor – it was of no use in deciphering the strange words she had scrawled in the margins of the torn out page.

Agentha's time on Stern's Remembrance had expanded her library and though she had acquired books that were both desirable and interesting, she still felt a pang of guilt. Setting herself up as a scribe, she had vowed to save all of the money she earned to secure passage back to her Order, spending only what she had to on food and water. Yet somehow, every time she strolled through one of the many market places that dotted its mazelike planetary capital, some merchant or other was offering a new title that had just come into their possession, likely sold by pilgrims trying to raise capital for an onward voyage. Though she knew that every book she purchased delayed her return to her sisters, it was more than compensated for by the bounty of knowledge she would bring back with her.

She picked up a fine leatherbound folio from the floor and sat it on the lectern. Over the past few hours she had kept coming back to this book, but if it held the key to understanding the intercepted transmission then she had yet to find it. *Dialects of the Draconis Sector* was the first book she had taken possession of during her temporary layover on the shrineworld and, although the author was anonymous, he or she had put together a fine study of the often disparate languages from almost a thousand worlds.

In the six months she had been stranded on Stern's Remembrance Agentha had taught herself fourteen new languages, three of which were entirely unrelated to any she had previously known. Unfortunately, none of the fourteen, nor the other two hundred and nine she had learned during

her time at the schola progenium and within the Order of the Fractured Cipher, were of any use to her now. It was as if the language that was being broadcast from the drifting ship was something entirely new. Or, as Agentha had suspected from the beginning, something completely ancient – a language that was already dead before the *Herald of Piety* set sail among the heavens.

Licking the tips of her fingers, she hurriedly flicked through the yellowed pages, scanning chapter titles and headings on the off-chance that there was something she had missed. She allowed the book to come to rest on one of the appendices outlining possible links between the languages of the fringe worlds of the Draconis sector and certain xenos tongues. Even possessing this book could earn her chastisement, possibly even excommunication or death, from some of the more militant of her order but, after whispering the correct litany to protect her immortal soul, she quickly scanned the pages. One word in particular caught her attention, not an exact match for any in the message but one of the syllables seemed to share a root with another word she had seen in a different book. She picked up the loose sheet of paper she had copied the message onto and placed it as a bookmark in *Dialects of the Draconis Sector*.

She was just about to lean down and retrieve another book when she returned her attention to the torn page, not the words she had written on it but the ones already printed there.

That was it. She had not been looking at this the right way. They were listening to the wrong part of the message.

Tucking the page into one of her numerous pockets, she hurried back to the bridge.

The thud of two vast spacefaring vessels gently coming together reverberated through the hull of the *Herald of Piety* as Agentha raced onto the bridge. A score of crewmen, all with similar facial features and colouring, turned to look at the panting, orange-clad Sister Dialogous. She stood partially bent forwards with her hands on her thighs for a few moments before pushing sweaty locks of auburn hair from her face and adjusting her eyeglasses.

‘Katylyna, the book,’ Agentha said breathing heavily. Even in her Adepta Sororitas trained peak physical condition, her exertions to traverse almost thirty decks had taken their toll. She held out the torn page. ‘I need the book you took this from.’

The woman pushed her way past several of her brothers, sisters and cousins to reach the alcove. Retrieving the book she once again pulled her sleeve down and brushed the dust from it before passing it to Agentha.

‘Docking complete, captain,’ reported one of the bridge crew, almost an exact duplicate of Brynla except for lighter hair and darker eyes. ‘The armsmen are cutting their way in now.’

‘You have to stop them!’ cried Agentha, frantically searching through the musty book. The pages were creasing with the force she was turning them but she seemed to neither notice or care.

‘What is it? What have you found?’ asked Keifmann, suddenly concerned.

Finding the page she was looking for, Agentha opened the book wide, its spine splitting with a dry crunch. ‘We were concentrating on the wrong part of the message. The words weren’t important – well they might have been important if we knew what they meant – but the bell was. The bell was telling us all we need to know.’ She passed the book to the aged captain who struggled to hold it in his frail hands. Brynla stepped in to help his grandfather, holding the book up so the words ‘Call signs of Battlefleet Draconis’ were visible in gold leaf along its damaged spine above the similarly printed characters ‘M.33’. The old man’s eyes went wide with realisation, what little pigment his skin retained rapidly draining.

‘Raise Bukwald on the vox,’ Keifmann said dryly, all moisture having escaped his throat. Vox-casters droned into life, tinny static mingling with the beeps and whirrs of instruments and cogitators. After a few seconds a man’s distorted voice answered the hail.

