



LAST BLOOD

JAMES MORTIMORE

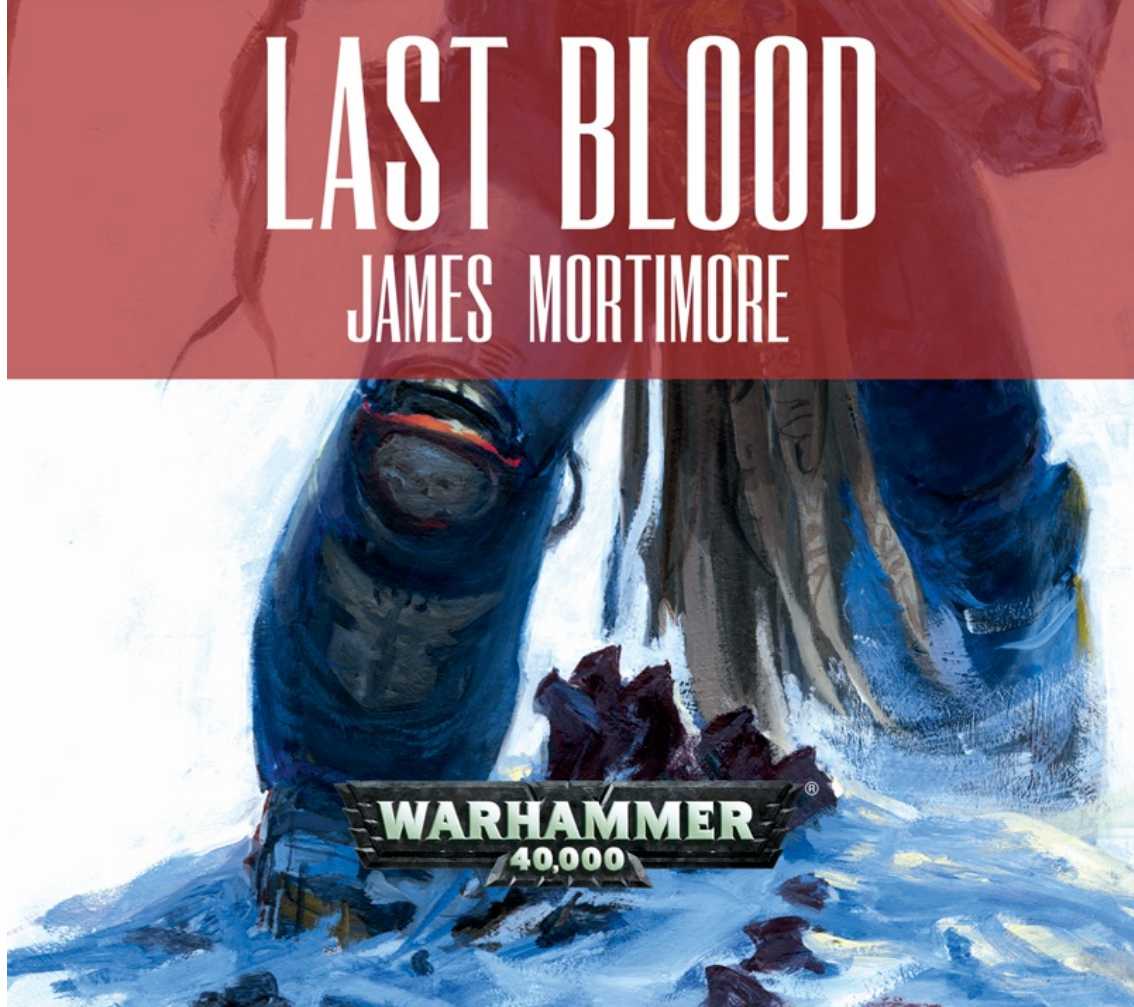


WARHAMMER
40,000



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When they fell upon Arboria the planet was a rural paradise. When they left it was a volcanic wasteland. In between lay one of the most violent battles beheld by living eyes. A conflict so fierce it flattened mountains, rendered oceans into vapour dense enough to extend the atmosphere tens of kilometres into space and gouged mortal fissures in continental bedrock through which the molten heart of the planet bled in boiling geysers bright as any sun.

In the time taken to sire a child, war made a scorched mosaic of a world. But the conflict did not end there. When a planet is deliberately transformed into a star there are no winners, no losers; no good or evil.

Just a minor rest in the endless song of war.

*– from The Menologium of the Ordo Malleus
(attr. Inculpatus Prolix Veridicus, Magister
Bibliophagus Athenaeum Delectus)*

Secundus Silvanus stared in disbelief at the transhuman wreckage before him.

