

WARHAMMER  
40,000

# FIREBORN

NICK KYME



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Though it was forbidden, Evangeline ran through the Chapel of Divine Sanctuary.

She ran as if the hounds of Chaos were behind her.

Votive candles lit the way through one of the transepts of remembrance, guttering faintly as she swept by. Statues of martyred saints glared at her disapprovingly from shaded alcoves. As she passed through the holy narthex, Evangeline was trying to piece together what she'd seen. Her sandalled feet rapping on the cold convent floor, louder than incendiary blasts in the silence, muddled her thoughts.

Blood.

She'd seen blood, like red rain coming from the sky.

All shall bleed, the voices had said. Skulls for the throne of—

The last part made her dizzy. She smelled oil, tasted iron and heard the harsh clank of machinery though the convent was quiet as the void.

In the Devotional Gallery, she found Father Lumeon.

'My child, what in the Emperor's name is wrong?'

The breathless specimen, a waif of a girl in pale unadorned robes, could only pant.

Father Lumeon, officious in his priestly vestments, drifted from behind his blackwood desk. He'd been labouring over parchments and data-slates, a mechanised lexicanum savant scribing his dictations with a neuro-quill. Sublimation of native belief cultures into the auspices of the Imperial Creed – it was heavy work, gratefully postponed, even for a devoted man like Father Lumeon. Dismissing a pair of cyborganic cherubs who had descended on angelic

wings to investigate the sudden fuss, he came before Evangeline and gently lifted her chin.

‘Be at peace...’

Evangeline’s frenzy lessened to an insistent ache.

‘And tell me what the matter is.’

The Sister Hospitaller had tears in her eyes and a tremor in her body.

An answer wasn’t forthcoming.

‘Come with me.’ Father Lumeon led her slowly to an ornate balcony, which looked out over all of Sepulchre IV.

Chapels and cathedra stretched into the distance, castellated bell towers touched the heavens, pilgrims marched over chasm-spanning ornate bridges, fluttering cherub-servitors flocked the skies. Armies of the righteous, adepts of the Ecclesiarchy and its most zealous defenders populated this shrine world. The sight of it gladdened Father Lumeon whenever he beheld it.

Sister Evangeline’s reaction was not as beatific. She wept and shook and looked away, pointing to the sky.

When Father Lumeon followed her gesture he noticed Sepulchre’s sun. It was red, where once it had been yellow. It was red and drenched the pale stone of the cathedrals so they looked as if they’d been fashioned from incarnadine bone.

‘What did you see?’ He seized Evangeline by the shoulder. He was hurting her and knew it. ‘Tell me now!’

Their eyes met, Evangeline’s full of fear and foreboding; Father Lumeon’s red-ringed and fervent.

What had she seen in the dark of the abyss? Why was the sky bleeding?

She confessed everything.

Pinching her under the arm to keep her close, Father Lumeon hurried Evangeline

through the quiet corridors of the convent-bastion. Their passage was met by furtive glances from the other Sister Hospitallers of the Order of the Inner Sanctum. Some carried votive candles or pungent censer burners. They kept their eyes low but were obviously dismayed that one of their Order, even a lowly novitiate, was being led off so urgently. Lumeon bustled past them, scarcely stopping as he activated gilded blast doors and mechanised arch-gates. Artefact chambers, stasis-locked reliquary vaults, beautifully illuminated vaulted ceilings and finely sculptured columns went by in a blur of insignificance. Father Lumeon ignored them all.

He said nothing, only frowned with the furrowed expression of a man who'd asked and received an answer he wished to return. He half-glanced at Evangeline. Her face was grey as ash.

Within the Order, it was unprecedented.

Slowly the religious austerity of the convent-bastion gave way to military functionality. Slab-like walls of gunmetal grey rose around them like bulkheads. Steam-stamped barrack markings and warning chevrons provided direction. The distant ring of combat training became a muffled refrain to their softer footfalls.

Evangeline had only ever roamed in the Chapel of Divine Sanctuary and its annexes that included her dormitory. She had never been to this part of the sprawling convent-bastion. It was cold and harsh. Percussive weapons fire from some distant armoury hurt her ears. The clash of blades sent unpleasant jolts down her spine.

Father Lumeon sensed her reluctance to proceed and had to march Evangeline the rest of the way. At the end of a long, stark corridor their journey ended. Before them, a single figure stood silhouetted in the light from overhead lumen-globes.

She had the cut and form of a Crusader. Her robes were red to resemble the blood of martyrs running in her veins. Her silver helm occluded her face completely, though her stance suggested it was severe beneath the mailed mask. One gauntleted fist gripped a vast Crusader shield almost the size of her entire body. Only with the augmented strength from her silver armour, which was also swathed with purity seals, devotional chains and holy parchments, could she wield it. The same was true of the Crusader sword in her other hand. Its blade

was etched with tiny inscriptions and crackled with energy from an unseen source.

Father Lumeon found it levelled at him when he approached her.

He held up the aquila icon, suspended around his neck by a string of beads. Each one had been fashioned from a saint's knuckle bone. It was a potent symbol and the staff of his office.

'In the Emperor's name, I must speak with Canoness Ignacia immediately. It is a dire matter.'

The slightest inclination of the formidable Crusader's head suggested she regarded Evangeline cowering beside Father Lumeon. The warrior didn't move and for a moment the venerable priest feared she might strike them both down.

At a silent command, the blast doors behind the Crusader broke open as if cracked by a bolt of invisible lightning. Lowering her sword, she backed off into the escaping pressure mist.

Wiping his brow with his sleeve, already knowing there'd be more grey in his temples come the morning, Father Lumeon started to drag Evangeline through after him.

The scream of warning klaxons brought them both to an abrupt halt.

The convent-bastion was on sudden alert.

'It's already here...' he breathed.

Heavy booted feet were hammering down the corridor towards them. Canoness Ignacia was marshalling her troops.

Sepulchre IV was under attack.

A mass evacuation was underway. Fleets of ships – lighters, ark-cruisers, speeders, freight-haulers, clippers and gunships – were deserting Sepulchre IV in their droves, like insects fleeing a forest fire. On the ground, those without vessels to ferry them to the starships anchored in low orbit around the planet had to run. Masses of people clogged the roads. Some clung desperately to one

another for succour, others screamed for deliverance. The few that had mechanised walkers or personal half-tracks were soon mired in the throng. Horns blared frantically like the wailing of the already damned.

‘Pandemonium reigns.’ Tsu’gan was unable to keep the sneer from his face. It was black. Not dark-skinned but really black, like onyx, and just as hard. The red spike of beard on his chin jutted like an accusing finger as he stared through one of the Implacable’s vision slits.

‘They want to live.’ Praetor’s deep voice was matter-of-fact but dominated over the Thunderhawk gunship’s engine noise. ‘It’s not so weak to cherish your own life,’ he added, guessing what the other Space Marine was thinking.

Tsu’gan turned – his heavy Terminator armour whirred and clanked as the hidden servos went to work shifting his bulk – and his red eyes blazed in the gloomy hold. He found the cumbersome suit a challenge, but relished the power it gave him. Tsu’gan valued strength above all else.

He appraised the rest of his squad in a glance.

Ankar and Kai’ru were as still as sentinels, their grav-harnesses locked and widened to accommodate their bulk.

