

The background of the cover is a dark, textured green with numerous small, glowing yellow-green spots, resembling a corrupted or alien environment. On the right side, a large, detailed illustration of a Necron character is shown. The character is a tall, metallic being with a skull-like face, glowing red eyes, and intricate armor. It has large, segmented wings or appendages at the top. The character's hands are clasped in front of its chest, holding a small skull. The overall aesthetic is dark and industrial, characteristic of the Warhammer 40,000 Necron faction.

WARHAMMER
40,000

KNOW THINE ENEMY

GAV THORPE

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KNOW THINE ENEMY

Gav Thorpe

The massive, slab-sided fuselage of the Thunderhawk gunship shook and rattled as it plunged through the upper atmosphere of the planet Slato. The roaring of its massive jets and the rumbling of the air against the armoured hull filled the interior with a deafening cacophony. The air glowed around the falling gunship as the armoured beak of its cockpit and the leading edge of its stubby wings glowed white-hot with the friction of its entry from orbit.

Brother Ramesis, chaplain of the 4th Company of the Salamanders Space Marine Chapter, felt the craft hit an area of low pressure and drop several hundred feet in a couple of seconds, pushing him up into the harness which secured him to the inner side of the gunship's fuselage. As the Thunderhawk plummeted deeper into the thick cloud of Slato's skies the passage became smoother, and half a minute later the pilot activated the standby lights. The padded restraints arched up into the wall above Ramesis's head with a hiss of hydraulics and he stretched his arms, the servos within his powered armour whirring quietly as they matched the movement. He felt pressure on his back as the Thunderhawk's machinery implanted his backpack into the socket along his armour's spine, then dropped the ablative shoulder pads down on either side of his head. Now fully armoured, Ramesis stood up and walked steadily along the decking of the Thunderhawk, passing his gaze over the twenty-six assembled Space Marines. Each was conducting his own pre-battle rituals: checking

weapons, comms or armour one last time, wishing each other the Emperor's benevolence or just praying quietly. Ramesis activated a rune set into a bulkhead and the door to the small chapel-room slid out of sight. Stepping inside, the chaplain lit an ornate brazier in the middle of the altar and then knelt on one knee before it, bringing his clenched fists to his forehead in a sign of worship. Standing, he took his rosarius, the Shield of the Emperor, from the reliquary to the left of the altar. Kneeling again, he cupped the great arcane device in both hands, running his fingers around its circular edge, seeing his face mirrored in the twelve gems set in concentric circles on its black enamelled surface.

'Beneficent Emperor, who rules the stars and guideth mankind,' Ramesis chanted as his thumbs gently pressed the jewels on the rosarius in the ritual pattern, 'Cast thy divine protection over me, your eternal servant. Though I gladly shed my blood in your honour, keep me from ignoble death so that I might continue to serve thy greatness. I live that I might serve thee. As I serve thee in life, may I serve thee in death.'

As he completed his ritual, the rosarius hummed into life. Ramesis could feel the Emperor's protective aura pulsing from its depths and it gladdened his soul. Hanging the rosarius's heavy chain around his neck, Ramesis stood and turned to the reliquary to the right. From within the intricately carved wooden box, fashioned by his own hand during his time as a Chaplain Novitiate, Ramesis took out his crozius arcanum, grasping its two-foot haft tightly in both gauntleted hands. Again Ramesis knelt before the altar clutching the crozius to his chest, its eagle-shaped head resting against the similar eagle blazon embossed on the armoured plastron across his chest.

'Beneficent Emperor, who ruleth the stars and guideth mankind. Guideth my hand that I might smite thine enemies. Invest this weapon with thine anger. Let mine arm be the instrument of thy divine wrath. As you keep me in life, let me bring death to thine enemies.'

With the invocation complete, Ramesis slid the firing stud in the haft of the crozius into its forward, active position. With a simple press of his finger, the eagle of the crozius would be surrounded by a shimmering disruption field, capable of smashing bone and shattering the thickest armour. Truly, the ways of the Machine God are miraculous, Ramesis thought.

As the final part of the Consecration to Battle, Ramesis hung his crozius from his belt and took his golden, skull-faced helm from its position in front of the flickering brazier.

'Beneficent Emperor, who rules the stars and guideth mankind. Let mine eyes

look upon your magnificence. Let mine eyes see truly all things fair and foul. Let mine eyes tell friend from foe that I might know thine enemy.' Ramesis placed the helm over his head, twisting it slightly so that the vacuum seals clamped into place. He turned a dial on his left wrist and the helmet pressurised with the rest of the power armoured suit.

'Tactical display,' the chaplain commanded his armour, and his vision was filled with an enhanced image of the outside: details of temperature, atmospheric pressure, light density and other factors were superimposed over his sight. As he rolled his head left and right to check the suit's calibration, Ramesis swiftly completed the other pre-battle procedures, double-checking the suit's power and exhaust assembly, the internal environment monitors, targeting crosshairs and myriad other systems that would keep him alive in the midst of battle, even in the depths of space.

The comm-speaker inside Ramesis's helmet chimed and the pilot informed him they were soon to land.

Ramesis strode out into the main chamber, where the other Space Marines of his force waited for him, their quietly sincere conversations showing they were eager for battle too. At his approach, though, they fell silent.

'Today we are joined by Brother Xavier, who has proved himself worthy enough to move on from his initiation.' The Space Marines raised their fists in praise of the newcomer, who bowed his head in thanks.

'Brother Xavier has served in Tenth Company for twenty-five years, and many are his battle honours,' Ramesis informed them. 'I am pleased to welcome him to our company and this, his first conflict as a full battle-brother, is indeed an honourable and auspicious one. We have come to this world to fulfil our duty as the protectors of mankind. There is no mission more sacred or righteous in its cause.'

'Several weeks ago an expedition from the newly founded colony on this world discovered something ancient and terrible. Their explorers found an alien device, a thing of great evil - for it has been placed here by the eldar.'

The Salamanders hissed and snarled in anger, for their Chapter had a long history of fighting eldar pirates. Their home planet of Nocturne had been plagued by the alien corsairs for millennia before the Emperor had arrived to bring them salvation. Ramesis himself had fought against the eldar on numerous occasions and was unreserved in his loathing of the capricious aliens.

'We have been told by the worshippers of the Machine God that this device is a gateway, a portal to the Immaterium,' the chaplain continued solemnly. 'Soldiers

from the colony's garrison were dispatched to guard this portal while it is investigated, to ensure that the eldar did not attempt to use this gateway to attack Slato. However, they are few and our divine claim to this world, as well as the lives of two hundred thousand colonists, requires that we aid them. We have learned in the last few hours that the eldar have indeed attacked Slato. Even as we descend, their warriors are assaulting the Emperor's servants at the portal. Our augurs and surveyors tell us that they are relatively few in number at present, but if they gain access to their gateway then they will be able to bring on untold numbers of reinforcements. If that happens, our fight to protect this world will be all that much harder.'

Ramesis allowed a moment for his battle-brothers to digest this news. He was glad to be facing the eldar again, for the deaths of many of his ancestors stained their hands and he looked forward to every opportunity to repay the blood-debt.

'Let us pray!' Ramesis commanded the assembled Space Marines. They turned to face him and bowed their heads in acquiescence. As Ramesis spoke he walked along the two lines of warriors, touching each on the chest with the palm of his hand, passing on the blessing of the Emperor and their primarch.

'May the Emperor look kindly on our endeavours today,' he chanted. 'May his eternal spirit steer us ever on the path of light. May revered Vulkan, primarch of our Chapter, watch over us. May we have the strength and wisdom that we will not fail them in honour and duty. Praise the Emperor!'

