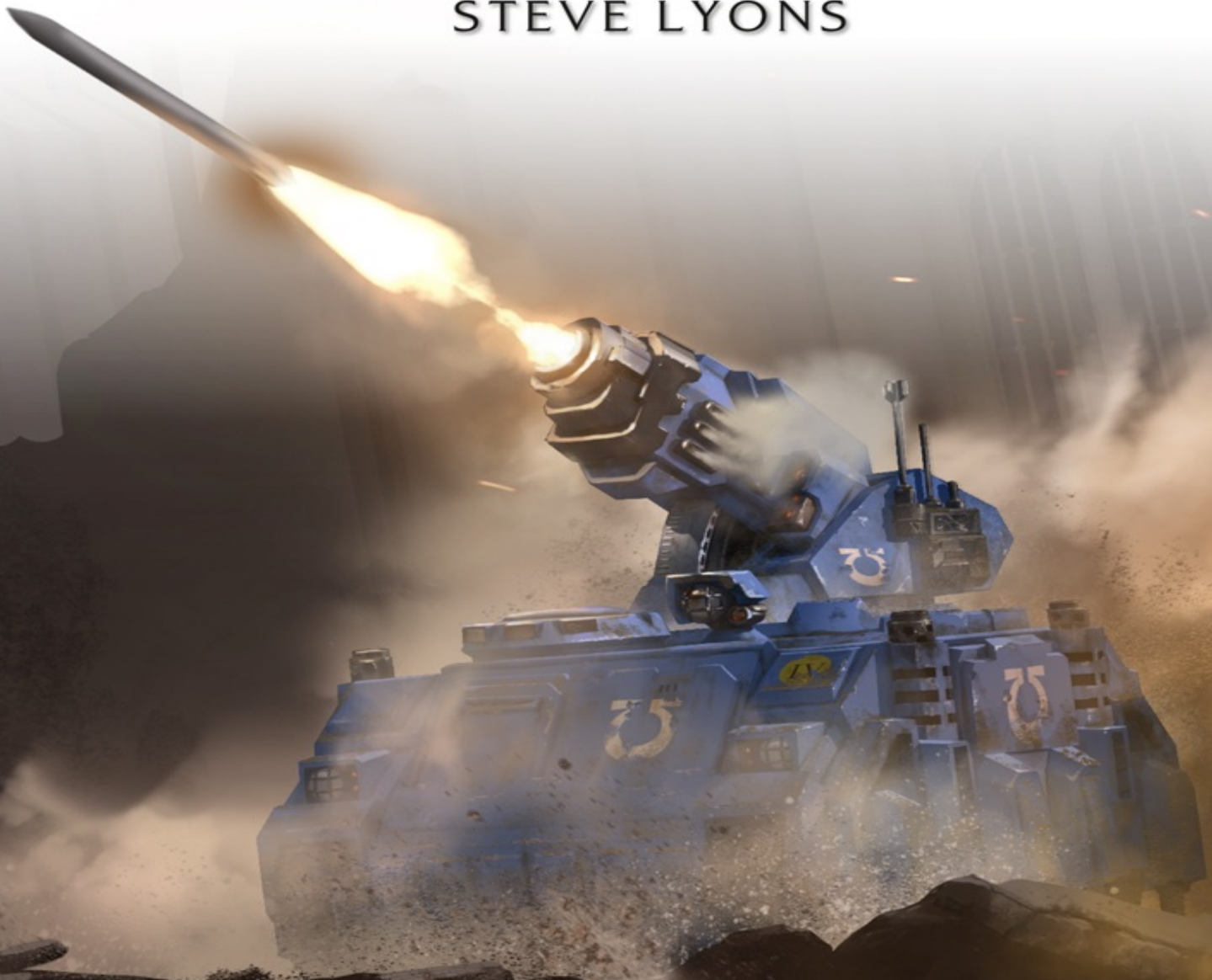


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They were hit as soon as they dropped out of the warp. Galenus had barely had time to see it coming. He stood on the bridge of the *Quintillus*, framed by the spreading bronze wings of the Imperial aquila in tarnished bas-relief. He had mag-locked the boots of his power armour to the deck plates, anticipating another rough re-entry into real space.