Gathimu, the ‘spear’, was anointing his heavy flamer with ash. He drew a wide slash with his armoured finger then followed it with a drake’s head. It was Kalimar, the creature he’d slain below Mount Deathfire and whose flesh he now wore as a mantle on his left pauldron. So focused, so honed was Gathimu.

Praetor was his sergeant, a veteran of over a hundred campaigns, a hero of the Chapter. Apart from Tsu’gan, he was the only one yet to don his helmet. Praetor’s face and scalp were bald, polished to mirror sheen by his brander-priest. The scars upon his cheek and the three platinum service studs above his left brow were marks of honour and service. His Terminator armour was more ornate than Tsu’gan’s. Fashioned by a master artificer, it bore the heraldic devices of dragon heads and gilded laurels. It came with a cape of salamander hide that almost went down to the floor.

Praetor glowered.

‘To your harness, brother. It’s not much farther.’

Tsu'gan obeyed, still finding the unfamiliar sensation of walking in Tactical Dreadnought Armour unsettling. Once he was mag-locked and secured by thick metal bracers, he relaxed.

These men, these super-men, were his brothers. Not by blood but by battle. Born in Vulkan's forge, their bond was stronger than adamantium. They were Salamanders, Fire-born. No, they were more than that. They were the Chapter's First Company, to which their armour and its proud iconography testified, their Firedrakes.

As Praetor leaned forward to look through one of the vision slits, the green of his Terminator suit caught a shaft of light from outside and turned a lurid purple.

'The sky is red as blood.'

'Yet we defy it, going against the tide.' Gathimu had finished his rituals and looked over at Tsu'gan through the cold lenses of his battle-helm. Ornate drake's teeth gave the helm a feral snarl. 'Flex your muscles, cycle through your pre-battle physical routines. It will help.'

'I am ready,' Tsu'gan snapped, a little too quickly.

'You are untempered.' Gathimu's even tone suggested he meant no offence.

Tsu'gan bit back a reply. He glared through the vision slit and saw again the red sky of the shrine world. Fat clouds gorged on blood smashed against the gunship's hull, painting it crimson and riming its edges with a visceral gum. Escaping ships sped past them too, headed away from the battle towards the hopeful salvation in low orbit.

A blockade of enemy starships was already forming around the planet. They planned to slaughter everyone on this world, a glorious sacrifice to their violent potentate. Soon, no one would be getting off alive. It lent the Salamanders' mission a certain... urgency that Tsu'gan felt more acutely as he looked outside.

Fire wreathed the horizon, casting a ruddy glow on the ruins of chapels and cathedra. Flaming bell towers had crumpled, like broken fingers reaching for the earth. Collapsed bridges were clogged with the dead and the sky blossomed with explosions from faraway aerial battles.

Tsu'gan clenched his power fist. The servos whined within and he thought of the distant war he would not be part of. He'd seen enough. Eyes back in the hold, he saw his battle-brothers felt his frustration too.

The Red Rage had come to Sepulchre IV, and its blood-lust was not easily sated.

Roaring afterburners announced their arrival at the docking pad. Landing stanchions extended quickly as the Implacable touched down. The Salamanders disembarked from the rear hatch, green-armoured giants ploughing through the pneumatic pressure cloud.

An Ecclesiarchy representative met them with two of her fellow Battle Sisters. Backwash from the Thunderhawk's half-powered down engines tossed her white hair, revealing a jagged scar that made her appear more severe.

Though they came from the Order of the Ardent Veil, these warrior-fanatics looked anything but peaceful. Their white power armour was studded with silver spikes, concomitant bodices drawn tight over their tauht muscles. They were akin to the suits worn by the Firedrakes' battle and reserve company brothers, only slighter but still potent. Holy signifiers – purity seals, rosarius beads and icons of the Emperor's aquila – bedecked the armour, defining the Battle Sisters' purpose and zealous determination. They held bolters low-slung at their hips. The sister superior with the white hair also carried a flanged power mace. Her helmet, mag-locked to her belt, was silver. Whatever force of Chaos had come upon Sepulchre IV must have been dire that these soldiers of faith could not defeat it.

Praetor bowed his head before the Battle Sisters to show his respect. It had not been easy for them or the Ecclesiarchy to ask for help. The veteran sergeant had no wish to make it any more difficult.

The white-haired superior nodded then turned her back on the Salamanders, leading them away from the docking pad towards a thick perimeter wall crowned by razor-wire. Two watchtowers with mounted heavy bolters overlooked a reinforced gate on either side, the docking pad's only access point. Hard-looking female faces regarded the strangers from within, their mood unreadable.

The docking pad doubled as a barracks and chapel, too. Tsu'gan noticed much of its religious statuary had been ripped down and replaced by ablative armour, sandbags and rockcrete barricades. Anything of significance to the faith of the

Order was gone, leaving a blank echo on a wall or a denuded alcove. The fleeing ships transported not only people but Ecclesiastical artefacts too.

‘I’ve had warmer welcome on Fenris.’ Kai’ru kept his voice low.

A glare from Praetor silenced him, before they were led towards the gate.

Tsu’gan had to agree with his battle-brother. A cold wind was blowing through the Order of the Ardent Veil and the white of their battle sisters’ armour reminded him of frost. Salamanders fought with a core of fire in their breast; these warrior-maidens harboured a spike of ice.

Once past the docking pad, Praetor chose to enlighten his brothers over a closed comm-channel.

++Use the senses our father gave you. The Order is mute. They cannot acknowledge you even if they wished to.++

Kai’ru found suddenly that he was similarly afflicted.

‘Deeds not words are the speech of angels.’ Gathimu was quoting from some philosophical treatise he’d read.

Any reply was forestalled as a pair of Immolator battle tanks reversed from the gate, allowing the Salamanders through. Their turret-mounted inferno cannons swivelled as they moved, constantly trained on the gate. One trigger pull from the gunners would engulf the entranceway in a conflagration of burning promethium.

With the churn of hidden gears, the gate cracked and slid open. As they had seen from the air, the carnage of burnt out tanks and twisted corpses lay beyond it. Sepulchre IV was a place of ruins and shades, of scorched earth and blood-tainted air. Some of the fires still flickered in the hollow shells of the broken basilica.

Several Battle Sisters flanked the gate, bolters aimed into the killing ground before them.

The sister superior looked expectantly at Praetor. She wanted to seal the compound again quickly.

Tsu'gan detected no enemies nearby. He scowled behind his battle-helm at what he saw as fear.

Fear is the province of the weak.

'Ave Imperator,' he heard Praetor say to the Battle Sister.

She slammed her gauntleted fist against her pauldron in salute as the Salamander sergeant led his Firedrakes out.

Deeds not words.

Once outside, the gate ground shut behind them. The gaze of the Battle Sisters in the towers was still upon them, though. Tsu'gan felt their heavy bolter sights like an itch at the back of his neck.

Gathimu released a spit of promethium from his heavy flamer to test the igniter on the nozzle, interrupting Tsu'gan's thoughts. 'This place reeks of death.'

Tsu'gan estimated over a thousand dead bodies strewn throughout the perimeter. 'The battle moved elsewhere?'