'Praise the Emperor!' the Space Marines replied in a deep chorus. At that moment a siren sounded twice and the pilot's voice sounded over the comm-net.

'Alien interceptors on an attack approach,' the pilot said hastily. 'Assume battle positions.'

The Space Marines each stepped back into the small alcove which served as their resting place during transportation, grabbing hold of the brass grip rails to steady themselves. Hurriedly Ramesis ducked back into the chapel to extinguish the sacred brazier before taking his own position. The Thunderhawk banked sharply to starboard for a moment, the artificial muscles within Ramesis's armour easily compensating for the movement. The gunship continued to zigzag sluggishly to evade the eldar fighters, before a sudden screech rent the air and a bolt of energy smashed against the armoured fuselage. The blast was mirrored inside the hull in a spray of violet energy, and Brother Lysonis was hurled to the decking. Ramesis took a step forward to aid the veteran-sergeant, but his comrade held up a hand to indicate he was well, before slowly standing up. Sparks of energy crackled around a gash in his abdominal armour, but there was

no blood. The blast had just inflicted a glancing hit on the Space Marine. As Lysonis reclaimed his place in one of the unoccupied alcoves, the gun-ship's reeling interior echoed with the sound of more energy bolts hitting the hull. Another fusillade was followed by the thump of a detonation, sending the gunship falling to one side.

'We've lost two engines,' the pilot informed them in a calm voice. 'Prepare for emergency landing!'

Ramesis felt his weight lightening as the Thunderhawk pushed forward into a steep dive, rushing down towards Slato's surface. For perhaps half a minute the rapid descent continued until the pilot fired the retro-jets, all but stopping the gunship dead in mid-air. The sudden increase in g-forces would have crushed a normal man, but Ramesis hardly even noticed, protected by the strength of his genetically modified physique and further enhanced by his ancient suit of power armour. With a skidding impact the Thunderhawk hit the ground a moment later, sliding to the right for several seconds before coming to a halt. Within a heartbeat the assault ramp had been lowered and Ramesis was charging out, the rest of his force pounding down the ramp behind him.

'This is Brother-Captain Nubean. We have made landfall in the high ground, at position secundus-deca as intended. Ramesis, lead your force to point secundus-octus, I will converge on your position from the other side.' Even carried across several miles by the comm-net, Nubean's voice was as clear to Ramesis as if he were next to him. The chaplain signalled an affirmative and then switched frequencies to address the Space Marines under his own command.

'Advance by squads, pattern Enflamus. Squads Delphus and Lysonis will lead, squad Malesti will form rearguard,' Ramesis ordered in a clipped, precise tone. The three sergeants signalled confirmation and the two lead squads set off at a trot, the long strides of their power armoured legs covering the ground quickly. Ramesis fell in with Veteran Sergeant Malesti, whom he had known since he was first inducted into the Chapter. They had fought together as scouts in the Tenth Company and though Ramesis had advanced more rapidly in the Chapter's hierarchy, they still shared a special friendship. As they ran along, Ramesis modified the comm-net controller on his wrist so that he could talk with Malesti alone.

'Eldar again, my brother. We will have to be vigilant.' Though Ramesis's words seemed grim, he was in a light mood. It had been several weeks since he had been in battle and he had looked forward with anticipation to fighting once more

against the Emperor's enemies.

'We have defeated the eldar before,' Malesti replied. 'We know their guile. Their arcane trickeries and sorceries will not avail them against us this time.'

'I share your confidence, brother,' Ramesis said. 'Captain Nubean is a strong commander. The honour of the Fourth Company prospers under his guidance.'

'And yours!' Malesti added with a chuckle. 'In the years you have been our chaplain, our battle-brothers' faith has been sure and steady. They conduct themselves with honour and respect, and do all that we ask of them and more. They do not fail in their duties as warriors of the Adeptus Astartes and they shall not fail us this day either.'

'They'll fight like steppe-lions, of that I'm sure!' Ramesis remarked.

They continued in silence for a while, jogging easily through the waist-high grasses of the plain, turned into a blaze of gold by Slato's setting star.

A few miles to the north ahead of them, the plains rose quickly into the foothills that eventually became a sharp mountain range. In every other direction stretched leagues of cereal plants, heavy with grain. The majority of Slato's landmass was given over to farming. Food grown here would feed the workers on mining worlds and industrial hive planets. Without such agri-worlds, the Imperium's labour forces would starve and the eternal manufacturing of arms and armour would cease, spelling the end for mankind's presence in the sector. It was paramount that Slato did not fall into the hands of the eldar.

In the last rays of the alien sun, Ramesis's force was continuing its forced march, making their way swiftly along one of the mountain valleys. But for the last few minutes, the sound of cannonfire had been echoing off the valley's steep sides.

'It appears the eldar are engaged in another attack.' Malesti was speculating. 'Landing behind the accursed aliens' position may prove to be an advantage: we can catch them between our guns and those of the Guardsmen at the portal. The Emperor has blessed us.'

'Beware of over-confidence, my brother.' Ramesis warned. 'The eldar are as slippery as a lava serpent and twice as venomous. They may have left a rearguard to protect them from such an attack.'

'True.' Malesti said. 'That is why we have come with two separate forces, so that if one is delayed the other may still fight through. With the Emperor's blessing...' Malesti's voice trailed away. His attention had become fixed on something ahead. Ramesis followed his gaze and saw that the two squads leading the march had halted. He was about to signal Sergeant Lysonis when the

comm-net chimed in his ear.

'Chaplain Ramesis, this is Sergeant Lysonis. The valley ahead is filled with woodland, a possible ambush site. Request orders.'

'I'll be at your position shortly. Stay alert.' Ramesis commanded.

A minute had passed before Ramesis and Squad Malesti reached the other Space Marines where they were half-hidden in the long grass and rocks of the valley floor. The woodland ahead nestled firmly in the base of the valley which they had been following, stretching up the mountain slopes to either side. It was impossible to tell how far along the valley the woods continued, but Ramesis did not even consider the option of circumnavigating it. To do so would cost valuable time and still offered no surety that they would reach the site of the gateway unhindered. Ramesis peered at the small forest, trying to discern any activity in the shadowy depths between the thin, tightly clustered boles of the trees.

'Sergeant Lysonis, activate your auspex. See if you can detect anything within those woods.' Ramesis's order was quiet but authoritative.

'We risk the eldar detecting the signal, chaplain. They may not know we are here yet.' Lysonis cautioned.

'Rest assured, sergeant,' Ramesis informed him. 'The eldar are very aware of our presence. Even if their machines did not locate us, their mind-magic will undoubtedly have detected our presence by now.'

The sergeant's head was bowed as he unhooked the auspex from his utility belt and adjusted the dials. As he held it in one hand, passing it left and right in the direction of the woods, its screen threw a flickering green glow onto the black paint of his armour, harshly lighting the helmet from underneath, so that he almost looked like some daemon from the pits of Chaos. Lysonis adjusted one of the many brass dials set next to the display, then tapped a switch into a different position.

'There are definitely human-sized life signals within the woods, chaplain, possibly a dozen or more.' Lysonis reported, replacing the arcane device on his belt and pulling his power sword from its scabbard.

Ramesis looked at the trees once more, seeking any sign of movement or life. There were none. After glancing at the chronometer reading on his visual display, the chaplain made a decision.

'*We* do not have time to circumnavigate the woods. Prepare for attack. May the Emperor guide our weapons.' As he spoke, Ramesis strode to the front of the gathered Space Marines.

