

WARHAMMER
40,000

SPACE MARINE BATTLES™

PLAGUE HARVEST

CAVAN SCOTT





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A WARHAMMER 40,000 NOVELLA

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ONE

Surely it couldn't be morning already?

Roj Ithell groaned, rubbing his eyes roughly with the palm of his hand.

'What time is it?' he slurred, rolling over, noticing the shallow imprint in the mattress where Katrina should have been. He ran a hand over the sheet. Cold. She must have been up for a while.

Roj pulled himself up, wincing as his feet made contact with the cold floorboards. He yawned, trying to focus on the aquila mounted on the wall beside the bed, running through his morning devotions with little enthusiasm. The farmhouse seemed so quiet.

He trudged out of the bedroom, stopping at the doorway to Anya's room. Kat was sleeping in the girl's cot, holding their daughter close. What a night. The Physician had warned them that Anya's fever might get worse before she got better. Surely it shouldn't take this long?

At least Kat was getting some sleep at last. She had borne the brunt of it in the night, sending him back to bed. He protested, but she wouldn't hear of it.

'You've got to be up with the dawn,' she'd insisted. 'You need to sleep.'

He couldn't ask for a better wife.

Which was more than could be said about his brother-in-law.

'You want to meet me *when*?' he'd spluttered when Mattias had dropped the bombshell the night before.

'You need to see it for yourself, Roj,' came the reply. 'If we're going to meet the quotas...'

'Fine, fine.' Roj had thrown his hands into the air, surrendering. Even when

they were at school, Roj knew better than to argue with Mattias once he had an idea lodged in that stubborn head of his. 'I'll be there.'

'First light?'

'First light, by the central water tower,' Roj had agreed, a smile breaking out across his bearded face. 'Sometimes I wonder who's in charge of this plantation. You or me.'

'Definitely me,' Mattias joked, satisfied with the outcome. 'Now go and look after my niece. Kat will be dead on her feet.'

'Your sister is as strong as a grox,' Roj insisted, waving his overseer away. 'She'll outlive us all.'

It certainly felt that way this morning. Roj was struggling to identify a part of his body that wasn't aching.

Roj pulled on a shirt, swearing as the material snagged on his artificial arm. The pistons squealed as he struggled to pull it free, ripping a hole in the fabric. Roj threw it to the side, reaching for another. Six years after the threshing accident and his mechanical limb still infuriated him.

'*Looks ugly as hell,*' Mattias had said when he had first set eyes on the metal pincers that bore little resemblance to the fingers they were replacing, '*but guess it will do the job. Just like the rest of you.*'

Funny, Matt. Real funny.

Managing to struggle into the rest of his clothes without further damage, Roj crept down the stairs, wincing as they creaked beneath his feet.

A door opened in the hallway below, light streaming across the tiled floor. A head poked out, lined face creasing as it spotted him making his way down.

'Mr Ithell,' the old woman said, pulling her robe tighter around her neck, 'you're up early.'

'Things to do, Ezmey, don't you worry.'

'I thought it might be...'

Roj raised his hand, cutting off the housekeeper's concern.

'Anya is sleeping. Mrs Ithell is with her.'

The old woman nodded.

'You'll need some breakfast before heading out. Did you hear the storm last night?'

She headed towards the stairs that led down into the kitchen, no doubt already concocting the perfect breakfast menu in her head. Roj glanced at the antique grandfather-chrono that stood in the hallway.

'No time, I'm afraid, Ezmey.' The housekeeper looked as if she was about to

argue. ‘Need to get going. I’ll eat when I get back.’

Ezmey tutted. ‘Very well. I’ll make up some oats. You’ve liked those since you were a boy.’ Roj smiled at the memory, but the expression soon faded when the woman started coughing.

‘That’s a nasty hack, Ezmey. You need to take it easy. We can’t have you getting sick too.’

Ezmey dismissed the thought with a snort. ‘It’ll take more than a cough to lay me out, don’t you worry.’

Outside, the air was fresher than he’d expected. Roj shivered as he closed the farmhouse door softly, his stump throbbing steadily against his implants. More rain today then. His missing limb was more reliable than any weather station – and had throbbed more often than not in recent days.

Roj trudged over to the shed, his booted feet splashing through puddles. He’d never known a season like it. The wettest in living history, Pa Serlon had said, staring up at the grey sky. He could believe it. Throne knew what the crops would look like. Mattias was right to make an inspection. They had to be ready for the worst.

The door to the shed squealed as he yanked it open, the sudden noise startling the akanu in its stall.

‘Yes, yes. I know,’ he snapped at the large, flightless bird that squawked harshly in the enclosed space of the shed. ‘No one likes being up this early, but keep it quiet. You’ll wake the entire farm.’

The akanu continued to complain, kicking at its hay with large four-toed feet, but settled as Roj attached the harness and led the bird to the cart on the other side of the courtyard. Anya was wary of the akanu they used on the plantation, even though she had been around them all her life. It wasn’t hard to see why. The blue-feathered bird towered over Roj, let alone a child. Kat had suggested he use a transporter to get around the estate, but Roj had stuck with the akanu-drawn cart. If they had been good enough for dad, they were good enough for him. Besides, grain was much cheaper than fuel – and they didn’t break down half as much, either.

‘That’s it, girl,’ he soothed, connecting the bird to the sturdy four-wheeled vehicle. ‘Nice and easy now.’

The creature pecked at the ground as he clambered on board the cart, but soon looked up when Roj pulled on the reins.

Roj stretched in his seat as the cart rattled between the gigantic fields, the akanu's feet slapping down on the slick pathway. A drop of ice-cold rain stung his forehead. Great. That was all he needed. Perhaps he should have brought the covered transporter, after all. He'd just wanted to feel the wind in his air, no matter how brisk it was.

He glanced around at the sorghum growing in the fields; a sea of deep green leaves. Maybe Mattias was being overcautious. The crop looked strong enough from up here, surprisingly so. Those new gen-engineered seeds had been worth the investment. His dad wouldn't have approved. He was old school, believing that all you needed was strong soil and good husbandry. A little helping hand didn't hurt though. Orath supplied grain for most of the subsector. Why not make the most of the planet's natural resources? An akanu or two were one thing, but when it came to production, Roj was determined to drag the plantation into the here and now. Sorghum 184 was the future.

The water tower came into view as Roj steered the cart around the chemical store. Not far now, then back home for Ezmey's breakfast. Roj was finally feeling hungry – although his stomach churned at the sight of the fortress on the horizon. Even though it was thirty or so kilometres away, the damned place dominated the skyline and still made him feel uneasy, even after all this time.

Why wouldn't it? Space Marines on their doorstep, their ominous presence felt, even though the Angels of Death themselves were hardly ever seen.

Before she had fallen ill, Anya had quizzed him about their presence.

'*Why* are they on Orath, Daddy? Is there a war coming?'

Roj had shushed his daughter, stroking her long blonde hair. 'Don't be silly, love. This is a peaceful planet.'

'Mr Bridgeman said that there's no such thing.'

'Dain Bridgeman says a lot of things – which is why most of us ignore him.'

But Roj wished he could explain why the Space Marines were here, if only to put Anya's mind at rest. The truth was that he'd asked his own father the same question, and had received much the same answer. No one knew why the Space Marines had chosen to build their bases on Orath all those years ago. They'd been here for generations. That was just the way of things.

'Better to accept they're here and move on,' his dad had said. 'Let them live their lives and get on with your own.'

It made sense. What was the worst they did, after all? Occasionally shatter the peace of the fields, flying overhead in their gunships. Dad always used to say

that garrisons were reminders of how lucky they were to live on a world free from war. Perhaps he'd been right.

'Whoa there.'

Roj pulled on the rein, slowing the akanu as they approached the water tower. The bird hissed, as bad-tempered as ever, but obediently came to a halt beside Mattias's own transport. No akanu for his brother-in-law. Matt hated the birds, preferring to thunder around the plantation in a six-wheeler. Said he liked being high up, so he could see the top of the sorghum. Roj suspected he found the akanu a little on the slow side. He was always on the go.

Roj jumped down, tying the akanu to one of the legs of the water tower, his brow creased into a frown as he took in the crop. 'Maybe you were right Matt. That corn doesn't look right at all.'

He made his way over to the edge of the field, his feet squelching through the mud. The stalks were thinner than they should be, off-colour too. Perhaps the rain had taken its toll after all. Roj shivered, but not because of the chill in the air. A thought nagged at the back of his mind. Something was missing; he just couldn't tell what. He turned 360 degrees, taking in the boundary. Everything looked present and correct, the akanu gently squawking to itself behind him.

What *was* it?

'Matt?' Roj called out, crouching down to examine an ear that had snapped from its stem.

Holding the oversized cob between his legs, he shucked the leaves, expecting to be rewarded with a flash of brilliant yellow kernels. That was another of Sorghum 184's selling points. Larger cobs than any other strain, able to feed twice as many folk than usual. But these seeds weren't bursting with goodness. They were shrivelled and black. He stood, reaching up to snag another ear. This one looked more promising. The kernels were the right size at least, but when he pressed against them with his finger, they burst like sacks of pus, putrid-smelling gunk oozing out. It was almost as if the corn was rotting where it stood. Any hope of saving the harvest dissipated. If this continued, it could be the worst year in the plantation's history. First there had been the earthquake a month or so ago. Three of the outbuildings were damaged, the roof of the eastern barn completely caving in. If that wasn't enough, sweating fever had broken out among the workers, leaving them short-handed just about everywhere. And now this. What were the odds?

'Mattias, it's me,' he called, assuming his brother-in-law had ventured deeper into the cereal to see the extent of the damage. 'I can see why you wanted me out

here. What are we looking at? Fifty per cent loss? Sixty?’

Throne help them if it was more than that.

No answer came.

A sudden roar made Roj spin on his heel, almost losing his balance. Two Space Marine aircraft thundered overhead – a heavily-armoured Imperial equivalent of a skimmer and some kind of fighter just below the clouds.

That’s when it hit him. There were no birds. Usually a flock of ground-nesting birds would have erupted from the sorghum, disturbed by the noise. Today, as the sound of the thrusters faded into the distance, there was nothing. No whirl of startled wings. No cries of alarm. No birdsong at all.

What had happened to all the birds?

Unnerved, Roj pushed himself into the tall cereal, the cloying stink of wet vegetation filling his nostrils. ‘Mattias, where are you? What are you playing at?’

If this was some kind of joke, it wasn’t a very funny one.

Someone coughed ahead of him. A weak, grating hack.

‘Matt?’

Roj crashed forward and bamboo-like stems snapped as he followed the sound. The crop was full of whining midges, nipping at his skin. He slapped the back of his neck in irritation. Why hadn’t the pesticides dealt with the bloody things?

‘Matt, are you all right?’

His brother-in-law was far from all right. He was lying face down on the floor, his body heaving.

‘Emperor, what’s happened?’ Roj gasped, dropping to the ground, his knees sinking into soft mud. He leant forward, reaching across with his robotic arm to roll Matt over. ‘Are you...’

The words died in his throat. Mattias had looked drained the night before, heavy circles beneath his eyes, but Roj had put it down to fatigue, to the stresses of the last few months, concerns about the crops.

But his brother-in-law’s face was now a mass of weeping sores, livid against deathly pale skin. His swollen eyelids were jammed with a thick yellow crust and white froth speckled trembling purple lips. His breath, when it came, was nothing more than a hollow rattle.

And the smell...

‘Throne,’ Roj gagged, fighting the urge to be sick. ‘What’s happened to you?’

He leant back on his knees, hand over his mouth, momentarily unsure what to do next. Should he call for help? No, by the look of Mattias there wasn’t time.

He needed to get Matt back to the village, to Ligart. The Physician would know what to do.

‘Come on then,’ Roj said, slipping his good arm under his brother-in-law’s back. ‘Can’t have you lying about. Not while there’s work to do.’

He slipped once, twice, trying to haul the overseer to his feet, cursing his mechanical arm that whirred and clicked with the effort. Matt had been there for him after the accident, telling him that everything would be fine.

‘You can rely on me, Roj, you know that. I won’t let you down.’

He owed Matt. Owed him so much.

‘That’s it,’ Roj said, finally managing to get them both up. Mattias was hanging like a dead weight, head lolling forward. ‘What’s that sister-in-law of mine been feeding you, eh?’ Emperor, Lilia would fall apart when she saw Matt like this. ‘That’s it. On your feet. Need to get you to the skimmer.’

They hadn’t walked three steps before Roj slipped, landing awkwardly on top of Mattias. The overseer cried out; a frightened little whimper. This was all wrong. Roj couldn’t remember Matt even catching a cold.

After a while, Roj gave up trying to carry his brother-in-law. He grabbed the back of Mattias’s shirt and dragged him out of the sorghum like a sack of grain, talking to him all the time, knowing full well that he couldn’t hear. It was for his own benefit, not Matt’s.

The rain was coming in by the time Roj manhandled Mattias into the back of the truck. For once, Matt’s need for speed was welcome. The akanu could stay sheltered beneath the water tower until later. Roj wasn’t even sure if Matt was still breathing, but wasn’t going to wait around to search for a pulse. Let a professional check him over. It might not be as bad as it looked.

‘Yeah, not kidding yourself there, at all,’ Roj taunted himself as he fired up the engine, twisting in his seat to throw an old blanket over his friend’s worryingly still body. ‘A little rain never hurt anyone, eh Matt?’

Matt looked like nothing could ever hurt him again.

What am I going to tell Kat? Roj thought as the skimmer rushed over the sorghum. This would hit her hard, especially with Anya so ill.

Behind him, Mattias groaned, turning over beneath the blanket. Roj almost shouted with relief. He was still alive and, as the old saying went, where there’s life, there’s...

A hand closed around Roj’s mouth, pulling him back into the headrest. His eyes widened as he saw Matt’s face reflected in the screen, cracked lips twisted

back into a snarl.

He tried to call out, but his brother-in-law's foul-tasting fingers were crammed into his mouth, his arm around Roj's throat. In desperation, he let go of the controls, clawing at Mattias's arm.

All he could hear was Matt's ragged breath and the ghost of a tuneless dirge in his ear. What in the nine hells? His fevered brother-in-law was singing when trying to kill him? When trying to kill them both?

Roj made a grab for the controls, metal pincers closing around the wheel, but it was too late. The truck skidded across the wet pathway, straight towards the chemical store. Roj squeezed his eyes shut as they ploughed through the corrugated doors, smashing through the barrels of pesticides and fertiliser before crunching into a row of racks.

Roj was thrown out of his seat and through the front screen. He didn't feel the glass give way, didn't even really feel the impact of his body against the shelves. His shoulder was on fire, even as he came crashing down onto the front of the truck. There on the steering wheel, just in front of him, was his artificial arm, the pincers still locked around the padded metal. His hand went to his shoulder, only to jerk away as it met torn metal and live wires. His robotic limb had been yanked clean away.

A moan came from inside the truck. Matt was still alive. Roj called his name, peering into the cab, smoke stinging his eyes. There was a sudden burst of heat as something at the back of the truck ignited, the glow showing Matt clawing at the seat that pinned him down, trying to pull himself out. No, that wasn't it. He was trying to get to Roj.

The two men stared into each other's eyes; friends since childhood. Family.

The flames blossomed, snapping Roj out of his reverie. The chemicals. If the truck was on fire, the whole place could go up. His mind raced, trying to work out how he could get Matt out. *If* he could. It would have been difficult enough with two arms, but one?

'I'm sorry,' Roj shouted into the cab and slid down to the ground, crying out as his ankle gave way beneath him. He hit the ground, sending new waves of pain shooting through his body.

But that didn't matter. He needed to get to safety.

He had no idea how he did it, limping through the flames. Instinct took over. One minute he was trapped in a world of black smoke and confusion and the next he was outside, the rain cooling his skin. He hobbled away from the shed, just as the first barrel went up, igniting the rest. The shed disintegrated into

razor-sharp shards, a massive fireball rising majestically into the sky. The shockwave plucked Roj from his feet, throwing him clear of the blast. He rolled, broken stalks scratching his arm, his face, before finally coming to a halt, gasping for breath. When he looked up, the fire had already spread to the crop.

He needed to get out of here, to get help. They could lose everything. In a daze, Roj scrambled to his feet and stumbled away from the blaze. As he fled, he was sure he could still hear Mattias singing in the heart of the fire.



TWO

Librarian Vabion of the Ultramarines soared above the fields of Orath, the wind rushing through his tightly cropped grey hair. Throwing his arms out wide, he allowed himself to be lost in the moment, raising his head against the warmth of the sun. He was happy, truly happy, the sweet smell of the countryside filling his lungs.

A shadow crossed in front of the sun.

Vabion opened his eyes, glancing down at the crops. As he watched, the stalks withered, seeds flying from rotten pods. A song wafted over the breeze, discordant, incongruous – and Vabion was falling, the sorghum rushing up to greet him, the stink of death choking him as he fell. Crying out, he threw up his arms to break his fall, preparing for the inevitable crack of bones as he smacked into the ground...

Vabion jolted in his seat, his eyes snapping open behind his helm. He was back above the fields of Orath, not flying through the sky as in his vision, but safe in the confines of a Land Speeder.

‘Sir, are you well?’

The Librarian turned to face the owner of the voice. The Space Marine’s power armour was polished silver, a skull-headed raptor emblazoned across an oversized pauldron – the livery of the Doom Eagles, his current companions here on Orath.

‘Quite well, thank you Brother Ritan,’ Vabion replied, keeping his voice steady.

‘You cried out,’ Ritan informed him, obviously unwilling to let the matter

drop. Who did the steersman think he was talking to? Vabion was an Ultramarine with 600 years of experience. The Doom Eagle had yet to reach his second century. He needed to show some respect.

‘I suggest you concentrate on piloting this Speeder, brother.’

The Doom Eagle fell into a brooding silence. He had some sense at least. Besides, Vabion had more to worry about than an impertinent pup. The veracity of his vision had unsettled him. Where had it come from? One minute he had been meditating, using the journey from Fort Garm to commune with the Emperor, and the next...

In all his years, Vabion had never experienced something so vivid.

‘Coming up on the listening post, Ritan.’

A voice crackled over the vox, broadcast automatically through Vabion’s helm. The Librarian looked up, watching the towers of Fort Kerberos, his home for more than two centuries, loom into view.

‘Yes, I see it Kerna,’ Ritan snapped back, gunning the engine just a fraction more. ‘You are cleared to proceed.’

‘Good of you to say so.’

The vox cut off.

‘One day, Kerna...’ Ritan muttered beneath his breath. The Space Marine’s meaning was obvious.

‘You do not like Brother Kerna, do you, Ritan?’ Vabion observed, enjoying the way the Doom Eagle shifted uncomfortably in his seat.

‘He is a good warrior,’ Ritan replied, gunning the engine slightly.

‘Which doesn’t answer my question.’

Ritan just glowered ahead.

‘I’ve seen many Space Marines pass through these garrisons, Ritan. A new squadron every six months, different Chapters every time.’

‘It must be fascinating,’ Ritan rumbled, his sarcasm obvious.

‘It is,’ Vabion insisted, a smile playing across his lips. ‘The chance to work alongside so many Chapters is rare. You see the differences as well as the similarities. The tenacity of the Aurora, the piety of the White Consuls. All born of Ultramar, all following their own path. And then there’s your own Chapter, The Doom Eagles of Gathis II.’

‘What of us?’ Ritan bristled.

‘So pragmatic, so driven. Your acceptance of your own mortality is extraordinary.’

‘Only in accepting the inevitable can we find strength,’ Ritan growled,

recalling the litanies learnt as a neophyte. ‘Only through death can we live.’

Vabion nodded. ‘Indeed. And your doctrines also speak of detaching yourself from glory, honour and jealousy, do they not?’ He let silence reign for a second or two, before adding: ‘You could learn much from Kerna.’

‘As I have said, he is a...’

‘...good warrior, yes,’ Vabion interrupted, ‘but he has seen much. In the short time I have known Kerna, I’ve realised that his only ambition is to serve.’

‘We are Doom Eagles,’ Ritan insisted flatly. ‘We exist only to spare others from grief.’

Yes, thought Vabion ruefully, and you must think me as green as a new recruit. Your service is no vocation, Ritan. It is a career. You long for prestige, nothing more. That is why your tour of duty here on Orath is such torture, so far from the glory of battle. But your presence here is vital, whether you believe it or not.

Vabion expected Ritan to sit fuming at his controls, put firmly in his place, but the young Doom Eagle surprised him: ‘May I ask you a question, Librarian?’

It depends what it is, Vabion considered.

‘Of course, Brother.’

‘Why Orath?’

Vabion answered the question with a sharp laugh. Over two hundred years of serving on the planet and no one had dared asked him the question. Perhaps there was more to this cub after all.

He turned to regard his brother. ‘Why would an Ultramarine allow himself to be stationed on a distant agri-world for two centuries? Well, Orath may be distant, but the listening posts located at Forts Garm and Kerberos offer great strategic value.’