'To the convent-bastion.' Praetor had donned his battle helm and was consulting a data feed running across his left lens. 'Our destination.' Topographical and geographical schemata spooled across his iris at rapid speed. Praetor's oculobe implant absorbed the information in a single beat, storing it in his eidetic memory for later use. He'd locked in the route to the convent-bastion and was mission ready. He led them to a patch of open ground.

'How many did they lose trying to get in?' Ankar took his place in a ritual circle with the others.

Praetor paused to blink the relevant data onto his inner helm lens. 'Nearly a quarter of their garrison – over a thousand battle sisters. Though I'd suggest that's a conservative estimate.'

'And within, defending the bastion?'

'Celestians, mainly. They may have a few hundred troops inside. There are more beyond its walls. Holding firm... for now.'

‘Such a waste of lives,’ said Kai’ru. ‘No wonder they’re so aggrieved.’

Tsu’gan’s servos protested as he moved towards Praetor, his armour as belligerent as his mood. ‘They’re fools. Mute or not, they should’ve summoned us sooner.’

Gathimu was standing next to him. ‘Would your pride have allowed that, brother? Asking for help?’

‘We need none, we are Adeptus Astartes.’ He stamped heavily into position beside his sergeant. His uneven gait was obvious, especially to Gathimu.

‘Your anger weighs you down more than that armour ever could. Let go of it.’

It’s not anger, thought Tsu’gan. It’s hate.

And it went deep, into his flesh where he’d tried to have the brander-priest’s iron remove it. But no burning, however invasive, could go far enough. Not when the hate and anger was turned inwards...

Behind them, the burst of engine noise signalled the Implacable’s take-off from the docking pad. The gunship had brought them as close as it could without risking being downed by enemy flak. Several Ecclesiarchy craft littered the killing field outside the fortified compound, testament to the wisdom of a foot approach. The rapid deployment of the Terminators to Sepulchre IV prevented any other kind of insertion.

‘And so we are alone.’ Kai’ru lifted his head to watch the slowly vanishing outline of the Thunderhawk. Headed for Sepulchre IV’s spaceport, it would aid the evacuation effort until summoned again by Praetor.

Gathimu was philosophical. ‘In the end brother, we are always alone.’

Praetor looked to him now the Salamanders had formed the ritual circle.

‘Ignite the flame.’

A burst from Gathimu’s heavy flamer lit a column of fire in the wasteland, like a beacon torch.

‘Vulkan’s fire beats in my breast,’ Praetor intoned.

‘With it I shall smite the foes of the Emperor,’ they concluded as one then each thrust their fists into the blaze, allowing their armoured fingers to blacken at the tips before withdrawing them.

‘We are born in fire,’ the sergeant continued, ‘so do we wage war with it clenched in our mailed fist.’

‘Unto the anvil!’ bellowed the Terminators.

Praetor unslung his thunder hammer and storm shield. ‘Firedrakes! In Vulkan’s name!’

The ritual circle broke apart and the Salamanders fell into combat-march formation, Praetor at the front, the others forming a two by two square behind him.

Tsu’gan’s lens display showed ten kilometres to the convent-bastion. The land between them and it was fiercely contested by Ecclesiarchy and enemy troops. The war was close by. There was no way could they reach their destination without encountering it.

It would be a long walk.

Sister Evangeline prayed. She was in one of the convent-bastion’s sanctums kneeling before an icon of her Order’s patron, the martyred Sister Uthraxese. Silver-armoured Celestians surrounded her with ready bolters. Despite their experience and status, the elite Battle Sisters looked edgy.

Father Lumeon was conversing with Canoness Ignacia at the back of the small chamber. The Celestians were Ignacia’s personal guard. She also wore silver armour but of a more ornate design. An antique power sword was sheathed at her hip, next to her battle-helm. Oil censers and a book of scripture hung from her belt by a pearled rosarius string, whilst the scars of battle mapped the Canoness’s face like a continent of past glories.

Father Lumeon looked calm but the way he worried at his aquila betrayed his concern. ‘We could hide.’

Ignacia gave him narrowed eyes.

‘In the Chapel of Divine Sanctuary,’ the priest added.

The Canoness shook her head. The notion of hiding was anathema to her. She wanted to wait. Perhaps with reinforcements from the Space Marines they could break through to the gunships.

In a bout of frustration, Father Lumeon pointed to where Evangeline was praying before the icon. There was a finger bone of the great martyr herself within its coffin-like confines. Some, the particularly devout, suggested some spirit essence still existed within the calcified remains.

‘The relic must be taken from this place. It cannot fall to the enemy. Even now they seek it!’

Ignacia was about to admonish him, when he held up his hand contritely. ‘Our forces dwindle by the minute. Soon there’ll be none left and the Ruinous Powers will not stall long at our barred gates. The Adeptus Astartes are on the way, canoness.’

She scowled at this, ever prideful.

‘If we hide, it might give us more time. We might–’

The hard clang of Ignacia slamming her fist against the wall stopped Father Lumeon mid-plea. Evidently, signing would not convey her meaning accurately enough.

Evangeline didn’t start at the interruption, though it was loud enough. She stayed calm, channelling an inner peace as taught by the sister superior of the Hospitaller.

Anger serves only to promote further anger. Guidance is only found when the mind is still. Serenity breeds truth.

Before the Canoness could go further, a pair of Crusaders from the convent-bastion’s outer wall arrived at the sanctum’s force-shielded doorway.

Both had removed their helmets in the presence of their holy mistress. There was

news from the battle-front. From their expressions, it wasn't good.

The chains tightened around the sorcerer's torso, forcing him awake. The iron links burned white-hot and sent needles of agony across his bare flesh where his power armour had been removed. Were it not for his enhanced constitution, he'd be dead.

Dreghgor knew that, just as he knew how far he could push his captive. The warlord of the Red Rage was a tyrant and a butcher but he was also wise. Khorne loathed magic, as did he. The collar of black iron around Dreghgor's neck was inimical to sorcery, but he was not beyond using sorcerers as a tool to further his own ends.

The bitch-maidens of the False Emperor held his warrior legions at bay. No matter how many he threw against their defences, the spiteful whores would not break. Dreghgor knew what lay within their disgusting temple; the sorcerer had scryed its presence after the knives had gone in. Khorne wanted it. Dreghgor would not fail his master, who had seen fit to grant him an armada of ships to bring forth a bloody reign upon the sub-sector. Seven worlds already burned in the wake of his red crusade. He only needed one more... The Eye of the Gods was upon him. He felt it like razorblades under his changed skin.

From the burnt out shell of a shrine, Hagtah Dreghgor had fashioned an arena. The remains of its millennia-old reliquaries were scattered about the bloodied floor like carrion bones. Priceless relic-statues lay broken and beheaded on a carpet of stained-glass fragments. The blood of innocents anointed the shrine's walls from where they hung impaled on hell-barbs. A Chaos star delineated the battlefield with a freshly flensed skull at each of its eight points.

Two of Dreghgor's champions clashed within it, chainblade to chainblade. They wore sanguine power armour, chased with brass. Reinforced ribbing between the armour's plates was as black as sackcloth, and each donned a skull-faced battle-helm in honour of their bloody god.

Dreghgor's own helm was fashioned into the visage of a snarling hound, a dark iron echo of one of his master's many forms, and had a single brass horn jutting from its left temple. His armour, scarred from numerous battles, was riddled with studs and barbs. Chains bearing eight skulls from his finest kills hung from plate to plate. He'd scrimshawed marks to represent the lesser 'achievements'. The

tallies resembled little more than deranged scratches there were so many of them. Rib bones were engineered into his vambraces. Alien teeth turned his gauntlets into spiked fists.