'For the Emperor and Vulkan!' Ramesis cried as he sprinted forward, the actuators of his armour turning every step into a bounding leap across the plain. Around him the Salamanders charged forward too, echoing his battle cry. The air was filled by a soft whistling noise and Ramesis noticed tiny slivers of crystal starting to patter off the armour of the Space Marines around him. Looking into the woods once again, half-seen shadows of movement caught Ramesis's attention as another volley of fire swept into the Space Marines. Behind him Ramesis heard a startled cry. He looked back over his shoulder to see what had happened. One of the Space Marines of Squad Delphus, Brother Lastus, was clutching at his helmet with one hand. Another member of the squad turned on his heel to grab Lastus's arm and haul him forwards. As the chaplain looked on, the toxins contained within the crystal sliver were already seeping into Lastus's bloodstream. The Space Marine gave a choked cry and his body began to shudder. The power armour amplified the shivering Space Marine's movements into flailing paroxysms as Lastus dropped his boltgun and fell to one knee.

'Sniper's needle hit Brother Lastus in the eye-plate,' Sergeant Delphus reported over the comm-link.

'Bring him with us!' Ramesis ordered as he turned his attention back to the woods. The first of the Space Marines were fifty paces from the trees now. Squad Lysonis stopped their advance and as one they raised their bolters and let loose a salvo of fire. Explosive bolts tore through the woodland, smashing swathes of shredded leaf and bark into the air, shattering branches and punching gaping holes into the boles of the trees.

Ramesis heard a high-pitched cry and a figure staggered forward from the shadows, a hand raised to its shoulder where bright red blood was spilling down the ever-shifting camouflage colours of its cape. It was tall and swathed in a long coat that shifted colour to match the shades of the trees and grass. Ramesis aimed his pistol, the crosshair imposed over his vision fixing on the eldar's hooded face. He could see its thin, pointed nose, the delicate features of its high cheeks and brow, and a pair of large eyes glittering with alien intelligence. The chaplain squeezed softly on the trigger and a moment later the eldar's skull exploded, the headless body flung forward several metres by the bolt's detonation.

As he reached the treeline, Ramesis found three more alien bodies. The first had two massive holes blown in its chest, another's leg was ripped off at the hip while the third had been turned into an almost unidentifiable crimson mess by several simultaneous bolter hits. Looking back across the grasslands, Ramesis

saw Lastus being carried between two of his battle-brothers who were firing their bolters with their free hands. The wounded Marine was still twitching as his system tried to clear away the alien poisons. The armour of another Space Marine lay close by, sprawled in the grass like a casually discarded doll. The chaplain could see a neat hole in the flexible armour of the warrior's left hip joint where the needle shot had entered. The shot must have hit a major artery for it to have killed the bio-enhanced Space Marine so quickly.

'May thy soul be forever in the light of the Emperor. By His grace he has taken you into his embrace. Serve Him as well in death as your sacrifice served Him in life,' intoned Ramesis, whilst inwardly cursing his force's lack of an apothecary. He could not afford for one of his warriors to carry the dead Space Marine's body and by the time the apothecary from Captain Nubean's formation could arrive, the fallen fighter's gene-seed would be useless. Every gene-seed not recovered was lost forever, weakening the Chapter.

Glancing around, Ramesis saw that all of the remaining men had reached the shelter of the trees. Of the eldar there was no sign. For the next few minutes the dim light was occasionally broken by the orange glow cast by the jets of fire from Squad Delphus's flamer as the Space Marines methodically swept through the trees for any surviving eldar. Ramesis sent Squad Malesti ahead to ascertain whether the route to the rendezvous with Captain Nubean was clear, then sought out Brother Lastus.

The chaplain found him crouched with his back against the trunk of a tree, thumbing bolts from a pouch at his belt into a boltgun magazine. Beside him was his helmet, with the left eyepiece cracked. Blood was dried across the left side of Lastus's face, a reddish stain against his dark skin, and his left eye had been stitched shut. The rest of his face was marked by the scars of the Salamanders' ritual branding. Three dragon-heads were scorched into his forehead, each representing a commendation from the company captain, whilst several lines were scarred along his nose and chin, each scar burnt forever as recognition for a particularly noteworthy kill. As Ramesis approached, Lastus looked up.

'I'd swear that devil-spawned eldar had been aiming for Brother Nitras next to me. No accuracy, these aliens!' the Space Marine joked.

'How are you faring, brother?' Ramesis asked, crouching next to Lastus and removing his own helmet.

'I can fight on,' Lastus declared with a wide grin that curled the lines of his scars into ragged swirls. 'The toxin is still affecting my hearing and smell, but my vision is almost clear. Well, through this one, anyway.' He stuck a thumb

towards his good eye.

'And how is your aim, Brother Lastus?' Ramesis asked. He needed to know how much he could rely upon his battle-brother in a firefight.

'Still true, lord,' Lastus assured him. The Space Marine gestured towards his helmet. 'That's an old Mark VI Regis pattern. It can compensate for the loss of one eye by boosting another signal through the remaining optical link. I won't even realise I'm handicapped. It fits a bit tightly - I almost asked for a different helmet when the armour was given to me - but praise the Emperor I persevered with it.'

Ramesis stood up and told Lastus to report back to Sergeant Delphus. With a salute the battle-brother fixed his helmet back on and strode off towards the other Space Marines.

Sergeant Malesti strode up to Ramesis and reported that the firesweep was complete, no other eldar had been discovered.

'Understood,' Ramesis replied, rubbing a hand through the short curls of his hair before donning his own helmet once more. 'Lead the force to the ridge. The eldar definitely know now from which direction we approach, and Captain Nubean will not want to tarry long waiting for us.'

Ramesis and his force arrived at the rendezvous point first. As the sun dipped below the horizon, Ramesis's vision was augmented by the aura-intensifier of his helmet, bathing his view of the landscape in a red sheen. From the crest of a ridge the chaplain could see the repeated glow of the Imperial Guard guns, further up into the mountains. It was another hour before Captain Nubean and his Space Marines marched into view. With the aid of the artificial eyes of his armour, the chaplain could see the shimmering heat surrounding the advancing force, plumes of pure white jetting from the exhaust vents cut into their armoured backpacks. Their guns glowed a dim red, which Ramesis knew could only mean they had been involved in a protracted battle. As they came closer, Ramesis did a quick head count: there were twenty-one of them, seven less than had set out. Several more appeared to be wounded and as Captain Nubean approached with his command squad, Ramesis could see that Apothecary Suda's reductor was covered in the dark red of Space Marine blood; he had been busy extracting the progenoid glands from the missing warriors. The gene-seed he had recovered would allow the Chapter to create more Space Marines to replace those that had fallen.

'We were ambushed shortly after insertion,' Nubean explained as he stopped in

front of Ramesis. 'They came in fast, carried inside two fast, skimming transports, our weapons unable to penetrate the force shields protecting the vehicles. There was another anti-grav tank there too, gliding out around us, trying to pick us off with rapid volleys from a pulse laser. Brother Kolenn managed to take it down with his lascannon, but not before Squad Mauria lost three warriors. We were mostly facing regular line troops, which did not present much of a challenge. Their shuriken catapults were unable to penetrate our armour, while our bolters punched them off their feet with every shot! It was the specialists, the ones they call Striking Scorpions, that caused me the most consternation - we've fought them before, Ramesis...'

'I remember. It was on Corronis IV. Close combat experts, with those infernal laser dischargers in their helmets,' Ramesis said, gesturing with a finger either side of his jaw to imitate the aliens' strange mandible-like weaponry.

'That's them,' Nubean agreed. 'Their armour was as good as ours: our bolters were virtually useless. They had managed to slip behind us, elusive scum. It was Squad Gorja that they attacked first. Their leader had some kind of power glove that punched through Sergeant Gorja's chest with ease. We managed to stave off the others by getting a crossfire on the alien wretches, and once that distraction had been disposed of we could concentrate our fire on the close combat fighters. We left none of them alive,' Nubean finished with a grim smile.

