

The background of the cover is a dynamic, action-packed scene. A large, imposing Scythed Dreadsword is the central focus, its massive frame and scythes dominating the frame. The dreadsword is shown in a dynamic pose, as if in the middle of a charge or combat. The lighting is dramatic, with bright highlights and deep shadows, creating a sense of intensity and scale. The overall color palette is dominated by metallic greys, golds, and the fiery oranges and reds of a battlefield.

WARHAMMER
40,000

SCYTHES OF THE EMPEROR
DAEDALUS

L J GOULDING

Daedalus

The thing that swam in the void before them was an abomination, in the truest sense of the word. It hung suspended against the emptiness above the hololith projection table, surrounded by tiny, flickering motes of light that represented only the largest of its brood-swarm vessels. At such magnification, even they were rendered indistinct next to the hive ship itself.

Brother Esau felt cold revulsion in his gut at the sight of it.

‘Throne,’ he murmured, blink-clicking the subtle augmetic that replaced his right eye. ‘What a monster.’

A vicious looking brute, it had not the trailing tendrils nor spiny, armoured growths borne by so many of its kin in Hive Fleet Kraken. Rather, its fleshy bulk was blunted at the fore into a kind of snout, complete with a pair of what might have been mandibles sporting an array of ill-fitting teeth, each many dozens of metres in length. All along its belly and back were yawning birthing orifices crusted with xenos filth, while its hindmost quarters were splayed like stubby, amputated limbs that kicked languidly at the vacuum.

All eyes in the strategium were upon this half-evolved horror in the tactical display, but those eyes were noticeably few. The strike cruiser *Atreides* had been built to carry an entire company of Space Marines to war, along with their weaponry, transports and attendant serfs and bondsmen.

And yet, since the recent tragedies that had cleaved through their ranks, she was currently home to only fifteen battle-brothers of the Scythes of the Emperor.

That accounted for more than a tenth of the Chapter’s total strength.

Shipmistress Hannelore leaned wearily over the table, her hands gripping its worn and battered edge. ‘This is what we face, my lords,’ she said, nodding to the gargantuan xenos beast. ‘The hive ship and its brood-swarm entered the Brakur System approximately eight days ago, local capital standard. It’s almost as if the Kraken knew we were coming.’

Sergeant Cassander, leader of Esau's depleted Assault squad, glanced up from the hololith. 'Can we expect any further contacts? Is this merely the vanguard of a larger splinter fleet entering the sector?'

Hannelore looked at him, sagging a little more. 'No, brother-sergeant, but that is hardly the point. We can't hope to stand against even this single swarm, alone. The Atreides isn't prepared for that level of engagement. This was supposed to be a multiple-objective expedition to an uncontested system, but we've arrived to find the enemy already attacking Brakur Four, and less than a day away from reaching Brakur Dominus as well. Communications have been severely disrupted.'

'Shipmistress, I hope you are not suggesting that we abandon our mission...'

She drew herself up, her jaw squared. 'I suggest nothing of the kind, my lord. I am simply informing you that direct combat with the tyranid fleet is not an option, at this time.'

Tapping at the hololith controls, Cassander called up the tactical data screed once more. 'I still see only one hive ship, and a swarm spread thin across two simultaneous invasion efforts. What do we know about this ambitious beast, then? Give me something to work with.'

'The hive ship's designation is #37067 Daedalus,' Hannelore replied. 'Though its void-warfare capabilities are to be considered average for a tyranid vessel of its size and displacement, its true strength lies in its swarm vessels, which are numerous and heavily weaponised. Daedalus is known to favour winged bio-forms in a planetary assault, and...'

Esau noted the shipmistress' pause. So too did several of his brethren.

She steeled her nerve.

'...and we have confirmed that it was present at the fall of Sotha, my lords.'

Angry murmurs passed between the warriors gathered around the table. The home world of the Scythes of the Emperor, a shining beacon of Imperial glory on the fringes of Ultima Segmentum for countless millennia, had fallen to the implacable advance of Hive Fleet Kraken several years ago. The loss of hundreds of brother Scythes defending the fortress-monastery at Mount Pharos

had wounded the Chapter deeply, but it was the shame of their forced retreat that still rankled with so many of the survivors.

That this monster had been part of the invading xenos forces should not have made a difference and yet, of course, it did.

Cassander cast about the group, irritation twisting his features. ‘Be still, brothers! Do not let your desire for vengeance distract you from our objectives, here and now – that was the lesson we learned after the slaughter at Giant’s Coffin. We fight a different kind of war, now. A war for survival.’

He gestured to Esau.

‘This young warrior is of the last generation to ascend from the neophytes of noble Sotha, and so too is the honourable Sergeant Quintos. If any of us should feel such righteous fury then it should be them, and yet they stand with us, dedicated in body and soul to the vision of Master Thracian for the future of our Chapter.’

Esau felt the gaze of his brothers upon him, and straightened. He did not let any admission of the unreserved hatred he felt in his hearts towards the xenos burn a hole in Cassander’s fine speech. ‘For the future!’ he repeated, with every ounce of conviction he could muster. ‘For Sotha!’

The sergeant nodded. ‘Aye, for Sotha. Now – our original objectives remain. What is the optimal course of action, given these new terms of engagement and the presence of pre-deployed enemy forces in-system?’

It was the veteran Galerius who answered, almost without hesitation.

‘Twin flights, brother-sergeant. We mirror the tactics of the xenos in striking for both worlds simultaneously, but use our superior speed and tactical advantage to achieve our objectives and withdraw again before the swarm can bring its full might to bear. As it is written, we must be the reaper’s blade, as well as the hand that wields it.’

‘Division of assets required?’ Shipmistress Hannelore queried, gruffly, while rubbing at her forehead. ‘We certainly cannot shield two dropship flights, so one of the missions will be running without orbital support.’

Esau stepped forwards. ‘Respectfully, honoured servant, the mission to Brakur Dominus does not require support from the strike cruiser. The tyranids have not yet reached the planet. We send the two gunships with the largest hold capacity to assist in the civilian evacuation effort – they can easily outrun the xenos at full burn, in the void.’ He pointed to the hololith, and the flashing golden scythe icon in the shadow of the hive ship. ‘On the fourth world, we have the Apothecary’s locator signal already locked in, regardless of any communications disruption. We can mount a rapid, precise aerial insertion to retrieve him from the surface, with covering fire from your esteemed gunners on the Atreides.’