‘We’re almost through, captain,’ said Bukwald, joy evident in his tone. ‘You were right, sir. There are people alive on there. We can hear them moving behind the airlocks.’

Keifmann threw Agentha a look of horror that she would never forget for the rest of her life. In that instant, all of the hope, all of the optimism,

all of the faith that Keifmann held bled away from him as if his soul had become an open wound.

‘They’re not alive, Bukwald. They’re dead. All of them dead.’

Keifmann’s words were lost under the sound of metal tearing over the vox.

‘Say again, captain. I missed that last part,’ said Bukwald.

‘It’s the plague, Bukwald. The plague of unbelief.’ Brynla’s hands fell away from supporting his grandfather, the younger man’s hands moving to his face in terror. Keifmann sank to his knees.

What he said next was drowned out by the sound of distorted screams already emanating from the vox-casters. ‘They’re plague zombies, Bukwald. Throne-forsaken plague zombies.’

The crimson-hued emergency lighting was one of the few archaic onboard systems that still functioned but, deprived of the accompanying klaxon, which had long since fallen into disrepair, the rust-rimmed corridors of the *Herald* took on a surreal aspect. The wail of alarms was replaced by the cries of pilgrims, a tide of humanity surging for the safety of the upper decks. Under the strobing red glow, Agentha swam against that tide, heading for a very different refuge.

Seelia and her younger sister Dotta surged past the Sister Dialogous, and Agentha thrust out a deceptively muscular arm and grabbed the older girl by the shoulder. Startled, Seelia spun defensively dragging Dotta with her by the hand.

‘The chapel. We’re making for the chapel. We’ll be safe there,’ Agentha said, her tone the very epitome of calm in stark contrast to the panic surrounding her.

Seelia looked on anxiously as her father, oblivious that he had left his children behind, was swallowed up by the throng, disappearing around a bend in the corridor without so much as a glance back.

‘There’s only room for the children, Seelia.’ Agentha looked down at Dotta, the girl’s face grubby with dried tears. Seelia said nothing. Her younger sister’s pleading eyes said everything for her.

Taking their place at the rear of the twenty or so children Agentha had already gathered to her, the Bride of the Emperor led His children towards sanctuary.

By the time they reached the lower decks, close to fifty children followed in Agentha's wake. Many she had plucked from out of the flow of pilgrims but some had been left under her charge by desperate parents who had realised what she was doing. The younger children held the hands of elder brothers and sisters, or clung to the folds of Agentha's robes. Some of her older students, who were more aware of the graveness of their situation – Stevan, Constantin and Ephrael amongst them – formed a protective cordon around the infants, broken table legs and corroded chunks of bulkhead grasped tightly as impromptu clubs.

No pilgrims remained this deep into the ship, all having fled higher once word of the plague zombie infestation had spread like a contagion through the accommodation levels. Thankfully, they had not yet encountered any evidence of the tainted invaders and had it not been for the screams of the dying at the other end of a vox-link fresh in her mind, Agentha would have thought the whole thing a hoax.

That situation quickly changed.

Coming to the corridor that led directly to the chapel, Agentha halted and spread her arms to prevent any of the pilgrim children from continuing any further. 'Stay here,' she said quietly.

Leaving her charges to linger on the threshold of the passage, she cautiously proceeded towards the shape on the floor fifteen metres further down, its immobile form picked out by the flashing red lights. As she got closer, the sound of her footsteps took on a wet aspect and she looked down to find herself walking through a puddle of blood. Reaching what she assumed to be a facedown corpse – nothing could have lost that much blood and lived – she rolled it over with a swift jab from her bloody boot.

In her time aboard the *Herald of Piety*, Agentha had prided herself on getting to know as many of the sixteen thousand or so pilgrims crammed aboard, if not by name, then certainly by sight. If she had known this man while he had been alive then she certainly could not recognise him in death. Scraps of militia tunic clung to bloodied meat, chewed internal organs spilling out from rents in the flesh. One arm was missing entirely, as was his face, which looked like it been ripped or bitten off to leave only muscle, exposed cheek and jaw bones.

Curiosity got the better of some of the children and Agentha heard them creeping forward to take a look at what she had found. 'I told you to stay

back,' she hissed sternly over her shoulder. The children, who by now knew to obey the Sister Dialogous or pay the price, did as she said.

Returning her attention to the armsman's body she found that he still gripped an autopistol in his one remaining hand. Prising away his stiff fingers, she retrieved the weapon and appraised it in the palm of her hands.