The captain pointed to a Space Marine whose left arm ended at the elbow in a blackened stump, with his other arm the wounded warrior was gesturing expansively to Sergeant Lysonis, not at all disconcerted by his injury.

'Brother Kahli's plasma gun detonated, but he brought two of the enemy down first,' Nubean explained. 'That's the fourth time in the last seven missions I have had a plasma weapon failure, though this is the first time it has been so catastrophic. I will have words with the Master of the Forges when we return. It matters not that our plasma weapons are ancient artefacts, I need them to be better maintained.'

The captain turned his gaze towards the distant flashes of fire coming from the distant Imperial Guard encampment. 'We must press on. I want to reach the Imperial Guardsmen before dawn,' he said, turning his attention back to Ramesis. 'It was well we did not try to mount an airborne landing at the battle sector itself. We came across a pair of the enemy's anti-aircraft vehicles about four miles back. They have gigantic crystalline lasers, they would have shot the Thunderhawks out of the sky with ease.' With a thin smile, the captain directed Ramesis's attention to two thin columns of smoke to the south. 'Still, they won't

be causing us any more worries.'

The captain's face grew serious again. 'I only wish we had more time for proper reconnaissance, but the Imperial Guard cannot be expected to hold their defence while scouts locate the main eldar positions.'

'I've never known the eldar to form a static camp, captain,' Ramesis commented.

'That is true,' the captain agreed, his helmet moving slightly as he nodded his head. 'If we had waited to find them we may have wasted what precious time we have. As you once taught us, Ramesis, we must always temper action with wisdom. Though we live for battle, a war is fought with wits as well as weapons.'

'I'm afraid I cannot take the credit for that, brother,' Ramesis confessed with a wry smile. 'I took it from the sermons of Chaplain Gorbiam, my tutor during my time as a Novitiate.'

The captain removed his helmet and took a deep breath. His forehead was pierced by eight service studs, each representing ten years of loyal duty to the Emperor. A pink scar cut from his right cheek to his chin, standing out against the supple sheen of his dark skin. Like the other Salamanders, his face and throat were covered with burns, each medal of honour intricately etched into his flesh. His dark eyes gazed solemnly out into the darkness, the weight of several hundred years of battle hung in that look. With a nod to himself, the captain replaced his helmet.

'Enough talk. Move our battle-brothers out.'

The Space Marines advanced more cautiously, sending out regular patrols to search for eldar ambush sites. Ramesis was with Brother-Captain Nubean and Brother-Epistolary Zambias of the Chapter's librarium. They had been marching for half an hour when Zambias held up a hand and Nubean signalled a halt. Without a word the librarian took off his helm and stared up into the sky where the stars of the galactic rim were scattered across the cloudless night like a fine dust. The librarian's face was gaunt, his bald head glistened with waxy sweat. His eyes were milky white with no pupils, as though he were blind, yet he gazed up into the heavens with a furrowed brow, as if searching for something. Ramesis saw a pale eldritch light playing around the psyker's eyes as he used his powers to scan the surroundings for other minds.

With a slow blink and a long exhalation, Zambias closed his mind once more. 'The eldar have broken off their attack. They are moving further north,' he told

Nubean and Ramesis.

'Then we advance quickly while they regroup!' Nubean barked, waving a hand forward to signal the surrounding squads to start moving again. 'Have you no clues as to the eldar's intent?' Ramesis asked Zambias as they broke into a ran.

'Their witchery is strong, as you know, brother-chaplain. I cannot penetrate their minds, I can only sense their presence. It leaves a foul stain upon the air, a corruption on the aura of this world. These lands belong to the Emperor, they abhor the presence of these vile aliens,' the librarian explained, his clenched fist showing his anger at the aliens' desecration of Slató.

'I have pondered upon this myself, brothers.' Nubean said. 'I have been in contact with the lieutenant in charge of the Imperial Garrison and there are a number of factors which puzzle me. I would welcome your guidance in these matters.'

'With our weapons we bring the Emperor's judgement, with our minds we bring his wisdom,' Zambias replied, putting his helmet back on.

'Three times the eldar have launched a full frontal assault on the Imperial positions,' Nubean said. 'That is unusual. The eldar are as fast as lightning on the plains, striking then disappearing as quickly. They know they are no match for massed guns, yet three times they have hurled themselves onto the tanks and squads of the Imperial Guardsmen.'

'I believe they are acting in haste,' Zambias answered after a moment's consideration. 'The force they left to waylay Ramesis was small, composed entirely of their so-called "Rangers", experts in infiltration, disruption and delaying tactics. Even the host they sent against us was not a large proportion of their warriors, if the auguries assessed their strength correctly. It seems they are concentrating everything they can spare on the portal and the humans defending it. Their usual strategy of hit and run would bleed us dry if we did not take the offensive, ensuring them a good chance of victory. Yet here they are, throwing their warriors into the teeth of the Imperial army. They are desperate to break through, of that much I am certain.'

'What matter is it whether they are desperate or nonchalant? They will die under our bolters either way!' Ramesis spat, taking his bolt pistol from its holster and brandishing it fiercely at the horizon. 'If they choose to make themselves easier targets then we should be grateful. I have little stomach for fighting the eldar. They slink and crawl and slither like serpents, never standing and fighting like honourable warriors. Their witchcraft is potent, their machines of war fast and manoeuvrable, it will be better for us that they forego such tactics to stand

and fight for once.'

'That is true,' Nubean agreed with a nod. 'We fight for a just cause, for the eldar cannot be allowed access to their infernal portal. If they reach their device they'll bring more of their kind to this world and slaughter the colonists, and it will be lost to the Emperor. We must ensure that does not happen.'

'Why do we not destroy the portal and end this matter immediately?' asked Ramesis.

'There is an agent of the Machine God in the Imperial Guard force,' replied Zambias. 'I believe he wishes it preserved for study.'

'Ach! The Machine God. Politics.' Ramesis's simple statement conveyed his contempt. 'I do not pretend to understand why we waste time with such matters. We fight, we kill, we are victorious. That is what it means to be a Salamander.'

'And what would we be without our armour and our weapons, Ramesis?' Nubean gently chided the chaplain. 'You above all others know that we exist only to protect the Emperor's domains and his servants. If the Mechanicus wish to examine this thing, as foolish as it seems to us, it is our duty to protect them whilst they do so.'

As he pondered this, Ramesis cast a look at the mountains around him. The light of Slato's twin moons had not reached into the valley yet and everything was swathed in shadow. They were jogging easily through the long wild grass, their passage only broken by the odd clump of withered mountain trees or cluster of tumbled boulders.

'That is another curious matter here, brothers,' Nubean said, picking up on Ramesis's earlier words. 'The eldar excel at the sneak attack, the hidden blow, but they forewarned the garrison of their approach. They sent them an ultimatum - allow access to their portal or be destroyed. Why would they give up the element of surprise, when perhaps they could have swept away the defences with a single conclusive assault?'

'Perhaps they wished to terrorise the Guardsmen, in the hope that they would not have to fight at all?' Ramesis offered, not trying to hide his lack of faith in the courage of the Imperial Guard.

'Equally, an attack with total surprise might have swept aside all resistance and given them access to the reinforcements they desire,' Nubean countered, adjusting his right shoulder pad as he jogged along, so that it sat better on its actuators.

'Ramesis is correct,' Zambias said, pulling his force sword from its scabbard. Psychic energy flowed through the blade, causing faint blue flames to play along

its length. 'It matters not what their devious scheme is. They will fall before the blade of the Emperor's anger all the same.'