Slayer Lord, Ender of Lives – just two of Dregghor’s well-earned honorifics.

The warlord watched his champions intently from a pile of ruined stone. Something was still twitching beneath him, mewling for a merciful death. He paid it no heed. Let the weak suffer. While the blood flows, Khorne’s will be done.

His warriors fought fiercely, hacking at each other with abandon. Every drop of spilled blood hissed as it touched the unholy circle. Dregghor saw dark energy coursing through the lines he had carved in the shattered flagstones.

With a grunt, one of the champions severed the head of the other and roared. Though his armour was cut and his body bleeding from countless wounds, the warrior exulted in triumph.

Dregghor smiled beneath his helm. Khorne would be satisfied. The blood-letting had been prodigious. He turned his gaze upon the shackled sorcerer, who looked on meekly from the opposite end of the arena, caged in an iron gibbet.

The warlord’s eyes burned like balefires, and he nodded.

As the sorcerer began to incant, blood from his ruptured organs flecked the inside of the cage. The victorious champion clutched his chest and went down on one knee.

Vokrhan was a mighty warrior; he would make a strong vessel.

Dark tendrils, like strands of hyperactive electricity, crackled around the circle. When the champion tried to rise, a black bolt felled him. He tried again, and this time the dark energy was more potent. Vokrhan’s roar of triumph had turned into a wail of agony. Despite all of his strength and fortitude, he collapsed and shook.

‘Take his flesh,’ Dregghor uttered like a curse. ‘Bind it to the engine.’

From below Dregghor’s ‘throne’ of sundered stone, a suit of dark mechanical armour was wheeled forth by Kharthak the Blood-wrought.

By now the champion's body was ravaged by daemon-change. Something dark and abyssal had crept into his soul. The essence of the thing manifested in his tortured and mutated flesh. Claws and monstrous faces stretched it as they fought for release, whilst screams heralded every agonised jerk of Vokrhan's body.

Kharthak released the ribcage of the engine, which sprang open like a fanged maw. Chains spilled from within like hungry tentacles, driven by a smoke-spewing, oil-spattering device on the back of the armour that also colonised its joints and limbs.

Hooks fashioned at the end of the chains found purchase in the terrified meat-puppet and dragged Vokrhan thrashing into the engine's iron embrace.

After the ribcage slammed shut with a hard bang, the screaming stopped. A dull glow smouldered in the eyes of the engine's banded war-helm. Its studded torso, made to resemble bone, heaved as if with a first breath.

Dreghgor leapt from his rocky vantage point and landed in front of it, stone splintering beneath him.

Dominance had always been one of the warlord's chief credos.

'Who is your master?'

With a creak of shifting iron, the daemon-engine went down on one knee in front of the warlord and lowered its head.

Dreghgor smiled... then struck it, hard across the temple. Even bowed, the daemon-engine was a head taller than the warlord, but his blow was fearsome enough to send it reeling to its feet and back a step.

Its eyes flared with red-hate and an array of weapons – sharp, spiked and bladed things, festooned with chains and dripping oil – snapped from its arms, greedy for blood. Dreghgor fed it his rage and his fury, it boiled within him like a tempest. He sensed the thing that had hollowed out his champion's corpse for its own, slaved to the engine. It struggled against its bonds. Let slip, it would devour him and all of his warriors.

Dreghgor liked that. The daemon-engine would cause such carnage. His smile

became a snarl.

‘Slay our enemies. Bleed them. Bring me what I seek.’

The streets of Sepulchre IV were drowning in blood. Ecclesiarchy troops lay tangled in the rubble like broken alabaster dolls. Survivors fell back by degrees, sloshing through vital fluids and avoiding the corpses choking up the once proud avenues.

Despite their defiance, the shrine world’s defenders were wilting before the Chaos battalions. The Battle Sisters were losing. Several combat squads were trying to hold their ground in Unity Square of Monast, Sepulchre’s capital. All other cities had been evacuated or overrun. Here in Monast, the Red Rage fell hardest. Here in Monast they bracketed the defenders’ escape routes, destroyed the bridges before reinforcements could be brought in and ensured dominance of the blood-soaked skies. Here in Monast they sought something, a relic to satisfy their warmongering god. The Red Rage surrounded the convent-bastion but, as of yet, hadn’t broken through.

But time, Tsu’gan was acutely aware, was running out.

‘Enhance magnification.’

The image resolved itself in his oculobe.

A bare-headed Battle Sister was holding her power sword aloft, rallying the troops when she took a round to the neck. She fell seconds later as the mass-reactive shell exploded, staining her skull-white armour crimson.

Sustained bolter fire met her demise.

Tsu’gan was reluctantly impressed. The Battle Sisters had adopted a long firing line and kept it steady in spite of casualties. He watched another sister superior step into the dead one’s place and try to anchor the defenders.

No war cries, nor screams. It was... unnerving. At first, Tsu’gan thought it was pique at having to call on the Adeptus Astartes to retrieve their holy artefact. Now, he wasn’t so sure. The Battle Sisters were almost automatons.

A few shattered rockcrete barricades and a pair of half-destroyed tanks stood

between them and the enemy. Red Rage Traitor Marines, their power armour baptised in arterial blood, wielding bolt guns and chainblades came at them in a mob. Cultists, those they had brought upon their graven ships and desperate converts, former natives now driven insane by the carnage, ranged ahead of them like pack dogs.

Tsu'gan sneered contemptuously.

Weak.

++Your orders, brother-sergeant?++ Ankar's voice came across the comm-link.

The Firedrakes were a hundred metres or so from the battle-site, having penetrated Unity Square, and approached down its flank. They could avoid this fight, continue on to the convent-bastion and the mission.

Praetor ignited his thunder hammer. Energy crackled along the head and haft, stirring the weapon's machine-spirit.

'Combat formation.'

Tsu'gan rejoiced. Battle at last!

As the Firedrakes advanced, a missile scudded overhead and tore apart one of the immobilised tanks. It detonated the fuel reserves, slinging the warrior-maiden who'd been firing its turret-mounted heavy bolter to the ground where she lay bleeding.

Flamers were brought up, and bathed the onrushing Red Rage with super-heated promethium. The cultists died immediately, like pathetic candles withered by a blow-torch. The Traitor Marines were not so easily felled. One collapsed to a knee, shimmering in the heat haze, his armour wreathed by fire, but the others drove through it. Emerging from the smoke, they looked like daemons born from the fiery hells of the warp. Tendrils of licking flame trailed off their battle-plate.

Chainblades screeching for blood, the Red Rage were about to tear into the Battle Sisters when a second flamer blast smashed into them from the flank, spilling bodies unprepared to meet it.

'Into the fires of battle!' Praetor thundered towards the Traitor Marines like an

armoured bull.

Tsu'gan was behind him. He felt the resonance of his heavy footfalls through his armour, and those of Kai'ru and Ankar, either side. Gathimu was at the rear, slow enough to scorch the Red Rage with his heavy flamer. Tsu'gan felt him too, saw his ident-rune on the grainy tac-display imposed on his helmet lens.