Sergeant Cassander, evidently impressed, rapped the knuckles of his gauntlet on the table’s edge. ‘Young Esau has it, brothers. Squad Quintos, you will undertake Reaper operations on Brakur Dominus. Squad Cassander, to the armourium – prepare for deep strike combat drop. We’ll be up against whatever horrors this Daedalus wants to throw our way.’

The strike cruiser’s primary hangar rang with the din of hurried assembly.

Loading servitors racked anti-air missiles into the waiting pods of the great Thunderhawks, the austere Chrepan Steed and battle-scarred Harpagus, along with weighty battlecannon shells for the main guns. The servitors’ Techmarine overseers checked and re-checked the belted ammunition feeds of the auxiliary weapons, knowing full well that they themselves would soon be piloting the gunships, and directing the efforts of the drafted human gunners if the xenos managed to catch up with them. Tech-adepts fired the engines, cycling up through the pre-combat flight routines.

Across the wide hangar apron, on launch rails intended for much larger craft, were the three elements of the Atreides’ only remaining assault wing – two ‘Talons and a single workhorse Storm Eagle gunship. As Esau and his brethren were towed up towards it on a repurposed cargo flatbed, he saw the two members of Squad Quintos take the knee before their sergeant. They hurriedly swore the oaths scribbled on parchment now being pressed onto their battleplate by liveried retainers.

As they rose, they raised their voices to join the battle hymns that echoed across the strike cruiser’s many decks. Serf and Space Marine alike, man and woman, young and old, all joined in the ancient rite, singing in glory of the Adeptus Astartes and to the destruction of their foes. These words were as old as Sotha

itself, dating back even to pre-colonial times, and every servant of the Chapter knew them as their birthright.

Simply because Sotha was no more did not mean that the old ways would change.

Sergeant Cassander stepped from the flatbed as it came to a halt beneath the Storm Eagle's open troop compartment, gathering his armour's umbilical in both hands. 'Brothers, take your marks for embarkation.'

They did as ordered, attended by mortal armourers every step of the way. A young man was directing an even younger man as he machined Esau's pauldron into place. 'No, loosen the bolts – you've caught the fibre loom behind the plate. This mighty warrior won't be able to raise his arm beyond shoulder-height, if you send him to war like that.'

Esau slowed to allow the novice to make the adjustment. He saw the youth's hands trembling.

'Take your time,' he reassured him with a smile that softened the harsh scar around his eye, and the cold blue of the augmetic lens itself. 'You'll remember this, now, and you'll never make that same mistake again.'

The novice nodded his thanks as he fixed the pad back into place, and Esau leaned towards him in mock conspiracy.

'It's the same for us all. This is my first deep strike drop, outside of simulation,' he whispered.

Keeping his trailing umbilical clear of the deck, he looked down to see where a large white circle had been painted on the scuffed metal. His name was written in chalk next to it, where the name of a previous battle-brother had been hastily scratched away.

So was each member of Squad Cassander assigned a place beneath one of the rails above their heads, with seven jump packs hanging ready in the cradles, facing each other in pairs. Esau glanced at the three empty spaces, and the disconnected fuel lines that dangled limply over them.

Their names had been obliterated, too.

Behind the Storm Eagle, klaxons signalled the readiness of the two Thunderhawks to depart, the whine of their engines growing louder as they traversed the launch rails. Cassander opened a vox-channel to Quintos and his warriors. ‘Emperor speed you, brothers. Do not look back.’

Brother Galerius narrowed his eyes. ‘Theirs is the easier task, but ours is the more noble...’

Other members of the Assault squad murmured their agreement – Tolliver and Xristos, both Sothan-born, and Kenai from distant Beremin. As ever, the dour-faced veteran Sorgn said nothing, staring absently into the empty pack cradle opposite him, lost in his own thoughts.

Status lights flashed green and the drop-rails descended, the packs guided down over the squad’s shoulders by the armoury serfs. Something was out of place, and the lights turned red as the rails withdrew again. Esau shifted from foot to foot, anxious to be underway. He could see his sword and helm ready on the arming frame before them.

Cassander called out over the roar of the Thunderhawks’ engines as they powered out through the atmospheric field. ‘Haste, honoured servants! The world below us will be long devoured by the Kraken, ere we launch!’

Two serfs scrambled up to the hanging rails, and heaved Sorgn’s pack back and forth in its cradle until some unseen connection was made true and the lights switched back to green. The warrior didn’t seem to notice, not even reacting until it was lowered onto his waiting back.

Each of them attended by two serfs in a rehearsed series of arming checks, the jump packs interfaced with Squad Cassander’s battleplate, and their umbilicals were disconnected as suit power switched to the turbofanned micro-reactors. Esau felt a tremor in his armour’s servos, and then the weight of his heavy limbs dropped away to almost nothing. He looked up to see Tolliver’s helmet being fastened into place, the mismatched eye lenses flickering to life as the inbuilt auto-senses took over.

Then he caught Galerius’ gaze, and they shared a nod of respect as their armourers stepped up. The older warrior’s helm was a Mark IV, crowned with the laurels of a Sotharan champion – far more impressive than Esau’s own reclaimed cast-off that was pulled over his brow with a snap-hiss of

pressurisation.

His chainsword was thrust into the sheath-clasp at his hip, though he could not see by whom. With his head locked forwards in the jump pack harness, he felt his greaves being mag-locked into the cradle runner as the drop safeties were engaged.

The sergeant's ident-rune flickered onto the squad display inside Esau's visor. 'Squad Cassander, all readouts confirmed for rail loading,' he announced over the vox. 'Be the blade, brothers! Pilot, we are ready.'

'Cassander, confirmed. Initiating loading sequence.'

The deck seemed to fall away from their boots as the rails were hoisted back into place, and then tilted madly as each cradle rotated ninety degrees up and around, dragging the Space Marines into a facedown dangle from their pack harnesses. It felt undignified, but it was the quickest and most efficient way to deploy a full Assault squad from the air.

Even so, Esau felt like a bolt-round about to be chambered.

The drop-rails slid inside the gunship hold with a squeal of gears. The sounds of the hangar receded as the hydraulic ramp closed behind them, the Storm Eagle's engines cycling up. A single amber beacon lamp whirled in the cramped space.

The pilot's voice came again. 'Atreides-actual, assault wing ready. Escort flights Talon One, Talon Two, trap for launch. Mark. Clear. Switching to manoeuvring thrusters.'