How easily the lies came after all this time.

‘As you know, I monitor and analyse any communications we intercept, looking for patterns, key phrases.’

‘I understand that,’ Ritan interjected, ‘but you fought at the battle of Necran against the Tyranid Hive, the siege of Ashira.’

‘To reclaim the reliquary of Marius Gage. That was a good battle.’

‘Good? It has already passed into legend. The advance of the Fifth across the Janivan pass. Thousands of greenskins slaughtered.’

‘You have done your research, Brother Ritan.’

‘Your reputation precedes you, Librarian – and yet you give it all up to become permanent custodian of two listening posts.’

Vabion’s eyes climbed the array of auguries that stretched before them. ‘We do

our duty, wherever that leads us.’

Now it was Ritan’s turn to doubt his companion’s words.

‘And why a revolving garrison of Space Marines? Why not station Imperial Guards here?’

Vabion’s smile faded. He knew he should not have started this, should not have baited the Doom Eagle. A mistake. Once the questions began, they would never stop. Let Ritan think what he will. Let him consider Vabion’s posting to Orath a punishment for some past indiscretion, but let it drop.

‘Why waste the resources...’

Vabion raised a hand, gazing out on the swaying crops. ‘Orath provides an opportunity for training. For contemplation.’

As far as he was concerned the conversation was over, although Ritan obviously thought differently: ‘What do Space Marines need with...’

Vabion talked over him, noticing something in the distance. ‘Ritan, break off from your approach.’

‘What?’ his battle-brother replied. ‘I was about to request for the gates to open.’

‘The gates can wait. We need to sweep the area around the bastion. No more than a kilometre from the battlements.’

‘Librarian,’ Ritan began, his frustration barely kept in check. ‘Sergeant Artorius is expecting...’

Vabion thumbed the vox-bead on the side of his helm.

‘Vabion to Kerberos, we are performing a visual check of the fort’s vicinity. Please inform Sergeant Artorius that we will be delayed.’

‘*Message received, Vabion,*’ came the response. ‘*Do you require assistance?*’

‘Negative,’ the Librarian replied abruptly, scanning the horizon even as the Land Speeder banked to the right. ‘Vabion out.’

‘What are we looking for?’ Ritan asked, accepting the new orders with little grace but, thankfully, no further argument.

‘I will know when I see it,’ replied Vabion, praying to the Emperor that he was wrong.

The murmur of Space Marines at prayer echoed through Fort Kerberos. As he walked the hushed corridors of the central keep, Brother Meleki wondered if the tower had been designed so that the sounds of devotions would travel along the low vaulted ceilings, to remind the faithful of why they served. He certainly had never experienced a place like this, his squad’s home for the next six months.

Such a sizeable fortress for so few occupants. Of course, he hadn't questioned the posting – unlike Ritan, who had as always made his feelings known.

'I do not understand why we are here,' Meleki's battle-brother had announced during maintenance rituals on their first day on Orath. 'Blasphemous forces swarm across the Imperium, threatening to overrun entire systems, and they send us here. A paltry world in an insignificant corner of the galaxy.'

'Orath is a lot of things, but insignificant is not one of them,' Kerna had argued, beginning to strip his bolter in the armoury. 'Cereal production running to millions of acres. Livestock farming on an industrial scale.'

Ritan had rolled his eyes.

'The Imperial Guard relies on the supplies from this paltry world,' Kerna had concluded.

'Then why doesn't the Guard protect it?' Ritan spat in response.

Meleki had watched his brothers quarrel in silence. At two hundred years, Ritan was barely older than himself, but Kerna had seen centuries of battle. A livid scar, slashed across his face, twisted his mouth into a permanent grin. He wore it well, a reminder that a battle could be lost with a moment's hesitation – a lesson that the ork responsible for the injury had learnt to its cost.

Meleki knew that some of the younger Space Marines in the Fists of the Fallen found Kerna's frozen expression unsettling. Many who rose up the ranks of the Eighth Company believed that a smile had no place on the face of a Doom Eagle. A smile spoke of joy. Frivolity. Anathema to the Scions of Gathis II. Doom Eagles were born of loss, forged by the realisation that all things – including their own existence – must come to an end. Even though he had only recently been promoted from the Scout corps, Meleki was fully aware that other Chapters viewed them as fatalists, obsessed with their own extinction. That was not true. Yes, a Doom Eagle was fully aware that death may strike at any moment, but this realisation only served to empower them. Oblivion held no sway over them. They embraced the long shadow of their own mortality. Turned it against their enemies.

When you acknowledged that life was finite, your need to serve burned all the stronger. Every second of every minute of every hour was important – vital. Nothing could be wasted, so that when you finally fell you knew your life had been worthwhile.

Meleki understood this was the reason Ritan grumbled as he ran through his weapon checks. It wasn't heresy or insubordination, but impatience. He was eager to prove his devotion.

The same desire burned deep in his own chest, but Meleki accepted that it wasn't his place to analyse every posting, no matter how unusual. Doom Eagles served. Doom Eagles died. That was the way of things.

'Use this time,' Sergeant Artorius had advised during their first briefing. 'Learn how to work as a unit, to understand how each of your battle-brothers operate. Discover each other's strengths so that we endure no weakness.'

Even then Ritan had complained, under his breath, of course. Even he wouldn't dare question the sergeant.

Artorius's briefing had provided all the information they needed to know. 'The squad is split between two permanent garrisons,' he explained, a hololith of the planet hovering behind him, 'Fort Kerberos, here in the north, and Fort Garm in the southern hemisphere.'

Even the position of the bastions was peculiar. If Meleki could dig through the centre of the planet, he would emerge in Fort Garm. The citadels were the perfect mirror images of each other – hangars, dormitories, weapon stores and apothecarions surrounding a central keep festooned with augury arrays.

'Each fort is maintained by five Space Marines, two pilots and one Techmarine,' Artorius had continued, acknowledging Brother Jerius, the red-armoured giant standing at the back of the company. 'I will be stationed here at Kerberos, but will travel between the two bases to monitor progress.'

'And what of the Ultramarine?' Ritan piped up, drawing a glare from Kerna.

'Librarian Vabion has his work and we have ours.' The sergeant's tone informed Ritan that there would be no more questions. 'At times, you may be assigned to accompany him back and forth from Garm.'

'To protect him from what?' Sedeca, another of their number, had muttered, not wanting to attract the sergeant's attention.

'Boredom probably,' Ritan had answered. 'That's all this place will bring.'

Only if we have to listen to your whinging, Meleki had thought, but kept his mouth shut. No use in making enemies in his own squad.

The murmured devotions mixed with a chorus of clicks and beeps as Meleki approached the Listening Chamber. Here the data from the auguries was gathered and processed. The listening posts on Orath monitored communication channels, the servitors slaved to the cogitators in the Chamber searching for key phrases and suspicious patterns.

They weren't alone. Techmarine Jerius was also in the Chamber, hard at work at one of the many consoles that lined the room. Glyphs from the displays

reflected against the Techmarine's dark red helm. Meleki had never seen Jerius's face. No one had, save maybe Kerna and Sergeant Artorius. As always there were stories – that the Thunderhawk crash that had taken both the Techmarine's legs had also ravaged his countenance so badly that Jerius chose to hide it beneath the helm. Meleki gave the rumour little credence. Such affectation smacked of vanity, which was not part of the Techmarine's make-up. Jerius was as black and white as they came, living his life to the letter of the codex; no deviation, no compromise. It was more likely that the Techmarine didn't remove his helm because he considered it a waste of time and energy. Why remove something you might need at a moment's notice, even here in a half-deserted bastion?

'Brother Jerius,' Meleki began, barely even noticing the lines of servitors silently toiling away over their consoles, 'it is time for our training session.'

Jerius didn't acknowledge Meleki's presence. There was no malice in the act; the Techmarine simply hadn't finished the task at hand. From what little Meleki knew about the augury systems, the Techmarine was running a diagnosis check on the main mast. He had manually realigned the surveyors before morning firing rites and was ensuring that the cogitators were receiving the correct data streams.

Finally, when satisfied, Jerius turned to his younger battle-brother.

'You are early,' he stated, his flat delivery neither suggesting that this was desirable nor an inconvenience.

'I could return later,' Meleki replied.

'No,' Jerius simply said, rising to his feet, servo-arms folding automatically behind him. 'It is time.'

Meleki's gaze fell across the servitors. 'Has there been any unusual activity?'

'Negative,' Jerius said, double-checking the display he had been using. 'Interplanetary traffic within acceptable parameters.'

His work in the chamber done, Jerius started for the entrance, the motors in his mechanical legs whirring softly with every step. Legend had it that Jerius had designed his replacement limbs himself. Meleki could well believe it. The Techmarine was forever upgrading his augmetics, making adjustments, replacing components. The Techmarine's work was never done. He could always find something to improve, which was exactly why Meleki had been pleased when Jerius agreed to walk him through the workings of the Stormtalons. He couldn't ask for a better teacher.

Meleki started after the Techmarine. 'Today we examine the targeting array?'

‘One of the primary systems on any gunship,’ Jerius replied. ‘A pilot cannot rely on automated auspex alone. If a fault developed—’

Jerius was cut off as a black-cloaked serf appeared around the corner of the corridor and barrelled straight into the Techmarine.

‘A t-thousand apologies, my lord,’ the serf stammered, wincing in anticipation of a blow that never came.

‘Look where you are going,’ Jerius snapped, no doubt glowering behind his helm.

The serf bowed low. ‘I will, sir. You have my word.’

‘I would rather a clear path,’ Jerius barked and the serf, realising he was still stupidly standing in the Techmarine’s way, nearly tripped on his cloak as he scampered to the side.

‘I am sorry, my lord.’

Jerius didn’t respond, but marched off, pistons hissing with typical efficiency.

Meleki stopped to regard the serf. ‘What is your name?’

A look of panic flashed across the serf’s sallow features.

‘F-falk, my lord,’ he stuttered.

‘Be more careful in future, Falk,’ Meleki advised. ‘There are those who are not as gracious as Jerius.’

The serf bowed once more, shaking visibly. He drew his cloak closer to him, one arm hidden beneath its sombre folds. ‘I will, sir.’

‘Now, be on your way,’ said Meleki, finally giving the serf leave.

Gabbling thanks, Falk rushed on. Meleki watched him go. The serf had been lucky he had not barged into Ritan. No wonder the man was shaking.

Falk didn’t dare breathe until he was sure that the Space Marines had continued on their way. He stood, hand clamped across his chest until the heavy footsteps of the Doom Eagles faded away.

Falk let out a relieved breath and collapsed against a nearby column.

That had been close. Too close. The way the Space Marine had looked at him. Like he knew something was wrong.

Nothing is wrong.

Of course. Nothing was wrong. Everything was as it should be. Except for the arm hidden beneath his cloak, of course. His flesh was itching uncontrollably. It was all he could do not to tear at it with his fingernails, to claw the irritation away – but at least the pain had stopped, for now. He had hardly slept the previous night, cramp set deep within his muscles, no, deeper even than that. In

his bones.

Don't be stupid. Bones can't cramp.

No, that was right. Of course it was. Bone couldn't cramp. What was he thinking? Falk was just tired, his reserves exhausted. Too many early mornings and late nights.

Not that they would ever thank you for working yourself ragged. They hardly even notice you are there.

Falk shook his head. He didn't serve to receive praise or gratitude. He served because it was the Emperor's will.

Perhaps the pain is the Emperor's will. All part of the divine plan.

Falk gasped in sudden agony, immediately clasp his good hand over his mouth to stifle another outburst. Someone would hear.

No one is listening.

The convulsions began again, his arm jumping uncontrollably beneath the heavy cloak. This couldn't go on. He needed to head back to the serfs' quarters, to seek out Hareen, their medicae. Hareen would know what was happening, what to do, before it got any worse. A chill struck Falk. What if there *was* something wrong with his bones? What if there was an infection of the marrow? He'd seen it before. There was only one way to stop the disease spreading. Lose the limb.

But how would he be able to serve then? His masters wouldn't waste bionic implants on the likes of a serf.

They'll make you a servitor. A mindless drone.

Falk couldn't let this happen. Hareen would help him. Hareen always helped him.

But what if he tells the Librarian?

The thought was too much to bear. Falk could see the Librarian's face twisting in disgust. In horror. See him drawing his sword.

In his delirium, Falk cried out, his shrill voice echoing along the cloisters. 'Emperor save me.'

Yes, He can save you.

That was it. Falk suddenly knew what he had to do. He wouldn't trouble Hareen. The medicae had duties. Distracting him would be a sin.

'No, I will go to the serf's chapel, pray to the Golden Throne. If it is His will, the Emperor will cleanse me. Make me new.'

You are the Emperor's loyal servant. He will not forsake you.

His mind made up, Falk hurried down the high corridors, keeping the pain at

bay by humming the hymn that had been running through his mind for days now.

A gift from the Throne itself, the voice in his head told him, comfort in your darkest hour.

Yes, thought Falk, true comfort. Praise the Emperor.



THREE

‘Looks like the fire’s gone out,’ Dain Bridgeman said, staring through the fire-trucks’ windscreen. ‘At the least the rain is good for something.’

Barett Halfen kept his speed up, the heavy vehicle’s tracks powering along the road that ran between the sprawling fields. ‘We still need to check. See what damage there is.’

They’d noticed the smoke half an hour ago, black plumes rising against the grey sky. Dain was right. The flames had probably been extinguished, but Mattias wouldn’t thank them if they left it to chance. A crop fire was the last thing the plantation needed. They had tried to raise Mattias as soon as they’d left the village, but there’d been no answer. They hadn’t been able to raise Ithell either.

Dain fidgeted in the seat beside him, tapping his fingers on the armrest. ‘It has to be the chemical store.’

‘Maybe.’

‘That much smoke. It’s the only possible answer.’

‘You know as much as me, Dain. We’ll see when we get...’ Something in the sorghum caught Barett’s eye.

He slammed his foot down, the truck’s brakes immediately locking. ‘Hold on.’

Dain cried out, grabbing onto his harness to stop being thrown forward. ‘What are you doing?’

‘There’s someone in the corn.’

‘Out there in this? They mad?’

Barett didn’t answer as the truck slid to a halt.

‘Where were they?’ Dain asked, but Barett had pulled open the door and

jumped from the cab.

‘Who’s there?’ he called out, pulling the hood of his rain-protector over his head ‘You all right?’

‘What do you mean, are they all right?’ Dain appeared beside him. ‘Why wouldn’t they be all right?’

Barett stepped forward, peering into the crop. Dain could hear them now, crashing around in the stalks, getting nearer.

‘Didn’t you see the way they were staggering all over the place?’ Barett asked.

Dain took a step back. ‘I was too busy trying to stop myself smashing through the... whoa!’

A man tore out of the sorghum, stumbling right towards Barett. He wore no rain-protector, his clothes plastered against its skin.

‘Roj?’ Barett asked, amazed to see the plantation owner in such a state. Ithell ran into him, hand clawing at Barett’s slick protector. ‘Slow down there. What’s happened?’

‘Throne. Look at his face!’

Roj Ithell’s knees buckled and he collapsed to the wet ground, Barett trying to support his boss as he fell. Roj let out a keening moan, staring up at his employee, eyes flashing with panic. Dain gagged. Roj’s face was a mass of seeping blisters, his lips swollen beyond recognition. One of his nostrils had completely closed over, the other flaring wildly.

‘What the hell’s wrong with his face?’

‘How the hell should I know? Help me get him on the barge.’

‘I ain’t touching him. He’s diseased.’

‘He needs our help!’ Barett snapped back. ‘He can hardly breathe.’

‘This ain’t right,’ Dain moaned, finally giving in and grabbing Roj’s kicking legs. ‘We ain’t paid enough for this.’

‘Quit complaining and get hold of his feet,’ Barett hissed before turning his attention back to Roj. ‘We’re going to get you on the barge now. Try to hold still.’

They tried to haul him up, but Ithell just screamed, his body twisting out of Barett’s grip. He thudded back to the mud, howling all the time.

Dain dropped Roj’s feet, rubbing his palms against his protector as if trying to brush off infection. ‘He’s too sick to move. We could be doing more damage than good.’

For once Barett agreed. ‘Fine, I’ll stay with him. You head back to the settlement. Get Ligart out here.’

‘You sure?’

‘Of course I am. Give me your protector.’

‘You’re joking!’

‘Give it.’

Grumbling, Dain struggled out of the overcoat and threw it to Barrett, before clambering up into the truck. He didn’t even look back as the bulky cab swung around on the track-base to face the way they’d come. He flicked a lever, switching the tracks into reverse, and opened the throttle.

Better off out of it, he thought.

On the ground, Barrett draped the protector over Roj’s convulsing body.

‘Hang on in there, Roj,’ Barrett shouted over the roar of the engines. ‘Dain will be as quick as he can.’

Roj seemed to calm as the barge screamed away.

‘That’s it. Not long now.’

The man’s breathing was shallow, the whites of his eyes stained red with ruptured blood vessels. He made a weak grab for Barrett’s arm, the farm worker trying not to flinch at the touch. The back of the plantation owner’s hand was smothered in pulsing abscesses. As gently as he could, Barrett guided the hand back onto Roj’s heaving chest. The man responded by starting to hack uncontrollably, bile gargling thickly in his throat.

Barrett glanced over in the direction of the village, willing Dain to hurry. He didn’t notice what was trying to push itself out of Roj’s mouth. Roj coughed once again, his swollen lips parting wide enough for the large fly to escape. It buzzed angrily in the rain, as another appeared on Ithell’s lips.

The settlement’s streets were deserted as Dain slammed on the fire-barge’s airbrakes. Not that he could blame his neighbours for staying inside. What kind of idiot headed out in a storm without a rain-protector?

Roj Ithell, that’s who.

Dain came in too fast, bumpers scraping against the dirt road, causing the tethered bovids sheltering in a nearby paddock to bellow at the sudden noise. Dain was out of the craft before the fans even started to wind down.

He charged across the central square, booted feet splashing through muddy puddles, heading towards Augustus Ligart’s surgery. He’d get the Physician out to Roj as promised and then put as much distance between himself and the sick man as possible. Barrett had been an idiot to stay with him. Loyalty is one thing,

but risking catching whatever had got Ithell was another.

‘Eta, I need your pa,’ Dain demanded as he threw open the door to the surgery, expecting to find Ligart’s plain daughter in her customary place beside the fire. Eta was nowhere to be seen. The chairs, usually occupied by Ligart’s patients, were empty; the softly-lit room eerily quiet.

‘Hello?’

Dain trod mud onto the floor as he crossed the room, heading towards the Physician’s inner sanctum, but Ligart’s office was as deserted as the front room, books left open on the large, wooden desk.

The ceiling creaked above Dain’s head.

‘Ligart, is that you?’ Dain called out, yanking open the door that led to the rickety stairs at the back. ‘We’ve got an emergency. Ithell’s sick. Real sick.’

No response. Where was the old goat? Dain took the steps two at a time, calling the Physician’s name as he turned onto the upper landing before skidding to an abrupt halt.

‘Emperor, no,’ Dain said, clapping a thin hand over his mouth. Ligart was on the floor, his red beard matted with bile. The doctor wheezed, a blackened tongue jutting over purple lips, and stretched out an imploring hand, but Dain wasn’t waiting around. He rushed down the stairs so fast he almost ended up in a heap at the bottom, turning his ankle painfully on the last step.

Cursing, he limped across the front room, bursting out onto the porch where he proceeded to throw up on the wooden slats. First Ithell and then Ligart. What was happening?

Wiping his mouth with the back of his hand, Dain looked up at the building next door. Ma Serlon’s place. Wincing, he hobbled down the surgery’s steps and hurried to the neighbouring hab. The rain had finally stopped, but he hardly noticed as he tried the door. It opened a crack, something blocking it from the other side. Dain should have stopped then, should’ve headed straight for home. His neighbours would have put good money on him running, but this time curiosity won out over cowardice. Dain had to be sure. Had to know.

Taking a step back, he put his shoulder to the door, feeling whatever was on the other side give way, but not enough to get through. He tried again, something cracking under the impact, but at least now the gap was wide enough to squeeze through.

Grunting with effort, Dain shoved against the door and pushed his way in. A stench hit him immediately, making him retch. Another sign that he should have abandoned his search.

‘Ma,’ he called out as he barged his way into the candlelit room. ‘Are you there? Something bad’s happening.’

He had known Ma Serlon since he was a boy, growing up just two habs down the street. Everyone knew the Serlons. Pa Serlon had worked the plantation longer than anyone could remember. Still did, whenever possible. Ma Serlon had baked his mother pies twice a week, a treat for the boys, she said. Succulent berries wrapped in thick, buttered pastry. Dain had always loved pie day, the sweet tang of stewed fruits drifting out of Ma Serlon’s open windows.

The house smelt sweet today too, but the wrong kind of sweet. Saccharine. Like meat gone bad.

Dain turned, immediately stumbling against the wall, sobbing at the sight that greeted him.

‘Oh, Pa. Not you too.’