It was a common misconception in the Imperium that sisters of the non-militant orders of the Adepta Sororitas were not trained to fight, that the limit of their usefulness was in healing the sick and translating esoteric scriptures and tomes. While it was true that those of their sorority who donned power armour were bred for battle, their entire lives dedicated to the art of warfare, many an enemy of the Emperor had come undone by believing that a Sister Dialogous or Hospitaller did not have the inclination or faculty for violence.

It had been many years since she had fired a weapon in anger but the training drilled into Agentha during her first few years in the convent came rushing back to her, sense memories triggered by the feel of the gun in her hand. From the length of the barrel she could deduce that it had an effective range of no more than two hundred metres, more than sufficient for combat on board a vessel such as this. The length of its magazine told her that it held a clip of twelve rounds and its weight revealed that there were only three shots left. The temperature of the gun, compensating for the coldness of the ship, led her to believe that it had been fired less than an hour ago. Gripping the autopistol by its handle and slipping her finger over the trigger she rose to her feet with it raised in case the armsman's murderers were still nearby.

Noise from along the corridor alerted her to the plague zombies' presence moments before the emergency lighting illuminated their foul forms in a red glow. Breaking off from feasting upon another poor soul, seven of the unholy abominations fixed Agentha with their dead stares and shambled towards her. Behind her, she could hear a murmur of panic pass between the children.

'Be brave, children,' she said, raising the pistol with a straight arm and looking down the barrel through the uncracked lens of her eyeglasses. 'The Emperor protects.'

The sound of her first shot rang out uncomfortably loud in the close confines of the ship's corridor, causing some of the children to wail and

scream. The bullet found its mark and the lead plague zombie, an emaciated thing that was barely more than a skeleton, collapsed to the ground, a clean hole punched through the front of its weathered skull.

Agentha heard the second bullet slide into the chamber and with the sound of her previous shot and childrens' screams still echoing, she pulled the trigger again. This time two of the monsters went down, the bullet passing through one rotten brainpan and embedding in an equally decayed forehead behind it.

Her ears ringing, she waited for the final bullet to chamber and adjusted her aim. The shock of recognition stayed her hand briefly as Illyia Vorchek appeared in her sights, the armsman's usually jovial features now a snarl of malevolence. She fired again and his visage went slack, the shot messily exploding his temple.

Agentha swung her arm again and pointed the gun at one of the three surviving plague zombies before pulling the trigger in hope rather than expectation. Instead of the report of a shell, all she heard was the sound of metal on metal, the clip exhausted. She tried again in the forlorn hope that the weapon had malfunctioned but met with the same result.

Such was the noise and her level of concentration that she had failed to notice a group of the older children move up alongside her and was momentarily startled when Ephrael, Constantin and Stevan appeared at her shoulders flanked by other adolescent pilgrims.

'The Emperor protects, Sister,' Ephrael said, raising a chunk of metal that looked as if it was once part of a doorframe.

'Indeed he does,' Agentha said, flipping the pistol in her hand so that she gripped it by the barrel and raising it above her head ready to use as a cudgel. 'But sometimes He gives us the means to protect ourselves.'

The plague zombie at the head of the pack lunged forwards suddenly, eliciting screams from the younger children and a flurry of blows from the armed teenagers. Agentha struck the monster so hard with the butt of the autopistol that it dropped to one knee, the side of its head broken open. She was just readying to strike it again when the sound of lasgun fire eclipsed the screams and moans.

Simultaneously, all three of the plague zombies' heads burst open, showering Agentha and her ad hoc child militia in gore. The trio crashed to the ground, wounds smoking from where shots had found their mark.

More movement from along the corridor caught Agentha's attention and several dark shapes emerged from a side tunnel before disappearing down the branch opposite, silhouettes of laspistols evident in each of their hands.

The final figure to appear stopped in the middle of the corridor, his enormous black eyes blinking uncomfortably under the emergency lighting. His bare torso was lithe, muscular and covered in simplistic tattoos of Imperial aquilas and other holy symbols. Even from a distance Agentha could tell that his skin was almost albino. He tucked his weapon into the waistband of his ragged trousers and made a perfect sign of the aquila across his chest. Agentha stowed her own pistol in the folds of her robes and returned the gesture. The man – though the longer he remained in view, the more Agentha realised that he was no older than some of her students – smiled serenely before following his fellow voidborn along the side corridor.

'Quickly. The route to the chapel is clear,' she called. The pilgrim children filed past her, some of them running for the sanctuary behind the sturdy wooden doors. Once she was certain that all of her wards were safely in the chapel she too ran after them.