The Space Marines reached the pickets of the Imperial Guard force without encountering any more eldar, though twice Zambias informed them that an enemy psyker had tried to break through the Epistolary's psychic shield. The Imperial Guard were in poor shape. The charred hulls of both of their tanks sat smoking in the darkness. The bodies of the dead were lined up, their faces covered by helmets, in a line that stretched for thirty Paces. Ramesis could see the thirty metres of killing ground which the Guardsmen had cleared in front of their line. It was scorched, pockmarked with craters and shell holes, yet there was no sign of any eldar dead. Ramesis presumed that the enemy had taken them back when they had been forced to withdraw from the sheer weight of the Guard's short-range volleys of las-fire.

The few surviving Imperial Guard squads sat around campfires, their long greatcoats and peaked helmets ragged and stained from battle. Their lieutenant hurried through the darkness to greet the newcomers. His eyes were ringed with fatigue and stress and his dark blue tunic was unbuttoned. A bandage was wrapped around the thigh of his left leg, blood seeping from beneath it in a red stain across his white breeches. He saluted to Captain Nubean in the manner of his regiment, one finger to the peak of his cap.

'Lieutenant Raskil of the Fourth Levillian, seconded to the Adeptus Mechanicus on garrison duty,' he said. 'Praise the Immortal Emperor that you are here to save us.'

Nubean looked down at the officer, the tip of whose head only reached to the Space Marine's chest eagle.

'You are mistaken, lieutenant,' he told Raskil. 'We are not here to save you. We are here to protect the portal from the foul eldar. Your survival is only important with regard to that mission.'

The lieutenant stepped back as if slapped, mouth gaping wide. Before he could say anything more, the hulking form of Brother Zambias was towering over him.

'Where is this alien artefact, lieutenant? I wish to examine it,' the librarian asked. The Imperial Guardsman was still taken aback by Nubean's reprimand.

'I'll, er... I'll take you there myself. Do you wish to rest and eat a little before we see it?' Raskil offered.

Ramesis felt his anger rising. This impudent human was suggesting their physical needs took priority over their mission objectives. He stomped towards

the lieutenant, but Nubean interposed himself, holding up a hand to halt Ramesis's approach.

'We do not require any sustenance yet, lieutenant,' the captain interjected swiftly. 'However, we must attend to the defence of this position before any other matters. Please detail your sergeants to work with my brothers. Your men can rest for the remainder of the night, my squads will stand watch until daybreak.'

'You realise that night here lasts for eighteen hours?' Raskil asked.

'We are aware of Slato's rotational cycle, lieutenant,' Nubean said, his voice betraying his confusion at the officer's inquiry.

'And your men are going to stand watch until daybreak, some ten hours away?' Raskil continued incredulously. 'I can detail some men for watch duty, it isn't a problem.'

That was too much for Ramesis. He stepped around Captain Nubean and stared down at Raskil.

'Your men require food and sleep. We do not!' Ramesis felt like he was stating the obvious. 'If your men do not receive these things, their combat performance is adversely affected. We have no such weakness. We can fight for a month on the proteins contained within our armour recycling systems alone. You also suffer from stress-related physical and mental disorders over protracted periods of conflict, which is why I will ignore these insults. Our brothers will stand watch. Please do not question the captain's wisdom again.'

Lieutenant Raskil gave a worried glance at the three giant Space Marines standing around him. Looking across the camp he saw the other Space Marines moving into positions from which they could keep watch to the north and south, along the valley. He wasn't surprised to notice his own men giving the massive warriors a wide berth, moving out of their way when they approached.

'Follow me then. Magos Simeniz has been analysing the... the objective for several days,' he said finally, setting off to the rear of the encampment.

Raskil led Ramesis and the other Marines into an even, bowl-shaped depression which was surrounded on three sides by steep cliffs, just behind the eastern side of the ridge where the Guardsmen had set up their defence. The artefact at its centre was instantly recognisable as eldar in design. The obelisk stood roughly twice the height of a man and was constructed from a deep purple stone, eldar runes were painted in gold leaf along its length. Delicate strands of silver wire hung from rods in the ground around the portal, tracing out a hexagram. The air was filled with a hissing sound, which was emitting from a square box, two foot

across and covered in dials and valves, which was sat nearby and linked up to the wires by coils of cables. The whole area was lit by the flickering flames of three braziers placed in a triangle around the dell. As they strode towards the alien creation, a stooping robed figure shuffled into sight from behind the machinery.

'Ah, Raskil, there you—' the figure started, then halted as he noticed the Space Marines for the first time. As he turned to regard them, the flames illuminated the face beneath the heavy cowl of his robe. Parchment-like skin hung in fleshless folds from his cheeks and his back seemed permanently hunched. From his right eye socket protruded a strange optical device with several different sized lenses which slid back and forth as he adjusted his focus. His nose was also absent, an air hose coiling from the middle of his misshapen face to a small cylinder at his belt.

'Come, see this!' Simeniz offered, beckoning to them with his right hand, from which protruded a number of small antennae. He led them to the far side of the analysis machine and pointed to one of the numerous screens showing a succession of sine waves and curving graphs. The Adeptus Mechanicus agent pulled a small plug from a receptacle implanted into the side of his forehead and plugged it into a matching socket in the machine, the wire linking him to the plug glistening with a thin sheen of blood. The screen which he had indicated began to change as the tech-priest chanted a low, almost sub-vocal, invocation. The outline of the artefact appeared in solid green lines and as the adept chanted faster, swirling orange dots began to form into concentric ovals that span in a seemingly arrhythmic pattern around the centre of the monolith.

'You see?' Simeniz demanded, stabbing a finger at the screen with obvious excitement.

'We do not understand the workings of this machine.' Nubean said, looking blankly at the ever-moving image.

The tech-priest gave a snort of derision and flicked a switch which locked the moving shapes in place, before pulling the mind-plug from its socket.

'That is a definite warp-coil energy wave,' the tech-priest said slowly, as a patient adult would address a child. 'Our suspicions were correct: this edifice is capable of opening a warp gate, enabling objects to pass through. Rather large objects if my calculations are correct. However, there have been some anomalies. The wave signature is not consistent with any point of warp-interface we are aware of. It is as if it led to somewhere that is part of the warp, yet is separate from it. Also, it has been increasing in magnitude since my arrival. I am

certain that someone is trying to activate it remotely.'

'Can you prevent that happening?' Ramesis asked, looking up at the great obelisk. The construction seemed to absorb the light from the braziers rather than reflecting it, staying in constant shadow. Being near to such an alien thing, with the scent of otherworldly evil hanging in the air, made Ramesis's spine tingle with some preternatural sensation of foreboding.

'I could potentially destabilize the warp field, but that could prove catastrophic if I am incorrect,' the tech-priest suggested, with a shrug of his slight shoulders.

'Be prepared to do so if I give the order.' Nubean said. 'We will endeavour to preserve this portal intact for your study, but our orders are to prevent the eldar from fully activating it. We will destroy it if necessary, for the lives of two hundred thousand colonists could be in danger.'

'Colonists?' Simeniz asked with a sneer. 'There are always more colonists - but we might not find another specimen of this quality for another five centuries.'

'If the eldar reach this portal, then it will be lost to us anyway.' Zambias said. The librarian held out his hands to either side and walked slowly towards the portal stone, gradually bringing his hands together in front of him as he did so.

'I can feel evil in this place. Ancient, alien evil,' he said, turning back to the group. 'We will be ready for it.' Ramesis answered confidently.