The old man was slumped in his chair, a blanket thrown over his knees. His face was almost unrecognisable, now familiar cankers obscuring his features, calloused hands hanging down lifelessly.

Dain heard a rattle somewhere to his side, down low, on the floor. Dain didn’t have to look to know what had been blocking the door.

Ma Serlon must have collapsed when she had been heading out for help. She was still alive, croaking his name as he pushed himself back out onto the porch.

‘This can’t be happening,’ he muttered wildly, as he gasped for breath, leaning on the railings. He looked frantically at the houses that lined the central square, wondering if the same sight would greet him if he explored each one, his friends and neighbours struck down by whatever plague had been unleashed.

‘Alice.’ His wife’s name sprung to his lips and Dain was running through the streets of the village, feet pounding on the wet paths as he rushed home. ‘Please be all right. Please be all right.’



FOUR

In the courtyard of Fort Kerberos, Kerna closed his eyes and let the driving rain pelt against his face. He breathed deeply, savouring the heady aroma of water against hot flagstones. For a moment, he was transported far across the Imperium, to home. Not the fishing village where he had been born, where he had first been chosen to endure the Aspirants' trial all those years ago, but to Ghost Mountain, the highest summit of the rain-lashed Razorpeaks range.

How many times had he stood on its peak, gazing down at the world below, remembering where he had come from? As a child he'd gawped at the flimsy gliders the tribesmen of Gathis II used to traverse their home world, marvelling that men could fly. Years later, as a fully-fledged member of the Doom Eagles, he still marvelled, although the reason for the wonder had changed. Now he was amazed that the people he'd left behind even survived armed only with primitive tools.

Yet the rain made no distinction between Space Marines and those the Adeptus Astartes protected. It fell on battle-brother and poor peasant alike. All were equal when the heavens opened.

'Brother Kerna.'

Meleki's voice roused Kerna from his thoughts. He opened his eyes to see the recently-promoted Scout crossing the courtyard, accompanied by Jerius, the rain hissing off the Techmarine's red power armour. Of course. Artorius had granted the pair special dispensation to miss midday prayers to continue the young pilot's Stormtalon training. They would perform their devotions later.

'Good day, Brother Jerius. Meleki,' Kerna said, grabbing the Doom Eagle's wrist in greeting.

Behind them another voice rang out.

‘Is it?’ Kerna turned and felt his spirits sink just a little.

‘Every day is good serving the Emperor, Brother Ritan,’ Kerna reminded the thorn in all their sides.

The Space Marine just grunted.

‘The left stabiliser needs tuning,’ Ritan barked at Jerius, ripping the helm from his head to reveal a face surprisingly free of scars. The only outward sign that the young Doom Eagle had seen battle was the ocular implant that had replaced the eye he’d lost on the fields of Nigraven. Ritan would go far – he was as brave as he was arrogant – but would foster little in the way of camaraderie in his brothers.

Just the way he’d want it, Kerna considered.

‘Your Land Speeder was underperforming?’ Jerius inquired, regarding the craft that was idling behind them with such intensity that it was as if the Techmarine was already attempting to commune with the machine-spirit within.

‘That’s an understatement.’ Ritan growled, his strong jaw so tightly clenched that Kerna could almost hear the Space Marine’s teeth grinding together. ‘I could hardly bring her out of the turns.’

‘You didn’t seem to be having problems from where I was looking,’ commented Kerna, his hackles rising at Ritan’s tone. One day the Space Marine’s lack of respect would lead him into trouble. Luckily for Ritan, his battle-brothers would come to his aid, whether they held him in high regard or not.

‘It deteriorated during our impromptu final sweep,’ Ritan spat, his good eye flashing with irritation.

‘Yes, what was that all about?’ Kerna asked, genuinely intrigued. He had been surprised to find that Ritan and Vabion had not returned when he had brought his Stormtalon down. ‘What were you looking for?’

‘Ask him,’ Ritan snapped, throwing a dark glance over his pauldron. Kerna followed his gaze, seeing Librarian Vabion approaching. ‘There was nothing we haven’t seen day after day. Field after field of wheat.’

‘It’s sorghum,’ Meleki corrected. Kerna had to suppress a smile, although with his face the way it was, no one would be able to tell the difference.

‘Whatever it is,’ Ritan scowled back, ‘some of the damned seeds must have got sucked into the engine.’

‘I will check it immediately,’ Jerius said without emotion.

‘You do that,’ Ritan growled, favouring Meleki with one last glare before

continuing on his way. ‘I need to strip my weapons, make sure something is working around here.’

‘Don’t forget your prayers,’ Kerna reminded the seething Doom Eagle. ‘It’s midday devotions.’

‘Then go pray yourself,’ Ritan shot back. ‘I shall petition the Emperor as I perform my maintenance rituals.’

‘How efficient,’ Meleki muttered darkly as they watched Ritan stalk towards the central keep, absently throwing his helm in the direction of a sickly-looking serf, demanding that it was cleaned.

Kerna placed an arm on his fellow pilot’s shoulder. ‘Pay no attention to Ritan. He is feeling the frustration of being so far from what he considers the action, but hasn’t the maturity to control himself. It will come.’

Maybe, he added to himself.

‘Doom Eagles should feel no frustration,’ Meleki insisted. ‘We know our duty and must serve – wherever that may be.’

Kerna nodded, switching his attention to the Techmarine. ‘The Land Speeder may have vexed our saturnine brother, but I’m pleased to report that the *Heart of Sorrow* performed beautifully on my flight back from Garm. You have worked miracles, Jerius.’

‘She served you well?’

‘As I am certain that she will for many years to come.’

‘I thought the only certainty in life was that it will end,’ a voice observed behind them. Kerna turned to see Vabion approach. He bowed slightly, acknowledging the comment.

‘You have been studying our doctrines, Librarian.’

‘It was either that or converse with Brother Ritan,’ Vabion smiled grimly. Kerna mirrored the gesture. In the short time he had known the venerable Ultramarine, Kerna had come to like Vabion – especially as he seemed to have the measure of their troublesome brother.

‘All Doom Eagles acknowledge our eventual passing. It informs our every decision,’ Meleki added, eager as always to help.

‘A lesson many Ultramarines could do well to learn,’ acknowledged Vabion, turning back to Kerna and changing the subject. ‘Tell me Brother Kerna, did you notice anything peculiar during our journey back from Garm?’

Kerna frowned. ‘Peculiar, Librarian?’

‘In the crops,’ Vabion clarified, peering deep into the Doom Eagle’s eyes. ‘Anything unusual about the sorghum?’

Kerna could only shake his head. ‘Not that I could see, although I admit, one field of cereal is much the same as the next for me.’

Vabion held the pilot’s gaze for a moment, as if he was searching for something.

‘Very well. Thank you, brother.’ The Librarian faced Meleki. ‘Do you know where I may find Sergeant Artorius?’

‘In his chambers, sir. The sergeant always prays alone.’

Vabion nodded sharply. ‘Of course. I must not keep you from your own devotions.’

With that, the aged Librarian marched towards the building Artorius used as his private quarters to the east of the central tower.

‘What was that about?’ Meleki asked, watching the Ultramarine leave.

‘No idea, lad,’ Kerna admitted, casting his mind back to his flight from Garm. Had he missed something? What had Vabion noticed about the crops?

The air of the chapel was cool against Falk’s flushed skin, the sound of his sobs punctuated by the *thwack* of the leather crop against his exposed flesh.

His diseased flesh.

He rocked on his knees as he continued to lash himself, bathed in the light from the stained glass window that dominated the chapel. Scintillating reds, blues and ochres dappled his body, illuminating just how far he had fallen.

Of course, the window was a conceit. The serfs’ chapel was deep within the keep, far from the thick exterior walls. It was not Orath’s sun that made the colours dance, but a series of tiny lume-globes set behind the stylised representation of the Emperor.

A trick of the light.

A lie.

Like Falk’s very life.

‘Why?’ the serf cried out, staring up into the image’s harsh eyes. ‘Why must I endure this torment?’

The Emperor didn’t reply, but glared down at Falk, his glazed features twisted into an expression of disgust.

‘All I ever wanted was to serve you.’

You have served Him. You have served Him well, whispered the voice in his head.

‘And this is how I’m repaid. By being made to suffer.’

The crop was now drawing blood, Falk’s shoulders a latticework of self-

inflicted cuts. The arm he had been hiding for so long felt like it was on fire, twitching uncontrollably as it hung against his pustule-encrusted side. He didn't care who saw it now. He just wanted to be whole again.

You can be whole.

'Then tell me,' Falk wailed, tears slicing paths through the dirt on his cheeks. 'Tell me how I can be free of this affliction. Hear my plea.'

'I hear you.'

Falk's breath caught in his throat, his head snapping up. Could it be? Could his prayers have been answered?

They have been answered.

Hardly daring to breathe, he gazed up into the face of the Emperor, a face that was now smiling warmly down at him.

'You have endured much,' the Emperor acknowledged, his benevolent face shining more than ever. 'You have proved your devotion.'

'Is this the voice of the Emperor?' Falk whispered, doubting his own senses, wiping tears from his eyes with the back of his good hand. 'Is this the voice of my Lord?'

'It is, my child. You will be blessed.'

'I have been blessed,' Falk laughed, a childlike grin spreading across his pocked face. Then he bent double again, suddenly afraid to look upon his god. 'I am not worthy.'

'You doubt me?'

'No,' Falk cried out, rising back to his knees, the crop dropping from his hand. 'You are my Saviour.'

The Emperor nodded, with the sound of scraping glass. 'I am. And you have been chosen.'

'For what?' Falk asked, the intense pain in his arm all but forgotten.

'A holy quest,' the Emperor replied, 'to find your reward.'

Falk struggled to his feet, never taking his eyes from the window.

'Will I be healed?'

'You shall be made anew.'

'Oh thank you, Lord. Thank you.'

The Emperor raised a hand, silencing the serf.

'You must travel deep beneath this fortress, to a place forbidden. Only there will you find salvation.'

'Beneath?' A frown crossed Falk's sweat-drenched brow. 'But how?'

'Follow the song in your heart, my child. You will know where it leads.'

The lights behind the window flared white, bleaching out the colours in the Emperor's fine robes. Falk raised what used to be an arm to shield his eyes but when he looked again, the Emperor had returned to His usual pose, just another image in a stained glass window.

No, more than that. Much more. This is where He appeared to you. Where He changed your life.

'Where he chose me,' Falk giggled, covering his mouth with trembling fingers.

Yes. Now will you go? Will you obey your Emperor?

Falk rushed to where he had discarded his robe.

'I will,' he promised, throwing the cloak around him, not even noticing when the rough cloth scratched painfully against his raw shoulders. 'I must.'

Then follow the song.

'But I can hear no song?'

Yes you can. Listen to your soul.

Falk paused for a second, confused, uncertainty clouding his mind once more – and then there it was, where it had been for the last few days. A distant voice, singing at the back of his mind. At first he had thought the strain tuneless, an irritant, symptomatic of his troubled state of mind, but now he could hear it as it truly was. A soporific aria of such monotonous beauty. A gift from the Throne.

Follow the song, Falk. Follow your destiny.

'My destiny.'

And the destiny of all on Orath. You will bring them the greatest gift of all.

'They shall praise my name.'

They shall join the song.

'Yes,' Falk declared, stumbling out of the chapel. 'All shall sing His praise.'

As Falk left the chapel, the lume-globes behind the Emperor's window blew out, one by one.



FIVE

Vabion found Sergeant Artorius exactly where Meleki had said, kneeling in his private command chambers. He hovered at the door for a second, not wanting to disturb the commanding officer's devotions. Even though he had only known the Doom Eagle for a short period, Vabion couldn't help but respect the sergeant. Artorius was a Doom Eagle through and through, his demeanour grave, his outlook pragmatic to the extreme. From the few stories Artorius had shared over the modest rations served in the echoing refectory, the sergeant did his duty, no matter what the cost, and expected his men to do the same, without hesitation. His eyes had flashed with each memory – victory against the ork hordes of Gantalere, the routing of Raven's Gate – but his words weren't the vainglory Vabion had experienced from lesser Marines. As he had expected from a son of Gathis II, Artorius focused on the Doom Eagles who had fallen in the midst of triumph, those who had given their lives in the line of duty. In Artorius's eyes, they were as worthy as the men who had left the battlefield alive, perhaps more so. He honoured them with every retelling.

Vabion had listened to each story without comment. He, of all men, appreciated the importance of self-sacrifice.

'Sergeant, may I have a word?'

Artorius looked up from the shrine set into the corner of the room.

'Vabion,' he said, rising from his knees and approaching the Librarian with arm outstretched. 'I trust your inspection at Garm was satisfactory.'

The Ultramarine grasped the sergeant's wrist. 'Your men are performing their duties with distinction, Artorius. You should have no concern there.'

'I do not.' There was no challenge in the sergeant's voice, just a statement of

facts. ‘But I do not need to be able to read minds to see that something vexes you, my friend.’

Vabion paused for a moment, searching the sergeant’s face. Is that what they were – friends? He’d kept the secret for two hundred years, not telling another soul outside of his own Chapter. The hesitation as he made up his mind must have been excruciating for the Doom Eagle, but Artorius waited respectfully, his lined face unreadable.

‘I have not told you why I came to Orath.’

‘And I have not asked.’

‘Which is appreciated, but it is time.’ Vabion indicated the controls beside a screen set into a large stone table, covered in scrolls and data-slates. ‘May I?’

Artorius merely nodded, following the Librarian to the desk. Vabion jabbed at buttons set into its surface. The lights of the chamber dimmed as a hololithic image shimmered into view above the table, the faint buzz of the projectors rising in pitch as the vision of Orath solidified. Artorius had told his stories, now it was the Librarian’s turn.

‘It began with a call for help. Eldar raiders had descended on Orath, to strip the planet of its riches.’

‘The crops?’ Artorius asked, turning his attention back to the Librarian. ‘They were attempting to steal the harvest.’

‘Nothing so mundane.’ Vabion’s hands moved over the controls, the planet spinning on its axis. ‘A sinkhole had appeared in one of the plantations.’ A red dot pulsed in the middle of the northern hemisphere’s major continent. ‘Here.’

‘But, that is...’

‘Right beneath our feet, yes.’ The hololith zoomed in to present a curved map of the surrounding countryside, but instead of the recognisable masts of Fort Kerberos jutting towards them, nothing but a gaping fissure marked their present location. ‘No one knew what had opened it, although the local workforce had reported one of the minor earth tremors that still occur to this day.’

‘There was nothing minor about the ’quake we endured on our arrival,’ Artorius reminded him, not taking his eyes off the crevice.

‘Indeed,’ Vabion agreed. The Librarian had to admit that they had been increasing in magnitude. The recent seism, not two weeks previously, had even opened a crack in the wall of the keep. The breach had been easily repaired, but the fact that it had happened at all was a worry. Another sign Vabion had missed? Maybe.

The Librarian forced his thoughts back to the story in hand. ‘The sinkhole

revealed hidden treasures. A curious farmhand descended into the chasm and discovered an underground chamber, full of alien artefacts.'

Artorius bristled at the description. 'Alien?'

Vabion nodded, staring into the hole on the map's surface as if he could gaze back through time. 'Orath, it became clear, had been sacred to the eldar for centuries, a world of great importance.'

Artorius's brow furrowed. 'But there are no signs of previous civilisation. No ruins or temples.'

'Not on the surface, but beneath the ground.' Vabion could feel himself being scrutinised by Artorius now, as questions no doubt raged through the sergeant's mind. Why hadn't he been told about this? What had been found? Thankfully, Artorius allowed him to continue, whether he deserved such an honour or not.

'The farmer discovered a chamber full of treasures, a shrine no less. He began trading the artefacts he unearthed, attracting the wrong kind of attention.'

'Some of these artefacts got off world?'

'The fool advertised what he had to offer, broadcasting what he had found to the entire subsector.'

'And he was noticed.'

'The people of Orath knew nothing about the ways of the universe. When the first traders arrived, the farmer greeted them with open arms, but they were just the beginning.'

'The raiders?'

'They descended like locusts, laying waste to the planet. Supply ships were destroyed, crops burned, the locals slaughtered.'

'Xenos scum.'

Vabion nodded. 'The raiders set up a barricade so that no one else could plunder the loot. And so we were summoned.'

Vabion paused for a moment, lost in his memories. His last drop. If he had known back then, would he have taken more care to remember each and every detail? The sound of the clamps being released in high orbit, the bone-shaking vibrations, the blistering heat of re-entry breaking through the heavy shielding, air so hot it singed your throat. Then would come the roar of the retro-thrusters, the realisation you were minutes from impact, seconds sometimes. The concussive jolt before hatches blew clear, the drop pod unfurling like a demented flower of death and destruction. The roar of battle greeting you like an old friend, beckoning you out into the carnage.

Vabion gasped as he found himself back in the past, charging down the still-

smouldering ramp, screaming at the raiders: *‘Courage and Honour!’*

But he never made it to the battlefield, instead he was flying, not by Thunderhawk or even jump pack, but by the force of his own will. He soared higher and higher over Orath, looking down at the gaps in the harvest, swathes of blackened sorghum, broken and rotting. He could still hear the battle far away, the screams of the raiders, the calls of his battle-brothers and behind it, just on the edges of his perception, a low, keening song – accompanied by a deep-rolling laugh.

‘Vabion?’

Artorius’s voice was like a slap in the face, bringing him to his senses.

‘What was that?’

The Librarian realised he was leaning heavily on the stone table.

‘A vision. More insistent than the first.’

‘The first? What else are you not telling me, Vabion?’

It took all of the Librarian’s strength to stand. ‘It was an easy victory. The cowards turned and ran, abandoning their booty with little in the way of a fight. But I had to see it for myself.’

‘The farmer’s treasure trove?’

Vabion nodded, his head still spinning from the fury of the vision. ‘I volunteered to descend into the subterranean chamber myself.’

Now it was Artorius’s turn to lean in.

‘What did you find?’

Ritan was still fuming as he stomped through the corridors of the keep. It was typical of Meleki, trying to get the upper hand, to make himself look good in Kerna’s eyes. He snorted humourlessly. What good would that do him? Kerna fancied himself as Artorius’s confidant, but he was the same as the rest of them. Older too. Past his prime. Probably why he was content to babysit this dismal listening post. Ritan would run through checks, performing training runs, but he didn’t have to enjoy it, or the company it forced him to keep.

Let Meleki suck up to Kerna. Ritan would prepare for when the Fist of the Fallen returned to their natural environment; when they were knee-pad deep in xenos bodies. Angrily, he swiped his chainsword through empty air, imagining its teeth biting through tyranid hide or ork bulk. Soon, he prayed, make it soon.

Ritan’s nose wrinkled, not through frustration for once but something suspicious. He sniffed deeply, his ire suddenly displaced by curiosity. There was something there. A sour odour – almost too faint even for Space Marine senses.

Ritan inhaled, feeling his neuroglottis fire as the fort's cool air washed over his tongue. Yes, he was right. A spore in the air; noisome. Toxic.

Without another thought, he drew his bolt pistol with his right hand, the grip of his left tightening around the hilt of his chainsword. He was too far from the refectory, too deep within the main structure, to be troubled by what little food waste the fort produced. No, this was something else, something malevolent. Maybe he would see action on this loathsome ball after all.



SIX

Dain charged up the steps to his hab, his lungs screaming for breath, and flung open the unlocked door. They never threw the bolt, even at night. Why would they? The settlement was safe. Everyone looked out for each other. They were a community.

Or rather they had been until today.

‘Alice!’ he gasped, running from room to room. ‘Where are you?’

‘Dain?’

The voice came from upstairs.

‘Thank the Throne, are you all right? Something’s happened, something bad.’

He raced upstairs, following his wife’s voice.

‘Dain, I don’t feel too good.’

Oh Throne, no, Dain thought, as he heard a fusillade of coughs burst from their bedroom. *Please Emperor, not Alice.*

He charged into the room. Alice was on the bed, retching into a bucket she’d brought up from the yard.

‘Hey, easy now,’ Dain said, trying to keep the panic from his voice as he rushed around the bed, his eyes flicking down to Alice’s swollen belly. ‘That’s it. Remember what Ma Serlon used to say? Better out than in.’

Used to. The thought of Ma made his voice catch.

Alice looked up to him with watery eyes. She was deathly pale, a cluster of sores gathered around her usually full lips.

‘Dain, what’s wrong with me?’

‘Now, let’s not panic...’

‘Dain, the baby!’

‘The baby will be fine. There’s... a bug going round, that’s all. It’ll be fine.’

‘This is no bug. Look at me!’

Then she swore, but Alice never swore. He was the one who cursed. She would scold him, saying that he wouldn’t be able to use that kind of language when their boy was born. He’d laugh and promise he’d change before that happened.

‘You need to call Doctor Ligart,’ she pleaded with him, grabbing the front of his shirt.

‘No, Ligart can’t help.’

‘What do you mean? Of course he can.’

‘We’ll go somewhere else.’