The Ultramarines skull and wings insignia adorning the chest-plate of Sergeant Cerrano's armour was lathered in blood, a match for the grizzled warrior within. Like its wearer the skull insignia was missing an eye, the death's-head features viciously scarred by enemy attack. The armour was broken in many places, and with it the man who had been a mentor to Silvanus since his acceptance into the Tenth Company.

‘Leave me, Silvanus.’ There was blood in Cerrano’s voice. ‘While I yet draw breath these vermin and I have a reckoning.’

Silvanus Secundus supported the dying warrior, half dragging him towards the dubious shelter of a nearby ruin.

‘Silvanus, are you listening to me?’

‘Yes, sergeant, I am listening.’

Cerrano tried to laugh. He coughed blood instead.

‘If you were listening we would not be retreating.’

‘We are not retreating. We are employing a specific tactical strategy.’

‘Silvanus, since you are still a novice and I am nominally your instructor as well as your immediate superior, I’m going to allow you a small amount of leeway in interpreting the—’

Another spasm of coughing overtook the sergeant.

‘Sergeant, you will heal, given time. When you heal the enemy will suffer anew.’

‘The enemy will suffer now, Silvanus, if you would only—’

Cerrano was interrupted again, this time by the resounding thud as Silvanus dumped him into the shadow of a pile of rubble which had once been a public bibliotheca.

‘Scout Silvanus, I must order—’

‘Sir, despite every effort to the contrary, your insistence will not summon enemies from the ether!’ Silvanus controlled his frustration with some effort. ‘You have left nothing here to kill.’

Cerrano cursed. ‘My apologies, Silvanus. It was selfish of me to keep the enemy to myself.’

Silvanus met the ironic comment with a quote from the Codex Astartes. ‘*Only the eager martyr hoards a battle.*’ He eased himself upright, bolt pistol at the ready, searching the ruins for signs of a hidden enemy. For now the battle seemed to have moved on. ‘As a Scout my place is to gather intelligence.’

‘Because intelligence wins wars, and, yes, I know the scripture.’

‘*Walls, trenches and towers are no obstacle,*’ The words of the Codex Astartes comforted Silvanus even as he spoke them. ‘*Lack of imagination and lack of will are obstacles.*’ Silvanus stared out across the battlefield, the clinkered ruin of a once-verdant agri world. ‘*Without the dark there can be no light.*’

Understanding bloomed suddenly in Cerrano’s one good eye. He struggled to rise. His broken body and armour would not support him. He sank back onto his bower of rubble with a frustrated sigh. ‘Quoting the Codex is no measure of

understanding it, Silvanus!’ he hissed. ‘How many times must you be told?’

Despite the quiet of the surrounding battlefield, Silvanus did not risk even a brief glance at his superior.

‘Blessed is the mind too small for doubt, Silvanus.’

At this final barb Silvanus did turn – but his reply went unspoken.

Sergeant Cerrano was dead.

Silvanus took in a breath. The air stank. Blood and iron and smashed stone and scorched flesh. The battle had been hard but he’d expected that. The cry for help from Arboria’s astropaths had been short, chilling, quickly silenced. A daemon incursion was something to be faced quickly, terminated with extreme prejudice. But the galaxy was a large place and war was everywhere. Three squads of Space Marines had been deployed on Arboria, a mix of seasoned warriors to conduct the battle and Scouts – such as Silvanus – to provide intelligence as to the disposition of the enemy. To their cost the Space Marines had quickly learned that the incursion had been much more widespread than at first believed. They had already been stretched thin across the entire planet. Now many of them were dead.

Silvanus’s own squad was wiped out to a man, with him the only survivor. His chain of command was broken, his comms damaged beyond repair. His injured arm would heal given time, but time was a luxury Silvanus could not afford. His mission was clearly defined: to provide intelligence, and to fight as necessary to accomplish that end. Right now there were no living enemies within the immediate battle zone. Silvanus therefore had only one goal. To acquire as much intelligence as possible as to the enemy’s disposition and bring it by any means necessary to whichever of his battle-brothers remained active on Arboria.

There was nothing to anchor Silvanus to the sergeant’s final resting place. The body could be collected later. Assuming victory. Silvanus identified a new vantage position on slightly higher ground and moved warily towards it, continuing to study the battlefield. A once proud city, now reduced to rubble. The bodies of enemies and civilians lay in haphazard piles, human wreckage from the aerial bombardment. Apart from the crackle of fires and the occasional thud of collapsing masonry the city was utterly silent. Or was it? Every living thing had a voice, but broken walls and lifeless halls could also speak if you knew how to listen, and what to listen for.

To a Space Marine, even the dead can speak.

Without the dark there can be no light.

Silvanus knew what he had to do.