'Stevan. Constantin. Come here and help me move the statue,' Agentha said, wrapping her arms around the representation of the Master of Mankind. The two boys looked horrified, as if the Sister Dialogous had just asked them to repaint the Golden Throne in a lurid shade of green. 'It's a statue, boys. The Emperor won't smite you down just for moving it.'

Hesitantly, Stevan and Constantin joined Agentha in sliding the statue across the rust-coated deck, revealing bare metal where the memorial's passage had scraped away the centuries of corrosion. Much to Agentha's surprise, Dolgan pitched in and helped for the last few metres, assisting them in putting the statue into position behind the now barred double doors. An even greater shock was the way Stevan playfully ruffled the smaller boy's mop of hair by way of thanks.

With their immediate safety ensured, Agentha allowed herself to sit down on one of the pews and exhaled long and loud. When Keifmann had

finally come to his senses, he ordered the bridge locked down and began transmitting a distress beacon. Not prepared to sit idly by while the faithful were slaughtered, Agentha had fled from the bridge before it was sealed to round up as many of the pilgrims as she could and lead them to the safe haven of the chapel.

Fortunately, it did not take long for reason to take over. It could take months, possibly years, for the distress beacon to be picked up and that was if the emergency alert systems were actually working. Crowding the chapel with hundreds of pilgrims for The Emperor alone knew how long would be just as dangerous as remaining in the open and taking their chances with the plague zombies. Even if they could remain calm and resist the urge to turn on each other, what few supplies they could scavenge would quickly run out and that was provided the ship's systems remained up and running to purify the air and water. No. Saving the souls of all on board the *Herald of Piety* was beyond both reason and her abilities, but the children? She would save as many of those as she could.

Some of the younger children still sobbed and friends or siblings did their best to comfort them, wrapping their arms around them or swaddling them in the blankets draped over the pews in the chapel. Others set about menial tasks to take their minds off the horrors they had lived through and the bleakness of their situation. Agentha was just about to pitch in herself when Constantin and Seelia approached her.

‘Sister,’ Seelia said, her voice unsteady. ‘What were those things? One of them looked like that armsman who came here earlier.’

Sighing, Agentha sat back down. From the moment they are able to comprehend them, the children of the Imperium are taught about the horrors of the universe. Of the mutant and the heretic, and of the alien and, obliquely, the malign powers that vie for their immortal souls. They are taught to hate and abhor any form of deviation, to reject totally all that does not shine under the rays of the Emperor's benevolent light. Agentha's own lessons and sermons were full of warnings about both the enemy within and the enemy without, but even in these dark times the chances of encountering any of those threats was still remote. There were some things, though, that she could not have prepared her students for.

‘I can tell you what I know,’ Agentha began. ‘But my knowledge is based on conjecture and hearsay, and what little I have read in my studies.’

Other children began to gather around the sister, intrigued by what she was about to say.

‘Please. This is not for the little ones’ ears,’ Agentha said noticing that Dotta and few of the infants had perched themselves on a nearby pew. Ephrael led them away to the side of the chapel and lay them down wrapped in blankets in the hope that they would fall to sleep.

‘Those... things you saw outside are suffering from a contagion, a malaise created and disseminated by a dark and insidious power.’

A ripple of gasps passed among the listeners. Some of them rolled up their sleeves or examined the back their hand to check for signs of contraction. Without warning, Seelia screamed.

‘He’s bleeding!’ she cried. ‘One of them bit Stevan.’

The children closest to Stevan retreated away from him and Agentha could clearly see the crimson stain along his sleeve. Constantin and Ephrael reached for the makeshift clubs at their feet.

‘It didn’t bite me!’ Stevan yelled, panicked. He pulled up the sleeve of his simple pilgrim attire to reveal a thin wound, likely the result of being raked by one of the plague zombies before the voidborn intervened.

‘That doesn’t matter,’ said Constantin, raising the chair leg in his hand and advancing on the bleeding Stevan. ‘Let’s kill him before he turns like the armsman!’

He hadn’t even taken two steps before Agentha’s powerful hand gripped him around the wrist. She dug her fingertips hard into his tendons causing him to both cry out in pain and drop his weapon. ‘Have you been keeping secret from me that you are in fact a Magos Biologis, sent from Mars to live among pilgrims?’ Agentha said, not relinquishing her hold on the boy.

Despite the pain, Constantin still looked bemused. ‘No, Sister,’ he hissed through gritted teeth.