The battle-barge's ancient engines had howled out their usual protest as the nature of reality had been forcibly rewritten around them.

Next, the shutters that had covered the viewports during the jump – to spare the eyes of the crew, and their minds, from the terrors of the immaterium – had begun to retract.

Galenus had seen the enemy ship in front of them, close enough that he couldn't make out the stars behind it. He had caught a fleeting impression of a slime-covered hull and cannon barrels glaring out at him from an endless row of dark turrets.

Then, the cannons had flared in unison.

Sergeant Arkelius was in one of the *Quintillus*'s launch bays.

He felt the first shockwave rippling through the ship, and knew it was under attack.

He kept his balance by bracing himself against the Hunter tank beside him – and by shifting his fully-armoured weight onto his left foot.

A bolt of pain shot through his left hip, the legacy of a recent injury. Arkelius grunted; not because of the pain itself, but because of what it represented. He didn't like to be reminded of his all too recent failure.

A ship-wide alert signal began to wail.

He felt the deck beneath his feet tilting. The *Quintillus*, he deduced, was taking evasive action – too urgently for the artificial gravity to fully compensate. Their enemy – whoever, whatever they were – were well armed. The yields of a hundred warheads couldn't ordinarily have shaken the *Quintillus*.

Several Chapter-serfs – roughly half of the score or so present – had been bowled over by the shockwave. They were struggling to their feet again, resuming their work, before their masters – a squad of Techmarines – could punish them for their tardiness.

The Chapter-serfs were loading up a pair of Thunderhawk gunships, preparing them for an imminent launch.

Arkelius, likewise, did the only useful thing he could do in the circumstances. He prayed. He asked the Emperor to protect His faithful sons in the Ultramarines Fifth Company – for the sake of the vital mission ahead of them and, he dared to hope, the many more to come.

It wasn't that he was afraid to die. Far from it. It was just that, for the past five weeks – every frustrating hour spent in enforced inactivity – only one thought had kept this faithful warrior going. He had looked forward to the moment when he would finally return to the battlefield and see the whites of his enemies' eyes again.

He didn't want to die like this.

The enemy ship was a battle-barge, like the Ultramarines own, with the same void shields and bombardment cannons. It could have been assembled on the same forge world.

The difference was that, now, it was in the hands of traitors.

It had been allowed to rot. It looked to Galenus like the hull was held together by rust, while patches of fungus clung to it like green and black warts. Three circles had been painted crudely across the bow in a triangular pattern: the symbol of the Plague God. This was a Death Guard ship.

It must have been lying in wait at the edge of this system; that much had been expected. Its near collision with the *Quintillus*, however, could hardly have been planned. A skilled psyker might have sensed the Imperial barge's approach through the warp, but could only have guessed at its precise time and point of emergence.

The shipmaster's quick reflexes – and those of his helmsmen – had saved them. The *Quintillus* had pulled up and away from the enemy vessel, void energy sparking from their two sets of shields as they scraped together.

The shipmaster ordered his gunners to return fire at will. They brought the whole of the starboard weapons battery to bear. Galenus watched and nodded his approval as a series of explosions tore along the plague ship's mottled hull.

The plague ship banked away laboriously, striving to protect its weakened spot

from further attack. The *Quintillus*'s route into the system was now clear. The shipmaster glanced at Galenus. 'We could come around and finish this, while we have the advantage,' he said.

Galenus shook his head. 'I say we resume our course.'

It was the shipmaster's call. However, he chose to follow Galenus's wishes.

The battle-barge was carrying three companies' worth of Space Marines. In fact, it was carrying three Ultramarines companies: the Emperor's finest, so they prided themselves. Galenus was the captain of one of those companies – the Fifth Company, the Wardens of the Eastern Fringe – and the officer in overall command of their combined force.

They were answering a distress call from a world at the edge of the Ultima Segmentum: the region of space that the Ultramarines administered. Galenus could see the world in question now through the forward viewport: a luminous green disc, encircled by infinite shadows.