Esau took a steadying breath as the gunship lifted off. All he could see was the floor of the hold close beneath him, and the soles of Xristos' mag-locked boots in the next cradle along.

The engine note rose sharply, inertia tugging at their harnesses.

'Accelerating to combat speed. Escort flight inbound.'

Then they breached the atmospheric field and raced into the void beyond.

The orbital approach to Brakur IV was mired by the brood-swarm of Daedalus.

The largest vessel-organisms were bladed devourers the size of an Imperial cruiser – whether these were immature siblings of the great hive ship or lesser craft in their own right was impossible to say.

The assault wing flew in tight formation, the pilots attempting to skirt the edge of the swarm on their way in. The void was lit by strobing flashes from the mighty gun batteries of the *Atreides*, though even direct hits on the xenos were eerily quiet in the upper reaches of the planet's exosphere, lending the engagement a strange feeling of disconnection.

That changed soon enough. The bio-cruisers were far from being the only threat to the Scythes gunships.

In the spaces between them, many thousands of kilometres wide, there swooped drone ships and other sundry bio-forms too numerous to catalogue. They reacted like a swarm of angry insects, perceiving the threat to their parent vessels from these strange newcomers, with their cold metal skin and fiery trails. There was no sign of any remaining resistance from the original human defenders of Brakur; no frigates driving at the tyranids for one last, glorious attempt at martyrdom, no isolated satellite guns determined to keep firing until their magazines ran dry. The invaders had evidently rolled over them and already begun their conquest of the planet below.

The Stormtalon escorts opened up on the stalker drones. They shredded chitinous armour with their blazing assault cannons, tearing xenos craft asunder and scattering their remains to the clutches of the fourth world's gravity well. The drones were fast, and they were agile, but they could not stand long before the sheer weight of firepower levelled against them.

'Assault wing, surgical strike on grid one-one-nine,' came the pilot's voice over the comm. 'Rockets free, rockets free!'

The larger Storm Eagle joined the attack, loosing a flurry of Vengeance missiles that filled the emptiness before them with detonations and whirling shrapnel. Though such a barrage could never hope to do significant damage to anything bigger than light voidcraft, one of the tyranid cruisers at their starboard wing juddered and convulsed in response, slowly rolling its exposed flank away from the unexpected irritation.

And with that, the assault wing had a clear corridor through the periphery of the

swarm. Daedalus still loomed above them, blotting out the light of the stars beyond, but the Techmarine pilots saw their chance and lit their engines for the surface. The Atreides, having remained comfortably out of bio-weapons range, powered up and away from the orbit of Brakur IV, striking out for the cover of the system's binary suns.

In their haste, the assault wing pilots did not see the vast hive ship beginning a glacial turn after them. Its brood had been stung, when all resistance should have already been extinguished. In the void over this first delectable prey-world, they howled their petulant frustration in the silent gestalt of the hive mind's alien consciousness.

Daedalus was compelled to answer that cry.

Heaving the cavernous birthing chambers deep within its foul interior, the hive ship clenched in a manner that nothing of such immense size had any right to do – not in any universe where goodness and wholesome things still endured. Its toothy mandibles spread in a silent scream. Its great spine arched.

With a final spasm, Daedalus spawned a new horror. Then another.

The twin hulks, formless and yet vaguely ovoid, tumbled into the vacuum in clouds of icy amniotic matter and slick with unspeakable residues. They trailed long, spined tails behind them, scattering the lesser bio-ships as they went, propelled by the force of their birth down towards the prey-world below.

Streaking contrails from a dozen other bio-ship landers scored the heavens around them. They were not the only xenos objects making planetfall, but they were to be among the most disastrous for the Scythes of the Emperor and their mission to the surface. As they plunged through the atmospheric boundary, the heat of re-entry warmed their void-chilled hearts. Ablative flesh and horned shell scorched, and cracked, and finally split apart.

Hatched on the wing, the two fledgling beasts drew their first fiery breaths, and roared at the almost unbearable agony of their new existence.

Brother Esau's world was reduced to the square metre of hold decking in front of his eyes, and the vox-chatter inside his helm. Though they had broken away from contact with the strike cruiser, the Storm Eagle was beginning to pick up signals from the embattled defenders of Brakur IV, and they did not paint a

promising picture of the mission ahead. The locals were throwing everything they had against the tyrannids and, by all accounts, Squad Cassander was about to drop right into the heart of the invasion.

They streaked now across the open skies over the ocean, banking between poisoned clouds towards the continental city of Tamuero. Far from the planetary capital in the northern hemisphere, the Scythes were nonetheless headed straight for their intended target.

From somewhere up ahead in the gunship's troop compartment, Sergeant Cassander reviewed the mission parameters. 'Brother-Apothecary Aratus' locator signal is strong,' he said, 'even though we have not been able to raise him on the secure Chapter frequencies. He was in Tamuero's inner ward districts to screen potential recruits, along with a handful of medicae staff from the Heart of Cronus. In an ideal scenario, we would evacuate all of them, as well as the gene-seed stocks...'

The sergeant paused. His implication was clear, but it was as well to spell it out.

'The primary objective is the retrieval of the gene-seed. Aratus himself is secondary.'

Esau spoke up. 'And the medicae adepts? The recruits?'

'Negative. We couldn't fit them in here, anyway, even if we wanted to. I am authorising the immediate use of lethal force, if a confrontation occurs – we cannot waste time arguing with our human servants about who is supposed to be ensuring the survival of whom.'

That left a bitter taste. A moment of silence passed between them all, broken only by the rapid crack of the Storm Eagle's lascannons engaging another airborne target outside. Then Cassander went on.

'Brother Galerius, you have fought alongside Aratus before. What can we expect from him, under these circumstances? Is he the "pragmatic" sort?'

Galerius thought for a moment. 'Hmm. I'd say, under these specific circumstances, that you'll have no objections from him. He will be protecting the gene-seed first and foremost. He'll understand the need for urgency in our extraction.'

‘Excellent,’ the sergeant replied. Then he changed the subject entirely. ‘Now, I want to see a tight deployment again this time. We’ll be dropping directly into the Second Ward. Kenai, if we cannot find a clear patch then you must burn us one out with the flamer. Frag storm, anything. We must not become separated, or the xenos horde will swallow us up one at a time. Once we secure the landing site, we—’

Alarm sirens howled in the enclosed space. Esau tried to look towards the front of the hold, to gain any idea of what was happening, but once again he couldn’t see past Xristos’ suspended boots.