It was still several hours before daybreak when the eldar attacked again. Ramesis had been with Zambias and Nubean for the whole night, positioning their warriors and the Imperial Guard for the best defence. The bulk of the force was stationed watching the northern approaches, where the eldar had attacked from before. However, Nubean had ordered Ramesis and a small contingent to guard the south, in case the eldar used their swift skimmer vehicles to launch their attack from the other direction. There were forty-four other Space Marines, as well as some sixty Imperial Guardsmen, and Ramesis was feeling confident that they could hold out. He was with Squad Lysonis when the first firing erupted to the north, on the right flank of the defenders.

The Imperial Guardsmen sent a steady stream of volleys into the darkness, the harsh white flare of their lasguns burning brightly against the dark. Sleek beams of blue energy struck back from the shadows, followed by a succession of flickering plasma bolts which impacted into the ground with blinding explosions. Ramesis's suit had automatically imposed a filter over his visor to stop his vision being impaired by the glaring light of the attacks, but he knew that the Guardsmen would have difficulty seeing anything in the darkness. As he

watched, a fist-sized star of energy shot from the gloom and impacted into the chest of a Guardsman, flinging his ragged corpse a dozen metres across the ground. Ramesis could hear the bellowed orders of the Imperial Guard sergeants, and in the occasional seconds of near-silence his ears picked up the shrill whine of eldar shuriken catapults tearing through the night air.

'We hold here. That may simply be a diversionary attack,' he told Lysonis, turning his attention away from the firefight that was raging a hundred paces to his right. Checking to his left, Ramesis saw the heat auras of several eldar craft skimming forward slowly, silently stalking towards the Imperial position.

'Magnify,' he told his suit, and his field of vision suddenly zoomed in on the faint shimmering lines of three eldar war machines. They flitted a couple of metres above the ground, dodging between the scattered rocks and trees. They were long and sleek, with a curved armoured canopy at the front and an exposed gun cradle to the back. Ramesis recognised them instantly as the craft he had been told the eldar called Serpents or Vypers, something like that; swift two-man attack vehicles armed with a lethal heavy weapon. As they came closer, the sleek, menacing lines of the craft could be seen more clearly, gliding steadily towards the Imperial defenders.

There was no need for him to warn his brothers; he could see they were tracking the eldar's progress as well. Taking a deep breath to steady himself he pulled his bolt pistol and crozius from his belt and waited Patiently for the aliens to get within range. A sudden glow from the slender weapon of the closest craft indicated a heat build-up, and a moment later a blue bolt of energy sliced out of the night, punching cleanly through the armour of Brother Kammia where he stood on the hillside fifty metres to Ramesis's right. The Space Marine stood there for a second as if nothing had happened, faint wisps of vapour steaming from the gaping hole through his torso. Then the warrior's legs folded under him and he fell to the ground, his armour clattering noisily as if suddenly empty.

The Space Marines reacted immediately, a lion's roar tearing the sky apart as they opened fire with their bolters in a mass volley of fire. Each bolt traced into the shadows on a tiny tail of flame, to explode a second later with a distinctive cracking noise. Ramesis watched the tiny eruptions spatter across the hull of the lead craft, shrapnel sent flying in all directions. As Ramesis switched his optics to normal view again, the Space Marine beside him, Brother Arthetis, braced his legs and brought his missile launcher to his shoulders. The Vypers were swinging past, the gunners swivelling their elegant weapons to direct their fire against the Space Marines. Arthetis swung at the waist to point the tubular

missile launcher at the closest, before pulling back heavily on the trigger. A blossom of orange fire erupted from the back of the missile launcher. For a second it appeared that the missile had not seen its targets: its course would take it straight past the last Vyper. Then the spirit within the missile became aware of the aliens swooping past and with a small flicker of a guidance jet it altered course. A moment later the krak warhead exploded, turning the rearmost of the three craft into a rapidly expanding ball of flame which tumbled into the ground with another explosion.

The Space Marines tracked the surviving Vypers, continuing to fire their bolters. Ramesis saw one bolt impact into a control plane before detonating, shearing the fin off completely. Its stability lost, the craft dived towards the ground and the chaplain saw the gunner lift his arms to shield his face a moment before the nose ploughed into the dirt. The skimmer's momentum sent the craft cartwheeling down the hillside, shards of curved armour flung in all directions. The last surviving Vyper flitted back into the shadows of the crags and disappeared from view.

The battle had raged for a couple of hours, the eldar preferring to dart in and inflict some casualties before withdrawing back into the darkness, rather than mounting a full-scale assault. Such tactics made it almost impossible to judge the eldar's numbers, but the shattered wrecks of two of their grav-tanks littered the ridgeline, and Lysonis had reported over fifty of their dead found in the surrounding area. During the last assault Ramesis had been caught in a hail of fire from a shuriken catapult, an alien creation that could send a storm of razor-sharp discs slicing through their target. The chaplain's ancient armour had held firm, though, and a row of the monomolecular-edged discs spread in a neat line from just below his left shoulder to his right hip. When the battle was won he would have Techmarine Orlinia carefully remove them so that Ramesis could keep them as a memento of the battle. He would repaint the armour himself, however, and thank it for the protection it had given him.

It had been over an hour since the last attack and Captain Nubean, convinced by the lapse of time that this was not some kind of feint, had led his command squad and Squad Delphus after them, determined to harass them and stop them regrouping. He had been gone for perhaps a quarter of an Imperial hour, having left Ramesis in charge of the remaining Imperial forces.

Those forces were much depleted. The eldar attacks had been highly efficient: only twenty nine of the Guardsmen and twenty-seven Space Marines were fit for

fighting. Ramesis knew that many of his fallen battle-brothers would fight on if asked, but it was imperative that they allowed their enhanced bodies every opportunity to heal themselves so that they might fight at full effectiveness later when they were really needed. Most of the troopers who had fallen were dead, shredded by shuriken, blown apart by starcannon plasma bolts or torn in half by high-powered laser weapons. Ramesis was looking at one corpse in particular, that of a young corporal whose face looked so serene and at peace. Strange, Ramesis thought in a detached fashion, considering his legs and half his spine have been vaporised. Then Ramesis's comm-link chimed and the body was instantly forgotten.

'I'm returning with some of the eldar,' he heard Nubean report.

The connection was cut before he had a chance to reply, but Ramesis was delighted that the captain had captured some of the filthy aliens so that they could be interrogated as to their plans and the strength of their army. It was not long before Ramesis caught sight of the returning Space Marines. Nubean was striding purposefully up the hill, accompanied by Zambias. His bodyguard was behind him, and between their massive torsos Ramesis caught occasional glimpses of the alien captives.

All three wore long flowing robes and tall, jewel-encrusted helms. Their slight forms seemed emaciated next to the immense physiques of the Space Marines, but the aliens were slightly taller. Intricately shaped eldar runes hung from their garments on fine threads, swaying gently as they walked forward. The one in the centre was the most ornamented and Ramesis realised with a start that this must be one of the legendary farseers, the powerful psykers said to command the eldar. The other two were warlocks; he had encountered them before, powerful battle-witches who were obviously serving as some kind of honour guard for the farseer. All three moved with an effortless grace, easily keeping pace with the Space Marines despite the long strides of the captain and librarian. Nubean and Zambias were about ten metres away now, and Ramesis could clearly make out the three aliens following them. Something was nagging at the back of his mind, but before he could work out what was amiss Nubean was standing directly in front of him.

'Come, brother! We have matters to discuss, and urgently,' Nubean said without formality, already striding past Ramesis in the direction of the portal.

It was then that Ramesis realised that the eldar were not bound in any way at all, and with a shock he noticed they still carried their weapons: shuriken pistols in finely-crafted holsters and long swords carried in scabbards hung with many

tassels and runes.