Arboria had been a world of hydroponic stations and agri-domes. Animals and adversity were all she'd ever known. Then the Space Marines came, with flesh hard as metal. Armoured giants falling like steel seraphim from the sky, their wrath incalculable, barely comprehensible. They'd razed Arboria, sky to ocean bed, and now they moved purposefully among the tide of human wreckage, seeking out any last spark of life and precisely, inevitably, extinguishing it.

The Space Marines had come because they had been alerted to a threat. They'd come with starships, the hammer of god, to break this world, to smash all life, to sterilise the crushed remains. If Arboria was a field, they had come to burn it, to drive out an infection. In their armoured eyes and minds, there was nothing left to save. All must die.

So she ran, as others ran, and the Space Marines followed, bellowing and burning, hacking and sawing and stamping and crushing. She saw them kill farmers, their wives and children, even their animals. Why not, when any livestock could be host to corruption? She watched them rain armoured bolts on fleeing crowds, saw them melt farmhouses in which terrified families were huddled to molten slag. She saw one armoured giant, ammunition exhausted, snatch up a double fistful of screaming farm hands fleeing a burning church and squeeze them to pulp. The giant strode on, smashing aside buildings and trees and freight-haulers and exo-loaders with equal disdain, its armour stained red and dripping with human slurry.

The mission of the Space Marines was very clear. Corruption was assumed, extermination mandatory.

They were here to kill, nothing else.

Only she knew why.

The flesh of the farmer tasted only of death.

The memories that came with it were slightly fresher but no less horrific, a chaotic montage of pain, anger and bitter despair. Silvanus struggled with them, trying to impose order, to make sense of the disparate and diffuse threads which, fading fast, were all that remained of a once-living mind. The process would take time. More time that he didn't have. More time that Arboria did not have. If the daemonic incursion was not halted other eyes would look to Arboria. Eyes which had seen planets become suns. There would be no mercy then, and all his brothers who died would have done so in vain.

Silvanus knew he could not stand still. He had to be ready with working comms when his Omophagea finally rendered all the farmer's available memory

to its clearest form. Fortunately that did not entail consuming more civilian flesh. Though he knew it was necessary, the thought repulsed Silvanus. These people were not his enemies, but victims of a greater evil. An evil he had dedicated his life to destroy, and which defined his very existence as a Space Marine.

To fight. To die for the Emperor. That was all he knew.

Sergeant Cerrano once told him there was always more than one way to fight a battle. Silvanus did not understand that, though he tried because part of his elevation from neophyte to battle-brother depended on that understanding. Cerrano was talking about tactics. Silvanus had studied the Codex Astartes for many months but had found only related entries. If the Sergeant had been quoting from the Codex, Silvanus could not find the passage. Maybe he was quoting from something else. A text Silvanus had not yet been granted access to. Maybe Cerrano was simply passing on his own experience, or trying to.

Memories slithered through his mind. A hated father. A test of courage. A child born during a long winter. The memories weren't his. They belonged to the farmer, the woman whose flesh he'd consumed. Silvanus shuddered. Suddenly there wasn't enough room in his head. The world was crushing him into too small a space. Memory Acquisition Syndrome. He'd been warned of it, trained to deal with it. But in the field... the reality... it was... it

burned it

burned the farm, a

new sun, funeral pyre for a dead world a

test of courage, of determination, it was

his first day as a soldier and

her last day as a mother and

Past and present fused in his mind, a slow detonation, unstoppable.

The blight came in the ninth year after her daughter was born. At first it appeared only sporadically across Arboria, but it spread quickly. All attempts to treat it were unsuccessful. Crops began to die, and with them the livestock Arboria would normally have used to feed itself and a significant portion of the Imperium. In just three seasons farms across the planet failed, and the smoke from the pyres of crops and the corpses of entire herds shifted restlessly far into the sky.

When her daughter brought up the Old Religion, her mother indulged her. She knew it was just superstition but she needed some comfort. It wasn't until much later that she realised her mistake. By granting a small hope for her daughter

and her friends, she had opened the door to a much darker infection.

The blight died during the long cold. But a new one rose to replace it. A human blight, all but invisible, carefully concealed from the population of Arboria, whose attention was fixed only on survival and rebuilding.

The Old Religion.

It lived and grew in the heat of fire-lit meetings held in secret places under cold stone or distant stars, in the deeper heat of living hosts, in the children whose belief both summoned it and gave it power.

The Old Religion. Renewed by the innocents it then corrupted.

Understanding came too late.

For her daughter or her world.

The taste of death was like bile in his throat.

Silvanus pushed the sensation aside, used the acrid stink of the battlefield to anchor himself to the moment.