The pilot’s voice crackled over the vox-link. ‘We’re being shadowed – xenos contact, right on our tail, three hundred metres. Deploying countermeasure chaff. I’ll try to blind it.’

The gunship banked sharply, throwing the Assault squad from side to side in their cradle mounts along the drop-rail. Esau reflexively gripped the straps of his jump pack harness with both hands to steady himself.

‘Pilot,’ Cassander called out, ‘do you have visual on our pursuers?’

‘I can’t see, it’s too... Throne! Escort flights, break, break, break! Move to engage!’

There was a hard impact against the hull, one that sent the Storm Eagle slewing through the air, its engines shrieking in protest. One of the ‘Talons shot past them on the port side, opening fire with its assault cannons.

They started to climb hard, only for another colossal impact to shake the fuselage.

Galerius cursed with the force of it. ‘Holy Terra, that wasn’t a bio-weapon attack – something struck us!’

Esau opened his mouth to reply, but an almighty crashing blow knocked the gunship from the opposite side and stole the breath from his lungs. His legs came loose from the mag-lock runner, swinging wide and striking the wall as the Storm Eagle rolled drunkenly to starboard, and he felt something give in the cradle above him.

The left rail mechanism broke free of the ceiling in a shower of sparks, dropping Sergeant Cassander, Sorgn, Xristos and Esau to the deck. The gunship continued to roll, tangling them as the metal twisted under the combined weight of four Space Marines and their jump packs.

That was enough. Esau's cradle links snapped free, taking the safety locks with them. He sprawled across the tilted wall of the hold, the Storm Eagle struggling to right itself. Sorgn at least had the presence of mind to release his own cradle manually – he pushed himself to his feet as smoothly as he could, moving up to free Brother Xristos next.

Sergeant Cassander was still pinned under the drop-rail. 'Pilot! What in the name of—'

The gunship lurched maddeningly, the forward-starboard bulkhead caving inwards with a shriek of agonised steel. Air roared out through the rift in the fuselage even as a claw the length of a Rhino transport cleaved through and into the troop compartment.

Beyond, in the dazzlingly bright whirl of daylight and clouds, Esau saw a fanged maw that could have swallowed a man whole without even touching the sides.

They were in a flat spin now, falling from the sky in the embrace of this new terror. It bellowed, wrenching the hole wider and snapping at the front of the stricken aircraft.

There were others, too – smaller things, the diminutive winged gargoyles that Esau had seen in battle so many times before. They dived and clambered over the hull, or swooped around the unfolding struggle like carrion birds. The pilot's agonised cries over the vox were punctuated by wild bolt pistol shots from the cockpit.

Sergeant Cassander drew his own pistol and tried to fire blindly at their attackers. 'Esau! Sorgn!' he called out over the deafening rush of the wind. 'Get the others first! Get them down!'

Esau managed to stand, but the ungainly weight of his jump pack pulled him over to one side as they rolled. The gunship lurched again as the gigantic creature tried to claw its way in, tearing at the ragged hole with its teeth and nosing its armoured snout through the breach. The young Space Marine looked

up to see Galerius, Kenai and Tolliver being rocked violently from side to side in their cradles, completely unable to release or defend themselves.

But before he could even think to do anything more, the hydraulics of the main assault ramp gave out, tearing the whole assembly from the front of the craft. In a single, dizzying instant, Sorgn was gone, knocked out through the opening in the tangle of twisted metal, and into the empty sky beyond.

The Storm Eagle was trailing black smoke as it fell, its engines stalling, locked in the clawed embrace of the creature that held them. The deck tilted further and further as they plunged through the air together, the pilot now either dead or having lost control completely – Esau couldn't tell. The fallen rail began to slide, dragging Cassander and Xristos with it. They kicked and struggled, trying to gain any purchase on the metal floor, but to no avail. The sergeant managed to half-turn beneath the weight of the rail, just as he slid into the great, snapping jaws of the xenos beast.

He screamed in agony, his pistol and blade forgotten. His armour gave way beneath the titanic bite pressure. Blood scattered in the rushing air.

Then the tyranid's fangs pierced the fusion cells of his jump pack.

The blast threw the creature's head back, obliterating Sergeant Cassander's body to the roar of the wind outside. Xristos was blown clean out of his jump pack's harness, the dead weight of his armoured form skidding away across the angled deck, while Esau was hurled to the rear of the compartment. He narrowly avoided the sharp end of the broken jump rail only to slam hard into the sealed bulkhead, falling back down in a daze.

The gigantic creature, mewling and howling in pain as it spat broken teeth, released the Storm Eagle and soared away. It was evidently content to let gravity finish what it had started.

Galerius, still trapped on the second rail, called out to Esau over the vox. 'They're getting in, brother! Purge them! Purge them with fire!'

Shaking his helm to clear his senses, Esau looked ahead to the roaring breach. Even as the world outside rolled over and over in that disorienting view, he saw a handful of the most tenacious gargoyle beasts dragging themselves inside on their taloned wings.

On the deck beneath the second rail was Kenai's flamer, dropped during the blast.

Esau scrambled forwards as best he could. Xristos' limp form slid past him, bumping off the debris and out through the wide gap in the hull.

'Move quickly, brother!' Galerius urged him. 'Use your mag-locks!'

Cursing himself for a fool, Esau magnetised his boots to the deck and lunged for the flamer. The tyranids hissed and growled as they scuttled towards him with murder in their eyes.

He snatched up the weapon, thumbed the safety off and squeezed the trigger.

Fire roared in the enclosed space, fanned by the raging winds. It set the xenos ablaze, their screeching howls almost deafening against the white noise of the gunship's descent. They thrashed and flapped, their membranous wings too ruined to lift them away from the kiss of the flames. Esau swept the blazing stream back and forth until the reservoir was empty.

But the fire burned too hot, and too fast. Warning chimes sounded in his visor, the heat rising to dangerous levels. He cast about himself in desperation. Galerius was kicking in futility against the flames. Tolliver's armour was alight.

'Get out!' Galerius shouted. 'Save yourself!'

It was the only way out of this nightmare. There was nothing more that Esau could do.

'Forgive me, brothers!' he roared, hurling the spent flamer aside. He powered through the rising inferno towards the hull breach, and leapt out.

It was not a clean jump. His pack turbines struck the ragged edge of the bulkhead, jerking him into a spiralling tumble as the rushing wind snatched him away.

Then he was clear. He was in freefall.