‘Then why do you presume to know how this disease is contracted?’ Agentha said, finally relinquishing her grasp. She looked sternly at the other pilgrim children who had taken up arms. Each of them laid down their weapons without the need for the sister to physically intervene. ‘I have some old bandages in my chamber, Stevan. Why don’t you go and dress your wound while I explain exactly why you aren’t about to turn into a monster and feast upon the brains of your classmates?’

The relief was evident on the boy's face but some of his peers were not as convinced, giving Stevan a wide berth as he moved through the chapel to Agentha's chamber. The Sister Dialogous motioned for the rest of the children to sit again.

'The disease does not spread like an ordinary virus, for it does not affect its sufferers physically, but instead attacks them spiritually. It is called the Plague of Unbelief and only those who lack complete faith can succumb to it.'

More gasps.

'Do not worry, children. Though the disease is likely already in the air that we are breathing, we are all immune.'

The gasps gave way to sighs of relief.

'Is that 'cos of the 'jections we had before we came aboard?' asked a scrawny youth, arms wrapped around his knees to preserve heat in the freezing chapel.

'If only it was that simple, Jonas,' Agentha said, smiling warmly at the boy. 'No. It is no inoculation that protects us from this plague. It is our total faith in the Emperor that prevents us from becoming like one of those mindless beasts. The armsman who tried to attack us outside was lacking in faith and so he fell under the sway of the Dark Powers. Our faith in the immortal God-Emperor prevented us from sharing his fate and as long as our belief is unwavering, our souls will resist its corrupting influence.'

She looked at the faces of her students, all rapt yet some still bearing the marks of scepticism or worry.

'And besides,' she added, turning to look in the direction of the chapel doors. 'We have the Emperor himself watching over us.'

Any doubt seem to melt away from the pilgrim children as they looked up to regard the basic rendering of their figurehead.

'Now please, children. Try and get some rest,' she said, pushing her eyeglasses back up her nose.

The huddle of figures surrounding her dispersed, hunting for blankets and empty pews on which to rest. Agentha stood up preparing to make her way to her chamber behind the pulpit but stopped abruptly, a hot sensation running through her leg. She ran her hand over it checking for any wound that she, like Stevan, may have unknowingly sustained during the melee with the plague zombies but could find no evidence of bleeding. Her hand

came to rest on something solid and warm and she dug into the folds of her robes and retrieved the object she had confiscated from Dolgan during lessons. The thing gave off a faint orange glow, the fine tracery pulsing rhythmically. Agentha stood transfixed by the sphere for several seconds before breaking her reverie with a shake of her head and looking around the room for its owner. Dolgan was nowhere to be seen but Yurkan was over by the lectern tidying up the books the Sister Dialogous had been studying earlier.

‘Yurkan. Have you seen Dolgan recently? I know he was here because he helped me move the statue in front of the doors.’ Agentha said, walking along the aisle between the pews. The tousle-headed boy glanced up at her nervously before carrying on about his business as if he hadn’t heard the sister speak.

‘Yurkan. I’m talking to you. Where is Dolgan?’

‘Please, my lady – I mean, Sister. He made me promise not to tell,’ Yurkan said, his cheeks flushing bright red.

‘Where is he?’ Although she had always tried to remain patient with the children under her care and tutelage, events of recent hours and a lack of sleep were conspiring to drive her temper to the fore.

‘It’s his mother,’ Yurkan said, the promise of tears sparkling under the candlelight. ‘She doesn’t believe like we do. Doesn’t have the same faith in an Emperor who would abandon her and her people to xenos raiders.’

‘Where. Is. He?’ Agentha asked, forcefully pushing her eyeglasses back up the bridge of her nose.

‘He’s gone to find her,’ Yurkan said, starting to cry.

The pipes that carried the purified air around the *Herald of Piety* were more than wide enough for an eight year-old child to traverse but for the two metre frame of a battle sister, it was slow going.

Dragging herself along on her belly, Agentha slid past vents that allowed cleansed air to circulate around the ship. Under occupation of the plague zombies that air was now foetid and rank, filling the corridors along with the guttural moans of the shambling horde. She came to the end of the pipeline supplying this particular deck of the ship that opened out slightly,

allowing Agentha to rise to her haunches and utilise the hand and footholds that would carry her up to the deck above.