He looked around. The daylight was harsh, grainy. His armour was streaked with the blood of his enemies, attackers who seemed to be growing stronger with every hour that passed on this world. Silvanus bent down and cleaned his chainsword by scrubbing it back and forth in the dirt. His good arm moved with pendulum regularity. Familiarity brought focus. The farmer's memories flooded into his mind. *Night. A cold sky. Blood. A ravaged child. Running. Shrieking. A trap! Something inside me—*

With the blood only partially cleaned from his weapon, Silvanus stopped.

Something moved nearby.

Silvanus sheathed his chainsword, snagged his bolt pistol and sprang upright.

The sounds were closer. Much closer. Enemies or civilians? Silvanus had already assessed the ground for vantage points and now moved quickly in the direction of a tower of rubble which had once been a hab-complex. From the elevated position he waited, and watched. The sounds approached, became clearer.

People. Survivors.

Ragged clothes, scorched flesh.

Somewhere in the group, the sound of someone crying.

Without warning something leapt on them from the cavernous interior of the smashed building. Something which had once been human. Something that slithered and juddered into the harsh daylight with horrific velocity, its voice a razor-thin squeal of triumph, its revolting form the physical embodiment of its

churning desire. *Here were more victims to sate its lust. It would have them, oh yess-ss-s. Take them and–*

Silvanus moved with a speed possible only for a Space Marine, leaping from the high ground in a long, shallow arc to meet the thing in midair, grasp it and smash it to the ground by sheer brute force, just metres away from the terrified civilians.

The thing shifted its attention to Silvanus.

– its eyes – Harvest Lord, her eyes–

Dismissing the vagrant memory, Silvanus engaged the enemy. Fighting it was like fighting a tornado made flesh. Here was one of those that had taken the sergeant and so many of his battle-brothers. The thing might have taken Silvanus too but for the lesson learned in hard combat, the knowledge of where to strike and how. Silvanus emptied an entire magazine into the ravening thing, opening its human body in a dozen ragged wounds. He was ready when daemonflesh, not blood, erupted from those gaping, black-tongued mouths. The thing moved, flesh churning as it turned itself inside out through its own wounds – daemonhuman, humandaemon, indivisible duality – slashing and biting, claws and fangs and clutching spines, bitter hatred in frantic strobing motion. The civilians ran screaming. One fell to lie still, face gone, blood gushing from a crushed chest. Another froze then toppled slowly, riddled with puncture wounds from a living maze of slashing spines. Collateral damage. The thing poured itself at Silvanus. It took his armour in three places. It nearly took his injured arm at the elbow. There was a lightning bolt of pain as the thing drove him into the razor sharp jaws of broken masonry and his shoulder dislocated.

Silvanus had no time to think. He was an automaton. A living machine. He was death dressed in blood and steel. Exhausting a bolt pistol magazine to force the thing back, Silvanus unsheathed his chainsword and swung it in a single-handed but nonetheless unstoppable stroke.

Shrieking metal met shrieking daemonflesh.

In a heartbeat the battle was over.

Victorious, lathered in the blood and gore of his enemy, Silvanus sheathed his chainsword, scooped up his bolt pistol and jammed in a new magazine. He looked around, first for other enemies, then for the civilians. He saw neither.

Wait. His assessment was inaccurate. Not all had fled.

One remained. A child of no more than nine years. A girl with short, filthy hair. She was staring at him with eyes that seemed to take up half her face. Adoration, terror, he could not read her expression. But there were no tears. And

she did not look at the fallen bodies.

For a moment Silvanus witnessed the scene from a different perspective. An armoured, gore-stained giant and a ragged, blood-soaked child, regarding each other across a wide clearing made treacherous by shattered masonry and human remains.

A long moment passed in silence.

Silvanus stared at the girl, 'I need a comm tower.'

The child stared. Shock. Incomprehension, he could not tell.

'A tall mast, very high. Topped with the Imperial aquila. The sigil of the Empire.'

The child stared.

Silvanus sheathed his weapons, linked his thumbs and flapped his armoured fingers in front of his face. 'A bird. With *big* wings and two heads.'

The girl held his gaze for a moment, then solemnly linked her own fingers in front of her face and copied Silvanus's gesture. She beckoned, moving away through the rubble.

Silvanus followed the girl for three hours through the smashed city. There were no more attacks, though many times they heard furtive movement in the rubble. He wondered how the girl had survived before she met the group she'd been travelling with. He tried unsuccessfully to engage her in conversation. She made no reply. Was it any wonder? Silvanus knew she would talk when she was ready. If she ever was ready.