The altitude's chill leached the heat from his scorched armour in seconds, and he struggled to orient himself towards the clouds below. The gunship's embattled

flight had brought them well into the airspace over Tamuero. He could see the city's interceptor guns stitching the skies with fire, but of the Scythes' two Stormtalon escorts, there was no sign.

He turned his head, following the Storm Eagle as it whirled ever downwards. Flames and burning bodies tumbled from the damaged hold, and he dearly wished he could convince himself that it was only tyrannids he saw amongst them...

There was a flash as the backdraught caught the fuel tanks. The resulting explosion tore the gunship to pieces, scattering fiery debris across the clouds.

A huge shadow passed overhead.

Esau quickly angled his body to face the other direction, to catch any glimpse of whatever new horror awaited him. 'Oh, holy Terra...' he murmured.

It was not the great, wounded beast that had plucked them from the air, but its twin. A harridan, like a gargoyle writ large – its immense wings broader than those of a Thunderhawk transporter, its barbed tail whipping behind it as it rode the thermal currents up there in the unclouded light of the Brakur suns, seeking to feast upon its foes.

Evidently, its hungry gaze had settled upon Esau.

It roared to the winds, before folding its pinions and sinuously diving after the lone, falling Space Marine.

This was some hellish new game of predator and prey unfolding across the heavens. Esau did not spare another backward glance, but tucked in his arms and fired the turbines of his jump pack.

He sped down towards the cloud cover, accelerating hard. The pack could not keep him aloft, but it was perfect for boosting or slowing his descent, or angling it as required. It was doubtful that he could outrun such a creature for long, one that had been bred to flight as the harridans were – but it would buy him precious seconds to think, and the obscuring banks of cloud precious seconds more.

He levelled out and then cut back his thrust to almost nothing, feeling his

stomachs yawning as gravity took hold once more. His vision was an almost complete whiteout among the clouds.

The beast's roar came only a fraction of second before it soared past. Esau could not twist aside in time, and was clipped by an armoured, bony dorsal crest, throwing him into a new spin. He spread his arms wide to arrest the uncontrolled motion, only to break out into the open sky beneath the cloud cover, right on the monster's tail. It almost seemed to be mirroring his movements in the broad sweep of its wings as it tried to circle back around to catch him.

The anti-air fire from the city below was becoming more focused and intense. They would be tracking the new target, coming in hard from high altitude, and likely prioritising it as a threat over the tens of thousands of smaller warrior-forms that darkened the skies of Brakur IV. Esau had no desire to be blasted from the heavens by friendly guns, even if the slaying of this monstrous creature would avenge the loss of his squad brethren in some way.

No – he would much rather live to witness its death. The problem was, between the heavens and the city below, he had nowhere else to hide.

‘Come for me then, beast!’ he cried, fumbling with the hilt of his chainsword.

A flak shell detonated beneath the harridan's exposed belly, eliciting a howl of pain. Another burst nearby. The gunners on the ground were finding their range, the shrapnel scoring xenos flesh and the flank of Esau's battleplate alike. Seizing upon the moment of distraction, he veered off hard to the right, but the harridan lunged for his outstretched legs and turned inside of his tightest possible trajectory, carrying it clear of the interceptor fire.

From there, it would easily snatch him up in its jaws. It roared as it made to lunge again.

The vox crackled in Esau's ear. ‘Dive, brother!’

Without looking back, he folded and dropped just as Brother Galerius opened fire from above him and in the opposite direction. A flurry of bolt pistol shots tore into the harridan's plated hide as the veteran soared over Esau's shoulders, keeping tight to its outstretched neck. Almost as an afterthought, he struck at the great beast's crested skull with his own blade as he passed, chipping the bony armour and causing the monster to recoil and howl in annoyance.

Esau raised his helm. 'Oh, you've really got its attention now!'

'Steady your descent,' Galerius called back. 'Between us, we'll lead it back into range of the guns.'

The other warrior fired his pack and rolled away to the left. Sure enough, the harridan bellowed its fury and swept down to give chase, snapping at his heels.

'By the Kraken's unholy teeth! Be quick about it, brother!'

Not daring to question his good fortune, nor how Galerius had escaped from the gunship, Esau drew his own pistol and re-angled himself to follow in the creature's wake. The veteran had given up trying to taunt it, instead using every reflex he possessed to keep just a few metres ahead of its jaws, and so Esau stung its rear quarters with a handful of well-aimed shots.

As the single-minded creature recoiled, he overshot it, trading places with Galerius once more.

'This way!' he cried. 'Make for the tall habs!'

The cityscape of Tamuero spread from horizon to horizon beneath them. Esau could see winged xenos creatures flocking between the spires, though they were outnumbered by the sheer hordes of tyranids engaged against the human defenders on the ground. Firefights raged in the streets, with every intersection becoming a contested kill-zone.

But it was the anti-air support that the two Scythes were counting on.

Goaded by their bolt pistol shots and carefully timed, criss-crossing flight paths, the harridan breached the effective ceiling of the ward district's emplaced guns for the second and final time.

Autocannon fire pierced its wings in a dozen places, and scored red blooms in the softer meat of its belly. Flak shells tore through its bony armour, shredding its muscles. The beast spasmed in the air once, twice, then folded to one side and went limp.

Its bulky carcass sailed down past Esau as he jinked away from another trail of interceptor fire. He spared it a backward glance as it crashed through the upper

levels of a municipal stack, hurling shattered masonry to the choked roadways below, before slewing through the glassaic roof of a squat Administratum building. He turned to Galerius, who was arcing around in a wide, descending circle overhead, and they exchanged a clenched salute of victory.

Esau smiled grimly behind his visor, looking back to where the harridan lay with its spine broken amidst the rubble, and opened a vox-channel.

‘This is Brother Esau of the Scythes of the Emperor, to local Brakuran forces. Good shooting. We will confirm the kill. If you could cease firing at us now, we would very much appreciate it.’

To his surprise, the channel chimed with a response almost instantly.

‘Brother Esau, this is Apothecary Aratus. Forget looking for xenos trophies. We must evacuate immediately.’

Less than half a kilometre from the ruined Administratum building was the temporary facility established by the Chapter for recruit screening. Though gunfire echoed through the streets outside and great campanile bells tolled in warning, within the armoured walls of the strongpoint could still be found a measure of safety from the tyrannid invaders. Heavy auto-turrets built into the gate approaches tracked back and forth, readily able to distinguish Esau and Galerius from potential xenos infiltrators.