Though Yurkan knew that Dolgan had escaped from the chapel to hunt for his mother, the older boy was unaware of how he had left the sanctuary. A quick search of the room had revealed an open air-vent and so Agentha had followed the Sertisian refugee boy into the dark pipeline. The Sister Dialogous knew that if their distress beacon was not picked up soon then she and the children would need to use the air filtration system to move around the ship and scavenge supplies. She had not expected to be cramming herself into the close confines of the pipes quite so quickly.

Hauling herself upwards and back onto her stomach, Agentha at last came to the hab deck where Dolgan and his mother lived. The noise of the plague zombies was louder here and the smell so cloying that she had to pull her robe up over her nose to block it out. Though she knew the deck on which Dolgan and the other Sertisian refugees resided on, Agentha did not know exactly where their hab-dorm was located and it took her an uncomfortably long time to locate the kicked out vent where Dolgan had made his exit.

Poking her head out to check for undead boarders, the pulsating ruby light picked out a trail of torn and ruined bodies running the entire length of the corridor. Drawn by the warm, living flesh of so many pilgrims crammed together the plague zombies had torn through the hab deck, their mindless, unstinting desire to kill and feast claiming young and old alike. In only a few moments, Agentha had already identified more than a dozen dead faces she recognised from her prayer meetings and classes.

She dropped down onto the deck and pulled at her robes, which had become bundled around her in the pipes. Adjusting her eyeglasses she patted a pocket at her waist and felt the warmth of the orb, its glow lighting a patch of material covering her thigh.

Though no zombies remained in the corridor where they had butchered so many, Agentha could hear that they were still nearby and cautiously picked her way through the corpses, bunching her robes at the waist so that the hem did not drag in puddles of blood. She paused over the still form of one of the pilgrims and knelt down to inspect her. Gripped in one hand was an autopistol, a cruder model than the militia-issue gun that Agentha still had secreted in her robes, and with a bent barrel no doubt damaged in a

futile struggle against the reanimated horde. The dead woman wore simple pilgrim attire rather than the tunic and fatigues of the militia so Agentha assumed she had either found the weapon or had smuggled it with her when she first boarded. Removing the clip, Agentha took the pair of bullets she found and, praising The Emperor that they were the same calibre as her own weapon, reloaded her autopistol. Now rearmed, she continued onwards with gun in hand.

Reaching the end of the corridor, where it terminated in a T-junction, Agentha looked carefully in both directions, weighing up which would be the best route to follow. She had just settled on the left-hand passage when a noise from the other branch caught her attention. She waited to hear it again and after a few seconds had passed she was rewarded with the indistinct sound of a child's voice.

Quicker than before, but still careful not to trip over trailing or torn limbs, Agentha followed the noise. Coming to another junction, she halted momentarily before picking up the aural trail again and clambering over a pile of desecrated bodies stacked in the entrance to one of the *Herald's* many hab-dorms.

Agentha blinked as the dull red emergency lighting ceded to the flickering white light of a single lumeglobe set high in the dorm's ceiling. Under an intermittent power supply, the room was completely illuminated for a fraction of a second before the light rapidly faded, bathing the dorm in total darkness for several moments before the cycle began anew.

The lumeglobe flared brightly and Agentha could see Dolgan standing with his back to her, immobile and fixated on a point at the rear of the cramped, communal living quarters. The light died and just before the room was cast into pitch blackness, the boy uttered a single word, his voice cracking as he fought back tears.

'Momma?'

The light blossomed again and Agentha became aware of somebody else in the room, the subject of Dolgan's attention. Hunched over a corpse at the back of the dorm, an unmistakably female figure – long dark hair and full of breast – feasted on entrails. The illumination faded once more and from the darkness Dolgan repeated his question.

'Momma?'

When the room became bright again, the woman was no longer devouring the corpse and was stood to face Dolgan and Agentha. Unlike the zombies Agentha had seen earlier, the woman's body was unravaged, the only signs that she had succumbed to the Plague of Unbelief the bloody smear around her mouth and the lifeless yellow eyes that regarded the two newcomers without any emotion whatsoever.

'Momma?' Dolgan asked one last time, as the room again went dark.

When the light came back on, the thing that was once his mother issued an unnatural wail and began to advance on the pair. Agentha moved closer to Dolgan and placed a hand gently on his shoulder. 'I don't think that's your momma, child. Not any more.' She positioned herself between the boy and the plague zombie. 'Look away, Dolgan. You shouldn't have to see this.'

Heeding her, Dolgan buried his head into the voluminous folds of the sister's orange robes. Agentha raised the autopistol and aimed it directly at the woman's forehead. Uttering a silent prayer, she pulled the trigger just as the room was plunged back into darkness.