Advance three steps – fire. Advance three steps – fire.

Gathimu was unfaltering.

Running in Terminator armour was difficult, but not impossible. Unused to the manoeuvre, Tsu'gan found his enhanced physiology stretched but he soon compensated. His breath sounded harsh and reverberant inside his helmet. The enemy were getting closer through the yellow-orange optic lenses.

A spray of blood cascaded from the shattered skull of a Traitor Marine as Praetor connected with his thunder hammer. A second red slash tore from the warrior's stomach as the Salamanders sergeant used his storm shield to open him up.

Tsu'gan triggered his storm bolter, the hard crash-bang staccato that followed filled his heart with righteous anger.

'In Vulkan's name! Glory to Prometheus!' He strafed a fresh line of cultists rushing to intercept the Salamanders.

The Terminators barrelled through them like they were nothing. One crumpled against Ankar's armoured bulk. Another disappeared in a visceral mist, torn apart by Kai'ru's chainfist.

Ahead of them, the Battle Sisters were rallying. But further enemy forces were coming, Havoc squads armed with heavy weapons and a Rhino APC carrying another battle squad. A wall of fire whickered from their ranks. It pinged off the invulnerable Terminators but scythed into the Battle Sisters brutally. Bodies were spun and tossed by the fusillade. They fell in silence despite their wounds.

A trio of Ecclesiarchy tanks rolled up the street to meet the enemy's secondary force, two Battle Sisters squads running alongside them. Unity Square was packed with troops. A short range fire-fight had erupted across a small patch of open ground. Frantic melta beams stabbed across the debris, generators

screaming. Heavy bolters added a grunting chorus to the orchestra of war.

The skirmish was escalating.

In the middle of the storm, the Firedrakes met the enemy proper.

Cracking ceramite, the sound of sundered power armour, accompanied Tsu'gan's bludgeoning of one of the Traitor Marines. Another came in his wake, firing his combi-bolter point blank into the Salamander's torso. Tiny insect-like stings were no more than an annoyance.

Tsu'gan's power fist crushed him into paste.

Buoyed by the sudden appearance of heavily armoured reinforcements, the Battle Sisters advanced beyond their barricades to link up with the Space Marines. Gathimu had reached his battle-brothers too, and sent a plume of burning promethium into the Chaos Rhino. Destroyed tracks and a badly scorched hull brought the vehicle to a skidding halt.

Keeping up the pressure, Gathimu engulfed the stricken Rhino. Smoke-shrouded figures stumbled from its hatches, before the hold ignited and blew out the rear door in a deep foom of exploding incendiary.

The muzzle-flare from Tsu'gan's storm bolter lit up his armour in a stark glow. Already ablaze, the Traitor Marines from inside the vehicle bucked and spasmed against the bolt storm. Three survived, staggered by shell impacts but unbowed in their durable power armour.

Praetor's thunder hammer showed no such mercy as he waded in and crushed them.

Emboldened, the Battle Sisters advanced ahead of the more cumbersome Terminators to establish a fresh strong-point beyond Unity Square. Further squads were moving in from the avenues of broken temples and collapsed spires. Rubble provided a natural cordon in which to funnel the Chaos renegades.

Tsu'gan noticed the sister superior he'd seen earlier give a curt nod of thanks to his sergeant before pressing on.

Praetor's voice rumbled over the comm-link a moment later.

++Fire-born, converge on my position.++

A series of affirmation runes flashed up on Tsu'gan's helmet lens as the squad tightened its coherency.

++Do we advance?++ Kai'ru sounded eager for more.

He wasn't alone. Tsu'gan was getting ready to head after their allies when Praetor spoke again.

++Hold position.++

++Brother-sergeant--++

Gathimu cut Tsu'gan off before he made a mistake he'd regret.

'Be patient, brother. This isn't over yet.'

Tsu'gan followed his eye-line. A pair of Immolator battle tanks spearheaded the Ecclesiarchy counter-assault. Their inferno cannons were short-ranged but deadly. Shooting gouts of intense fire ahead of them, they laid a path for the warrior-maidens behind. Some rode inside the Rhino APC that followed. Others hung onto its outer rails, holding their bolters one-handed.

Tsu'gan's eyes narrowed. His oculobe filtered out smoke graining and sharpened the image despite the distance and the heat haze. Something was coming, heralded by a squall of blood-crazed cultists. What was left of the Havocs and the few Traitor Marines from the battle squads retreated to consolidate with it.

++Massive heat signature, brother-sergeant.++ Gathimu was calm, the blind sword of utter stillness to Tsu'gan's font of reckless anger.

++I read++

Threat icons in Tsu'gan's helmet array flashed insistently.

++Looks like some sort of machine. Dreadnought?++

Tsu'gan locked onto it with his targeter. His tac-display spooled down the metres

rapidly.

It was speeding up, and no Dreadnought.

Ankar cranked fresh rounds into his storm bolter. ++An Adeptus Astartes?++

A dense but distant thunk of metal against metal arrested Praetor's reply. A dark shape was crashing out of the sky towards the Firedrakes. It took Tsu'gan a few seconds to realise it was one of the Immolators.

They were already moving when Praetor bellowed. ++Disperse!++

A hunk of flaming tank landed between them, like so much burning shrapnel. It had literally been torn apart.

++Forward on me, brothers!++ Praetor circled the wreck quickly, overcoming the weight of his armour with sheer strength.

Tsu'gan was first behind him, but Praetor already had a lead. 'What is that thing?'

It resembled a suit of mechanised armour, a simulacrum of a man, something that might once have been part of the long defunct Legio Cybernetica. And though it had pistons and cogs, wheels and chains, and vented steam and oil like a mag-lev train, it was no robot. Something lived and drew breath in those dark iron confines. Tsu'gan felt it.

'Unnatural...' Gathimu sounded almost haunted. 'It's possessed.'

Tsu'gan's teeth clenched. It was a daemon that had a hand in the death of his former captain, Ko'tan Kadai. His ire grew as he vowed this one would be banished back into the warp without taking anyone with it.

A short distance away, the Battle Sisters were levelling everything they had at it. Bolter fire, even melta blasts rolled off like they were nothing. Another Immolator crumpled like parchment when the daemon-engine shoulder-barged its hull. Fuel and ammunition exploded in a vast fireball that Tsu'gan felt in the resulting heat wash.

'Emperor's name... It's strong.'

Praetor was swinging his thunder hammer in a slow but steady arc. ++We are stronger.++

The daemon-engine was relentless. It tossed Battle Sisters like limp marionettes. White-armoured bodies fell like rain, eviscerated by its blades and saws.

Tsu'gan heard Praetor mutter when the Firedrake's charged.

++Vulkan guide me in my hour of doom.++

Up close, the daemon-engine was massive. It reeked of blood and oil. Smoke and heat exuded off its dark iron flesh in a pall. But it was the eyes that Tsu'gan really noticed. With every blow, as the carnage increased, they blazed brighter with a malign light.

Praetor swung. It was like lightning from the sky when he struck. Tsu'gan expected to see the daemon-engine crumble but instead his sergeant's battle cry became a roar of agony as he was punched off his feet several metres through the air.

To see the mighty Praetor so humbled made the Firedrakes falter.

Kai'ru recovered quickest, getting ahead of Tsu'gan to ram his chainfist into the daemon-engine's torso.