By the time they reached the local Administratum, once spread across half an acre of what had been verdant parkland, the sun was low in the sky. Silvanus studied the area carefully before moving forward. There were a number of buildings, once tall, elegantly sculpted, now more than half demolished. The largest building was almost completely gone, having collapsed into an ornamental lake, crushing a series of fountains depicting the local harvest deities and flooding the area with thousands of litres of water. Scouting the full complex took more than an hour. Evening had fallen by the time Silvanus – his armour now lathered with mud – brought power to the single functioning uplink antenna. But when he accessed the comms network, he heard nothing but static. Dead air on every channel.

Silvanus slumped against the rubble propping up the antenna. The girl hunkered down beside him. Her finger traced idle graffiti in the mud on his armour. Silvano barely noticed. His worse fear had become reality. The daemon attack had completely destroyed the Ultramarines force on Arboria. Silvanus

himself was the last on the planet still able to fight.

No. Again his assessment was inaccurate. He was not the last.

Above the ruined, flame-lit city, the stars rippled gently. Landing jets. A small ship, moving across the sky with supreme confidence. Only one ship would move like that, with a confidence – an arrogance – to match that of its pilot, the huge ‘I’ emblazoned across its hull. It was a ship Silvanus knew he must reach if he were to deliver his intelligence, the memories he had gathered.

The Inquisition had arrived on Arboria.

It had been another cold spring day, and she had driven the exo-loader to the lake in the hills to harvest ice, returning after sunset to find the farm cold and dark. She parked the exo and set the alarm, then entered the farmhouse. There was no light or movement anywhere. The house was cold and dark – and empty.

But it didn't feel empty.

A cold terror crept into her heart. As if the black sky itself had come down and filled her. She shivered, called her daughter's name, and was answered only by silence.

She came back to the still-open front door. Night. Cold stars pressing hard through shreds of cloud. She walked to the barn. Her daughter was inside. She stood, arms raised, bare feet planted in a lake of blood. More than blood. The charnel-house remains of more than a dozen of her friends. The bodies were torn apart, the pieces flung asunder, toys discarded by a spoilt child. Some of the pieces were still moving. One whined softly, thankfully, as it finally died.

Her daughter was smiling. A dreamy look.

Something about her face was wrong.

'...mummy...'

The voice was a whisper, cold and hard as the distant stars. She realised what was wrong with the child's face when the dark thing inside pushed outwards against its new container, stretching and distorting it, seemingly for fun, then letting it bounce back into her shape as if made of elastic.

The thing moaned then, as if in pain. Or pleasure.

Its voice was her daughter's voice.

'...you've come to play...'

It moved. It moved wrong.

It cracked and huffed and creaked like old timbers.

It coiled and juddered and undulated towards her.

'...play mummy play...'

She reached for the wood axe. It was exactly where she knew it would be, hanging by its leather strap from a wooden peg beside the door, the same place it had been every day her father had been alive, placed too high from the ground for a child's hand but just right for a mother's. She snatched up the axe and swung, driving it with every ounce of her strength through the thing that had once been her daughter's face.

It laughed, and its laughter was the death of worlds.

The shock of impact tore the weapon from her hands. For a moment the axe just hung there, blade and shaft wedged tightly into the cloven skull. But then it seemed to move, to shudder, to become one with the thing. She watched with absolute horror as her daughter's eyes slid around the axe blade, marbles rolling around a child's toy, to fix on her again. And then the axe was no longer a weapon or even a tool but part of the thing itself, and then it was gone, absorbed, integrated. Used.

'...bad mummy...'

It reached for her. Fingers. Talons. Living axe edges, skittering like spiders through childflesh.

She burst out of the barn and ran.

Silvanus staggered at the intensity of the civilian memories overwhelming him. They should not be this powerful. He should be able to control them, integrate them, use them. He shook his head to clear it, sucked in deep breaths of cold, smoke-laced air. His vision cleared. His arm was raised. His

axe buried in the

chainsword buried in a nearby wall.

The girl was standing, frozen, beside the chainsword. As if he'd tried to – no! He would not think it. Her eyes moved from the blade to his face, her gaze level, showing no fear. Shock. She must be in shock. And why not? – she was just a child after all. The horror unleashed upon her world, on everything she held dear, would surely have affected her mind. His mission included protecting her. Not killing her – even by accident – even when suffering the throes of another's horrific memories.

Silvanus reached out for the chainsword, wrenched it from the wall, sheathed it.

He stared at the child, wondering if he should attempt an apology.

The girl slid down the wall, knees to her chest, arms wrapped around them for warmth or comfort, a figure of abject exhaustion.

Silvanus shook his head.

‘If we sleep, we die.’

Her face crumpled.

‘We cannot stay here. I will carry you.’