A servitor advised that the plague ship was coming around behind them. It wasn't about to let them go so easily. The shipmaster had all available power diverted to reinforce the *Quintillus*'s stern shields. Simultaneously, Galenus activated the comm-bead in his gorget and broadcast on a ship-wide frequency. He ordered all ground forces to report to their drop pods and ships immediately, and prepare for emergency deployment.

The bright green world in the viewport was growing steadily larger.

Galenus could see now that its colour was an unnatural one: it was sickly, almost yellow. It made him think of rotten fruit. Worse still was the seething corona of purple energy that crowned the yellow-green planet's northern hemisphere.

The Chapter Master himself had briefed Galenus on this mission. He had told him that the battle for the world that lay ahead of him – the world and its people – had already been fought and lost. He was fighting for something far more important now.

With engines howling and void shields flaring, with the plague ship hot on its tail, its cannons blazing, the battle-barge *Quintillus* screamed towards a planet named Orath.

Chelaki was well acquainted with Orath's once-fertile fields.

The last he remembered, those fields had been spinning up to meet him.

He had thought himself dead – although, in fact, this was hardly a new sensation for him. In his mind, he had been dying since the day he had first

donned his silver power armour and become a Space Marine, a pilot in the Doom Eagles Chapter. Every second of his continued existence since then had been a blessing from the Emperor.

Something was burning. He could smell it, even through his helmet's air filtration systems. There was something else too: a putrid, overripe stench that even the fire couldn't mask, that made his nostrils want to shrivel up and close.

Chelaki remembered. He had been wrestling with the controls of his Stormtalon gunship as rune panels exploded in his face. He must have blacked out; he could feel the darkness still clinging onto him now. His injector system pumped another dose of adrenaline into his primary heart. The cold shock convulsed his body and tore his eyes open.

He was pinned in the Stormtalon's wreckage, staring straight up at the sky, which was curiously flecked with purple. He had flown for seventeen hours across the planet – he and one other pilot – racing to the aid of a squad of battle-brothers under siege. He remembered that terrible moment when he realised they had arrived too late.

The sky had been cracked open. The unholy energies of the warp were seeping through the jagged rift. Chelaki had seen flaming drop pods plummeting to earth. His gunship had been met by a swarm of mutant insects, and among them, worse horrors still.

He had been prepared to face a small but powerful Death Guard force. The situation, evidently, had escalated since then. Now, Orath was the subject of a full-scale invasion.

He sent out a tentative vox signal. As expected, there came no answer. The remaining members of his own squad were out of range, half a world away, at Fort Garm. As for the Fists of the Fallen – the Doom Eagles squad that had been charged with protecting Fort Kerberos – there were no other survivors.

Chelaki was the last man standing.

Today, he was more blessed than he could ever have imagined – which only gave him all the more to repay the Emperor for.

In the launch bay, a Techmarine completed his final checks on the *Scourge of the Skies*. He clambered down from the vehicle's roof, and gave its newly-appointed commander an affirmative nod. It was time, then.

Arkelius took one last look around the *Scourge's* gleaming blue exterior. He knew it would be some time before he saw it again – if ever.

He had never commanded a tank in the field before. He had never set foot

inside this particular variant – a Hunter – although of course he had studied its schematics closely.

Like the Predator Destructors that made up most of the Ultramarines artillery, the Hunter was based on the ubiquitous Rhino template. The major differences were an extra layer of armour plating – and the Skyspear missile launcher bolted to the Hunter's back.

The *Scourge* was recently returned from a complete refit. It was freshly painted in Ultramarines blue, proudly bearing the Chapter's stylised U-symbol in white.

Arkelius hauled himself up onto the Hunter's roof. He squeezed his broad shoulders through the tank commander's hatch and dropped into a cramped compartment.

His crewmates were ready at their stations. He could see his gunner, Iunus, through an open hatchway behind him. Brother Corbin was in the driver's compartment to Arkelius's right, separated from him by a thick bulkhead.

Arkelius reached up and pulled his hatch shut, firmly. His only views of the outside world were now through narrow vision slits. The main one was in the *Scourge*'s sloping prow directly in front of him, and he adjusted his seat until he could see squarely through it. There were smaller slits around the hatch above him too.

He addressed his crewmates over the *Scourge*'s vox-frequency.

'We're ready to roll,' he growled.