'Taste Vulkan's wrath, warp spawn.' The oath died on his lips when one of the thing's hell-blades punctured his Terminator armour as if it were tin. With his aegis broken, Kai'ru could only watch as the saw-teeth churned his innards to mulch.

Gathimu was advancing fast, Kai'ru's name a cry of anguish on his lips. The igniter on his heavy flamer was already burning when the daemon-engine levelled its wrist-mounted cannon and unloaded. Dozens of armour-piercing shells, jacketed with hellfire, peppered his armour and detonated the promethium tanks on his back.

Blinded by the sudden explosion, Tsu'gan waited a few seconds before his oculobe implant compensated. Gathimu was burning.

++Ankar.++

The other Firedrake nodded. They would attack the daemon-engine together. Tsu'gan's tac-display recorded five metres until engagement when a transmission icon flashed urgently on his helmet lens. It had an Imperial signature, emergency coded. The message spooled as rune-text across the display:

Incoming. Fall back five metres and stand fast.

A high-pitched whine broke overhead. No time to retreat. Tsu'gan and Ankar locked their bodies as the ordnance hit. It struck the daemon-engine squarely and it disappeared in a storm of fire and shrapnel.

The explosion billowed outwards, engulfing the Terminators who weathered the blast like a cliff against the tide. When the dust dispersed, the daemon-engine was crouched almost fifty metres away but still intact. It rose slowly. Its dead eyes blazed brighter.

Behind the Salamanders, Ecclesiarchy troops were advancing in force. A stern-faced sister superior appeared from the roof hatch of an Exorcist. It looked more like a grotesque church organ than a battle tank, but there it was, auto-loaders priming for another missile launch.

Another pair of Immolators flanked it, heavy bolter turrets rattling. High velocity, mass reactive shells stitched a thick line all the way to the daemon-engine. The dense impacts never even scratched it. The tanks rolled on past the Salamanders, determined to block it. Two Rhinos sped after them, fully loaded with engines screaming.

'See to your battle-brother.' Praetor was on his feet. His battle-helm was shattered and he'd torn it off. He was bloodied, still groggy from the blow. It was incredible he lived, let alone stood.

Praetor scowled when it didn't happen immediately. 'Get Gathimu up.'

With some effort, Ankar and Tsu'gan hauled the Firedrake to his feet. His armour was badly damaged, blackened by burns, but he nodded his willingness to fight.

Tsu'gan was ready to go again. 'How do we kill it?'

‘We don’t.’

‘But Brother Kai’ru—’

‘Is gone.’ Praetor’s face was grim. This wasn’t an easy decision. ‘We make for the convent-bastion. They have given us that chance.’ He gestured to where the Battle Sisters fought and died furiously.

Incomprehension and anger warred in Tsu’gan’s burning eyes. ‘What of vengeance? Our brother’s death demands it!’

Praetor snarled, thrusting his thunder hammer in Tsu’gan’s direction. ‘I’ll fell you where you stand. Obey my orders.’

He showed them his back and stalked away. ‘On my lead.’

Despite himself, Tsu’gan was about to protest again, when Gathimu touched his arm.

‘We’ll win no honour for Kai’ru by dying here, our oaths unfulfilled. Sacrifice is not always physical, brother.’

Grief softened Tsu’gan’s face briefly, before the mask returned and his impotent wrath dominated.

The Firedrakes left the battlefield. The convent-bastion wasn’t far. Tsu’gan knew, in their wake, the daemon-engine would be close.

The heavy drumming of explosions outside sounded muffled through the thick convent-bastion walls.

Father Lumeon was pacing.

Why don’t they feel thick enough?

Since departing with the Crusaders, Ignacia had not returned. Five Celestians remained, a full half of her bodyguard, led by Sister Clymene. They eyed the long corridor beyond the force-shield nervously. It was dark, its emergency lighting low.

He looked away when the shadows started to grow and coalesce in his mind. His heart was racing and he gripped his aquila for support.

Evangeline showed no such anxiety. She was kneeling before the reliquary, serene, bereft of all doubt. Though her lips moved in prayer, she made no sound.

Sister Clymene hunched over a tactical console fashioned like a shrine in one corner of the chamber. She turned to Father Lumeon, who then went over to her.

A grainy pict-viewer displayed the situation beyond the convent-bastion's walls. Flaring bolter fire polluted the image with bright flashes, overloading the external pict-viewer. Static from comm-link chatter obscured it further. But the picture was painfully clear to Father Lumeon. There was no escape. They would all die here. All that mattered was the relic.

He was muttering a prayer to the Emperor when four armoured forms came into view at the edge of the pict. Lumeon had never studied the Adeptus Astartes in any great detail but he recognised the insignia of the Salamanders and offered up his profound thanks.

Despite their bulky armour, the Adeptus Astartes progressed steadily through the Chaos picket lines, shredding foes with their holy bolters and bathing the heinous masses with cleansing flame. Father Lumeon was transfixed as a bald-headed giant smashed his way to the gate, his warrior brothers behind him. As the barrier wall began to open, a force of Celestians came out to meet the Adeptus Astartes. Desperate to get inside, the Red Rage couldn't get close. The defenders were just too fierce to breach.

Once the Salamanders were through, the Celestians retreated and the gate banged shut again. Pintle-mounted fire from the towers intensified and a battle tank was rolled into the small outer courtyard to watch the gate.

The vox-unit on the tactical console crackled to life.

++This is Sergeant Praetor of the Salamanders First Company Firedrakes – acknowledge.++

Father Lumeon looked to Sister Clymene, who gestured for him to answer.

His relief was almost palpable. 'Lords, the Emperor's blessing you have come. I

am Father Lumeon, Missionary High Priest attached to the Orders.'

++We are sealing the inner doors now.++

Father Lumeon's tone betrayed his surprise.

'Ah... But how will we get out? The relic—'

++Is in safe hands. Be more concerned that the enemy doesn't get in.++

There was a short pause that filled the priest's gut with lead.

++Something is following us. There is little time. Ready the relic, we will be with you soon.++

The vox-link died and silence returned.

Something is following us.

Something.

The words replaying in Lumeon's head chilled him before he found some resolve.

'Sister Evangeline.' She was praying in front of the reliquary and looked up. 'It's time.'

The force-shield shimmered once then dissipated before Praetor and his Firedrakes stepped into the sanctum. It was quick to resolve itself again, the waft of ozone from its reactivation souring the air.

Tsu'gan scowled at such fear.

'That won't save you,' said Praetor, looking down at the frail, old priest in front of him.

'Then we shall have to rely on the Emperor's grace to protect us.'

If Praetor had an opinion about this, he kept it well hidden.

The priest bowed. 'I am Father Lumeon.'

The Firedrake sergeant kept the introductions brief. He showed him a small, cylindrical device mag-locked to his belt. 'Teleport homer. Once locked onto its signal, my ship will transport us and the relic aboard.' Praetor's expression became regretful. 'Its localised field is too small for all of us. Besides, you would not survive translation intact. I am truly sorry.'

Lumeon was already resigned to his fate. He had no fear of death, only of losing the relic.

Praetor's gaze alighted on the reliquary of Sister Uthraxese where a slim novice was kneeling.

'Brothers, make way.' The Firedrakes standing behind him spread out. A gap for Praetor and the relic formed between them.