‘No, I want Ligart, do you hear?’ Alice insisted, her weak voice becoming hysterical. ‘Get me Ligart, Dain. Get me Ligart!’

‘He’s dead, all right?’ Dain grabbed his wife’s shoulders. Her nightdress was soaked with sweat. ‘He can’t help anyone, do you understand?’

‘Dead?’ Alice sobbed, raising a hand to her mouth. The lesions had taken hold there too.

‘We’ll try the next town. Take next door’s skimmer.’ They wouldn’t need it anymore if they were like the rest. ‘Come on.’

‘No,’ Alice moaned, heaving again. ‘I can’t. I-I feel too sick.’

‘You have to, Alice, do you hear me? For the baby. You have to let me get you away from here.’

Nodding, she tried to stand, but immediately collapsed back in a faint. Dain leapt forward to catch her, sweeping her into his arms. She began hacking again, but threw a shaking arm around his shoulders.

‘That’s it, honey. I’m just going to take you downstairs.’

Alice was barely conscious by the time Dain struggled out of the hab, her head lolling against him.

‘That’s it, honey,’ Dain encouraged as he carried her over to his next door neighbour’s Land Crawler. Melkins never usually minded if he borrowed it – and this was an emergency. If he knew his old friend, the ignition key would be in the cubbyhole beneath the controls. He lowered Alice into the passenger seat and slid the door shut.

‘Just relax,’ he called as he sprinted around to the driver’s seat, ‘I’ll get you to someone who can help.’

Yeah, but who? he asked himself as he searched for the key, finding it exactly

where he'd expected. Good old Melkins. He slammed it into place and thumbed the ignition, looking back towards the centre of the village. The spires of Fort Kerberos rose in the distance.

'The Angels of Death,' he whispered beneath his breath, immediately regretting his use of the Space Marine's nickname. 'They'll be able to help, Alice. They know stuff, more than Ligart ever did. We'll go there, ask for sanctuary. They'll know what to do. Just hang in there. This won't take long, I promise.'

He thought Alice said something, so he leant in, trying to ignore how bad his wife smelt. Like a corpse.

'What's that?'

But Alice wasn't talking; she was singing, a shapeless tune that Dain had never heard before, but that had to be better, right?

'That's it. Keep singing. You'll be all right. Both of you.'

The Land Crawler lurched forward.

'I promise you, baby. It'll be fine.'

The more Ritan followed the trail, the stronger the spores became. He marched through areas of the fort he had never been, nondescript corridors, dust-filled storerooms. The place was a veritable labyrinth, although why it needed to house so many rooms when only a handful of Space Marines were posted here at one time, Ritan could not imagine.

The air was thick with contaminants now, leading him on through a large dim chamber, a large stone relief covering the far wall. The Imperial aquila. You could tell this place was built by Ultramarines. Ostentatious idiots.

He stormed into another corridor only to find that the trail had gone cold. Ritan took another breath. The air was clear.

Ritan turned, cautiously walking back into the aquila chamber, his eyes narrowing. While the other rooms he'd explored were full of equipment, this space was empty. He glanced down at the flagstones, noticing another difference. Every other floor in the keep was laid in simple lines, each sand-coloured tile staggered against the next. It was a pattern duplicated on floors throughout the Imperium, from high cathedrals to lowly garden paths. Not so here. This chamber boasted a distinctive motif.

A large circular stone sat at the centre of the room, curved slabs spreading out to form a round shape, ringed by a darker stone rim. It looked like a giant wheel set into the floor.

Ritan stooped, placing his chainsword on the floor and removing a glove. He ran a finger on the grooves between the rings nearest the edge of the design. The inner stones were held in place with rough grout, but the crack between the sand-coloured slabs and the darker fringe were free of the mortar. Those stones felt like they were packed close together, held by nothing but the pressure of the stones on either side.

The Doom Eagle sat back on his haunches, pulling his glove back on, and inhaled once more. The toxins in the air were more intense than ever. He reached up, toggling a control on the edge of his ocular implant. The lenses whirled and clicked and the implant cycled through all available filters. Electromagnetics, heat, energy signatures, infrared.

‘There you are.’

He could see them now, illuminated by the filter, spiralling like glowing dustmotes in the air. He swept the room, lingering on the large image of the aquila. There were more of the spores, not floating in front of the carved sigil but smeared across its surface in five livid groups – each roughly the shape of a human hand.

Ritan stood, retrieving his chainsword, and walked across the circular tiles towards the aquila. It was huge, stretching the length of the wall, the full span of a Space Marine’s arms. He examined the stains, each increasing in intensity as they ran across the eagle’s body; on the tip of the left wing, the left foot, the right beak, right shoulder and finally, the third from last feather on the right wing.

‘A pattern, but for what purpose?’

Without pausing Ritan reached up, pressing his gloved fingers against the first rapidly fading patch.

The stone wing gave way beneath his fingertips. The movement was almost imperceptible, but it was there, accompanied by a faint but discernible click. He moved across the relief pressing each spot in turn. Again the mechanical clicks repeated themselves. By the time Ritan depressed the bird’s shoulder, he could feel vibrations shifting beneath his feet, a series of deep resounding thuds as if ancient machinery was falling into place.

Turning to face the circular motif on the floor, Ritan all but slammed his palm on the final feather and was rewarded by the sound of gears grinding heavily against each other.

If Ritan was surprised when the centre of the tiled wheel started to fall away, he didn’t show it. His face might as well have been carved from the same stone as the aquila. The central rings of the design dropped down, tile edges squealing

uncomfortably against each other before the entire thing rolled to the side, hidden beneath the rest of the floor.

Almost immediately, lume-globes flamed into life within the entrance that had opened, revealing a large spiral staircase that dropped down into shadows far below. The steps were thick and wide, designed for broad feet, each worn in the centre by centuries of heavy boots tramping up and down.

‘Leading where?’

Curiously, Ritan took the first step, noticing how well his own boot matched the indentation. A Space Marine then? One of their own.

‘And for what purpose?’ Ritan growled as he made a decision. Other men would have gone back to report what he had found – other men like Kerna. But what would Artorius command? That they explore, ascertain what lay hidden at the bottom of the mysterious stairwell. Why wait? It would be better to discover for himself, and *then* report back to the sergeant, armed with facts and not mysteries.

If this was a threat to the bastion, then Artorius would want to know. He would *demand* to know.

No hesitation. No fear. Only duty.

Clutching his weapons tightly, Ritan began his descent.

‘What now?’ Dain cursed as he was forced to slow the Land Crawler. He hadn’t thought anything of the flies at first. A couple of the fat insects had splattered against the windscreen, usual for this time of year, but then he’d realised the air was teeming with the things.

The nearer he got to the centre of town, the worse the swarm became. The skimmer was plastered by their bodies now, sickly green fluid splashed all over the screen, so thick he could barely see. How could it have got this bad? He’d only been here half an hour ago. Dain flicked the wipers, but it only made things worse, smearing the gore back and forth.

Beside him, Alice started to hack again, a deep rattling cough sending her body into convulsions.

‘Easy, now,’ Dain said, desperately trying to remain calm. He reached across and placed a hand on her arm, withdrawing it quickly when he felt the soft edges of the weeping blisters. ‘We’ll get through this soon. The Space Marines will help us.’

They have to, he thought, wiping his hand on his trouser leg and coughing himself. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, noticing the red welts

rising up beneath the skin. He couldn't get sick as well. He just couldn't.

The Land Crawler stuttered, the engine stalling, pitching Dain forward in his seat.

'I don't believe it. The bloody things must have got into the intake.'

A bloat fly murmured past his head.

'They're in here too.' Dain swatted at the insect as the skimmer stalled. 'I'll have to check the engine.'

He reached for the door handle, but stopped when Alice doubled over, retching heavily. It was then he realised that the flies seemed to be flitting around her head.

'Baby?' he asked, as his wife offered him scared eyes. Her body heaved and Dain shifted back in his seat, expected to be covered in the contents of her stomach – but Alice wasn't sick. Instead, his wife spewed a swarm of angry flies right into his face. Dain screamed, trying to protect himself from the bugs with one hand, scrabbling with the door control with the other.

The door swung up and he fell back, his head smacking against the road. The insects were all over him, streaming out of the Land Crawler, stinging his eyes, pushing their way into his mouth, their drone-like thunder in his ears.

Calling for Alice, he tried to get back into the cab, but was pushed back by the sheer number of the flies. They covered him from head to foot, nipping at exposed skin, feeding on the sores that were erupting along his flesh. He bit down, feeling their hairy bodies pop between his teeth. They were scrabbling across his tongue, forcing themselves down his throat, clambering into his ear canals, his nose.

Dain managed to take three or four steps before collapsing to the floor, no longer able to breathe. Not that such an inconvenience would be a problem for long. Soon he would rise again, they all would. Ithell. Ligart. Ma and Pa Serlon – even his darling Alice. They would no longer need to draw breath, wouldn't even remember who they were. One urge would consume them. One need. To serve He who had blessed them. All other thoughts forgotten.

But, lying there, in the dirt, Dain could still remember his unborn child – and cursed the Emperor for letting this happen to them.



SEVEN

The staircase seemed never-ending, guiding Ritan deeper and deeper beneath the fortress. The air was stale, but still full of the spores that danced in front of him, the trail fresher than ever.

When he finally reached the bottom, the Doom Eagle found himself standing in a long, sloping corridor that curved around ahead. The lume-globes had gone, replaced by sodium torches that threw flickering shadows against the cambered ceiling.

Ritan ran his fingers against the walls. Their construction had changed too. This wasn't rockcrete, but a material Ritan had never seen before, almost like bone or ivory.

'What is this place?' Ritan hissed, his words echoing along the strange corridor.

Almost in response, another voice drifted back towards him. A sob. Someone *was* down here with him.

'Identify yourself,' he called out, his challenge reverberating along the walls. There was no response, save for more wails, not far away.

Ritan started forward, his bolt pistol held level. 'This is a stronghold of the Adeptus Astartes. Show yourself and state your business.'

The Doom Eagle followed the twisting corridor until the sight that greeted him caused him to falter for the first time in his life.

The hololith shifted in front of Artorius, the planet blurring to be replaced by a sprawling chamber. The high-vaulted ceiling was suspended on impossibly thin buttresses that swept gracefully up from a floor covered in intricate hieroglyphs.

Between each column, alcoves were set into the gem-encrusted walls, cogitator screens flashing with a thousand scrolling eldar runes.

The sergeant's mouth pulled into a snarl. What might have been beautiful for some was nothing more than blasphemy to the Space Marines.

The sergeant jabbed a finger towards a tall crystalline structure in the middle of the shrine. 'What is that?'

Vabion continued his story. 'At first we thought it nothing more than a false idol.'

The Librarian's fingers played across the controls. 'Then I discovered these.'

The image zoomed into the far wall, highlighting a series of simple pictograms. Stylised figures cowered before an arcane sigil – two rings joined by what looked like a jagged bolt of lightning. While the uppermost ring was unbroken, the lower of the two was shattered, as if flying apart.

Vabion pointed towards the image. 'I believe this rune represents a rift in the warp – a rift the eldar discovered running directly through the planet.'

'A rift?' Artorius's hand instinctively dropped to the hilt of his chainsword.

'Think of it as a fault line running through creation.' Vabion manipulated the controls and the hololith shifted back to the crystal. 'The pictograms suggest that the eldar managed to stabilise the rift using these crystals, sealing it by means of technology we've yet to understand.'

The image rotated, giving Artorius a 360 degree view of the structure. The massive crystal shard protruded from a raised dais, flashes of energy coruscating at its glinting heart.

'What is it made from?'

Vabion shook his head. 'I've studied the Great Keys for two hundred years and still cannot tell you.'

Artorius glanced up at the name.

'Keys?' he asked, 'Plural.'

The controls beeped as Vabion shifted the image back to a view of the planet. The hololith span so the sinkhole was located at the planet's uppermost point.

'From what I have deciphered, the eldar called them the Keys of Vault. The first is here, beneath our feet.' The psyker indicated the pulsing red dot that represented the shrine. 'And the second is on the other side of the planet, exactly matching the first.' Another bead of light began to throb at the bottom of the orange translucent globe.

'Beneath Fort Garm,' rumbled Artorius, his arms folded tight across his monumental chest.

The hololith zoomed back into the site of the sinkhole, a three-dimensional representation of Fort Kerberos's building brick by brick.

'The garrisons were established to protect the shrines, on my recommendation. As soon as I approached the first Key I could feel the darkness it was holding at bay.'

'And if the Keys were removed?' The question hung in the air for a second as the Librarian met the sergeant's gaze.

'I am not sure. I volunteered to remain on Orath as permanent custodian of the shrines, charged with studying the Keys, trying to gauge the threat. Two centuries have passed and I am still no nearer to an answer.'

'But the cogitators in the shrine?'

'The glyphs are unlike any we've seen before. I have translated scraps of data, but the results are cryptic at best. My best theory is that the programme the network is running is some kind of hex, a charm against the destructive power of Chaos.'

'And, so we have no idea if the rift may be relatively small...'

'...or another Eye of Terror.' Vabion nodded. 'We do not know. The ancient eldar took their secrets with them. Certainly the danger was great enough to warrant building the shrines themselves.'

The Librarian fell silent, letting the sergeant process the information. Artorius's jaw was set, a solitary muscle pulsing in beat with his anger, but when he spoke his voice was steady, controlled.

'So over time, the shrines were forgotten, hidden away from sight. Everyone who knew of them dead...'

'Or silenced,' Vabion admitted.

'Except you.' The statement was pointed. The Librarian knew where this line of questioning was heading.

'We kept the shrines' existence secret from everyone, including those charged with guarding them.'

The sergeant shook his head.

'Listening posts, on a seemingly insignificant agri-world.'

'A useful cover. The information they provide *is* of use to the Imperium...'

'But they really exist to ensure no one discovers the existence of these Keys,' Artorius stated flatly, shaking his head. 'So why tell me? Because of your visions?'

Vabion extinguished the hololith. 'Partly. But also due to something I noticed during our journey back from Garm. The crops are...' He faltered, his head

spinning. ‘The crops...’

When he replied, Artorius’s voice sounded as if it was bubbling up through water. ‘What about the crops? Vabion?’

But the Librarian couldn’t answer, he was falling forwards, raising his hands to protect his face from the stone table, preparing for the sudden impact; the impact that never came.

He was flying, soaring over the fields of golden cereal once again, the sun burning the back of his neck, the roar of the wind filling his ears. Vabion threw back his head and laughed, overwhelmed by the experience. He felt alive. More alive than he had for years.

He swept down, swooping lower over the harvest.

‘Look at it. There’s nothing wrong, no sign of blight at all.’

He threw his arms wide, rising back up into the air.

‘The crops are strong, the air fresh. Orath is as bountiful as ever.’

The words were hardly out of Vabion’s mouth when the chill he had experienced fell over him. He looked up, squinting into the brilliant sun. Clouds were moving in from the east, faster than he’d ever seen, their shadows sucking the colour from the corn below.

In a second they had smothered the sky, blocking out the sun, plunging the world into darkness. Bitter winds buffeted the Librarian, forcing him to a standstill. Vabion hung in the air, unable to move forward, but straining not to be blown back.

Something crackled far beneath him. He looked down to see channels appearing in the carpet of green, great swathes of the harvest flattening as if trampled by invisible giants rushing this way and that. Stalks snapping, seeds bursting in their cobs, oozing out of the withering leaves like thick, black molasses.

‘This isn’t random,’ Vabion realised, watching the trails of disease streak out towards the horizon. ‘There’s a pattern forming.’

But what? He needed to rise, to gain more height. He looked to the clouds, despairing as he saw they’d been whipped into a broiling maelstrom above his head. Lightning flashed from the churning vortex, a tremulous laugh rolling like thunder across the ravaged plains, the same laugh he had heard before. Deep. Wet.

Vabion screamed as the first bolt of lightning struck him, frying the flesh on his bones. He tried to escape, to find shelter, but couldn’t move – caught in the

web of electricity that blazed from the heart of the storm, surging through his body.

‘Vabion!’

The voice called to him above the din of the storm. He threw out a blackened hand, desperate to be saved, but couldn’t speak, his tongue boiled away.

‘Vabion, come back to me! Vabion!’

It was like hitting an air pocket. One minute there was noise and clamour and pain and fear and then... nothing, save for the buzz of Artorius’s cogitator.

‘*Cias?*’

‘*I’m here, Appius. I’ve got you.*’

Vabion realised he was on his back, staring up at the ceiling of Artorius’s command quarters in confusion.

‘What did you see, Vabion?’ the sergeant asked, not wasting time to enquire after the Librarian’s health or state of mind. Ever practical.

‘We need to patrol the area.’ Vabion grabbed Artorius’s arm, letting the sergeant help him back to his feet. ‘Ritan and I did a sweep earlier looking for gaps in the crops.’

‘For signs of disease?’

Vabion didn’t need to reply.

‘I will send the Stormtalons on patrol,’ Artorius said, grabbing his helm, ‘have them report anything unusual.’

Vabion nodded, trying to control the waves of nausea that were still threatening to overcome him. He had never experienced a vision so palpable.

‘And I must check on the Key.’



EIGHT

Falk cried out as pain surged through his body. Muscles burned. Tendons snapped. Bones shattered, knitting together in forms they were never designed to take, before splintering again a moment later. He could feel his skin bubbling, his mouth full of the bitter tang of blood and bile. It was as if every cell in his body was being torn apart, unseen hands clawing at him from the inside.

It was heaven.

You have come far, Falk. You have done well.

‘You are pleased with me?’ Falk gibbered, his voice sounding alien in his own ears.

Most pleased. You are blessed.

‘I am blessed,’ the serf repeated, smiling wildly. His parched lips cracked as they stretched over diseased gums.

Falk had no idea how long it had taken to find this place. Minutes or hours, time had little meaning anymore. There was only pain – exquisite, beautiful pain – and the song, drowning everything else out.

He hadn’t known where he was going. He’d never seen some of the corridors before, never been permitted to explore the keep.

They wouldn’t let you. Didn’t trust you.

He had just followed the song. Every step had been agony, every breath a living hell, but as he’d staggered into the aquila chamber the chorus had swollen to a crescendo. The blithest sound he had ever heard. Rapture.

How he had laughed when he had been shown how to open the entrance to the staircase. The truth of Fort Kerberos hidden in plain sight.

‘They thought they could keep it from me,’ he spat as his spine twisted into a

new pattern. 'Didn't deem me worthy.'

They will pay. For their deception, for their arrogance.

'For how they have treated me all these years.'

Like you did not exist.

'Like I was nothing.'

But you are everything, Falk.

'I am your salvation.'

Our deliverance.

'I have joined the song.'

You are the song.

'I am the song...'

It had always been there, the song. He knew that now. He had heard it in his mother's womb, when he was pushed out into the world. When he had pledged his life to becoming an Ultramarine.

When he had failed the trials.

No. They failed you.

The song was never-ending. Eternal. It would be sung long after he had gone to dust.

No, you will never die. You will sing the song forever.

'Who is there?'

Falk gasped. Another voice. Gruff. Accusatory. One he thought he remembered.

'Show yourself.'

Demanding to be heard.

They want to drown out the song.

'They can't. The song is everything. The song is all.'

They want to silence the song. To silence you. They always have.

Falk snarled. Never again. Things were different now. *He* was different.

'This is your last warning...' the voice insisted.

They must pay for what they have done.

'They must die,' Falk decided.

'Meleki, where is Kerna?'

Meleki looked up to see Artorius striding towards the Stormtalons, his red helm tucked beneath his arm.

Jerius answered for the young pilot. 'Brother Kerna is offering his thanks for a safe journey.'

‘In the chapel?’

‘Yes sir,’ Meleki replied.

Artorius nodded. ‘Go and fetch him. Jerius, begin pre-flight checks.’

‘We are going on patrol?’ Meleki asked, confused. No flights were scheduled until tonight’s battle practice.

‘I need you to perform a sweep of the area around the fort.’

‘How wide?’

‘A fifty kilometre radius.’

‘Understood.’

‘And if that doesn’t show anything, repeat at one hundred kilometres. You are looking for signs of disease in the crops. Any signs at all.’

‘In the crops?’ Meleki repeated, intrigued, before Jerius cut in.

‘Do not question the sergeant’s orders.’

Meleki felt his face flush. ‘I am sorry, sir, I meant no disrespect.’

Artorius waved away the apology. ‘There will be a full briefing on your return.’

‘But, if we’re searching for signs of blight...’ Meleki continued, knowing full well that his question would prompt another scowl from Jerius.

Artorius paused, searching the young pilot’s eyes. Meleki was convinced he’d overstepped the mark and was preparing to apologise once again when the sergeant finally spoke up.

‘There have been too many secrets in this place.’

‘Sir?’

‘There is a potential rift running through this planet.’

Meleki couldn’t stifle his reaction. ‘In the warp?’ Beside him even Jerius shifted where he stood, hand dropping to his bolter, servo-arms whirring forward as if ready for attack.