Brother Corbin fired up the Hunter's engine. Its roar was deafening to Arkelius in his confined quarters. He adjusted his hearing implants to filter out the worst of it. Still, the engine's vibrations carried through his power armour and rattled his bones.

Leaning forwards, he peered through his front vision slit.

Corbin was following the hand signals of a hunchbacked Chapter-serf, guiding the *Scourge* across the launch bay and towards the nearest Thunderhawk. Expertly, he threaded his way between a pair of landing stanchions. Another tank – a Predator Destructor – was already dangling from the Thunderhawk's belly. Corbin pulled up behind it.

A moment later, Arkelius heard and felt magnetic arms clamping onto the *Scourge*'s hull, and they were hoisted off the ground.

He was about to tell Corbin to kill the engine when he realised that he already had.

Arkelius had read Brother Corbin's service record prior to their first meeting

that morning. He had served for almost as long as the sergeant had, and most of his experience had been gained at the controls of this very vehicle.

Arkelius, in contrast, was more used to leading infantry squads, and he had the battle honours to prove that he was good at it. At least, until that fateful day five weeks ago, when an ork's bloody blade had laid him low.

Intellectually, he knew there was nothing he could have done to prevent it. All the same, he couldn't help but blame himself. He felt he ought to have been more careful.

For weeks now, he had known that he was destined for the planet Orath. Galenus had assigned him to command a garrison there, watching over a pair of minor listening posts; the captain's way, he had imagined, of keeping him on the sidelines a while longer. He couldn't shake the nagging feeling that Galenus no longer trusted him.

But then, everything had changed.

It was quiet inside the Hunter battle tank, and dark, just a little light falling into Arkelius's compartment through the vision slits. He could hear Iunus breathing softly behind him.

This wasn't the way he had pictured his arrival on Orath, and for that much, at least, he was profoundly grateful. Nor, indeed, was this how he had envisaged his long-awaited return to battle, with his boltgun holstered at his weakened hip and his chainsword sheathed.

He wouldn't see the whites of any enemies' eyes today.

The yellow-green planet now almost filled the forward viewport.

On its master's command, the *Quintillus* threw open its launch bays. It spewed out a swarm of smaller vessels: Stormtalons and Thunderhawks, mostly. The swarm peeled away from its mother ship and streaked eagerly towards the looming, bright orb.

The smaller ships outpaced the *Quintillus* as it began to level out of its dive. Their ceramite-plated hulls blazed fiercely as they struck the planetary atmosphere.

On the bridge, Galenus's eyes were glued to a tactical display. It showed a rolling map of the mostly flat terrain beneath him, and the battle-barge's position and projected flight path relative to it. His objective on the ground was marked too, with a blinking red triangle. It was labelled in High Gothic script as 'Fort Kerberos'.

The triangle was partially obscured – and near-encircled – by an irregular

purple shape, which blighted the tactical display like a stain. It could only have been Orath's newly opened rift. It was larger than Galenus had imagined.

He knew, from his briefing, that time was very much of the essence. He had to position his troops as close to the fort as he possibly could. He couldn't risk the *Quintillus* being sucked into that rift, however.

He had asked the shipmaster to take them lower than he would normally have dared.

He knew they were taking a gamble. The battle-barge wasn't built for atmospheric flight. Its engines were already upping their protests a notch – even at this distance from the planet – as they fought to resist the slightest tug of gravity upon their massive burden. Even if they won that battle, there was a chance of the ship's hull buckling under the stress.

Galenus focused on the tactical display in front of him as the shipmaster barked out a series of minor course corrections. The *Quintillus* was flying underneath the warp rift now – and its icon was steadily approaching the blinking triangle.

At last, the red triangle turned white as the ship's icon overlapped it, and the shipmaster issued a one-word command.

'Now!'

A servitor confirmed that his cue had been acted upon.

The drop pods had been ejected, each carrying two combat squads of five Space Marines. They appeared on the tactical display as flickering images, plummeting to the ground faster than any cogitator could lock onto them and track them.

That was it, thought Galenus. Three companies despatched to the latest battlefield as required. Now he could worry about himself – and the *Quintillus*.