Apothecary Aratus met them at the barricaded entrance, at the top of a wide set of stone steps. Empty shell casings and gritty debris crunched underfoot.

The Apothecary looked from one warrior to the other, and back again. He frowned.

‘Is this it, Galerius? Where is the rest of your squad? Where is Brother-Sergeant Cassander?’

Galerius mag-sheathed his chainsword and removed his laurelled helm, gulping at the dusty air. The entire left side of his face was swollen and blistered, the neck seal of his battleplate evidently broken by the fire on board the Storm Eagle.

‘We were intercepted before we even made our combat drop,’ he said. ‘Damned

xenos snatched the gunship right out of the air.’ He ran his tongue over his teeth and spat a goblet of red-tinged saliva onto the steps. ‘I’ve never seen anything like it. These beasts are fast, faster than usual. And agile too. Young Esau and I barely made it down here.’

Aratus sagged, casting a glance back over his shoulder into the requisitioned building’s interior. ‘It’s Daedalus,’ he muttered. ‘The hive ship – its broods are hyper-evolved for flight, and aerial engagements. Who knows what kind of prey-worlds it must have feasted on to achieve that level of genic specialisation. I’ve been here since before the invasion began, but these winged hordes seem to be without end. Honestly, there is no way that the defenders can hold out much longer. It is regrettable. We had over a hundred potential recruits, far more than the gene-seed stocks I brought with me...’

He turned to Esau.

‘And I realised I know you too, brother. Your name sounded familiar. I fitted your eye, after Miral Prime. You’ve come a fair way since then, though. How is it serving you?’

Esau did not remove his helmet. He wanted to maintain some distance from the Apothecary for the purposes of their mission, and just a little emotional detachment, even if fate seemed determined to test him in that regard.

‘It is an acceptable replacement. You have my gratitude,’ he replied. ‘The focus is sharp, the resolution of the pict-captures more than adequate. I would say, however, it feels a little small in the socket – may I ask, where did you obtain it?’

Aratus pursed his lips. ‘You don’t really want to know the answer to that, brother. Come now. We are wasting time.’

He led them into the strongpoint, through a grand reception hall now fallen to ruin, then past rooms filled with empty archive shelves and uneven rows of scribe stations. Galerius twitched at the sight of civilians cowering in the unlit recesses.

‘What was this place?’ he asked. ‘Before you arrived, what was its purpose? It seems too well defended to be a library, too scholarly for a medicae centre.’

Aratus did not turn. ‘A local precinct house for the Adeptus Arbitres. The sector marshal turned it over to us without question when we arrived.’

Slowing at one of the many side alcoves to examine the defaced statue of an Imperial saint bearing a symbolic set of scales, Esau noted the scraps of parchment trodden into the tiled floor by innumerable feet. ‘But there haven’t been any Arbitrators stationed here for some time, by the look of things.’

‘No. There was some sort of uprising on Brakur Dominus a few years ago, and the enforcers from this precinct house were reposted to the system’s cardinal world instead. Although I don’t know as that will help, now, once the Kraken reaches them.’

The bells still pealed out their alarum from the towers far above. The Apothecary halted at a secure door, and punched a code into the lock.

‘Look, I didn’t know if the Chapter would get here in time, so I worked out the best exit strategy I could. As it happens, it seems that’s all we have left. There’s an Onager lighter craft on standby on the pad above us – it’s been out of action since the Arbitrators left. I got a couple of local techs to get it running again, in exchange for passage off-world with us. I hope they don’t think it too raw a deal, when they find out Chapter Master Thracian’s policy on refugees.’

The door clanked open, to reveal a step down into a cellblock annex. Four anxious looking human serfs in a mixture of medicae garb and surplus security gear jumped to their feet, clearly charged with protecting the two sealed cryo-caskets in the centre of the low chamber.

Galerius shot Esau a cautious look. The gene-seed. This was their primary objective.

Aratus continued, gesturing to one of his attendants. ‘Nalyatov here has flight training, says he can get us to a rendezvous with the Atreides. Recall your Stormtalon escorts, and we’ll make a run for it right now.’

‘I doubt that’s possible,’ Galerius sighed, replacing his helmet. ‘We lost track of them on the way down. If they survived the attack, they will likely have returned to the Atreides, beyond comms range.’

The Apothecary rounded on them. ‘You “lost track” of your escort gunships?’

‘We had other things on our mind, brother!’ Esau growled. ‘Like the xenos brood-mothers trying to rip us to pieces!’

Aratus glared at him, then became aware that Galerius had stepped quietly to inspect the gene-seed containers. The Apothecary edged between them, also shielding the closest of his trembling human aides.

‘I know what this is, brothers. I know you’re only here for the cryo-caskets, and if there’s room for Brother Aratus then so much the better, yes? I’ve been in your position before, tasked by Thracian to ensure the future of the Scythes of the Emperor above all else. But you tell me your gunship is gone, and your squad too. The only orbital craft we still have can carry the gene-seed, all of us, and the two techs as well. Why do you need to leave these honoured servants to die, their years of expertise lost, just because your mission parameters did not include their survival?’

He drew up straighter, placing a proprietorial hand upon one of the caskets. Through the frosted glass, the dark shadows of its contents could almost be seen.

‘Just because we are ordered to do something does not make it right,’ he added.

Esau glanced around the annex.

His conscience prickled. The Apothecary’s words made sense. Esau could feel the eyes of these helpless mortals upon him, and upon the chainsword at his hip.

He looked to Galerius. The veteran shrugged. ‘We would still be completing our mission as stated...’ he murmured, evidently of the same mind.

Aratus nodded, but let out a long sigh as he took up his own chain-blade and helm. ‘Well, brothers, we’re all goodly souls after all. The problem is, the Onager is an unarmed cargo lighter, and the second of Daedalus’ harridan-spawn you brought with you is still circling the city, like it has your scent. The defence force gunners report it as too high for them to engage – without an escort, we’ll be easy prey once we get anywhere near it.’

Esau eyed their precious cargo. Not only the cryo-caskets, but the human serfs too.

‘We could leave Tamuero airspace, and find a clearer path to orbit,’ he

suggested. ‘That’s how we came in.’

Galerius shook his head. ‘The smaller tyrannid swarms would be all over us in minutes. We need cover from the ground to get us anywhere near the stratosphere. That’s assuming the repaired lighter holds out, and our man Nalyatov doesn’t steer us into a hab-spire on the way up.’ He nodded towards to the serf. ‘No offence, Nalyatov.’