Artorius nodded. ‘Any disease in the harvest may simply be a natural occurrence, but we cannot take any risks. Vabion is checking his...’

Another pause.

‘...his equipment. In the meantime, I need you both in the air as soon as possible.’

Meleki nodded sharply, the gravity of the situation only now beginning to sink in. ‘I shall fetch Kerna at once.’

He excused himself, heading for the Space Marine chapel where he would find the more experienced pilot deep in prayer. As he crossed the courtyard, the Doom Eagle felt a sudden thrill. A breach in the warp, here on Orath. He found

himself praying they would find something, rebuking himself immediately. Such thoughts were forbidden. Was he actually hoping to find daemonic activity on this peaceful world? Didn't he realise what that would mean?

Meleki couldn't fight the smile that tugged against the corners of his mouth.

Defending the Imperium from the forces of Chaos. A chance to serve the Emperor.

Surely hoping for that wasn't a sin.

Ritan couldn't believe what he was seeing. An alien shrine hidden beneath a Space Marine base. What treachery was this? What desecration?

He took a step forward, never letting his gun drop for a second. In front of him a shimmering shard of crystal rose from a series of steps in the centre of the vast room, the light of cogitators that lined the unnaturally smooth walls reflecting off its translucent surfaces.

Suddenly everything slotted into place.

'Vabion?' Ritan called out, coming to a stop beside the crystal. He felt a prickling across his skin. Emperor only knew what unholy purpose the artefact served. 'Is that you, in the shadows? Where you belong?'

Someone moved behind one of the curved buttresses.

'Is this why you engineered your posting to this miserable world? Forbidden knowledge from a xenos temple?'

There was no answer. He started forward again, slowly, preparing for attack.

'It makes sense,' Ritan continued, his ocular implant switching to heat vision. Yes, there was someone hiding there. Someone big. 'You disappear for hours at a time, no one ever asking why.'

He could hear Kerna now. '*Do not question a senior officer. Do your duty.*'

Sycophantic fool.

'Kerna is in awe of you, of the Ultramarines. Blinded by past glories. Not me. I see you for what you are.' A thought occurred to him. 'Maybe he's involved. Is that it? Is Kerna in league with you? What have you offered him?'

Another doubt came to mind. If Kerna was part of the plot, whatever it was, what about Artorius? No. He found that hard to believe – although the very fact that the sergeant had allowed himself to be deceived was somehow more disappointing. Ritan had looked up to Artorius. Thought him a good man. He wouldn't make that mistake again.

'Won't you come out and face me, traitor? What is it your Chapter says? Courage and Honour?' Ritan snorted in derision. 'You have neither.'

He was almost at the buttress now, his trigger finger itching to fire. Then he cocked his head, listening intently.

‘Are you singing?’ The man had obviously lost his mind. ‘Will you sing when I drag you back to the surface to pay for your crimes? Or will you beg for forgiveness?’

‘Will we beg, he asks,’ a voice replied and not the one Ritan was expecting. It was thick with mucus. ‘We are past begging, past bowing and scraping to the likes of him.’ Thick with hate. ‘The real question is whether *he* will beg, to us. For mercy.’

That was enough. Ritan wasn’t going to suffer such impertinence, not from Vabion, not from anyone. He stepped around the buttress, bolter steady and sure in his hand. ‘In the Emperor’s name, I demand you...’

Reveal yourself. That is what he was going to say – but he wasn’t given the opportunity.

The flail cracked out of the shadow, slicing against Ritan’s face, sending out a spray of red mist. The Doom Eagle staggered against the support arch, pain blossoming across his cheek.

‘No more demands,’ the voice bellowed over the ringing of his ears. ‘No more orders.’

Another lash, splitting the red aquila on his chestplate, gouging the muscle beneath.

‘Not possible,’ Ritan wheezed, looking down at his chest in shock, the wounds already begin to fester. ‘What are you?’

His ocular implant shattered, deep furrows appearing across his cheek, his teeth smashed from his jaws.

‘Salvation,’ the fiend screamed. ‘Deliverance.’

Ritan fired wildly, the thunderous report of his bolter echoing around the chamber, drowning out his assailant’s shrieks – only to be silenced when the flail came down hard on his gun arm, smashing ceramite, shredding muscle. He cried out, his legs buckling, bolt pistol slipping from his grasp. He felt so weak. So helpless.

‘Can’t be happening,’ he panted, his entire body shaking as he dropped to his knees. ‘I am. A Doom. Eagle.’

‘You are dead!’ the voice exalted, breaking into a peal of manic laughter. ‘You are nothing.’

Another strike, across his pauldron, into his shoulder, scraping against bone. Ritan tried to look up, tried to focus in the dim light of the shrine. He could

barely move, his muscles failing, limbs impossibly heavy. He knew his chainsword was still in his hand, but couldn't even lift it.

The figure in front of him blurred, then came into sharp relief, causing his already pounding hearts to thud all the faster in his ruined chest.

'You're a serf...' Ritan gasped in amazement, the muscles in his neck bunching.

'He recognises us,' the creature screamed in glee, 'at last!'

There was no mistaking the tattered, stained cloak that hung from the monster's back, or the small human head that sat preposterously on top of a pair of heaving shoulders. The servant's body was mutating before his eyes, tumours erupting across its chest, muscles clustering beneath corrupted flesh. One arm was withered, hanging limply, while the other had been replaced by the long meaty flail, yellowing bones jutting from ulcerated gashes.

'But can he tell us our name?' the serf drooled, suddenly snapping the flail across Ritan's side. The Doom Eagle gagged, unable to whimper, let alone cry out. 'Does he know who we are?'

Ritan tried to feel for his chainsword, but his fingers wouldn't respond, his entire arm numb. White foam frothed on his slack lips, his good eye slowly closing as his face swelled. Whatever pestilence was swarming through his body, it was too great even for a Space Marine's superior healing abilities.

'Did he not hear us?' the serf-thing cackled, delivering another toxic blow. 'Does he not know?'

Do I know what? Ritan wondered, feeling his grip on the world slip. He barely knew where he was. Couldn't even be sure who he was. All he wanted to do was rest, to be free of the pain, of the demented voice, yelling at him. So angry.

He thought he should pray, but couldn't remember how. Instead he started humming the song that throbbed at the back of his head.

The comforting, tuneless song.



NINE

‘No!’ Vabion breathed.

The fact that someone had found the shrine was enough of a shock. That it was left open was inconceivable.

‘Two hundred years,’ The Librarian muttered, stepping cautiously into the aquila chamber. ‘Two hundred years and no one has come close to discovering you.’

That in itself was a lie. A few had almost stumbled on the secret of Kerberos, but Vabion had worked hard to ensure the truth remained hidden. He had been forced to do some terrible things – but this was different.

He stared at the staircase, his grip tightening around his force sword, a sickening feeling settling in his stomach.

The place stank of the warp.

‘Something corrupted has walked this way,’ he said, as if uttering the words could somehow protect him from the dark forces at play. ‘Something unhallowed.’

Vabion dropped on one knee, leaning on his sword, the sharp point pressing into the stone slabs.

‘Protect me, oh Lord, as I protect others.

Deliver me, oh Lord, as I deliver others from damnation.

You are mighty. Your enemies are weak.

You are truth. Your enemies are lies.

You are victorious. Your enemies are lost.

I will bind them in Your glory,

Smite them in Your name.

Your will be done.'

Thumping his chestplate with an armoured fist, Vabion rose to his feet, his mind clear and his purpose true.

His will be done.

The Librarian trod the steps he had walked so many, many times – ignoring the nagging fear that told him that the battle was already lost, no matter how many prayers he uttered.

The skies of Orath reverberated to the sound of the Stormtalons. Kerna sank back into his harness, feeling the rumble of the engine surge through his body. He had been asked before why he had never pushed for promotion, why he remained happy to serve the Emperor as a pilot. Others took his reluctance to scale the chain of command as a lack of ambition, but it was simply a case of knowing one's place in the universe. He belonged here, in a Stormtalon's cockpit, feeling the vibrations rise up the stick he held in his hands, the roar of the stabilisers in his ear, knowing he could bring death raining down from the skies on their enemies at any moment.

Up here, the years weighed less, the burden of his service easier to bear. Death would come, there was no changing that, but here, at the controls of the *Heart of Sorrow*, he would always make a difference.

'The Emperor is our protection,' Kerna said to himself, recalling the invocation he had learnt when he had first taken to the skies of Gathis II. 'The Emperor is our guide. And we shall be His teeth.'

He opened the *Heart's* throttle and felt the Stormtalon respond, increasing in speed without hesitation. Doom Eagle through and through.

'*Kerna, come in.*' Meleki's eager voice broke through the vox-line.

'I hear you, Meleki,' the older pilot responded.

'*Look to your eight o'clock.*'

Kerna did as instructed, scanning the horizon.

'*Do you see them?*'

'Hard not to,' Kerna replied. 'Low hanging clouds.'

'*Are you sure they're clouds?*'

The lad was right. The clouds were dark, heavy, but so near the ground, localised to small areas. Kerna tapped the runes on his display screen, zooming the Stormtalon's nose pickers into the nearest cloud mass.

'Twenty kilometres away,' he muttered to himself.

'*And another to the south-west. Much larger*'

‘I see it.’

‘*Kerna, isn't that the location of the human settlement?*’

‘I am afraid it is.’

Kerna heard a growl to starboard and glanced through the canopy. Meleki had brought his Stormtalon, *The Endurance of Gathis*, to Kerna's wing.

‘*They could be fires.*’

‘Possible,’ Kerna acknowledged, but his gut told him they were anything but. If what Artorius had told Meleki was true, a few cereal fires were the best they could hope for. He thumbed a toggle on the vox. ‘Kerna to base. Unidentified cloud formations sighted due west of Kerberos. Will investigate.’

‘*Understood, Kerna.*’ The pilot raised his eyebrows. Artorius himself was manning the vox. He had expected to hear Ritan's contemptuous tones. The sergeant was taking this threat seriously. ‘*What about the harvest?*’

Kerna twisted in his seat, looking down through the reinforced canopy. ‘Definite signs of disease, sir.’

‘*Over how big an area?*’

‘As far as the eye can see.’

There was a silence at the other end of the vox-line, then: ‘*Meleki, swing around and head towards the grox farms to the south. We need to know if this is limited to arable crops.*’

Kerna turned, seeing the younger steersman nodding within the *Endurance*.

‘*Understood. Will report back.*’

Meleki immediately dropped his left wing, swooping below the *Heart*. To the south of Fort Kerberos, the crops gave way to vast hangars, each housing thousands of lobotomised grox, bred intensively for their meat.

‘Keep in constant communication,’ Kerna instructed Meleki as he gunned the *Heart* towards the nearest swirling black cloud. ‘Let me know what you find.’

‘*Likewise,*’ came the reply.

The descent had been difficult, both physically and mentally. Even with the protection of his psychic hood, Vabion had been shocked with the intensity of the warp energies that rushed up to greet him, wave after wave. He had been forced to stop numerous times and place a hand on the wall to steady himself.

A song was playing through his mind.

The song he had heard in his vision.

Now he stood at the foot of the stairwell, preparing himself to stride forward, trying to block the tuneless dirge that seemed to emanate from the stones themselves.

‘You must be strong,’ he told himself, ‘to overcome whatever lies ahead.’

The words bolstered him. The Emperor was with him. He was sure of that. What was it his Doom Eagle cousins said?

‘Ah, yes,’ he murmured. ‘No hesitation.’

The Ultramarine marched towards the threshold of the shrine, exploring the eldar’s sacred space with his mind.

‘I know you are here,’ he declared, striding into the chamber. ‘I know what you want. And I know I will defeat you.’

‘He is confident,’ came the shrill reply, a voice Vabion found familiar. He made straight for the Key, climbing the three shallow steps on the dais, feeling the crystal’s familiar pressure against his mind. At first, the shard’s strange energies had been a frustration, a puzzle that needed to be solved. Now, after all these years they were a comfort. Like an old friend.

He placed a palm on the crystal, the malicious presence in the chamber subsiding. He allowed himself a moment drawing strength from the mysterious crystal, staring into the flickering lightning trapped at its heart. Then he closed his eyes, focusing deeply. It was a ritual he had performed thousands of times before. Imagining he could see every inch of the shard’s translucent surface at once, searching for flaws.

‘There...’

The revelation hit him with such force that he nearly reeled back, stumbling from the platform. Not opening his eyes, he tracked the fault, running his hand to the base of the crystal, where the shard plunged into the wraithbone seal.

He could see it in his mind, highlighted as if aglow. A hairline crack in the surface, no more than a few centimetres.

But that is all it would take.

For a moment, Vabion’s mind jumped, away from the shrine. He was back in the rolling skies, higher than any vision so far. As always, the rot was spreading in the sorghum, forming its patterns.

‘No, not just any pattern.’ Vabion flinched at the sight. An all too familiar sigil. ‘No. Not here. Not now.’

‘He’s found it,’ the voice cheered, pulling the Librarian back to the shrine. ‘Found the imperfection.’

Vabion rose unsteadily to his feet.

‘It was the earthquake, wasn’t it,’ Vabion said, stepping down from the dais. ‘That’s what your masters used to fracture the Key.’

As he talked, Vabion explored the darkness with psychic tendrils, immediately

recoiling as they brushed against a lost mind.

‘You are right to cower,’ he announced, holding his force sword with both hands as he crossed the rune-covered floor. ‘I will send you back to whatever hell you have been dragged from. You have no place here.’

‘No place he says,’ the strident voice came back. ‘The arrogance. Always the same.’

‘You speak as if you know me.’

‘Oh, we do.’

‘Then show yourself.’

‘That’s what the other one said.’

‘The other?’

‘Show yourself. Show yourself. Over and over. He fell, fell so far. Come and see.’

The stench hit Vabion at once. He had been concentrating so much on the psychic realm that he had blanked out the real world – but it was now impossible to ignore. He felt his gorge rise as his eyes fell upon something sprawled next to one of the buttresses.

No. Not something. Someone.

‘Ritan!’

Not that Vabion could recognise the Doom Eagle from his face. The warrior was on his back, one arm reaching for his discarded chainsword. Bubbling flesh seeped through lacerated power armour, pooling beneath the ceramite. Only the eye implant slowly sinking into the mass of tumours that used to be Ritan’s once-proud face betrayed his identity.

‘Does he see now?’ the sibilant voice continued. ‘Does he realise nothing can save him? Not his witchcraft. Not his husk of a god.’

‘He is greater than yours,’ Vabion snapped, barely keeping his temper in check. Ritan had been an insufferable pup at times, but he hadn’t deserved his fate. ‘The Holy Father will protect me. I am an Ultramarine. No daemon will have my soul.’

He felt the blow coming before it struck, lashing across his back, stripping the armour away in one strike.

Vabion span, bringing his sword down despite the pain, slicing through excrescent-smearred flesh. His attacker fell back, gaping at the stump where its plague flail had been. The repulsive extremity thrashed at his feet like a wounded snake before the afflicted skin burst, spilling wriggling maggots over the gleaming floor.

The Ultramarine didn't wait for another opportunity. He dived forward, burying his sword deep within the beast's misshapen flesh – but the real damage was yet to come.

The Librarian opened his mind to the warp itself, channelling its terrible energies down the blade, into the creature's body. The aberration bellowed in pain, its humped back exploding in a cascade of brilliant, cleansing balefire. Corrupted matter and twisted bones splattered across the shrine as Vabion yanked his weapon free, dragging the mutant forward, down on its knees.

The monstrosity lurched forward, retching on the floor, a deluge of ichor splattering across Vabion's feet. The Librarian watched disgusted as the body shrank, like a deflating balloon.

'This is for Ritan,' Vabion barked, raising his sword high above his head, the pox-ridden traitor almost at its original size.

'Wait,' the pawn wailed, looking up at its would-be executioner. 'Tell us... tell *me* one thing.'

Vabion's eyes narrowed, wondering if this was a final, desperate trick.

'What do you want to know?' he growled, curiosity getting the better of him.

'Do you know my name?'

Vabion brought his sword down, severing the serf's neck. The body flopped into the mess on the floor, the head rolling to the side, eyes wide and unseeing.

'Yes,' Vabion uttered, finally feeling the pain that raged across his back. 'Your name was Falk.'

The Librarian sank to his knees, shuddering as his body fought the pestilence the plague flail had delivered.

'You are my protection,' he prayed, leaning on his sword as he had before. 'You are my deliverance. You...'

The sound of a voice singing made Vabion pause.

Not just any voice.

Falk's voice.

Vabion opened his eyes and found himself staring into the eyes of the serf, eyes very much alive, eyes filled with malice.

'Join the song,' the decapitated head giggled.

Vabion didn't have time to react. Fresh agony coursed through his back, not caused by Falk's previous attack, but by a new, unexpected weapon. As blood bubbled to his lips, the Ultramarine looked down in amazement to see a barbed spearhead sticking out of his chest, transfixing him to the floor.

Even as he cried out in pain and surprise, the Librarian heard the noise he had

dreaded from the moment he had set foot in the shrine over two hundred years ago. The sound of the Great Key beginning to shatter.

The force sword fell from his hands, clattering across the floor, as he watched heavily corroded boots stalk around Falk's body, stopping directly in front of him.

The Librarian tried to look up at the newcomer, but the spear twisted savagely in his chest. A vice-like pressure gripped his body, his vision bleaching.

'One of his hearts is stopping, master,' babbled the head. 'Are you pleased? Did we do well?'

Vabion gasped for a breath that would not come.

'You did wonderfully,' said a foul voice drenched in corruption.

'Will we receive our reward?' Falk asked hopefully.

'Without question.' One of the heavy boots reared up for a second, before stamping down on the serf's abscessed head, crushing it to a pulp. 'As will you, custodian. As will you.'

Vabion's body began to convulse, shaking as his augs fought the infections. He still couldn't see his tormentors, but knew what they were.

'Plague Marines,' Vabion sneered, naming his enemies, the first step to controlling them. 'Tainted by Nurgle. Cursed.'

His captor laughed, grinding the remains of Falk's skull beneath his boot.

'Not tainted, Librarian. Blessed.'



TEN

Kerna tipped the nose of the *Heart of Sorrow*, swooping towards the strange cloud Meleki had spotted on the horizon. It was much larger than he'd originally estimated, blossoming out across the surrounding fields even as he watched.

'*What are you seeing?*' Meleki's voice was heavy with interference over the vox-line.

'It's no fire,' Kerna reported, slowing the Stormtalon, 'but I'm not sure it's cloud either. What about you?'

'*It's the same here. Like a veil stretching across the grox farms.*'

'Any sign of livestock?'

'*They would be inside even if I could see, but there's no sign of activity. No workers, vehicles. Nothing at all.*'

Kerna made a decision. 'I am going to take the *Heart* down...'

'*Into the cloud?*'

The pilot nodded, even though his battle-brother couldn't see. 'The jet wash may clear the fog, let me see what is happening beneath.'

'*Understood.*'

Meleki was learning. Not long ago, he would have questioned the decision, suggested an alternative – but there must be no hesitation.

'Stand by.' Kerna hit the airbrakes, slowing the Stormtalon, while simultaneously reaching for the vector controls. It was a manoeuvre he had performed time and time again. As the retro-thrusters fired, the gunship's wings began to rotate with a clank of gears, the *Heart's* engines swivelling down to face the cloud itself. Within seconds the Stormtalon was hovering above its target, waiting for the command to drop. Kerna glanced out of the canopy and

began the descent; the thrusters roaring like a Gathis mountain lion.

He peered closer, glyphs flashing across his helm as the cogitator struggled to analyse the swirling mass.

It wasn't until the *Heart's* weapon stacks dipped beneath the cloud that Kerna realised his mistake. A black dot shot up from the whirling mass, heading straight for the cockpit. Kerna didn't have time to react until its oversized, hairy body slammed into the canopy, livid guts splattering in a wide arc. Then there were more of them, throwing themselves at the Stormtalon as if trying to smash their way through. They rattled against the canopy like rain, coming from all angles, an ever-growing mass of twitching corpses plastered across the glass.

Kerna swore beneath his breath, opening the engines, the sudden thrust parting the brume beneath him.

'It's not a cloud,' he barked into the vox. 'It's a swarm.'

'Say again...' Meleki's response crackled through his helm's earpiece. '*You're breaking up.*'

'Deathbottles.'

The *Heart* lurched, falling deeper into the insect throng. The *rat-a-tat-tat* against the canopy intensified, drowning out the warning bell that tolled as fault locator glyphs flashed across his vision. He twisted in his seat, seeing thick smoke belch from his port thruster. The infernal bugs had clogged the intake, the engines on the point of overheating.

'How can something so small cause so much damage?' he growled as the *Heart* bucked, before finally beginning a laboured ascent. The engines had cleared – but not enough.

'Meleki, I require assistance,' he reported as calmly as possible, trying to turn the Stormtalon to face Fort Kerberos as they rose. 'The *Heart* is compromised.'