The shipmaster bellowed over the screaming engines, 'Get us out of here! Pull up!'

The crew seemed to have been wrestling with their controls for an age before the battle-barge responded. At last, it began to climb again, centimetre by agonising centimetre. It grazed the outermost tendrils of the warp rift, and Galenus had to shield his eyes from its vicious purple glare, which was already making his brain itch.

The *Quintillus* wrenched itself free of Orath's pull and soared again. Had Galenus had the time, he might have breathed a small sigh of relief. But they weren't out of danger yet. 'The plague ship,' barked the shipmaster. 'Where is it?'

Crewmembers were scrambling around the bridge in a frenzy, running diagnostic checks, taking readings. ‘It broke off its pursuit of us, sir,’ one of them reported. ‘It went after the transporters.’ He punched up the information on the tactical display.

‘Bring us around,’ the shipmaster ordered. ‘I want eyes – and guns – on that junk pile.’ Once again, the deck plates tilted as the *Quintillus* banked ponderously to the right.

A moment later, Orath heaved back into sight in the forward viewport – along with the rotting plague ship, which was now between them and the yellow-green planet.

The plague ship had a straggler in its sights. Its cannons blazed, and the luckless Thunderhawk – along with its pilot and the Predator Destroyers it had been carrying – were consumed in a blossom of flame.

Galenus held himself still, clenching his jaw. He had to remind himself that this wasn’t his battle to fight. The shipmaster knew what he was doing.

On his snarled command, his gunners assailed the plague ship with everything they had: assault cannons, torpedoes, they even brought their lances online and pounded the enemy’s shields with focused energy beams. The plague ship reeled under the sustained assault and the last of its would-be prey, the Imperial swarm, slipped out of its grasp.

The *Quintillus* kept up the punishing bombardment regardless.

Galenus watched with grim satisfaction as a muck-encrusted engine pod exploded. The stricken plague ship came around, and, for a moment, the captain thought it was actually going to try to ram them. It veered away, however, and plunged into the warp rift instead.

It was probably returning to the Eye of Terror, he thought. Doubtless, it had a base there, perhaps on the Plague Planet itself.

He only prayed that the ship was as damaged as it had appeared to be. Otherwise, there was a chance of it returning – loaded up with reinforcements.

Chelaki remembered.

Blazing drop pods plummeting from the sky; the air filled with hideous, bloated flying insects, large enough to be ridden as mounts; Fort Kerberos in ruins.

He remembered the creature – or some manner of infernal machine? – that had come screeching out of nowhere, with burning breath and rending claws. It had shrugged off his cannon fire and torn the cockpit of his Stormtalon apart.

Tangled up in twisted metal, he hadn't had a chance to bail out.

There had only been two Doom Eagles squads stationed on Orath. It had seemed like more than enough to guard a pair of minor listening posts.

A jagged shard of the Stormtalon's hull had pierced Chelaki's side.

The force of the crash must have driven it straight through his armour. It had lodged itself deep between his ribs. It seemed to have the whole weight of the hull pressing down on it. He didn't have the strength to pull it out.

The only thing he could do was pull himself off the shard. To gain the leverage he needed, he had to shift his position and let the shard tear further through his flesh. His armour increased the flow of stimulants to his brain to dull the pain.

At last, with a spray of arterial blood, Chelaki stumbled uncertainly from the gunship's wreckage. He wasn't able to get his legs underneath him in time and he landed flat on his face and stomach. He levered himself up to his knees.

He had come down in a grain field. But the sorghum-variant crops around him were diseased and blackened – and smouldering, as a cluster of small fires struggled to take hold in their midst. The crops, he realised, were the source of that rotten stench in the air.

The readouts in his helmet were warning him of a hundred different airborne diseases and viruses, both known and unknown. His armour had been fractured and fatally compromised. No longer was it airtight. The wound in Chelaki's side had scabbed over – his Larraman's organ had done its job, as always – but it felt as if it was burning.

He heard a scraping, snuffling sound, and turned. Two creatures were clambering over the wreckage behind him. They were only a few feet tall: squat, misshapen horrors that looked as if they had been moulded from filth and excrement. The folds of their stomachs undulated as they moved, and their oozing cold sores left slime trails in their wakes.