The city was large, the ruin extensive. The Inquisition ship had touched down on the far side. Silvanus moved quickly but carefully from shadow to broken shadow. He could have made better time without the girl – but somehow he could not abandon her. Not if he wanted to retain his honour. The inquisitor was her only hope for life. His was the only ship on Arboria. As slim a chance as it was, only now could he grant her safe passage from this doomed world.

Silvanus stopped. Doomed? How did he–

fled. She

fled from her own child as

laughing it destroyed a world. As she herself destroyed

by fire, by the uncontrollable outpouring of Chaos into a new

home, her home was gone, her world, subsumed

in a churning horror of interdimensional corruption that Silvanus recognised – even though the farmer could never have done so. He saw, through her eyes, the ultimate corruption of a world. Memory wound together in his mind, a barbed maze from which there was no escape.

Revenge.

Sacrifice.

Chaos triumphant–

With a mighty effort, Silvanus refocused on the here and now. He was making an error. Holding the child instead of a weapon – even in his injured arm – was tactically unwise and Silvanus felt sure that although he could not quite remember the exact passage, it ran counter to Codex scripture. He lifted the girl and put her on his shoulders, setting his mind against the gnawing pain of his injury, and considered his choice of weapons. The bolt pistol was down to its last magazine – and that was half empty. That and the chainsword were far from silent weapons. Which left only one choice. Silvanus drew his gladius, a short blade, double edged with a spiked hand grip for close combat. The blade was balanced for throwing yet heavy enough to cut through any non-tempered material. Its name was chased into the blade. *Comedentis Carnem*. A name inherited from its previous owner, long fallen, and the weapon chosen for him by Sergeant Cerrano when he joined the Tenth Company.

‘The name of this blade is Flesh Eater and it has saved many lives. Wield it

with skill and honour, and feed it well, for it is always hungry.'

Silvanus watched cold starlight and the hot glow of burning buildings run, liquid silver and fierce bronze, along the edges of the blade. Then he lifted his eyes to the jagged shadows of the broken city. He knew from orbital observations taken prior to deployment the space port was located on the far side of the city, perhaps as little as two kilometres from his current position. The Inquisition ship would have landed there. Hefting the child to get a better balance, Silvanus moved quietly forward.

He had taken but twenty steps when a host of attackers fell upon them with savage ferocity.

Silvanus weathered the first blows, gladius flashing silver and bronze, stars and fire. On his back the girl was moving, catching her balance, clutching his dislocated shoulder as tight as any vise. An attacker leapt towards them. Silvanus raised his gladius and the thing impaled itself through the throat on the blade. Face to shrieking, abhorrent face, Silvanus raised his bolt pistol and pulled the trigger.

The thing's head blew apart in a fountain of gore.

The thing in the barn came after her. It moved fast but not urgently. She changed direction, sprinting to the exo and leaping into the saddle in a way she hadn't managed for decades. The shock of impact slammed up her spine, an old familiar thrill, long unfelt, subsumed now in horror. She palmed the lock and the exo powered up. Even now she knew there was no escape from the thing which had once been her daughter. But escape was not her intention. She needed elevation. Line of sight to the uplink towers at the local Administratum. If the exo could access the network there she could call for help, or at the very least, broadcast a warning to anyone who was listening.

She swung the exo around and ran for the hills above the farm.

The thing was already in front of her. It moved without moving, slithering and jerking in frozen echoes of motion, passing through farm machinery as if it were fog, absorbing them into itself. She tried to ignore the effect it was having on her. Terror and guilt merged with horror, became a numb sickness churning in her gut. She could mourn her loss later. If she lived.

She avoided the thing by jumping over it, a tactic she knew would work only once. Without looking back she started to run. At the same time she warmed up the long unused comm system and gasped a message into the recorder.

She plunged into the darkness of the farm. There were people in the fields. Not

people. Hosts. They came in waves, a storm upon the shore, throwing themselves on the exo, dragging it down in fits and spurts. The machine multiplied a rider's strength by a considerable amount but not infinitely. For every host smashed aside, two took its place. For every two crushed underfoot, many rose anew. The exo was old, half a century or more. It was a farm tool not a war machine. It wasn't built for combat. The battery charge dropped towards the red line with terrifying speed.

She forged a course upwards, fighting the ever-increasing slope of the foothills now as well as the attacking hosts.

The comm locked on, began to transmit. She hit repeat.

The exo tipped, swayed, fell.

She gasped. The exo hit the ground and tumbled, crushing flesh and bones, bursting bodies to reveal the corruption within, mutant flesh which swelled and rolled and slithered, becoming new and ever more violent forms.

She swung both hands, the exo shovel and claw cutting a bloody swathe through the attackers. There were too many. She scrambled to her feet and tried to jump clear. The weight of those clinging to the exo was too great. She fell again.