Esau took a deep breath. He thought of Cassander, Sorgn and the others, and he knew what had to be done.

‘Well we aren’t escaping anything, stood down here,’ he said grimly. ‘Let’s break for orbit under cover of the interceptor guns, and we’ll deal with the xenos as and when.’

The three Space Marines threw out their fists in the old Sothan reaper’s salute, and Galerius drew his pistol. ‘Aye. We will be the blade, brother.’

The Onager was a variant of the workhorse Arvus-class shuttle, found in Naval service across the length and breadth of the Imperium, though it was unclear how this battered old specimen had ended up on the landing pad of a Brakuran precinct house. The cargo hold was far smaller than that of a Chapter Storm Eagle, and built for mortal dimensions. Even so, the serfs had managed to cram the two bulky cryo-caskets in behind the pilot’s compartment, while they themselves filled the bench seats down either side. They fastened stale rebreather masks over their mouths and noses, against the risk of decompression at altitude or in the near void.

The engines guttered and strained as the craft lifted off. From where he stood astride one of the secured containers, with his bare head and armoured shoulders filling the tight observation dome in the ceiling, Aratus’ attention was stolen away. A huge, flaring blast of green bio-plasma lit up the sky some three kilometres to the west.

‘Throne...’ he gasped, ‘The perimeter of the Third Ward has fallen...’

Galerius and Esau were crouched one behind the other towards the back of the shuttle, right up against the sealed drop-ramp. Their bulky jump packs prevented them from standing at all, or indeed turning around in the narrow confines of the hold, and so they had edged in backwards to face out with Esau in the rearmost

position.

Just in case.

Unable to see what the Apothecary was seeing, he called back into the hold behind him. ‘What’s going on out there? Do we still have our route?’

The city was being overrun, in scenes that were doubtlessly being played out all over the besieged continent. This was the beginning of the end for Brakur IV. Soon the defenders’ guns would fall silent beneath the weight of the Kraken’s assault, both on the ground and in the air.

But not yet. Nalyatov struggled to haul the Onager around, the force of their rumbling ascent dragging on their bodies as the shuttle slowly began to climb and gather speed.

A huge explosion at street level a few blocks away tore through the foundations of one of the immense, tottering spires. The structure sagged as it fell, streaming rubble and what might have been tiny, flailing bodies from the uppermost levels. Vast clouds of masonry dust billowed out over the city beneath them, forcing the serf pilot to bank hard away.

The ever-present rolling thunder of the guns grew as the shuttle climbed further still. Shrieking flocks of winged creatures filled the air, yet the Onager used the covering fire to find a path through them.

The hold was soon lit by the bright Brakur suns through the crystallex dome over Aratus’ head. They had broken the cloud cover into the skies beyond, only now there were scores of fiery contrails streaking towards the surface, if not hundreds – the next, overwhelming stage of Daedalus’ assimilation of this doomed world.

The Apothecary darted his gaze left and right, scanning the horizon. ‘Nalyatov, head south-south-west, engines to maximum. Keep trying to raise the Atreides. I don’t see our—’

He froze. His eyes widened.

‘By the reaper’s grin, that beast is huge! Harridan brood-mother, coming right at us out of the sun! Take evasive action!’

Over the howl of the engines as the Onager veered unevenly from side to side, the approaching creature's roar could be heard even within the sealed hold. Galerius thumped the metal-grilled floor in frustration.

'Damn it, you can't outrun it in this old wreck! We need to strike now if we're going to have any sort of chance.'

Esau gritted his teeth and reached for the ramp controls.

'This is it, brothers,' he said, releasing the locks. 'Honoured servants, strap in tight. And close your eyes. That's an order.'

As soon as the ramp lowered even just a few centimetres, the roar of depressurisation became one with the roar of the wind. Up here, the air was thin.

Galerius rapped Esau on the back of his leg. 'Are you sure about this? We could take it together, just like the first one.'

Esau kept his eyes on the steadily falling lip of the ramp, revealing the riven sky beyond.

'No, brother – your pack's reserves won't last long enough to bring you back, even if we did. And if all else fails, I'll lead it away from the shuttle. They will need you here in case anything worse comes along afterwards.'

The veteran let out an exasperated cry, then rapped on his leg again. 'Fine, but you are a terrible liar, Esau. Now get ready.'

The harridan swept into view. The old, familiar hatred began to growl in Esau's gullet at the sight of it – gaining rapidly, beating its wings hard to match the Onager's slewing flight. He could even make out the gaps in its fanged maw where Sergeant Cassander's pack had mauled it.

With a hydraulic clank, the ramp locked open. The beast roared.

Esau kicked off hard with both legs, launching himself straight towards it.

He flew through the air like an armoured missile, not even needing to fire his jump pack to carry him from the shuttle's open bay. The harridan actually flinched as he hurtled past its head and over the left wing, faltering for just a

moment before diving on after the Onager.

And then Esau was past it, tumbling down in the wake.

‘No...!’ he cried, struggling to turn himself against the weakly rising thermals. He realised that had misjudged the leap, and now faced another plunge to the surface of Brakur IV.

He had failed. The harridan was only seconds away from the fleeing shuttle, slowed by the drag of its open ramp.

Then, in a moment of apparent insanity, Esau saw his chance.

He fired his turbines, shooting forwards and ramming himself bodily into the harridan’s serpentine back, right behind the hunch of its broad, pinioned shoulders. He barely managed to grab hold of the horned chitin plates protecting its spine.

The creature thrashed from side to side, howling and bellowing, bucking its body like an unbroken, monstrous steed as it tried to dislodge him. Esau held on as tightly as he could, only then realising that he had not planned anything beyond this last, desperate act.

‘I’m going nowhere!’ he bellowed through his vox-grille, mostly at his reluctant mount. ‘You’ll not shake me! I’ll steer you into the ground if I have to!’

He caught movement at the corner of his vision. From between the segmented plates on the beast’s back, smaller creatures were spawning into the battle. These grotesque, newborn gargoyles hooted and hissed as they pulled themselves free with withered claw-limbs, regarding Esau as a threat to their brood-mother and nesting place if nothing else, and swarming over its undulating hide towards him.

‘Get back, you filth!’ Esau cursed, keeping his grip with his left hand and drawing his chainsword from its sheath-clasp. He swiped at the closest gargoyle, cleaving the head from its scrawny neck and letting the limp body tumble away. More of them came, firing their weapon analogues and spitting angry, yellow globs of bio-acidic drool that flew wide in the rushing wind. He slashed at them again and again.