'When translation occurs, there will be a massive exothermic reaction. Stand well back. Better still, leave the chamber.' Praetor had moved into position. When he turned the novice was standing downcast before him.

'I am tempered in Vulkan's forge, sister. I have no need of benediction.' Praetor looked up. 'Priest, bring forth the relic. Our time is almost up.'

A dull explosion echoed through the convent-bastion walls all the way to the sanctum. Luminal red bathed the chamber from the tactical console. The outer wall had been breached.

Tsu'gan had a decent view of the screen from where he was standing. The ensuing fire-fight was brutal. A familiar form appeared through the carnage of bolter fire and smoke. Celestians fell like porcelain statues, shattered by its irresistible force.

'The machine has broken through.'

It scythed through the defenders, crushing tanks and swatting Battle Sisters aside, until it reached the inner gate. Flamers and melta guns were brought up, but nothing fazed it. If anything, the daemon-engine looked bigger, a mutating hulk whose unnatural flesh strained at its corporeal bonds. Tsu'gan's eyes narrowed when he caught something through the melee. Before he could analyse it further, a stray explosion killed the pict-feed and the tactical console went dark.

Tsu'gan's eyes met his sergeant's.

It will be here soon.

Already, the heavy thump of the daemon-engine's feet could be heard hammering up the corridor towards them.

Praetor's face was solemn. None would survive. But retrieve the reliquary and it would all be worth it.

'Now, priest.'

Father Lumeon looked nonplussed. 'It is before you, Astartes. Sister Evangeline is the relic.'

What might have been anger crossed Praetor's face. 'Don't mock me, priest. If you've lost your mind to Chaos, I'll vanquish you here... now.'

'Evangeline is the relic, a living relic! She beheld a vision from the Emperor on Earth and it has awoken her grace.'

Praetor saw the truth in the priest's eyes, and beseeched Vulkan for his strength.

'Then we have a problem.'

Father Lumeon was shaking his head. 'No, no. You're here now. Rescue Evangeline. The rest of us do not matter. You must do this, lord. I beg of you!'

Praetor ignored the priest's pleas, addressing his Firedrakes instead. 'Secure the corridor. Firepoints at every ingress.'

Gathimu and Ankar waited for the force-shield to deactivate again then lumbered through the doorway.

'Astartes, what are you doing? The living relic—'

'Is a girl, and thusly will not survive teleportation to my ship.' Praetor spoke harshly. He wasn't angry at Lumeon, thrusting the serene-looking novitiate towards him desperately. He was angry at the situation and the fact they faced a foe he knew they couldn't best with strength of arms. Herculon Praetor was not

used to such impasses.

Father Lumeon seemed to shrink with despair. Evangeline, by contrast, was utterly calm. Her serenity and grace emanated outwards. It was slow, but even Tsu'gan was beginning to feel his choler lessen just by being near her.

Praetor felt it too. He reached out to touch Evangeline's cheek but stopped short.

'I can see why the Red Rage wants you so badly, child. Have no fear, they won't claim you.'

Judging by his ambivalent demeanour, Father Lumeon was unsure if that was a good or a bad thing given the circumstances. He looked askance down the corridor where the sounds of battle were growing louder.

'What do we do?'

Praetor regarded the priest sternly.

'Return to your reliquary, both of you, and pray.'

Tsu'gan couldn't avert his gaze from Sister Evangeline as she knelt in prayer. Such poise and calm. She radiated tranquillity. Peace threatened to overcome his rage. Tsu'gan had not experienced such a feeling in a long time.

The din coming from the corridor had lessened in the last few minutes. It could mean only one thing. The Celestians had been defeated.

A ring of explosives rigged from the Battle Sisters' frag and krak grenades booby trapped the entrance to the sanctum. When the daemon-engine breached the force-shield, it would set them off. By then the Firedrakes and their ward would be withdrawing into the room behind it. Tsu'gan had performed the short reconnoitre himself: from the sanctum to a long gallery, which then led to a transept and finally a chapel. Cloisters and dormitories bled off from this chamber, but the daemon-engine would have caught them at that point and have to be fought.

Tsu'gan didn't fear it, but nor did he wish to be found wanting when the time came. A desire for flagellation at the brander-priest's rod had welled up in him during the tour. Upon returning to the sanctum and Sister Evangeline, that

masochistic urge had ebbed.

Gathimu's voice came through on the comm-link. He and Ankar were at the opposite end of the corridor.

++It comes.++ Harsh-sounding bolter fire broke the feed. ++Glory to Vulkan and the Emperor, brothers. I go to them now.++

Gathimu disappeared, wading into the battle that Tsu'gan could only imagine beyond the corridor.

Ankar was behind him.

++Unto the Anvil, brothers.++

Even Evangeline's presence couldn't quell Tsu'gan's anger. He fist was clenched. 'I will carve their names into its hell-bound flesh.'

Praetor hefted his thunder hammer. 'Honour their sacrifice with victory, brother.'

Tsu'gan was in no mood for pragmatism.

'I hope their blood is worth this human's grace. We don't even know why she is so important to the Ecclesiarchy.'

Father Lumeon rose from the reliquary where he prayed with Sister Evangeline to approach the Firedrakes.

'Do you know what true names are, Astartes?'

'They are a daemon's weakness, words of power that can banish them into the warp.'

Lumeon faced Praetor. 'Yes, they are. Sister Evangeline knows true names.'

'What do you mean, priest? Speak plainly.'

'By being close to a daemon, she can hear their true names. She can banish the denizens of the warp with but a word! That is why she is so valuable. That is why you must save her.'

Only Evangeline's presence kept Tsu'gan's rage from boiling over. He wrenched off his battle-helm. He was livid. Praetor's outstretched hand warned him to be still.

'A pity you did not mention this before.' The sergeant leaned in closer. 'But what of the fact she is mute? How can she even utter such a word?'

Father Lumeon followed the Firedrake's gaze to Evangeline then back again.

'The Emperor's divine will is not for us to question, it just is. I do not know how.'

Praetor slammed his fist into Tsu'gan's chest to hold him. 'Go back to your prayers, but be ready to move.'

He sighed, turning to Tsu'gan as the priest sloped away again. 'Vulkan give us strength.'

'There is no way to defeat this thing.'

Praetor's brow furrowed. 'Not with the weapons we have here at least.' He paused, deciding on their final strategy. 'We hold it as long as we can. Then do what must be done. The enemy must not claim her. Whatever vile sacrifice is in mind for this child will be far worse than death, for her and the sub-sector.'

'I will do my duty.'

Praetor nodded. 'If we still live, I will engage the beacon and pull us back to the ship.'

The two ident-runes on both Firedrakes' tac-displays blinked out.

Tsu'gan's face was grim. Their brothers were dead. He checked the load on his storm bolter. It was getting low. As Praetor backed away, gesturing for the priest and his novitiate to get up, Tsu'gan stomped into position in front of the force-shield. The five Celestians, including Sister Clymene, formed a firing line with him.

Silence flushed the corridor. Unseen fires sent flickering fingers of dusk across the metal walls. Smoke drizzled outwards like a carpet of fog. The heavy clank

of the daemon-engine's footfalls beat in time with the defenders' hearts.

Tsu'gan aimed at the end of the corridor. 'Brace yourselves.'

Five boltguns locked and loaded beside him.