When the light returned, Dolgan's mother was at peace, the contents of her skull sprayed across the back wall of the hab-dorm.

A sudden noise from the doorway caused her to turn around, pistol still raised. Whether drawn there by the moaning of what was once Dolgan's mother or the promise of living flesh, a horde of zombies, at least twenty in number, had congregated at the entrance to the hab-dorm and were clawing and tearing at the stack of bodies barring their way.

Agentha drew Dolgan to her, the boy clinging tightly to her gore-encrusted robes, her eyes darting about the room, desperately searching for an air vent or some other means of escape, but she found none. Another cycle of lightness and dark passed and suddenly the horde were in the hab-dorm, hungry mouths moaning discordantly.

Keeping the boy behind her, Agentha moved towards the back wall, using herself as a shield should one of the pack break and lunge for them. The plague zombies still had ten metres to cover but even at their sluggish pace they would be on the Sister Dialogous and the refugee boy in seconds.

Agentha took aim with the pistol again but, realising that she could take down no more than four or five with a single shot, instead considered

another, darker option. With only one bullet left she could spare the boy an agonising death and place her faith in the Emperor that she would be prevented from suffering too greatly. Turning to Dolgan, she placed the muzzle of the autopistol against his forehead. The boy looked up at her, his eyes becoming as wide as those of the voidborn.

Agentha had just started to apply pressure to the trigger when the constant warmth at her thigh became a burning sensation. She tried to ignore the pain but some compulsion forced her to lower the pistol and remove the sphere from her pocket. Bizarrely, the object felt stone cold in her hand but the tracery burned with an intensity that was painful for her to look at. New symbols and runes that she had not seen before, but in an ancient language familiar to her, manifested across its surface and in an instant she knew what she had to do with it. The room lit up again and with the plague zombie horde almost an arm's length away, she held the orb in both hands and twisted it hard, rotating around a previously unseen seam. Its glow took on an unnatural blue aspect.

The lumeglobe went out. This time it did not come back on.

Agentha's nostrils filled with the scent of scorched ozone and every hair on her body rose, charged by static. Dolgan buried his head back in her robes again, sparing him the temporary blindness of the teleportation flash as multiple, bulky figures materialised in the room.

The room lit up suddenly with the unmistakable muzzle flare of bolters, the noise of the weapons unbearable in such a confined space. Agentha could feel the heat of the discharge and the splatter of the plague zombies bursting open under the intense barrage.

After two seconds, the firing ceased.

Although used to being in close proximity to bolter fire, Agentha could do nothing to prevent the inevitable ringing in her ears and as her vision righted itself after the intense burst of the teleportation flare, she could hear nothing. Dolgan still clung tightly to her and she looked down at him, his shape unclear through her hazy vision. What she could make out, even with her sight impaired more than it usually was, was that the boy was pointing.

Following the line of his shaking finger, Agentha was startled to find that one of their mysterious saviours remained in the room. She held up the sphere, its glow slowly fading, and the blue light caught the edges of

what she instantly recognised as power armour. Space Marine power armour.

The same compulsion that had come over her when she activated the device took hold of her again and she moved forwards, each step revealing more of the massive figure rooted to the spot before her. One vast pauldron sported a simple skull icon while the other was decorated with a flame motif that was repeated across both greaves. The black of the armour was the deepest Agentha had ever seen and it seemed to swallow what little light the sphere gave off. She came to a halt less than a metre in front of him and held up the orb, offering it back to what she believed to be its rightful owner.

The Space Marine looked down at Agentha and regarded her. To the Sister Dialogous it felt as if he was peering into her very soul, holding it up to the light and examining it for any flaw or imperfection. Agentha gave an involuntary shudder, not because of the biting cold but out of fear; fear that the Space Marine might look inside her and find her wanting. The last of the orb's light faded and the armoured figure reached out a gauntleted hand. Agentha closed her eyes.

When she opened them, the hab-dorm was lit up again but the Space Marine and the sphere were gone.

Agentha trod lightly down the aisle between the pews in the chapel, careful not to wake the children sleeping on them. She had just returned from the bridge where the new captain of the *Herald of Piety* had briefed her about how he planned to make for the nearest inhabited world and put in for repairs and to resupply. Brynla was a good man and Agentha was certain he would live up to the high standards of command and piety set by his grandfather. Her only regret was that the old man had died under such horrific circumstances.