'What devilry is this?' the chaplain demanded, sighting his pistol at the farseer. It was obvious that the Space Marines were under some kind of foul influence of the eldar's psychic powers.

'Calm yourself, Ramesis!' Nubean shouted back, putting himself between the chaplain and his target. 'The situation has changed. Put down your weapon.'

'Weak-minded fool!' Ramesis hissed, pointing his bolt pistol at the captain. 'This is some cursed eldar mind-trick!'

Zambias once more stepped between the chaplain and captain, laying his heavily-gauntleted hand on Ramesis's pistol.

'There is no trickery here, brother,' the librarian assured him calmly. 'We are both free from influence.' Zambias's helmet was hung from his belt and Ramesis could see his eyes were normal, betraying no sign of mental powers being used.

Ramesis hesitated for a moment and studied the librarian's face. Seeing nothing but the honourable and honest face he had come to know and respect over the last few years, he took a reluctant step back, lowering his pistol. The three eldar strode past without even glancing at the chaplain, acting as if nothing at all had happened. Their alien haughtiness infuriated Ramesis but he managed to keep his anger in check - for the meantime.

The portal was being guarded by Brothers Amadeus, Xavier and Joachim, and they eyed the group of eldar accompanying Nubean very suspiciously. Raskil's men and the other Space Marines were left watching the valley, in case this was a subtle ploy to lure the Emperor's servants into some false sense of confidence and security. As the group entered the natural bowl containing the eldar artefact, Magos Simeniz looked up from where he was adjusting the wire hexagram around the portal, his jaw dropping almost comically when he noticed the nature of his visitors.

'What are they doing here?' he demanded, stepping protectively in front of his analytical engine. The farseer took a pace forward and raised his hand in some kind of alien gesture, his fingers splaying open and then closing into a half-fist. When he spoke, the eldar's voice was musical, every syllable and sound perfectly formed and intoned, spoken without hesitation.

'I am here to deactivate the opening-ward, the device of power you call a portal,' the farseer waved an arm hung with several thick golden bracelets in a fluid gesture towards the obelisk.

'This is trickery! You will open the gateway to your fiendish home and bring

more of your warriors,' Ramesis claimed, striding to stand next to Simeniz.

'Interference would not please us,' the farseer said gently, with an inclination of his head. 'The voices of our home and forefathers have sent us here, the runes guiding my dancing path to your presence. There is one who comes here, born in nightmare and feeding on fear. He is Kha-rehk, leader of the Fanged Maw. He comes and slaughters you all, sating his thirst with your peoples' essence.'

Ramesis stared at the eldar leader, fixing his gaze on the two green, gemlike ovals he assumed served as eyepieces in the helmet. It was impossible to tell what the farseer was feeling or thinking, the alien's bowed head could be a demand or acquiescence. Captain Nubean removed his helmet as he joined the chaplain, Magos Simeniz scurrying close behind. The captain's eyes were troubled and Ramesis could see that the responsibility he held was weighing heavily on his shoulders.

'Everything has been explained. Well, I think I understand,' Nubean told the others. 'A band of eldar renegades are trying to use this portal to attack the colonists. This farseer has arrived to close the portal completely, so that it can never be used again. We must act quickly to sever this bridge between realms.'

'No!' Simeniz cried suddenly, a crazed look in his natural eye. 'They're trying to keep it a secret from us! They want to hide their wonderful technology from the Machine God!' With a hiss the tech-priest launched himself at the farseer, his fingers spread like claws. Ramesis reached out to grab the deranged adept but the farseer acted more swiftly. The eldar psyker made a short gesture with the fingers of his raised hand and Simeniz's head was surrounded by a faint rippling nimbus of yellow light, stopping him in his tracks. Zambias had taken a step forward, his hand on the hilt of his force sword, but no sooner had he moved than one of the warlocks was barring his path, a glowing witchblade brandished in its hands.

'Release him!' Nubean demanded and the farseer flicked its fingers again with an almost bored shrug. Simeniz fainted to the ground. As Ramesis stooped to one knee to check he was alive, the tech-priest opened his eye and groaned sleepily.

'It told me things,' Simeniz whispered. 'Showed me a glimpse of the portal. It was wonderful.' The tech-priest struggled to his feet and gazed wide-eyed at the farseer, who had turned its attention to the portal itself.

'What do you care about our colonists?' Ramesis demanded of the eldar.

'Nothing,' the psyker admitted with a dismissive wave of a long-fingered hand. 'More of your warriors discover the butchery and seek answers. You stumble

across our Craftworld as she drifts peacefully through the stars. You do not understand what has happened and the guilt for the spilling of blood is laid upon us. Your warships gather and attack us. We destroy all of them, but many of my kin die doing so. We wish to avoid this outcome. We did not wish to fight against you. If the Dark Kin break free from the webway we will need the strength of both our forces to turn them back.'

'How do you know this?' Ramesis asked, still convinced that the eldar were trying to trick them somehow.

'How do you know that you are awake? Or even alive?' the farseer said.

'Speak plainly!' Ramesis demanded.

'*We* waste time!' the eldar leader snapped back. 'I will gladly leave you all to die in the most agonising manners, if you would kindly leave assurances that my kin are not responsible for your deaths or the eradication of your intrusive little dunghill of a town. I must close the webway arch and I must be doing it now!'

The farseer raised its hand and pointed at the portal, chanting softly in its own strange, melodic language. As Ramesis watched, the analytical engine gave a shriek. Simeniz leapt to man the status displays, his fingers working furiously at a series of switches and dials.

'The... the portal's beginning to open,' he said in an awed whisper. All eyes turned towards the stone. A dark corona of energy was forming around the obelisk, tendrils of white power crawling along its surface. A dull hum filled the air and as they watched the silver wire of Simeniz's analysis matrix began to melt.

'Treachery!' Ramesis bellowed, bringing up his bolt pistol and firing at the farseer. There was a flare of psychic energy and the bolt dropped to the ground, unexploded. Behind the farseer, Ramesis saw Zambias exchanging sword blows with the warlock in front of him. Amadeus, Xavier and Joachim fired their bolters at the other warlock, but the eldar side-stepped neatly past the volley and struck out, its witchblade slicing across Amadeus's chest with sparks of psychic power.

Ramesis pressed his thumb to the power stud of his crozius and turned back to the farseer. Suddenly, the chaplain's mind exploded. He felt quicksilver shards of mental energy piercing his soul. It seemed as if the universe itself was shrieking in his ears and light as bright as the sun blinded him. Gritting his teeth, Ramesis forced his eyes to focus on the farseer, who was still standing calmly in the middle of the hollow, his attention fixed on the portal, one hand still outstretched towards it.

'Vulkan give me strength!' Ramesis cried, throwing off the farseer's mental attack with a sudden surge of willpower. Ramesis was two strides from the eldar when it snapped its head towards him like a mantis spying its prey. The farseer opened its right hand and its witchblade leapt from the sheath across its back and settled into his grip. Ramesis brought his crozius around in a vicious back-handed strike, smashing the power weapon into the alien's head. Gems scattered across the ground as the farseer reeled. Ramesis brought his arm back for another attack, but the eldar reacted quickly, spinning on its heel to deliver a double-handed blow with its witchblade. Ramesis thought the eldar had missed for a moment until he brought his arm forward to strike again with the crozius. In a moment of disbelief, Ramesis noticed that his right arm stopped just above the wrist. Glancing down in a detached fashion, the chaplain saw his crozius lying on the ground, his gloved hand still gripping its haft.