And now she could see the thing approach. It looked like a girl again, like her daughter. It walked slowly, naked, across the darkened fields. Where it encountered the injured or dead it fed without hesitation upon the vapours rising from their bodies, their last breaths misting the chill air. It shrieked exultantly as it moved. It grew and shrank. It stretched and contorted. The stench of it, now that it was out of hiding, was the stench of an abattoir. It was corruption incarnate. An abomination made flesh. And yet it had hidden inside her daughter for months and she had never known.

She dragged herself upright to meet it.

It smiled.

'...I have lived many lives, mummy...' It told her in a fowl whisper. **'...this is far from my first flesh...'**

'Help will come.'

'...because of your warning... ye-e-ssss...'

The thing's bloated razorskull tipped minutely to one side, a gesture her daughter had made when considering farm chores or homework. Three of its eyes closed in thought. Or memory.

'...I was once imprisoned in flesh such as yours...' Her – its – mouth seemed to slither around its face as it spoke. **'...forced to the bidding of my Inquisition'**

master... tortured for his pleasure... his knowledge...'

The thing shrank, slithered and coiled, was suddenly human again. Her child, gazing at her with a face she'd brought into the world, and loved.

Its eyes, she thought. Harvest Lord, its eyes.

'...I waited... oh ye-e-s-ss... and learned the ways of my enemy... he was arrogant and I was patient... even the Inquisition are not infallible... now... I am free... and I am glad your warning was sent... now he will come... Malec Ric of the Ordo Malleus... the one who imprisoned me... tortured me... and I will have my revenge. I will sacrifice him... I will use his blood to call forth my reality into this abhorrent plane... and every living thing will know... such exquisite... pain... oh mummy... mummy... I want to play...'

She barely had a moment to absorb this new horror, the way she'd been tricked – used – before the thing that had once been her daughter pushed its smiling child's face through the exo and her ribs, deep into her chest, and vomited its foul corrupting essence into the beating heart of a new host.

The flesh.

The flesh he'd consumed was–

Silvanus cursed. The flesh of the civilian farmer had been tainted. He had consumed it unknowingly but the corruption now lived and grew within him. Silvanus did not know what might happen to him now. Perhaps he would fall to Chaos. Perhaps he would die from infection. If that was his fate then so be it. He would take these vermin with him and deliver his warning before he died. He could only hope the Inquisition would honour his wish to save the child.

Silvanus swung his chainsword viciously. The attackers were falling back, shrieking furiously even as they were hacked apart. Why were there so few? Surely they could not all have been killed? The girl clung to his injured shoulder, her shifting weight bringing a pain which clarified his thoughts.

Sensing victory was close, Silvanus drove the hosts back towards the Inquisition ship, where they were finally caught in a crossfire and annihilated.

At last Silvanus staggered into the staging area before the ship, finally able to loose his burden. The child fell lightly to the ground and stood beside him. There was a long scratch on her face, souvenir of a clawed limb which had nearly taken Silvanus's head. Other than that she seemed unhurt. Silvanus was glad. He fell to his knees in the dirt and rubble, his gore-drenched chainsword falling to lie beside him. The inquisitor descended from the ship's ramp towards him.

Silvanus tried to rise. His injuries were too great, his corruption a growing

malaise. Silvanus was under attack from without and within, even as he lay motionless on the sterile ground. He did not care. His life did not matter. Only the warning he must deliver. The innocent he must save.

‘My lord, I am... Secundus Silvanus. I... bring a... warning...’ Silvanus fought for breath. The inquisitor waited. ‘There is one on this... world who plots your... capture and sacrifice... a powerful... daemon...’

‘How do you come by this information?’ The inquisitor’s eyes narrowed. ‘You have eaten corrupted flesh?’

Silvanus barely had the strength to agree.

‘I understand.’ The inquisitor nodded gravely. ‘And the child?’

‘Only you... can save... her life.’

Silvanus felt the inquisitor’s bleak gaze rake his body, studying him from every angle. Studying, assessing, judging. ‘You beg for life, Silvanus, even as you lay dying before me. Your actions are to be commended, even if they are driven by memories and desires not your own.’

‘You will save her then? My lord, I thank—’

‘You are young, Silvanus.’ The inquisitor’s gaze remained cool, expressionless. ‘Had you survived this encounter you would yet have had much to learn. Here, then, is what would have been your first lesson: I would not save this child even if she *were* human.’

‘I... but... sire, I do not...’

The inquisitor leaned forward, tracing the graffiti the child had drawn in the mud and gore coating his armour.

Not graffiti. Controlling sigils. Dark sorcery.

And then Silvanus *did* understand.