From what she could gather from the few crewmen and surviving pilgrims she had spoken to, the operation to cleanse the *Herald* of its plague zombie infestation had taken less than five minutes, the Space Marines teleporting from skirmish to skirmish and putting down each pocket of infection quickly and ruthlessly. As to the identity of their rescuers, nobody was sure. The best look at them anybody got was from

the brief bursts of muzzle flash and that was only enough to positively identify them as Space Marines, their chapter affiliation still as mysterious as how and why they come aboard in the first place. Agentha had her theories but chose to keep them to herself.

She reached the entrance to her chamber and looked back into the candlelit chapel with a sigh. The statue of the Emperor had been moved away from the entrance and the pews rearranged to make it once more appear like a place of worship rather than a refuge from plague zombie invasion. Soon, the faithful would return and her lessons resume, though with smaller congregations and class sizes. The Plague of Unbelief and the mindless violence of those afflicted had accounted for fully two-thirds of the pilgrims and crew aboard and until the *Herald* reached the next shrineworld, those numbers would not be bolstered.

By the time the ship was once more overcrowded with pilgrims, it would be somebody else delivering the Emperor's Divine Word from the pulpit, Agentha having already informed the new Captain Keifmann that she would be disembarking when they put in for repairs to try and seek passage on a vessel heading in the direction of Segmentum Solar and the Order of the Fractured Cipher.

She smiled sadly as she watched the dozen sleeping figures huddled under piles of blankets and whispered a prayer for each of them. When the *Herald* next docked, the newly orphaned would be handed over the planetary authorities and be put into whatever system was in place there for dealing with the parentless, be it indentured servitude, military service or other vocation that benefited the Imperium. Wise to their potential fate, some of the older orphans had already headed towards the depths of the ship, throwing their lot in with the tribes of voidborn and criminal gangs who would grant them protection when the armsmen next swept the ship. Dolgan and the other Sertisian refugee children had not been seen since the ship had been brought back under control and Agentha could only assume that they too had gone below decks.

Turning away, she lit a candle in her Spartan chamber and gathered together her blankets and bedrolls. She had not slept at all in over a day – or slept well in over a year – and with slumber so near, she yawned as she lay down and removed her eyeglasses, carefully placing them on a stool

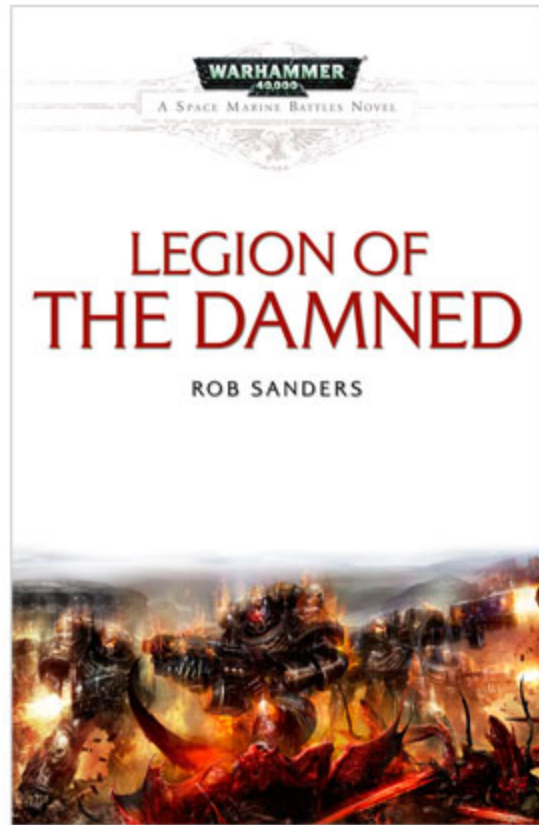
beside her. She scrunched up a blanket to use as a pillow and, closing her eyes, rested her head upon it.

The side of her temple came into contact with something hard nestled into the folds of the blanket and she sat up again, replacing her eyeglasses with one hand while she retrieved the foreign object with the other. Cold and light in her hand, she held up the orb that she had given back to the Space Marine, the runes and symbols no longer evident and the tracery lacking a glow of any hue.

Agentha smiled wearily and put the orb on the stool next to her along with her eyeglasses. The mysteries of the artefact could be fathomed another day. Right now, Emperor willing, she was going to get a long overdue good night's sleep.

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Domiciled in the East Midlands, C Z DUNN is the author of the Dark Angels novella *Dark Vengeance*, the audio dramas *Ascension of Balthasar* and *Malediction*, as well as several short stories. Having spent many years in the publishing industry, with a strong leaning towards genre fiction, he is an expert in e-publication, audio production and zombies.



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