The witchblade slashed out again and Ramesis dived to one side, the alien weapon smashing across his left shoulder pad. Sparks fountained into the air from the severed auto-actuators as Ramesis rolled and regained his feet. The farseer seemed to glide towards the chaplain, advancing without walking, the Witchblade blazing with power. The eldar took a wide-stepped stance, its robes billowing in a psychic gale of power, and brought the blade in a slow circle around its head. Ramesis noticed that one of the eye-jewels had been shattered and he could see part of the farseer's face. An almond shaped-eye stared back at him with contempt in its gaze. As the farseer advanced, the eye's yellow iris began to glow, filling up with tiny sparks of energy until it was a small star of white light.

With a thunderous explosion of energy, the farseer was knocked down onto one knee. Behind the sprawling eldar stood Xavier, Ramesis's crozius gripped in both hands. The Space Marine struck down again and again, battering the farseer's head and back until the alien stopped moving, its blood seeping into the dirt. Looking around, Ramesis saw that both warlocks were dead too. Brother Amadeus was on his back, Zambias helping him hold in the organs that were trying to spill from the massive slash through his chest bone. Simeniz was cowering on the ground, sobbing gently, covering his eyes. Nubean strode over and grabbed the back of the tech-priest's robes in one hand and lifted him off the ground.

'Stop the portal opening!' he demanded, hurling Simeniz towards the logic machine.

The portal-stone was glowing white-hot with energy. A cold wind seemed to

emanate from its surface causing the braziers to flicker madly. The tech-priest set to work, while Ramesis strode to where Xavier was standing over the farseer, alien blood dripping from the crozius arcanum in his hands.

'This is a good omen, brother!' Ramesis grinned, pointing towards the crozius. 'The Emperor has obviously marked you as special. When we return to Nocturne I will enter your name into the Novitiate of the Promethean Cult. You will make a fine chaplain one day. '

'Thank you, brother. I pray to live up to your expectations,' Xavier replied, the honour shining in his eyes.

Ramesis clapped his left hand on the young Space Marine's shoulder pad and looked at the stump of his other arm. Already his genetically-modified blood had clotted and stopped the bleeding, his power armour releasing pain-numbing elixirs into the nerves around the injury. When they returned to the fortress-monastery, the Master of the Forges would fit him with an artificial hand. Such prosthetics were common amongst the Salamanders. There would be no shame in it.

'I think I'm too late.' Ramesis heard Simeniz mutter.

All eyes turned to the tech-priest where he stood hunched over the analyser.

'What did you say?' Nubean demanded, his dark eyes narrowed.

'I'm too late...' Simeniz repeated, pointing at the portal. The white energy had formed into a swirling ring of power many paces across, a purplish shadow staining its centre. The air was filled with a piercing whining noise, somehow loud but also just at the edge of hearing. Without any order being given, the Space Marines began to back away from the alien artefact, taking up a position on the crest of the rise. Captain Nubean was shouting over the comm-net, demanding all squads to assemble on the hill.

With a crack louder than thunder the portal yawned open, creating a massive oval of pure blackness that stretched three dozen metres across the whole width of the depression. Within the blackness of the void there blinked cold, distant stars. Nothing happened for several heartbeats, then suddenly the renegades burst from the ellipse of energy. Gunfire flashed out of nowhere and more eldar leapt into view, each of their rifles spewing a hail of deadly crystal splinters. More eldar riding midnight-black jet bikes covered in scything blades flashed into existence, their screaming engines sending them racing past the startled humans. The Space Marines and Imperial Guardsmen opened fire as more and more evil creatures slid into existence. The skin of these eldar was pale to the point of being white, contrasting harshly with the black of their armour, which

was made of flexible plates festooned with glittering blades. Hooks and barbs hung from chains around their wrists, loins and necks, and many of them wore extravagantly coloured crests on their high-fluted helmets.

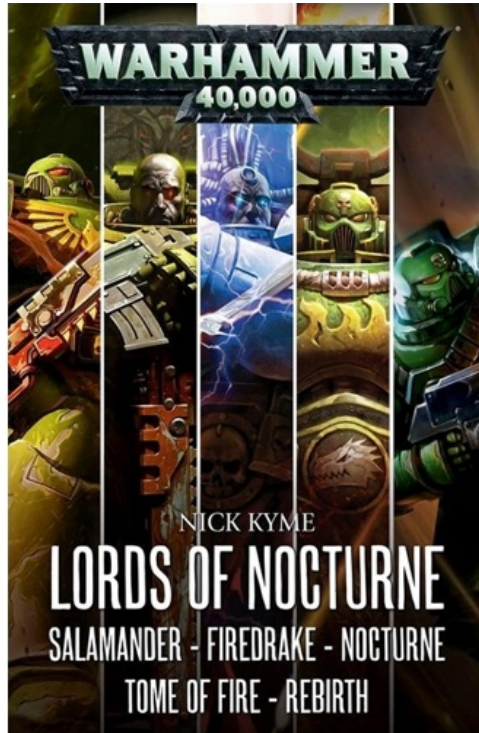
Watching as the dark portal spat forth a sleek anti-grav vehicle packed full of howling warriors, Ramesis knew at the last that the alien farseer had been right. Their force could not hold against the alien host on its own. The war engine glided slowly forward, menacing in its calmness. The creatures aboard it brandished cruel curved and serrated blades, and fired pistols indiscriminately into the mass of Imperial servants before them. The exotic cannon mounted on the prow of the renegades' craft spat a ball of dark energy at the Space Marines, slicing easily through the armour of Brother Lastus. More and more warriors leapt through into the world, accompanied by packs of alien beasts which had no skin, their flesh and muscles clearly visible in the light of the constant gun fire. With ear-splitting howls the hunting pack bounded up the slope, their fanged jaws and clawed feet tearing a bloody path through the Imperial Guardsmen. More skimmers were sliding into view, bearing a seemingly endless stream of depraved and vicious warriors.

Firing his bolt pistol at the charging aliens, Ramesis knew a fear like he had never experienced before. If their forces had been combined with the original eldar force, without being weakened by days of fighting each other, they would have been able to stem the tide of renegades pouring through the breach in reality. Now the servants of the Emperor stood alone. Ramesis knew that they were doomed: their only hope of victory had been shattered by his own hatred and inflexibility.

Determined that he would not die alone, Ramesis snatched the power-sword clenched in the hand of Malesti, who lay dead in the dust. The hollow was full of the aliens' corpses, yet more and more seemed to spill forth into the battle. Screaming with rage, the chaplain charged into the centre of the throng. Ramesis was surrounded by their warriors as he hacked blindly left and right, felling an enemy with each blow. The whining of anti-grav engines was deafening and the chaplain was knocked to one knee by the downblast of something large sweeping overhead. The noise of guns and blade-on-blade swirled around him, accompanied by a cacophony of screams which were suddenly drowned out by a deafening bellow of inhuman rage. He was hemmed in on all sides by shadowy warriors, his armour rent and torn from the blows of his enemies, his real enemies. As the darkness closed in on him the last sight he had was of their thin faces laughing with cruel glee.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Gav Thorpe is the author of the Horus Heresy novels *Deliverance Lost*, *Angels of Caliban* and *Corax*, as well as the novella *The Lion*, which formed part of the New York Times bestselling collection *The Primarchs*. He is particularly well-known for his Dark Angels stories, including the Legacy of Caliban series. His Warhammer 40,000 repertoire further includes the Path of the Eldar series, the The Beast Arises novels *The Emperor Expects* and *The Beast Must Die*, Horus Heresy audio dramas *Raven's Flight*, *Honour to the Dead* and *Raptor*, and a multiplicity of short stories. For Warhammer, Gav has penned the End Times novel *The Curse of Khaine*, the Time of Legends trilogy, *The Sundering*, and much more besides. He lives and works in Nottingham.



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