Even so, there were too many of them. They could rush him in numbers, dragging his grip away and casting him to the air once more.

From the shuttle, Galerius called out over the vox. 'Esau! You magnificent madman! Let us take some of these horrors off your platter!'

The open cargo hold lit up with the muzzle flare of bolt pistol shots, joined a moment later by someone's plundered las-carbine. Accuracy was virtually impossible, and such small arms could never hope to harm a beast like the harridan – but they kept it agitated and off-balance.

And they could harm the gargoyles. A bolt shell blasted one creature apart at Esau's shoulder, spattering his visor with xenos blood, and another was winged as it tried to scramble out of harm's way.

Aratus was speaking to the pilot. 'Brothers, we are running out of time. Nalyatov reports more winged tyranid warrior-forms converging from the north. We must flee, for the gene-seed's sake.'

Resigned to his fate, Esau gestured to the heavens. 'I have this, Apothecary. I will distract the beast and lure it away myself. Close the ramp and head for the rendezvous.'

'Go well, brother. You will not be forgotten.'

Esau braced his feet and hauled himself up with one hand. He kept his profile as low as he could to lessen the immense buffeting of the wind, holding his chainsword tightly and eyeing the flexing, alien musculature of the harridan's back. He was trying to picture the sinuous movements of the creature's flight as it dived after the Onager, waiting for the optimum moment to make his escape.

He paused. With each downward beat of its wings, he saw the harridan's exoskeletal plates separate by just a few fingers' breadth to reveal the taut cartilage beneath.

It was a narrow gap. Would it be enough?

'Wait, Aratus,' he voxed, 'I'm going to try something.'

'Make it fast! Sixty seconds to enemy intercept!'

‘Confirmed. Have Nalyatov ready for full thrust on my mark.’

Esau pulled the strap of frag grenades from his belt. They were intended to maim and disperse lightly armoured infantry, or clear a dropsite, but he fancied that all three stuffed into an enclosed space could hurt even a tyranid of this great size. He added his only krak charge for good measure.

But he would need to time it perfectly. He counted down under his breath.

‘Five. Four. Three. Arm... and drop! Go, go, go!’

He thrust the grenades in, dropped his chainsword, crossed his arms in front of his visor and pushed as hard as he could off the harridan’s back. The wind jerked him away in an instant.

All four charges detonated at once. Shards of bloody chitin flew through the air, the great beast howling as the blast sheared through the joint of its fore-shoulder. The right wing buckled and folded, and the harridan contorted around the wound, enraged and agonised in equal measure. Its writhing convulsions dislodged many of its gargoyle brood, scattering more of them to the wind, bleating in fear. Esau ignited his jump pack in a short burst to carry him clear above the disoriented flock, then levelled out.

The harridan tried to right itself, sweeping both wings down hard.

The strain was too much. With a sickening, meaty snap, its damaged pinion broke clean off at the shoulder in a welter of vital fluids.

Esau and his brethren spat curses after the crippled brood-mother as it went whirling to destruction, the cheers of the human passengers clearly audible over the open vox-channel. The lone warrior hung in the rarefied air, on the border between the sky and the low void beyond it, and watched the Onager shuttle powering away from him on its path to orbit. Fuel warnings were chiming across his visor display from the faltering jump pack turbines.

He saw the armoured form of Galerius desperately beckoning to him from the open ramp. ‘Brother! Give it everything you have! We can allow you a few seconds more!’

The shuttle’s engines darkened, the craft’s escape velocity dipping marginally.

Esau didn't hesitate. He opened the pack thrusters to full, aiming his trajectory up and over the soaring shuttle.

Then his reserves were spent. For the space of a few heartbeats, he felt almost weightless against the infinite horizon before his powered leap guttered into one final, sprawling tumble into gravity's deadly clutches.

He had judged the angle almost perfectly, instinctively accounting for the arc of his path and the movement of the Onager relative to it.

Almost perfectly.

Almost.

Within ten metres of the open hold, he realised that he wasn't going to make it. He was going to fall short of the ramp's edge by what could have been only a few centimetres, but might as well have been an entire world away.

His open gauntlets clawed at the empty air. He felt the wash of the shuttle engines, so tantalisingly close. He saw the faces of the human passengers strapped down to the bench seats, their expressions of vertiginous terror frozen in that moment.

Galerius' powerful gauntlet closed around his wrist.

With an almighty roar of exertion, his boots mag-locked to the interior hull, the veteran heaved Esau another arms-length up, allowing him to scramble over the lip and into the hold.

The two of them lay panting on the deck as the ramp ratcheted closed behind them. Esau's twin hearts thundered in his ears, and he realised that he could not have stood even if he had wanted to. The older warrior pulled off his laurelled helm and let it clatter to one side.

'That was...' he gasped, manage a wide smile. 'That was an untidy landing... brother... You should... work on that...'

Esau released his jump pack harness and rolled onto his hands and knees. Out beyond Nalyatov's cramped cockpit space, he could see the flame-streaked blue sky darkening into the void ahead of them – and the first bio-ships of the tyrannid

swarm that hung against it. The shuttle bumped and struggled with the ascent, but Aratus, holding a communicator to his lips, was scanning the wide curve of Brakur IV's planetary thermopause.

'Calling strike cruiser Atreides, strike cruiser Atreides, please respond. This is Brother-Apothecary Aratus, for outbound Onager shuttle. We request immediate assistance. We have the gene-seed. Repeat, we have the gene-seed.'

The vox crackled. The tyranid assault was still interfering with their transmissions.

'Repeat, strike cruiser Atreides, this is--'

A reply came through, strong and clear. 'Onager shuttle, this is Atreides-actual. We have your signal, dispatching a 'Talon escort to bring you in.'

Esau and Galerius both recognised the voice of Shipmistress Hannelore. Curiously, she sounded distracted. Fraught, even.

'Be advised – we are engaging xenos vessels, to buy Sergeant Quintos more time. Keep back. Maintain safe distance.'

Galerius rose to his feet. 'Look,' he murmured. 'It's Daedalus.'

The monstrous hive ship had clawed its way closer to Brakur Dominus, taking the majority of its void-swarm with it. The Atreides grazed the upper edge, its guns forcing the more wary xenos back but having little effect on the larger and more determined bio-ships.

Esau gritted his teeth. He knew that the war against Hive Fleet Kraken was far from over.