'*Are you bailing out?*' Another textbook response. Straight to the point.

'Not yet, but...'

His voice trailed off as he cleared the swarm. The *Heart's* nose had dropped, leaving him staring down at the fields of rotting sorghum. The deathbottles were multiplying, spreading out over the decaying harvest, their drone unnaturally loud even above the troubled roar of the engines – but that wasn't all.

'*Kerna!*' Meleki called over the vox, alarmed by the sudden silence. '*Are you there?*'

'They're running,' Kerna reported, almost to himself. 'On the ground.'

'*Who's running?*'

'Survivors.'

‘From the settlement?’

‘Must be. No, wait...’

‘Kerna?’

‘Something’s not right. The way they’re moving...’

‘What do you mean?’

Kerna frowned. None of the survivors, if that is what they were, looked back as they ran. He’d expect at least a couple to steal one last glance of their infested home, of the horror they were fleeing. No one stopped to help their neighbour as they stumbled in the mud. They all looked forward, towards the fort, their arms and legs strangely uncoordinated, like marionettes dragged across a stage by an inexperienced puppeteer.

‘Dozens of them, probably more, moving as one.’

‘As a pack.’

‘They’re not human. Not any more.’

‘Then what are they?’

When Kerna replied, his voice was flat, without a glimmer of emotion, simply stating the facts, nothing more.

‘Plague Zombies. The settlement has been infected – and they’re heading for the bastion.’

Dain was in agony. Beautiful, exquisite agony. He barely noticed the air pressing down on him as the Space Marine’s gunship banked overhead; hardly felt the vibration of its stricken engines running through his bones.

All he wanted to do was run and sing.

The song was everything to him, driving him on, drowning everything else out. The grind of the thunder, the cries of the rest of the pack as their bodies continued to change; to purify in their decay. They were blessed. Truly blessed.

In front of him, a woman stumbled, almost sprawling to the ground before righting herself. In the past he would have stopped to catch her. No longer. He simply barged past, feeling brittle bones crack as she spiralled away. He didn’t look back as she tumbled in the muck of the perished crops, didn’t see the pack trample over her.

A memory tugged at his mind, somewhere beneath the song. He’d known the woman once. Yes, he was sure of it. Her skin had been strong and supple then, her head covered in lustrous curls.

He remembered her voice, the excited tremor when she had shared the news. Good news. The kind that made him pick her up and spin her around.

Laughter and joy, tempered with doubt and uncertainty. How would they cope? Would he be able to support them? Would he be a good... a good...

What was the word?

He couldn't remember.

Didn't care.

That life meant nothing to him now. There would be no more doubts, no more uncertainty – only the song and his god and the hunger. Throne, he was so hungry.

Soon, he wouldn't remember any words at all. He wouldn't be able to reason, to make choices, to have regrets. All he would have was his instinct – and the song. Always the song.

A rattle broke out, followed by screams. The sound should have meant something to him, should have inspired fear, should have him running for cover. For safety.

He couldn't remember why. He couldn't remember anything. His past. His name. Even the fact that he'd ever had one.

He looked up, confused, angry, scanning the skies with rheumy eyes. There it was, the source of the noise, a giant, metal bird, swooping angrily towards them.

The creature that used to be Dain Bridgeman howled at the blazing cannons, the sting of the gunship's shells ripping through his arms, his chest, knocking him onto his back.

There was no pain, even as the heel of the woman he had once known came crashing down on his face.

There was nothing, save for the song.

Artorius scowled at the hololith of Fort Kerberos on the table, weighing up the defensive possibilities. The structure was fairly standard. Four sloping ramparts, each cornered by large gun-turrets. The keep sat at the centre of the courtyard with the serf's barracks located near the north-west turret, opposite the squat building he used as his command quarters to the east. The Stormtalon hangars hugged the west wall, while the armoury and apothecarion were housed in heavily-armoured, one storey buildings in front of the keep's south-facing entrance. The entire place was ridiculously large for such a small company, and now he knew the reason. Kerberos wasn't there to protect them, but the shrine hidden beneath its foundations.

But would the defences be enough?

Kerna's voice sounded tinny over the vox, the report of the *Heart's* cannons

punctuating the pilot's report.

'Have engaged the damned. Engines holding. For now.'

'Take as many of them as you can,' Artorius ordered, extinguishing the hololith and marching from his chambers, the stink of rotting vegetation hitting him the moment he stepped into the courtyard. He flexed his hand, his chainfist revving in response to the gesture. He knew many considered the weapon unwieldy and slow, best left to Terminator units, but it had served him well in the past and would do so today, if the Emperor willed.

He thumbed the vox control, opening a channel to his other pilot. 'Brother Meleki, what is your situation?'

More gunfire filtered through the feed.

'En route to Kerna, Sir.'

'And the damned?'

'Streaming out of every deathbottle swarm.'

And heading for the bastion, Artorius thought. A rune flashed across his visor. Incoming message from Fort Garm, on the other side of the planet.

'Artorius.'

'This is Hura, Fort Garm.'

'I know who you are, brother,' Artorius barked impatiently, hurrying past the aircraft hangers. 'Report.'

'Our Stormtalons have been scrambled as ordered, sir.'

'E.T.A?'

'They will arrive at your destination in seventeen hours, local time.'

Seventeen hours. An eternity if the situation worsened. Artorius banished the thought. You worked with what resources you had.

'Any sign of contagion around Garm?'

'Negative sir. Have dispatched Land Speeders to sweep the area.'

'Excellent. Report back if...'

'ARTORIUS!'

The scream came from everywhere and nowhere. It felt as if the sergeant had taken a mace to his head, a burst of brilliant colour pinwheeling across his vision.

'Vabion,' he gasped, collapsing to his knees.

'Sir?' Hura buzzed in his vox. Artorius tried to swat his concerned voice away as if it was a bug. 'Sir, what has happened?'

And then the shout was gone, rushing past him like a sandstorm, scouring his mind, leaving him raw.

‘Kerberos, please respond.’

Artorius shook his head, trying to make sense of the world again. ‘It was Vabion. He cried out to me.’

‘I do not understand, sir...’

‘Neither do I, Hura. Artorius out.’

He killed the channel, pushing himself back up. He toggled his helm control.

‘Vabion, come in.’

There was no response, save for the thunder that rolled in the distance.

‘Repeat: Vabion. Are you there?’

Nothing. For all he knew, Artorius had just experienced the psyker’s death throes. Whatever it had been, the answer lay in this damned Key. The sergeant would find it and protect it, laying down his life in the process if necessary.

‘Duty forever,’ he murmured, running through the litany as he set off for the keep. ‘To our dying breath and beyond. Emperor protect me.’

Emperor protect us all.

Plasma-fire echoed around the courtyard. Artorius’s head snapped around. That had come from the serf’s barracks on the other side of the fort. He changed direction, circling around the central tower.

He wasn’t alone. Behind him, he heard footsteps. He glanced over his shoulder to see Brothers Blasius and Sedeca barrelling out of the hangers. A muscle on the side of his eye twitched. No sign of Ritan. Usually he would be the first into the fray, desperate to show his worth to the Chapter.

‘With me,’ he shouted, banishing the thought. They came around the keep, more plasma-fire greeting them, accompanied by the hiss of hydraulics and the cry of something not quite human.

‘By the warp,’ Artorius cursed as the scene came into view. It was Jerius, fighting what appeared to be a horde of daemons. Artorius looked again, taking in the thick cloaks wrapped around their bloated bodies. They were serfs, or rather they used to be, their bodies contorted out of shape. Limbs had been replaced by ribbed flails or curved blades fashioned out of their very bones. He counted eight, two of their execrable brethren already dead at the Techmarine’s feet. Jerius’s plasma-cutter, mounted on one of his whirling servo-arms, dispatched another, torching its swollen head.

His Doom Eagles didn’t wait for the order. They opened fire, their bolts peppering the monstrosities. Artorius brandished his chainfist, blades that could bite through a tank making short work of tainted flesh. As he ploughed through a second corrupted serf, he could hear Jerius praying. Impressive. Even in the

midst of battle, the Doom Eagle was petitioning the spirits that drove his artificial legs and servo-arms.

In response, the heavy pincers at the end of the servo-arm clamped around the head of one of the rampaging serfs and crushed it like a ripe fruit.

‘May all our prayers be granted,’ Artorius snarled as he used the butt of his bolt pistol to slam the head of another of the serfs into the wall. The former servant slid to the floor leaving a trail of pulsating brain matter. Artorius delivered two bolts into its head. You could never be sure with the damned.



ELEVEN

The temperature inside the shrine was stifling. Or maybe it was the fever. Vabion couldn't tell.

‘Librarian...’

All he knew was that the sound of that voice was making his head spin faster than before. That unnatural voice, like everything else in this Emperor-forsaken place. A profanity.

‘Look upon me.’

Even if Vabion wanted to, he doubted he could raise his head. The spear was still lodged in his chest, countless infections running through his veins. He had tried to call out telepathically to Artorius, to warn him, but the sadist holding the spear had twisted the shaft, the razor-sharp barbs slicing new wounds to add to his growing collection. The pain had been enough to cut short his cry for help, robbing him of his psychic abilities. He would never have believed it possible. For so long, his powers had defined who he was, how he served the Emperor. To be so reduced, that was the real agony, no matter what they did to his body. He was nearing the end, that much was certain. The moment would have to be chosen carefully.

‘Did you hear me, fool?’

‘I am no fool,’ Vabion hissed.

The figure standing in front of the Librarian laughed. A wet, unsettling sound.

‘Get him to his feet.’

Vabion screamed as the spear levered up against his damaged flesh. At the same time, hands grabbed his arms, the grip impossibly strong, bruising his skin even through his armour.

The Librarian was forced to face his tormentor for the first time.

A Chaos lord. The very words sickened him. A former captain who had turned away from the Golden Throne to follow the dark path that led only to damnation.

Vabion looked the traitor up and down. His body was a bloated sack of necrotic flesh, encased in a rusty mass of armour that dripped with the acrid discharge of ulcers and boils. His bowels were exposed, writhing like glistening worms, and he wore no helm, proudly displaying his wrecked face for all to see. The Champion's right cheek was ripped away to reveal rows of decaying teeth hanging from a yellowed jaw. While his withered eye sockets were empty, it was obvious that the heretic could still see – another daemonic gift from his foul Lord.

'We have much to be grateful to you for, do we not, Pestilan?' the Champion said, glancing over Vabion's shoulder. He heard the bearer of the spear snigger, the laugh touching his mind as well as his ear. So, this Pestilan was a sorcerer, the Chaotic equivalent of the Librarians.

More information. More power.

'Your cooperation was vital,' said the Champion.

'I did nothing to help you,' Vabion spat.

'Granted, Falk did well.' The Chaos lord paused, dismissively indicating Ritan's petrifying corpse with the blade of his War Scythe. 'The death of your brother weakened the seal, but still wasn't enough to let us break through. For that we needed another sacrifice. A righteous one. You did the rest.'

Vabion wasn't going to rise to the bait, even as he watched something push itself from the Champion's gut and scamper up its master's chest to perch on the Chaos lord's spiked pauldron. It was a Nurgling, a diabolic familiar created in the image of Nurgle himself. The scabrous creature plucked a strip of meat from the Champion's ruined cheek, crammed it into its mouth and began to chew.

'You will never win,' Vabion promised, spitting in the Champion's face. The spittle pooled in one of the empty eye sockets. The fiend leant forward, nearly dislodging the Nurgling from his shoulder.

'I already have. Show him.'

Fingers pressed against Vabion's throbbing forehead, sharp nails digging into his flesh. Vabion tried to resist but Pestilan was too strong, pushing past his defences, plunging him into another waking dream. A nightmare.

The shrine vanished, Champion and all, replaced by a vision of Orath stretching beneath him. But this time it was different. This time Vabion wasn't flying, but transfixed to a gigantic tree by Pestilan's spear, his body lifeless,

unable to move.

‘Look upon your world,’ Pestilan hissed into Vabion’s ears, into his mind. ‘See what you have done.’

‘I will not look,’ Vabion insisted, although he had no choice.

‘You must.’

He felt his head pushed forward, forcing him to gaze upon the planet spinning far below. As before, the blight was raging through the crops, carving paths through the withered sorghum. The channels joining together, forming giant rings in the fields – the sigil of Nurgle, writ large across an entire continent.

The air was full of music, the disciples of the unclean one singing a tune as malformed as the god they worshipped – and there he was, lounging on a vast throne of melted bones and screaming corpses, Grandfather Nurgle himself, a mound of unholy, gurgling flesh. At his right side stood the Champion, looming over the ruin of Fort Kerberos, War Scythe in hand.

Nothing could have prepared Vabion for the sight of Nurgle in all his infernal glory, not his years of training, his devotion to the Golden Throne. The Librarian sobbed in anguish, sickened to his very soul. If he could have gouged out his own eyes, he would have done it gladly. In that moment, everything withered and died. His beliefs. Values. Hopes for the future. Tainted forever. Rotting away faster than the crops in the fields far below. He had failed. Failed his primarch. Failed his Emperor. Only madness remained. Damnation.

‘Do you see, Space Marine?’ Pestilan jeered. ‘Do you see Lord Naracoth’s victory?’

Vabion couldn’t breathe. Couldn’t even remember his name. No. It would not end this way. He was an Ultramarine. Courage and Honour. That was his creed. Nothing could take that away from him. Not Pestilan. Not the Champion. Not Nurgle himself.

‘What did you call him?’ he wheezed, desperate to find a fixed point in the midst of the delirium. ‘What did you call your Champion?’

‘Naracoth,’ came the rapturous response.

‘Naracoth,’ Vabion repeated, rolling the word around his tongue.

Names were power. Names could bind.

Names could kill.

‘Remember it,’ the sorcerer gloated, ‘for it will be your doom.’

In front of them, Naracoth raised his Scythe, viscous slime dripping from its twisted handle, and brought the weapon down, cleaving the very air in two. Vabion could only scream as the daemons of the warp rushed out of the rift,

creatures no words could describe, no eyes should ever see.

‘No!’ he yelled, pushing against the gnarled back of the tree.

‘Now you feel it,’ Pestilan shrieked in his ear. ‘Now you feel fear.’

But Vabion wasn’t finished yet. His scream hadn’t been of terror, but of defiance.

‘I am an Ultramarine,’ he bellowed, shoving back, not in the vision, but in the shrine. ‘I feel no fear.’

Pestilan’s mistake had been linking minds. He had sought to dominate, to mentally cripple, but all he had done was provide an anchor.

The sorcerer wasn’t prepared for Vabion to act in the real world, but the Librarian had used the vision as an opportunity to steady his cramped limbs, to prepare. He thrust back, pushing himself along the length of the spear, ignoring the explosion of pain in his chest. The back of his skull smashed into Pestilan’s helm, causing the sorcerer to stumble, out of surprise rather than pain.

Not that it mattered. The result was the same. Vabion grabbed the shaft of the weapon and pulled it clear of his chest. In as fluid a movement as he could muster, the Ultramarine twisted, shoving the spearhead into the neck of one of the Plague Marines that had held him, before jabbing the pole-arm back into the exposed chest of the other. The foot of the staff sank deep into the traitor’s peccant flesh, bursting out of its back.

Out of the corner of his eye, Vabion saw Naracoth’s War Scythe flashing down towards him. He twisted the spear, throwing the Chaos Marine into the weapon’s path. The Scythe’s blade sliced into the brute, but Vabion didn’t have the chance to celebrate. Behind him, Pestilan pulled his shattered helm away with one hand, throwing the other into the air. Eldritch energy blasted from his splayed fingers, slamming into Vabion. The Librarian bellowed in pain and crashed to the floor, his body writhing under the unholy onslaught.

Never had he felt such pain. Every cell in his body boiled, the power of the immaterium flowed freely through his mind. Convulsing, Vabion bit clear through his tongue, his limbs caught in a macabre dance.

‘That’s enough,’ Naracoth ordered, Pestilan obeying immediately. Vabion moaned as his body continued thrashing of its own accord. Choking, he could only watch as Naracoth and his Marines loomed over him. The Plague Marine that had received the blow from the Scythe kicked him in the side, causing him to spit blood over the polished floor.

‘I said enough,’ Naracoth boomed, smashing the Marine across its helm with the back of a spiked gauntlet, drawing another peel of insane laughter from the

Nurgling.

Vabion rolled onto his back and stared up at them, unable to speak.

‘By Mortarion, Pestilan,’ the Champion rumbled, ‘this one is strong-willed. He will make a fine sacrifice, don’t you think?’

The sorcerer merely nodded, tumescent maggots dropping down from a face the like of which Vabion had ever seen. Pestilan’s countenance was a mangled knot of gnashing teeth and flashing eyes, set in a bed of rotting muscle. The grubs showered down on the Librarian, wriggling into his mouth and gnawing at his eyes.

‘Bring him,’ Naracoth commanded, and the Plague Marines grabbed Vabion’s armour. Pestilan stepped aside to let them drag the Librarian up the steps to the Key, his head smacking painfully against the crystal he had studied for so long.

‘You fought well,’ the Champion admitted. ‘As I knew you would. I suspect you even believed you could win.’

The Nurgling nearly fell from Naracoth’s shoulder in excitement.

‘That was necessary. Despair can only prosper once hope is extinguished – and now all hope is gone.’

Naracoth raised his Scythe, bringing the foot of the staff over Vabion’s eye. The Librarian tried to wriggle away, but was paralysed, staring up at the sigil of Nurgle carved into the bottom of the corroded metal.

‘One final sacrifice,’ Naracoth roared as he brought the staff crashing down through Vabion’s eye.

As he died, Vabion couldn’t feel the staff crack through the back of his skull. He couldn’t see the blood running freely around the seal or hear the Key begin to crack. He wasn’t even aware of the hymns of praise Naracoth and his traitorous band sang to their Lord.

But he did experience something he had never known during his long life.

Vabion felt fear.



TWELVE

To the east of Kerberos, The *Heart of Sorrow* banked, its assault cannons carving up the Plague Zombies that scrambled towards the fort. Inside the cockpit, Kerna watched in grim satisfaction as his guns did their work, tearing apart the rotting attackers.

‘That’s it,’ he coaxed, pulling back on the stick, ‘hold it together.’

Up to now the pilot’s prayers had been answered. The *Heart*’s engines, though sluggish, had cleared themselves, the gunship turning as he climbed. And not before time.

Kerna’s eyes rested on the horizon.

‘More of you,’ he said, taking in the shambling figures closing in from all four points of the compass. ‘Has no one on this planet escaped infection?’

As the Stormtalon came about, his eyes rested on the nearest cloud of deathbottles.

‘By the Emperor...’

The swarms were behaving differently now, the insects flying around and around as one. He checked his auspex.

‘In the same direction,’ he muttered, fascinated. ‘They’re moving in the same direction. Like a formation.’

He gunned the *Heart* towards the cloud, trying to get a closer look at the vortex the flies were forming.

‘No. Not a vortex. It’s a gateway!’

The *Heart of Sorrow* slewed to the left as, without warning, daemons flocked out of the portal the deathbottles had formed.

‘Rot Flies,’ Kerna hissed, pulling the Stormtalon into their path and opening

up his cannons, cutting down the first of the daemoniac attackers.

Kerna had heard tales of Rot Flies, although the reality was worse than he had imagined. The monstrous insects were enormous, their bodies distended by foul gases, coarse hairs erupting around deep gashes that exposed their slick innards to the elements. Two sets of ragged, decomposing wings propelled them forwards and each carried one of Nurgle's foot soldiers – a Plaguebearer – on their hunched backs. The infernal riders hung onto chitinous saddles, waving corroded plague knives and glaring at Kerna through his canopy with frenzied, cyclopean eyes.

He weaved expertly through the swarm, cheering as two more of the nightmarish steeds erupted in bursts of emerald slime, the Plaguebearers tumbling screaming to the ground.

‘That's the best you can do?’

A Rot Fly dropped down from above, spewing digestive juices from its long, pus-covered proboscis. The stuff splashed against the cockpit, hissing alarmingly. The canopy itself frothed, bubbling where the foul concoction of juices had made contact.

‘Like acid,’ Kerna grunted, glancing to his lascannon stack. The silver ceramite was boiling there too.

‘So, deadlier than I gave you credit for. No matter. The *Heart* has never let me down yet.’

He glanced at the rear display, finding more Rot Flies gaining fast. He counted ten at least, their tattered wings blurring as they bore down on him.

‘Fast too,’ the pilot commented. ‘But how quickly can you react?’

He slammed on the airbrakes, the Rot Flies streaking past, not expecting the sudden deceleration.

‘Thought so,’ he grinned, targeting the lascannons. Three more of the daemons dissolved into flames as his shots found their mark. But the celebrations were short lived. Suddenly, Rot Flies were everywhere, not just behind or in front, but coming from the sides as well. They may not have had artillery but they could manoeuvre faster than the Stormtalon, the purulence they spat from their snouts scarring the *Heart's* armour with every pass. Warning runes flashed across his helm, as the acid reached vital systems, the acrid stench of electric fires filling the cockpit.