He turned to the girl and saw her through other eyes. Her mother’s eyes. No child this, but a daemonhost – the dead farmer’s corrupted daughter – the very daemon who sought revenge upon the Inquisition and would cause a warp breach to accomplish its end.

Silvanus uttered a cry of rage. *Used!* He drew his bolt pistol. Before he could fire, the girl reached out towards him. A casual motion, a fluttering of fingers like a bird’s wings, and Silvanus was smashed aside as if by an invisible hammer. Losing his grip on the bolt pistol, Silvanus fell, blasted backwards with pulverising force through the ruin of the space port, finally fetching up against a huge block of masonry hard enough to split it in two. Rubble trickled onto his face. Darkness edged his vision. Pain drove, lightning hot, through his body.

The girl – the daemon – dismissed him instantly, already looking away. In a

moment her child's eyes were gone, her expression now one of hatred and loathing. A name touched her lips, even as her gaze sought a new target.

'Malec Ric... at last you are... *mine...*'

Her voice was winter, the death of worlds. The last word became a smile, a loathsome grin, which wrapped itself around the girl's head. Her skull peeled away to reveal the spiked and pustulent horror within. An entity which absorbed the fallen bolt pistol as easily as breathing, which corrupted and infused the weapon with dark sorcery, even as it sought its most desired target.

Five shots, a pentagram in the air. Five ear-splitting explosions as the bolts impacted around the inquisitor, vaporising rubble and scarring the lower hull of his ship where the great 'I' of the Inquisition was emblazoned.

The inquisitor merely swayed, as if in a gentle breeze, allowing first the bolts and then the shrapnel from the explosions to pass harmlessly to either side. His lips were already moving, shaping dark sorcery to match that ranged against him.

The daemon smiled, teeth like axe-edges skittering through childflesh. The inquisitor did not.

Dark sorcery blazed in torrents between them.

Now weapons fire bloomed from the ship's upper hull. Silvanus blinked as a dazzling glow engulfed the child. The abhorrence – protected by its own sorcery – uttered a series of incomprehensible incantations and the guns *moved*, searching out a new target: the inquisitor.

The daemon shrieked. Exhultation. Joy. *Here* was the death it had sought for so long. *Here and now. Oh ye-e-ss-ss-s.*

The vicious gloating came too early.

Lurching upright, every muscle in his body cracking with strain, Silvanus drove forward, gladius in hand, his last blood expended with a single objective.

This blade is called Flesh Eater.

Feed it well, for it is always hungry.

Silvanus swung, his last energy, a mighty blow.

Shining blade met foul daemonflesh – and fed deeply.

Then Silvanus was falling again, and from this fall there would be no rising. Lost somewhere in the dim fog that was his receding awareness, Silvanus saw the inquisitor was moving, taking advantage of the distraction Silvanus had caused, uttering binding rituals, dark sorcery to hold the thing in the girl's body. Already the daemon was shrieking in rage, finally understanding how it had been trapped. That the inquisitor had known of its plan from the very beginning.

Good. It would die then, with the girl, when her flesh expired.

Silvanus must have uttered his thought aloud. From a long way away, the inquisitor's voice brought new horror. 'No, Silvanus. Not the girl. The daemon will be bound in a new host. A stronger host. There is much yet to learn from it.'

To Silvanus the inquisitor's words were so much dead air. His mind was lost in a memory, not his own, of a mother and daughter working and laughing together in a field of summer corn.

Play mummy. Come and play!

'You should understand this is not a punishment for failure. The Inquisition is employing a specific tactical strategy. Without the dark, there can be no light. Your sacrifice will be honoured.'

With the expiration of his last breath, Silvanus's corruption was complete.

With the daemon bound, the inquisitor issued his final instructions.

When the once verdant agri world of Arboria was replaced in the heavens by a short-lived minor star, inquisitor and daemonhost alike witnessed the event with eyes that were very far from human.

When Inquisitor Malec Ric chose to cast his captured daemon loose, the cost was great. Three squads of Ultramarines. Five billion innocent lives. An agri world become a star. Whatever the cost, the tactical intelligence gained was worth the loss. Considerable knowledge and understanding of our enemy has been added to the Magna Bibliotheca and will be used against the forces of Chaos in future battles. The original test subject has been retained in a new host. The experiment was a complete success.

– from The Menologium of the Ordo Malleus
(attr. *Inculpatus Prolix Veridicus, Magister
Bibliophagus Athenaeum Delectus*)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

James Mortimore is the author of the Warhammer 40,000 short story 'Last Blood', featuring the Ultramarines. He is renowned as a science fiction author who has worked in many well known fictional universes, and is currently working on more tales set in the grim darkness of the far future. He lives and works in Bristol, UK.

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