'Lower the force-shield.'

The energy veil flickered and dissipated at Tsu'gan's command.

A large silhouette bled onto the gunmetal floor. The daemon-engine lumbered into view.

It was much larger than before. Its flesh strained against the machine shackling it. Blood and oil seeped from every cleft in its armour. Long, hell-runed chains scraped along the floor as it moved. Steam and smoke spewed from the engine on its broad back. And the eyes... the eyes burned with a baleful fire, stoked by the fear and rage of its enemies.

Tsu'gan hesitated for a second.

'Fire!'

An incandescent bolter storm roared from the sanctum archway. For a few moments the daemon-engine took it, even staggered as the mass reactive shells exploded against it. Then it charged.

Its bulk had slowed it and it took a few seconds to overcome inertia but then it was moving, like a battle tank with engines screaming.

Tsu'gan estimated it would clear the corridor in approximately five more seconds.

'Back into the sanctum. Now!'

The force-shield was reactivated in their wake.

Reunited with Praetor, Tsu'gan was retreating into the long gallery when the daemon-engine hit the force-shield. The energy veil stretched and crackled, sending jolts of electricity through the abomination's metal frame. As if it was

wading through bands of viscous light, the daemon-engine pushed and strained against the field. Then like rubber put under too much stress, the bands snapped and the veil shut down for the last time.

Tsu'gan's storm bolter was already blazing halfway down the gallery when the daemon-engine stepped across the sanctum's threshold and tripped the grenades.

Intensified by the close confines of the chamber, the explosion was deafening and blew smoke and fire in both directions. Shrapnel careened off Tsu'gan's armour, embedding itself in the walls and floor.

Laying down suppressing fire all the way, Tsu'gan and the Celestians reached the chapel. Nothing stopped the daemon-engine. They didn't even slow it down.

Three of the Celestians rushed forward, bolters flaring at close range, righteous fury in their eyes.

They were scattered in seconds, smashed and broken against the walls.

'Protect them, brother!' Praetor led with his storm shield, the daemon-engine looming ahead.

It went against Tsu'gan's every instinct to leave his sergeant. But, shielding the non-combatants with his body and backing off from the battle, he obeyed. He was her last defence. Sister Evangeline needed him.

Expecting to slow, rather than smite it, Praetor was lasting longer against the daemon-engine this time. Its bulk actually worked against it, and the Firedrake was able to get in beneath its guard and land a few blows.

Bolter fire raked down the machine's torso, before the last Celestian was impaled on a hell-blade. Transfixed, she shuddered once and then died.

Sister Clymene made the most of her comrade's sacrifice by attaching a melta bomb to the daemon-engine's blind side. Too close to withdraw, she was cooked in her armour while the abomination was rocked but stayed standing.

Only Praetor remained.

Tsu'gan and the others had almost reached the end of the chapel when he saw the

sergeant smashed aside. Praetor was lifted off his feet and left a ragged hole in the wall where he'd crashed through it. His thunder hammer was sent spinning loose, embedding itself in the chapel floor just a metre from Tsu'gan's grasp.

They'd reached the door to one of the dormitories. The daemon-engine had slowed, sensing its prey was near and at its mercy.

Tsu'gan's storm bolter was empty. He'd have to crush her neck.

'Shut your eyes.'

He struck Father Lumeon, as hard as he dare without killing him, knocking the priest unconscious before he could protest.

'Shut your eyes, Evangeline.'

Tsu'gan reached around her tiny neck, sensed the warmth of her skin against his gauntleted fingers... and stopped. He thrust Evangeline into the centre of the chapel, where she stumbled and fell.

As he dragged Father Lumeon and closed the dormitory blast door behind them, he saw the daemon-engine close on Evangeline.

By Vulkan, I hope this works...

Alone, Evangeline faced the daemon-engine. She quietened her fast-beating heart and recovered from her stumble into a kneeling position. She began to pray.

With each silent benediction, the abomination that had been summoned to sacrifice her soul to Khorne slowed. Whereas before, brute force and fury had driven the daemon-engine to impossible feats, now every step was an effort. The closer the machine came to Evangeline, the more it began to shrink. Its grotesque musculature withered and atrophied. The baleful lights in its eyes started to fade, like a candle starved of oxygen.

This was the Chapel of Divine Sanctuary – its borders were anathema to rage and fear. Here, peace and tranquillity held sway. Sister Evangeline was the paragon of that fundamental truth. She was order in place of chaos, serenity opposed to anger. There was nothing in this place or in her for the daemon-

engine to feed upon. She had disarmed it, and by the time it reached her it had returned to its former size, hell-blade poised above her bowed head but unable to strike. Ichor was drooling from between the daemon-engine's armour plates, its body seized as if fossilized. Impotent, dwindling rage smoked away to almost nothing in its eyes.

The blast door opened and in stepped Tsu'gan. His eyes were closed. He felt Evangeline's aura brush against him, and envelop him, like a cool breeze. Reaching out, he found the thunder hammer in his grasp and released it without effort. He could hear everything, every heart beat, every shallow breath.

A spark ignited in the daemon-engine's eyes. Hellish hope became neutered fury as it found nothing but calm in the warrior before it.

In a pure moment of awakening, Tsu'gan hurled the thunder hammer.

It spun, end over end, until his righteous blow broke open the machine chassis that bound but also girded the abomination within.

Free of its fetters, fire surged into the now unbound daemon's eyes. Hellish claws reached out from the shattered rib cage as it pulled loose.

I will feast upon this world.

Evangeline opened her eyes and uttered the first and last words she would ever speak. A true name...

Khartak-shek-hlad-bahkarn...

The daemon shrieked before a harsh corona of light engulfed it. Hot winds, the stench of ash and blood tainted the air, then was gone, the daemon with it. The banishing spilled outwards like a droplet expanding in a massive pool, beyond the chamber, beyond the convent-bastion walls, across all of Sepulchre IV.

In the chapel, only a smouldering hunk of machine metal remained. The scorched remnants of the engine were lifeless and inert.

Praetor staggered in, bloody but with storm shield in hand.

It was over.

Father Lumeon had roused too and stumbled in behind Tsu'gan. What he saw made him weep.

Evangeline's aura had almost faded.

'Her grace is spent. By speaking, she violated the most sacred credo of the Order. Her unique gift is lost.' The priest was distraught, but glad Evangeline was alive.

Tsu'gan saw it differently. 'A daemon is banished and the Red Rage has been dealt a severe blow.'

Reports were flooding in through his comm-link. He read them aloud. 'Their forces are in retreat. The skies are clearing and the blockade lifts.'

Praetor scowled. 'It will not last. We have only a short opportunity.'

Going to the comm-bead in his ear, he contacted the Implacable with extraction coordinates. Praetor turned to the priest and novitiate. 'You will ride with us.'

Father Lumeon nodded, holding Evangeline close like a child.

'Brother-sergeant.'

Praetor took his thunder hammer from Tsu'gan and nodded.

'A worthy blow.'

Tsu'gan saw the respect in his eyes and made the most of it. With Evangeline's grace gone, the old anger was returning. He'd been a fool to believe it was anything more than a temporary reprieve.

'What's wrong, brother?'

'Nothing,' he lied. By the time the sound of the Implacable's engines were overhead, his inner-pain, his rage had returned.