He looked up from the controls just a moment too late to react, and ploughed into a Rot Fly head on. The gunship shuddered with the impact, the fault locators immediately reporting that the communicator sensor array had been damaged.

The burning smell intensified as the caustic ichor went to work, another Plaguebearer steering his mount in for a collision course. Kerna reacted initiatively, skidding the gunship to the side, avoiding contact – but only by a whisper.

‘You can’t shoot me down, so you’ll ram me, eh?’

Back on Gathis II, Kerna’s flight instructor had maintained that weaker guns could never win a fight. These obscene creatures were setting out to disprove that fact. He threw the stick to the right, narrowly missing another suicidal bombardment, but found himself blinded as the *Heart* smashed directly into a Rot Fly.

The bulging abdomen split, spilling its steaming viscera across the canopy. Kerna found himself staring at the face of one of the partly-digested victims, plastered against the already smoking screen. His view blocked, the Stormtalon bucked as it clipped another attacker. Kerna slammed his fist down on the canopy release control, expecting the reinforced glass to jettison, but was rewarded only with the clunk of jammed locks. Cursing, the Doom Eagle pounded the canopy frame, the stink of the Fly’s corpse breaking into the cockpit as the cover started to come away. Then, with the sound of squealing plasteel, the canopy was wrenched away, the sudden inrush shoving Kerna back into his harness.

The Doom Eagle sent the *Heart* into a sharp climb. A Rot Fly shrieked by, disgorging the contents of its stomach into the open cockpit. The sludge sizzled against his power armour, the unholy taint already starting to eat its way through, but Kerna barely noticed, bringing another Plague Drone into his sights and squeezing off a fresh salvo. If he was going to go down, he would take as many of the fiends with him as he could.

The Stormtalon inverted, looping around before levelling off. In front of him, a line of Rot Flies dropped down, converging on his position.

‘This is it, then.’ There was no way he could hit all four at once, but could beat them at their own game and knock them out of the sky. Kerna threw the *Heart* into a dizzying spin, guns and lascannons blazing, his yells of defiance lost in the wind.

All four daemons erupted into a mist of blood and guts. Pulling out of the spin, Kerna’s eyes followed the sound of engines. It was the *Endurance*, the last of the sun glinting off the gunship’s pitted silver hull.

Kerna thumbed the vox controls, switching from the *Heart*’s communication system to a local direct channel.

‘My comms relay is down,’ he called to Meleki, taking out another Rot Fly as they spoke. There was no need for thanks. His battle-brother would know he was grateful. ‘I need you to call all this in.’

‘As you command.’

Below them Rot Flies continued to belch out of the Deathbottle, the sky darkening at preternatural speed. The crops were all but gone now, the land carpeted in a grimy morass.

‘It’s no good,’ reported Meleki, the alarm noticeable in his voice. *‘No response from base.’*

‘Then we need to return. Whatever is happening, the fort is at the centre of it.’

Meleki didn’t respond. Instead, he just followed Kerna’s lead, turning back to base. Glowering at the charging hordes, Kerna couldn’t help but recall his flippancy over the crops.

One field of cereal is much the same as the next for me.

And he’d thought Ritan naive. If he survived the day, he prayed the Emperor would forgive him.

Outside the serf’s barracks, the battle had gone the way Artorius had expected. Strong though the corrupted servants had become, they were still no match for superior Space Marine firepower. Artorius turned, gunning down the last deviant. His prayer of thanks was tempered by the realisation that greater challenges lay ahead.

A voice broke through his helm: *‘Garm to Artorius.’*

‘I hear you, Hura.’

‘Sir,’ the Doom Eagle replied. *‘It’s our auguries. They’re going off the scale. Warp energies like I’ve never seen.’*

‘In your location?’

‘No sir, yours. Our readings show massive psychic disruption in orbit.’

Artorius looked into the darkened skies. ‘Let me guess, directly above Kerberos.’

‘Affirmative, sir.’

‘The Key must be failing.’

‘Key, sir?’

‘Ready yourself Hura. We face a major daemonic incursion.’ Out of the corner of his eye he could see Blasius and Sedeca glance at each other. This couldn’t have been a surprise to them. ‘We must stop the forces of Chaos, whatever the cost.’

'We are dead already.' The response was automatic, as training dictated.

'The Emperor will protect us as we protect him.' Artorius killed the channel and turned to Jerius.

'This Key?' the Techmarine prompted.

Artorius checked his bolter. 'It holds the rift at bay. There is another beneath Garm. Vabion was their custodian.'

'Was?' Blasius picked up.

'Is,' Artorius corrected himself, although he had no way of knowing for sure.

He felt a surge of anger. None of this would have been happening if the truth about Orath hadn't been hidden away. If they had known, they could have prepared. They would have seen the corruption in the serfs. Noticed the signs. Could this have been what the Ruinous Powers had planned all along? Tricking good people into believing they were doing the right thing. From the farmer who explored the sinkhole to Vabion and the Ultramarine hierarchy. They'd all been deceived.

'The Key is located in a chamber beneath the keep,' Artorius explained. 'We must assume we'll encounter opposition.'

'Sergeant?' It was Sedeca, looking out towards the west walls. 'Listen.'

Artorius followed the Space Marine's gaze. Sedeca was right. There was something there, a low keening hum, but not just one voice.

There were hundreds.

'With me.'

The Doom Eagles sprinted over to the battlements, Artorius sucking air through his teeth when he saw what was approaching. The plains were teeming with Nurgle's decaying followers, what little sorghum remained trampled into sludge beneath the relentless march of the baying horde.

'Sir,' Jerius cut in, servo-arms swivelling around to point out small blots in the sky. 'They're not alone.'

'Plague Drones,' Artorius sneered. 'Distance?'

'First wave, half a kilometre at best,' the Techmarine estimated.

'But what is that noise?' Sedeca asked.

'They're singing,' Blasius replied in disbelief.

'If that's what you can call it.' Jerius strode over to the heavy-duty lascannon mounted on a nearby bulwark. He crouched down, his artificial legs hissing, and revealed a screen. Tapping the controls, he reported what Artorius had already guessed.

'Scanners show that we are being approached from all sides. The damned

number in the thousands.’

‘The entire population of the northern hemisphere,’ Blasius commented flatly.

‘Against four of us,’ added Sedeca.

Jerius rose to his feet. ‘Sounds like good odds to me.’

Artorius allowed himself a grim smile. ‘Careful Jerius, that almost sounds like a joke.’

The Techmarine cocked his head as if such a thing would never do. ‘Sir, I do have a suggestion.’

‘I thought you might.’

‘If I can slave the other gun-turrets to this cogitator...’

‘You can defend the battlements alone?’ Artorius saw where his Techmarine was going with this.

Jerius nodded. ‘Leaving the three of you to secure the Key.’

Artorius placed a hand on the Techmarine’s shoulder, half expecting him to shrug it off.

‘Do your duty,’ the sergeant said, indicating for Blasius and Sedeca to follow him. ‘For Gathis II.’

‘For the Imperium,’ the Techmarine responded as his battle-brothers sprinted away. Without giving the approaching hordes another glance, Jerius got to work.



THIRTEEN

An experienced Space Marine didn't need to be a psyker to develop a sixth sense. Artorius had no idea what was happening in the shrine, but knew they shouldn't just barge straight into the keep. It wasn't hesitation – just prudence.

Scouting around the serf's barracks he indicated for Sedeca and Blasius to continue over the courtyard.

'Sedeca, take up position behind the armoury,' the sergeant breathed over a closed vox-channel. 'Blasius, you loop around and wait at the east wall of the keep.'

'Yes sir,' the Doom Eagles replied in unison, following his orders without question.

His men away, Artorius flattened himself against the barracks and peered around at the heavy tower doors. They were still shut. Excellent. He would have Blasius enter and check the area, covered by Sedeca and himself. Once they were sure it was clear, they would proceed inside the keep and find this Key. A simple manoeuvre.

'Sir, the doors.'

Sedeca's warning changed matters immediately. As Artorius watched, the entrance to the keep swung open. He balled his fist, waiting to see who would appear through the opening gap, that same sixth sense telling him that neither Vabion nor Ritan would step into the light.

'Emperor's teeth,' Sedeca cursed quietly in his ear. Artorius shared the sentiment, his scowl increasing as a heinous figure lumbered from the tower. Its filthy armour was eaten away both by rust and the juices that ran freely from ulcerous growths that squeezed through every chink. Even from this distance,

the sergeant could see a haze of insects buzzing around the solitary black horn that jutted up from its grimy helm.

The mark of the Death Guard.

The traitor wasn't alone. Three more Plague Marines swaggered into the light, the largest wielding a War Scythe nearly twice its height, a severed head impaled on the weapon's long spike. The discoloured skin was covered in welts and a bloody hole gaped where an eye should have been, but there was no mistaking the slack features.

Vabion.

Artorius vowed he would bring the Chaos Champion down himself.

The sound of las-fire cut through the air, first from Jerius's direction on the wall and then around the fort as the other gun-turrets automatically began to fire. The Techmarine had done it.

In front of them, the Champion turned to a sorcerer with a devilish mass of teeth and eyes for a face. Artorius watched as the Plague Lord jabbed a finger towards the western ramparts. The sorcerer bowed low, before stalking off towards the sound of Jerius's guns. Another command from the Champion sent the other two Plague Marines trudging off in the direction of the Eastern turrets.

That's it, thought Artorius. Go and look for the Doom Eagles you expect to find behind the guns. Leave your master standing alone.

Power armour glinted across the other side of the courtyard. Perfect. Blasius was now in position, pressed flat against the wall of the keep. Artorius watched with satisfaction as the Doom Eagle expertly tracked one of the trudging Plague Marines with his bolter, waiting for the word.

'Hold your position,' the sergeant instructed into the vox. 'Wait for the enemy to separate. Jerius, you're about to have company.'

'Understood,' came the Techmarine's level reply, accompanied by regular blasts of las-fire.

Artorius regarded the Champion, standing alone by the keep doors, scythe in hand.

What about you? Artorius wondered, his eyes narrowing. What are you waiting for? Defending the shrine?

Something splashed across Artorius's vision, a foul stench pervading his helm. He glanced up, cursing as he locked eyes with a Nurgling that was peering down at him from the barracks roof, bile dripping down from its giggling maw. The fleshy demon tumbled forwards, dropping down onto Artorius's face before the sergeant could even raise his bolter. It clawed at the Space Marine, stupidly

trying to gnaw its way through his helm, needle-like teeth snapping off in the process. If any of those fangs found naked flesh they would deliver a multitude of poxes, but were thankfully no match for ceramite.

Artorius grabbed the foul creature's flabby back, his armoured fingers sinking into its soft flesh, and smashed it against the wall. The second blow splattered the thing's internal organs across the brickwork, but the demon's shrieks had already betrayed him. Artorius heard Naracoth bark an order and the wall of the barracks began to disintegrate under an onslaught of plague-infused bolts. Shaking steaming blood from his fingers, Artorius waited for a break in the volley before dropping around the corner to return fire. His bolts found their target, fragments of corroded power armour and lumps of mouldering flesh leaping from the Plague Marine. The traitorous scum didn't even slow. Impervious to pain, it merely lumbered forward, death blazing from the ancient-looking bolter pistols it held in both hands.

Across the courtyard, Sedeca had engaged another of the Death Guards, but to similar effect. The Marine spouted endless goutts of flame from a plasma-blaster, seemingly unaware that it was under fire from the Doom Eagle. No matter how many times it was hit, the traitor continued tramping towards Sedeca, horny scabs appearing over its wounds mere seconds after they'd been inflicted. This was impossible. How did you fight an enemy that didn't feel pain?

'I'm taking the Chaos lord,' Blasius announced matter-of-factly across the vox, rushing towards Naracoth, chainsword held high. *'For the Emperor!'*

Artorius was forced back around the corner of the barracks, but didn't need to see the outcome of the attack. Blasius's war cry immediately degenerated into a cry of pain as the Champion buried his War Scythe into the Doom Eagle's shoulder. For a second the terrible shriek of metal against ceramite shrieked through Artorius's helm before the vox-line abruptly cut off.

The sergeant couldn't respond to his battle-brother's death, although he vowed he would personally carve Blasius's name onto the obsidian Walls of the Fallen, back on Gathis II – if he survived the day himself.

With teeth gritted, he threw himself around the wall and fired directly into the Plague Marine's path.

At the battlements, Jerius couldn't prepare himself for the attack he knew was coming. All around him, lascannons fired, slaved to his own gun-turret, the air burning with the metallic ozone of every salvo.

All the time he muttered prayers to the dozens of machine-spirits who were

working in unison to protect Kerberos. He was the line that couldn't be crossed and nothing could distract him from his task.

With an inhuman bellow, a Rot Fly swooped down towards the Techmarine, spitting blazing skulls from its filthy proboscis. Jerius twisted the turret, a searing barrage of cobalt energy ripping through its putrid guts. The Plaguebearer on its back screamed in fury as steed and mount crashed down into the bulwark and tumbled away to the ground below.

Something clattered across the floor at his feet. Jerius glanced down, his eyes widening as he realised what he was looking at. A pulsing, mummified head grinned up at him, the mouth and eyes sewn shut, luminescent maggots wriggling free from its shrunken nose and ears.

'Blight grenade,' the Techmarine cried out, before the concussive blast knocked him from the turret. Jerius smashed against the battlement, choking as noisome fumes overcame his helm's ventilator, spores from the grenade already eating their way through his power armour.

Another fireball blossomed at his feet, sending up a bloom of infected shrapnel and toxin-heavy smoke. Jerius reached for his bolter, but his cybernetic legs jolted, pushing him away from his weapon. Pain lanced through his body as his implants began to short out, his systems disrupted by the grenade's corrosive forces.

Through the miasma, he could make out a figure. The sorcerer known as Pestilan stood, plague-spear in hand, half a dozen blight grenades spiralling around his skeletal form, held in the air by unaccountable power.

With a flick of the sorcerer's hand, two of the death heads shot towards Jerius – but this time the Techmarine was ready. His plasma-cutter swept down, igniting both of the grenades in turn. At the same time, the Techmarine's grabber arm jerked to the floor, knocking his bolter towards his waiting hand.

He might not be able to walk, but he could still fight. Ignoring the cramp shooting up his arm, Jerius grabbed his bolt pistol and raised it towards his attacker.

Six shots thudded into the sorcerer's shoulder – but Pestilan didn't fall. Instead he laughed – a noise like a knife on glass – as if the injuries had only tickled.

'My turn,' the Plague Marine hissed, balefire flaring in his multiple eyes. Dark energies crackled from his crooked fingers, slamming into the Techmarine's chest.

Sedeca broke from cover and charged straight at the plasma-gun wielding Plague

Marine. As Artorius continued swapping bolts with his own attacker, the Doom Eagle swung his chainsword, its teeth carving into the three skulls emblazoned on the Death Guard's pauldron.

The blade stuck fast and deep in the brute's shoulder, giving the pain-insensitive traitor the opportunity it needed. Even as Sedeca slammed his fist into the Death Guard's breached helm, struggling to pull his sword free, the Plague Marine brought the barrel of his plasma-gun to the Doom Eagle's head. The traitor fired, Sedeca's helm disappearing in the burst of flame. The fire, fuelled by unhallowed magic, melted the Space Marine's helm clean away, burning through flesh and bone in seconds.

Sedeca's body dropped and the Plague Marine turned, bringing his weapon to bear on Artorius, Sedeca's chainsword still wedged deep in its shoulder. The sergeant twisted in time with the monster, aiming and pulling the trigger in a movement honed by centuries of combat. Across the courtyard, the bolts found their mark, the Plague Marine's head dissolving into a cloud of bone and decaying brain matter – but still the fiend didn't stop. It staggered forward three, maybe four steps before it finally realised it was dead and tumbled forward, landing in a loathsome heap beside Sedeca's corpse.

The sergeant switched targets again, focusing on the ponderous Plague Marine that was traipsing ever nearer to his own position. The bolts punched deep, shattering the already chipped power armour and detaching the arm, bolter and all, just below the elbow. The traitor didn't even flinch, continuing to fire from its remaining gun.

Artorius retreated around the corner, ready for another chance to attack, and came face-to-face with a hefty figure charging towards him.

Naracoth's War Scythe sliced through the air, but Artorius reacted as if he'd been prepared for the attack all along. He fainted back against the wall, firing into the Plague Champion's chest at point-blank range even as the crackling blade smashed harmlessly into the floor in front of him. Ichor sprayed from the wound, splashing over Artorius, burning through his armour.

Naracoth didn't hesitate. Swinging up the Scythe, he smashed the foot of the staff into Artorius's helm. The faceplate flattened the sergeant's nose, blood bursting across his face like juice from squashed fruit.

A second blow, to his stomach, sent him pitching forwards, the dark energies that flowed through the staff shooting directly into his guts. His bolter skittering across the floor, Artorius crashed to his knees, expecting his head to be cleaved from his shoulders at any moment.



FOURTEEN

Jerius could no longer make out detail, only shapes, like shadows in the mist – but the pathogens from the blight grenade hadn't affected his hearing.

He heard Pestilan's cry of triumph, imagined the sorcerer charging forward, spear low like a lance. He had even calculated the exact moment the spearhead would pierce his chest.

While he couldn't match the Plague Marine's depraved tolerance, Jerius had lived with pain every second of every day since the Thunderhawk crash. He had used his own chainsword to remove his trapped legs, cauterised the stumps with his plasma-cutter. The bionic limbs, which he had fitted himself, burned with every step. What was Pestilan's attack but one more torment to add to the collection?

As the spear burst from his back, the Techmarine brought down his servo-arm as he'd planned, the pincers closing tight. His implants immediately registered resistance and Jerius knew he had Pestilan's neck in his grip.

The sorcerer responded by twisting the spear, but the pain barely registered anymore. Jerius knew he was going into shock, his system shutting down, but even now the Techmarine didn't despair. This was more than a Doom Eagle's acceptance of the inevitable. Jerius wasn't just a Space Marine, he was a disciple of the Machine-God. The flesh was weak, but the machine was strong. His cold metal pincers turned, forcing Pestilan's head over. There was a satisfying crack as the sorcerer's vertebrae finally shattered, and the pressure on the spear lessened as Pestilan fell away.

Releasing the sorcerer's body, the servo-arm found the spear and, closing around the shaft, ripped it free. This time Jerius did scream, the weapon

inflicting more damage on the way out than it had caused going in. He sank back, exhausted, but he could still make out the sounds of the unclean hordes. They had started to scale the walls, avoiding the lascannons. Barely even able to draw breath, the Techmarine turned his plasma-cutter on the first Plague Zombie to scramble over the top of the battlements.

His sergeant's order played through his clouding mind.

Do your duty. For Gathis II.

The stink of burning flesh filled the already pungent air.

For the Imperium.

'Where is your relic of a god now?' Naracoth jeered as he raised his scythe high for the killing blow.

'Nearer than yours,' Artorius screamed, twisting up and slamming his hand against the Plague Champion's belt. The Chaos lord looked down, the skin around his empty sockets widening as he spied the krak grenade Artorius had magnalocked into place.

The sergeant was already rolling out of the way when the charge went off, throwing Naracoth back into the barracks wall.

Artorius didn't wait to see if he had killed his foe. Retrieving his bolter, he sprung to his feet, straight into the path of the oncoming Plague Marine. Infected bolter-fire strafed his back as he barged headfirst into the traitor, his shoulders sinking into its entropic guts.

'You may not feel pain,' Artorius roared, the force of the impact causing the Chaos Marine to tumble back, 'but you can still fall.'

The brute crashed to the ground, firing bolts wildly in an arc. Thudding a knee into its chest, Artorius punched down into the Marine's face, the chainfist's blades cutting deep into cancerous flesh. With supreme effort, the Doom Eagle dragged the whirring teeth down, through the Plague Marine's neck, slicing its chest cavity open.

'Get up from this, turncoat,' Artorius snarled as bloated flies burst from the wound. They whined around the sergeant's face but he didn't swat them away. Instead he dragged the chainfist free and took the Plague Marine's head off with a final flourish.

The corrupted warrior bucked beneath Artorius's weight before finally falling silent, diseased blood oozing across the flagstones.

Jerius thanked the Emperor for sparing him the sight of the aberrations that were

pouring into the fort. The noise and the smell was bad enough – perhaps his blindness was a blessing after all.

The Techmarine had managed to haul himself up, hanging desperately onto the turret. His bolter was back in his hand and he was spraying the side of the bulwark with indiscriminate gunfire, his plasma-cutter blazing above him. Hearing the unmistakable drone of a Plaguebearer, Jerius swung his servo-arm down. He grabbed the daemon and swung it like a writhing club, knocking its unholy brethren from the battlements. He would have smiled grimly if his features weren't now permanently slack, paralysed by the diseases that were ripping his body apart.

Heat surged up his spine and for one glorious moment the stench of the damned was overpowered by the biting tang of burning wire. He tried to shift, but his right leg was completely frozen. He was immobile, incapable of even dragging himself forward. The end was now inevitable, but he had been dead ever since he'd endured the aspirant trails deep within the Razorpeaks. Memories flooded back involuntarily. The sound of his fellow candidates screaming as they plummeted into the lava-flows below the Eyrie, the numbing pain of the flesh flaying from his bones as he struggled through passages lined with thorns as sharp as butcher knives. Every Doom Eagle was born in a frenzy of pain – the fact they died in agony was proof that the universe was nothing if not consistent.

'We are Doom Eagles,' the Techmarine slurred, 'We are dead alr–'

The chant was cut short by Pestilan's plague knife slipping beneath Jerius's helm and slicing through the Techmarine's throat. Jerius gargled blood and gave up his spirit, slumping forward, his legs still frozen in place.

Pestilan pulled the knife free as Jerius fell, baying in victory, his vile head sat forevermore at an unnatural angle from the rest of its body. The sorcerer threw his arms up high, praising Nurgle as the zombie hordes surged over the battlements, scrambling towards the keep.

'Praise the Lord of Disease, Death and Destruction,' the Plague Marine exalted, looking sideways into the heavens and seeing two Stormtalons descending from blackened skies. The lead gunship's cannons blazed like angry fireflies and Pestilan's psalm was left unfinished, his virulent body ripped apart in a blitz of las-fire.

Artorius pushed himself up from the Plague Marine's corpse as the Stormtalons roared above.

‘Kerna,’ he yelled, activating his vox, his eyes darting over the crowds of zombies clamouring towards him. ‘Clear the infestation. Do you copy?’

He received nothing but static. The Stormtalons had overshot Kerberos and were already pitching around. They didn’t need any further orders; the pilots would know what to do.

Casting his eyes around to catch a glance of Naracoth, Artorius sprinted towards the keep’s open doors. The Plague Champion was nowhere to be seen, but Artorius wasn’t naive enough to believe that it was dead.

The air filled with the rattle of the Stormtalons’ guns as Kerna and Meleki performed another fly past, the ground itself bucking beneath the bombardment.

Artorius was thrown from his feet. No, this was more than the Stormtalons’ attack. The tremors were too intense. It was as if something was forcing itself up from beneath the fort.

From the rift that ran through the planet.

From the warp itself.

Yelling in defiance, Artorius leapt towards the doors as the courtyard buckled. Shattered stones erupted into the air and the sergeant was thrown forward. He could see gigantic, rust-covered talons bursting from beneath the slabs.

With a crack, Artorius hit the heavy tower doors and slid dazed to the now uneven floor.

‘Say again, Meleki?’

Kerna could barely make out what his fellow pilot was yelling across the vox, the Doom Eagle’s voice distorted by the waves of white noise which squealed through the speakers.

He had a suspicion that his battle-brother was congratulating him on the amount of Plague Zombies and Plaguebearers he had mowed down during their last pass.

‘Stow the celebrations,’ Kerna muttered beneath his breath, throwing the *Heart* into a turn. The two Stormtalons peeled away from each other as they came around, warning bells lost in the rushing wind of the open cockpit. ‘We’re a long way from saving the day yet.’

They were the last words Kerna would ever utter.

In the *Endurance*, Meleki pulled hard on his stick.

‘Kerna, did the sergeant make it?’ he shouted, fighting against the sheer force of the gees the gunship was pulling. ‘Kerna?’

There was no response.

‘Channel’s finally fried,’ Meleki told himself, the pressure of the turn bearing down at him. The Stormtalon levelled off as it came about. ‘No need for the vox. We can do this in our sleep, eh Kerna.’

They had practised the manoeuvre time and time again, coming in at 90 degrees, Kerna slightly ahead. They’d cross, turn and repeat the tactic, firing directly into the ground forces with every pass.

The damned didn’t stand a chance.

Until now.

The thing was flying up towards the *Heart of Sorrow*. Up from the ground, not dropping from the skies. Its scythe-like wings were flattened out, claws reaching up towards Kerna’s gunship. The fang-lined jaws were wide open, baleflamer jutting forward like a perverted metallic tongue.

And then there was the noise. The beast’s profane howl was indescribable, like a nightmare being torn in two; an unearthly wail that threatened to shatter even the sanest of minds.

There was nothing rational about the daemon engine that had pushed itself up from the very bowels of the planet itself.

It was a Heldrake – a winged daemon engine forged at the heart of the warp. Once a gunship much like the *Endurance*, the Heldrake had been twisted beyond recognition. It no longer resembled any aircraft he had ever seen, taking the form of an apocalyptic dragon from ancient legend. Deep within the monstrous form, the withered body of the original steersman was cocooned in a nest of cable and bone, his flesh fused with the distorted metal, soul devoured long ago by the daemons that breathed infernal life into the war craft.

The ultimate predator of the skies.

And one that had Kerna in its sights.

The *Heart of Sorrow* slewed to the right, trying to avoid collision, but it was hopeless. The Stormtalon was dwarfed by the mechanical atrocity that moved in for the kill.

The Heldrake grabbed at the gunship like a craghawk snatching a sparrow, talons slicing easily through the aircraft’s armour plating.

‘Kerna!’

The craft seemed to hang in the air for a second, locked in a deadly embrace, before the Heldrake dropped its fearsome head and disgorged its baleflamer into Kerna’s cockpit. The *Heart of Sorrow* exploded into a ball of blinding flame.

Without even thinking, Meleki turned the *Endurance*’s nose into the fireball

and opened fire, lascannons flashing ahead.

With a bellow of victory, the Heldrake burst from the firestorm, flying straight towards the Stormtalon.



FIFTEEN

Artorius didn't wait to see what had burst from the ground, or witness the fate of his Stormtalons. There was no callousness in the act. There was nothing a lone Space Marine on the ground could do to save them now, but he might still be able to protect the Key.

Grunting with the effort, Artorius swung the heavy tower doors shut just as the first of the damned scrambled over the churned ground to reach the threshold. Their rotten fingernails scratched at the ancient wood as he slammed the heavy deadlocks home, the infected horde's lamentations muffled by solid oak imported from the forests of Macragge.

The devastation of the courtyard hadn't reached the interior of the tower, the keep's foundations standing firm. Artorius ripped his wrecked red helm from his head, expecting cool air against his bruised skin. Instead the atmosphere was humid, sweat immediately prickling against his neck.

'Now, Vabion,' he asked into the relative quiet of the entrance chamber, 'where is this shrine of yours?'

His eyes fell across a trail that ran across the floor. He crouched down, stopping short of running his gauntleted fingers over the flagstones. A kaleidoscope of splattered juices; greens, browns and red, no doubt dripped from the Plague Marines festering bodies.

'Mixed with Vabion's blood,' he acknowledged grimly, filtering the unearthly shrieks from outside. Gripping his bolter tightly he marched forwards, following the grisly path, heading deeper into the structure.

By the time he'd found the aquila chamber and started to descend the stairs to

the shrine, Artorius's vision was beginning to swim.

It made no sense. His injuries were hardly severe. Why was he feeling this way? He stopped, pinching the bridge of his broken nose with trembling fingers. The bones had already set, albeit flattened against his face.

Then he saw his glove. The ceramite was pitted and chipped. The damage continued down his arm, across his chest. As some points the armour had completely rusted away.

'The Champion,' he hissed, realising what had happened. He had been splashed by Naracoth's blood – not once, but twice. When he had fired into the Chaos lord's chest and when the grenade had detonated. It had eaten through his power armour, exposing him to whatever toxins the traitorous dog had been incubating. Then there was the Plague Marine. He had literally knelt in its filth, breathing in the gases escaping from its decaying flesh as it had died.

'Protect me,' Artorius begged, forcing himself to take another step. His limbs were as heavy as Terminator armour, the blood in his veins feeling as if it was congealing with every beat of his hearts. 'Need to keep going.'

When he finally reached the bottom of the stairs, the corridor in front was twisting as if it was looping around itself.

Voices rushed towards him, bouncing off the distorted walls. Familiar voices.

'Go back,' Jerius screamed, urging him to flee. '*Save yourself.*'

He blinked, seeing the faces of his battle-brothers in the torches that lined the shifting walls.

'*All is lost,*' insisted Ritan.

'Just illusions,' he gasped. He was sure Kerna's face had joined the others. 'If there's a warp breach, at the end of this corridor...'

'*You will die,*' Jerius called.

'You know the answer to that,' Artorius choked on a ball of phlegm that caught in his throat. He spat it out. It was blood-red. 'Must focus. Continue.'

But Artorius halted when he crossed the threshold to the shrine, hesitating not from fatigue, but awe.

'Holy Terra.'

Nothing had prepared him for the scale of the place, not Vabion's hololith or the story that had accompanied it. The chattering screens had been silenced, their once gleaming surfaces cracked, but the light from a thousand strange gems burned through the heavy mist that hung in the air. They seemed to call to him, urging him forward.

‘No,’ commanded the voices in his head. ‘*Turn back.*’

‘You are phantoms of the mind,’ he shouted in response. ‘Nothing more.’

Disobeying the spectres, he staggered towards the Key.

Or what was left of it.

The crystal had been smashed, scattered across the floor. He stumbled towards the dais, where a single, solitary shard rose from the platform. The wraithbone seal was smothered in a dark stain, empty power armour lying on the other side of the steps.

‘A sacrifice,’ the sergeant hissed. ‘That’s how they did it.’

The rich blue paintwork had been eaten by rust, the aquila across the once noble breast cracked, its edges eroded away. Vabion’s body had completely putrefied, reduced to a puddle of festering sludge. Artorius looked away, disgusted at the waste. ‘It was not your fault,’ he said, although the words sounded hollow in his ear.

‘Then who is to blame, Doom Eagle?’

Artorius’s head snapped up at the sound of the voice. It wasn’t ethereal like the haunts that had tried to turn him away, but it had no place in the natural world either.

‘Traitorous scum.’ Artorius turned towards the Chaos lord, raising his shaking bolter. The Champion stepped out of the shadows at the far end of the shrine. Where his swollen intestines had draped, Naracoth’s abdomen was now crammed with a host of wriggling, chattering Nurglings, each jostling for position as they filled the void blasted clear by Artorius’s grenade. One tumbled from the cavity to land in the pile of foetid biomass and corroded armour that lay at the Chaos lord’s feet.

Doom Eagle armour.

‘*Run away,*’ Ritan’s voice urged him.

‘You have failed,’ Naracoth sneered, absently squashing the Nurgling beneath his boot. ‘Your men are dead or dying. The crops have failed. Orath belongs to us. We shall open a new Eye of Terror in this place.’

‘Part of the Key is still in place,’ Artorius insisted, readying himself for attack. ‘There is still...’

‘Hope?’ Naracoth scoffed, his ever present War Scythe held in both hands. ‘Vabion had hope. It didn’t save him. Your hope lies in the reinforcements you believe are screaming towards us. They won’t save you, either.’

‘Maybe not,’ Artorius spat, trying to gather the last of his resources, ‘but they will destroy you.’

Naracoth continued as if Artorius hadn't uttered a word.

'Imagine the strain the rift is placing on the Key hidden beneath Garm. All it took was one tiny fissure to allow us passage. You should see the cracks in the other Key. Your battle-brothers have already been consumed.'

'You lie!'

'Do I? Melkan. Krytorius. Hura.' The blood froze in Artorius's veins. 'Names you recognise? Brethren no more.' Naracoth crouched down, running his hand through the biological debris that used to be Ritan. 'They belong to me. They belong to Nurgle.'

Still smiling, Naracoth sucked the viscous remains from his fingertips.

Artorius could take no more. Pulling the trigger of his bolter, the sergeant charged forward with a bellow of rage.

The Endurance of Gathis strafed the back of the Heldrake with lascannon fire as he passed, but to little effect.

The Chaos born monstrosity roared, bathing the Stormtalon in balefire, scrambling half the instruments on board and cracking the canopy. Meleki pulled up into a loop, hoping to flip over and down onto the creature, but came in too fast. The Doom Eagle found himself diving into thin air and by the time he pulled up, the Heldrake had come around to hang on Meleki's six o'clock, hellish flames licking at his tail.

He knew that he couldn't outrun the possessed aircraft, its infernal engines more powerful than any Stormtalon. The best he could do was to skid from left to right, drawing the beast away from the fort, never presenting the daemoniac machine with a clear target. Keep moving, remain unpredictable, stay alive.

For now at least.

Warning glyphs were already flashing, the engines on the point of overheating. Flame streamed past the canopy, widening the cracks, filling the cockpit with the stink of sulphur.

'Getting too close,' Meleki gasped, his eyes stinging with the reek. 'Need to finish this.'

Yanking the stick towards him, Meleki threw the *Endurance* into another heart-stopping climb. For a moment, as dark orbs danced at the edge of his vision, Meleki felt at peace, removed from the world, absolutely sure about what he was about to do.

And then, as the engines threatened to stall, he pulled himself back to the here and now. The gunship was on its tail, in a near vertical ascent. He didn't even

need to glance at the rear displays to know that the Helderake was climbing with him. He could feel it behind him, jaws open, waiting for the kill.

‘Not today.’

The Stormtalon inverted, pulling more gees than Meleki had ever experienced. Even with his Lyman’s ear, Meleki felt himself whitening out as the aircraft pitched into a spiralling descent, corkscrewing back down to the planet.

‘Follow, damn you,’ he spat, checking the displays. ‘That’s it. Come and get me.’

The Helderake had taken the bait, trying to match his spiral. The monster was faster than the *Endurance*, but it was also bulkier. In the warp, its immense size wouldn’t hamper its flight, but here, in the real world, it was subject to the same laws of physics that governed Meleki’s own ship.

He hoped.

It was risky – a manoeuvre Meleki had never performed himself. Throw the ship into a tight spiral, gambling that your larger pursuer won’t be able to turn as fast. The stick shook in his hand as he kept himself spinning down, never taking his eyes from the rear display.

It was working.

‘That’s it,’ he laughed without humour. ‘You can’t match the turns, can you? Can’t keep in close.’

Sure enough, the Helderake was being forced to loosen its corkscrew, taking more airspace with every revolution.

The smaller, more agile *Endurance* only needed a fraction of the space to turn, spinning faster and faster, dropping back along the Helderake’s long body with every roll. Where he had started the descent in front of the abomination, Meleki was now above the bulk of its accursed hull and, before long, dropping behind.

It was the moment he’d been waiting for. As soon as he saw the umbilical cables trailing from the dragon’s rear, the Doom Eagle unleashed his side-mounted lascannons, raking against the Helderake’s oxidised tail.

The daemon engine pulled out of the dive, trying to turn so it could return fire, but Meleki wasn’t about to let go. The electronic whine in his ears informed him that the heat-seeking missiles had locked onto their target. He was ready.

Meleki fired everything he had. Las-fire cut into the Helderake’s ribbed spine, corroded armour plates sliced clean from its metallic hide. The Helderake bucked, its dragon-like head whipping around, but it was already too late. With a thumb of the trigger, Meleki’s missiles were away, zeroing in on the last vestiges of the Helderake’s original form – the two sets of exhaust vents that blazed on either

side of its back. The rockets slammed into the engines, triggering a chain reaction that saw the daemon rip itself apart.

Unable to pull up in time, Meleki soared through the inferno, burning debris streaking across his fuselage. For a second, he imagined he saw the twisted remains of the Helderake's pilot screaming in defiance, its face a mass of lesions and crudely implanted cables – and then the vision was gone, the *Endurance* barrelling out of the firestorm.

Before today, Meleki might have celebrated his victory, but not now. He could almost hear Kerna telling him not to get carried away.

'I know, old friend,' he said sadly. 'The battle is far from won.'

Pulling the gunship into a hard left, Meleki came about and streaked back towards Fort Kerberos.



SIXTEEN

Artorius was thrown back with such force that the buttress cracked, dust cascading down on the two combatants from the high ceiling. The sergeant slid down to the rune-lined floor, his gun hanging helplessly by his side. Naracoth's scythe had cut deep, nearly cleaving the Doom Eagle's arm from his body.

The Chaos lord loomed over the fallen Space Marine, Nurglings hopping down from his stomach to nip and tear at the flesh that was already beginning to swell beneath Artorius's breached armour.

'You are as weak as that foolish Librarian,' Naracoth gloated, backhanding the sergeant across the mouth, his spiked gauntlet opening Artorius's cheek and dislodging what were left of his teeth. 'But your blood will serve me well.'

Artorius groaned, blood bubbling on his torn lips. He tried to raise his power fist, the teeth of his chainblade clogged with Naracoth's flesh, but the gauntlet clattered back to the floor, the sergeant's resources spent. Bloodshot eyes rolled up in their sockets.

It was over.

Naracoth bellowed in triumph, throwing his heavy scythe aside. Grabbing Artorius's chestplate, the Champion hauled the broken Doom Eagle towards the Key, no lackeys to assist him now. It didn't matter, he babbled, barely even grunting with the exertion. Soon he would have a mighty company steeped in filth and decay.

'I only wish you could see it,' he cackled, dragging the sergeant up to the shard, 'but what kind of sacrifice would you be if you were left alive?'

Naracoth let Artorius fall back onto the wraithbone seal and produced a sacrificial knife, the wicked blade alive with forbidden runes.

Carefully, almost lovingly, he raised the sergeant's chin, exposing his throat.

'Accept this offering, my Lord,' Naracoth intoned, pressing the blade down onto the pale skin, 'and bless your humble servant. The sacrifice will be made.'

A bead of blood appeared beneath the blade and ran down to the seal – and Artorius's eyes snapped open, glaring up at the Chaos lord.

'There shall only be one sacrifice today,' the sergeant croaked, bringing his good arm up in an arc. In his hand he held the shard of the crystal he had grabbed as he had been pulled towards the Key, its jagged edges reflecting the look of surprise on Naracoth's face. It slammed into the Champion's head, embedding itself deep within the Chaos Marine's murderous brain.

The Plague Lord stared down with empty eyes, the knife slipping from his fingers. Artorius shoved him back, the Champion collapsing clear of the seal, a strange gargle escaping from his throat. There was no scream as his body convulsed, the flesh becoming like liquid, falling away from his bones. Naracoth and his Nurglings died with a whimper, leaving nothing but skeletons and armour that crumbled into dust.

The sergeant let his hand fall back, his chainblade clattering against the floor and laughed for the first time in fifty years.

'Praise the Throne,' he wheezed. The Chaos Champion lay dead and the final sacrifice had yet to be made. Without Naracoth, the incursion would fail and Nurgle would be pushed back into the world beyond.

He was finished himself. Of course he was – but Artorius was dead already. It was enough that he had served his Emperor and the Patriarch to his last.

He had won.

High above the fort, Rot Flies rose up to meet the *Endurance*. The gunship shuddered, its primary wing slicing through a daemonic thorax, the contents of its stomach spilling down on the zombies and Plaguebearers that still clawed at the tower doors.

At the front of the crush, one of the ghouls tried to prize the doors open, the grey stump of its missing arm bobbing helplessly. Long ago, it had left its family sleeping at home. Now it had no memories of such things. All it knew was that it needed to get into the keep, to reach the Key, to make a sacrifice.

In the cockpit of the Stormtalon, a warning bell sounded. The mid-air collision had done more damage than Meleki first imagined. The port engine slowed and stalled. Calmly, Meleki switched to stabilisers, only to be rewarded with more

alerts. Primary stabilisers were no longer operational. Targeting array offline. He was left with one functioning engine and secondary thrusters.

The fort below was a disaster site, the courtyard swallowed up by a crater, buildings flattened. Only the keep remained, a testament to Ultramarine architecture. As he watched, Plague Drones threw themselves against its wall, as if they could demolish the tower with the force of their distended bodies alone.

‘One choice left,’ the Doom Eagle decided.

The *Endurance* swung around and dropped its nose. Meleki glared at the damned.

‘If I’m going down,’ he growled, ‘I’ll take you all with me.’

Gunning the engine, Meleki wondered if the sacrifice he was making would be remembered.

The *Endurance of Gathis* ploughed into the mass of writhing bodies, the fuel tanks igniting, sending up a cloud of thick, choking smoke that could be seen for kilometres around.

Deep below the ground, Artorius heard a rumble from above and watched as cracks appeared across the stone ceiling, dust pouring down as great clumps of masonry worked themselves loose. They tumbled, one after another, crashing into the polished floor, the weight of the collapsing tower above too much to bear.

The sound of the roof coming down should have been the last thing Artorius heard. It would have been, if it hadn’t been for the mocking voice at the back of his mind that laughed and jeered.

And sang a song.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

CAVAN SCOTT's writing for Black Library includes the short stories 'Doom Flight' and 'Trophies', with lots more on the way. He has written novels, audio dramas, short stories and comics based on many popular series. He lives and works in Bristol.



In the skies above Quadcana Prime, Doom Eagles Sergeant Kerikus pilots his Stormtalon gunship, the *Wrath of Aquila*, against the haphazard Dakkajets of the orks.

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