Chelaki guessed that they had been searching the crash site for carrion. One of them had been poised to spring at his neck and shoulders.

He planted his hand in the ashy ground beside him, rolled away from the muck-creatures and to his feet. In the process, he drew his chainsword and thumbed its activation rune. Its engine roared, its whirling blade shrieked, and the creatures baulked as their intended victim proved himself less helpless than he had seemed.

Chelaki took a step towards them and swung his blade. It sliced through the nearest of his attackers, but coughed and sputtered indignantly as great globs of the creature's feculence adhered to its teeth.

The second muck-creature must have known it couldn't outrun a Space Marine. It flew at Chelaki instead. A spiked tongue lashed out from inside a ring of teeth and flecked his armour with rancid green and black spittle.

It hit him in the stomach, extruding filthy, rope-like tendrils to bind itself to him. It was squirming its way towards Chelaki's wound, as if attracted by the newly formed scab. He tried to block its questing, slobbering tongue, but it simply oozed its way around his gauntlet. He felt it clawing, tearing at his exposed flesh.

Disgusted, he thrust the edge of his blade into the creature's formless mass and tried to scrape it off him, striking furious sparks off his own armour in the process.

He must have hit a vital organ inside the creature – presumably there was something in there somewhere – because it shrieked and suddenly released its grip on him.

It smacked into the ground at Chelaki's feet, and he stamped on it with all his strength and armoured weight. The creature popped like a festering boil, and he was spattered up to his chest with its pus.

A third muck-creature was watching him from amid the wreckage. He had almost missed it, but his motion sensors had detected its presence.

It must have been hanging back, waiting for an opening to strike, or perhaps just a chance to share in its fellows' spoils. It had witnessed the fate of those fellows and was trying to slink away. Chelaki knew that, if it did, it would reveal his presence here to its Death Guard masters. He snatched his boltgun out of its holster and squeezed the trigger, but the weapon didn't fire. Its chamber was cracked; an explosive round was jammed inside it.

He cast the bolter aside – he would retrieve it later if he could; for now, he couldn't take the risk of it detonating in his hand – and he started to run. He rounded the downed gunship just in time to see the muck-creature slithering through the mangled frame of the cockpit canopy on the other side.

It tried to scamper away from him but Chelaki caught up to it easily and despatched it with a single sweep of his blade. In the wake of his exertion, however, he was left with a pounding heart and heaving lungs. He could feel sweat prickling his brow.

He took a moment – the first chance he had – to get his bearings.

He saw the crack in the sky, the warp rift, pulsing hatefully. If anything, it looked even wider than it had before. He knew that Fort Kerberos – what remained of it – lay directly beneath that crack, hidden from him for the present

by an intervening rise. The air above the site was clogged with dust and smoke – but, with his augmented eyes, Chelaki could make out darker shapes flitting through the miasma. He remembered the huge flies and their hideous riders, and he fell back to the wreck of the Stormtalon and squatted in its shadow.

He had a chance – one final chance – to strike a blow against the Emperor’s enemies. He knew he mustn’t waste it. He had to find a way across this field, somehow, without the rift’s violet light glinting off his silver armour and betraying him.

Chelaki couldn’t wait for nightfall. He feared he didn’t have that long. What he needed, he concluded, was a distraction – and no sooner had he formed that thought, than the Emperor saw fit to oblige him again.

His gaze was drawn upwards, once more, by the howling of engines. Two Thunderhawks streaked above his head, and Chelaki grinned as he took in their bright blue livery and the white Chapter symbols on their bows.

They were flying low, circling the occupied site of the destroyed fort. As Chelaki watched, more blue ships swooped from the heavens to join them. In the distance, to the north-west, blue drop pods were plummeting from the clouds like hailstones.

Salvation was here.

Why hadn’t they landed yet?

Arkelius ground his teeth, impatiently. A drop pod would have delivered him to the front lines by now. His blade could have had its first taste of traitor blood.

He was monitoring vox-chatter with one ear. He had heard about the destruction of one of the other Thunderhawks. It must have been carrying a pair of tanks too. Two tank crews – six battle-brothers – gone before they had even set wheels on the ground. Not only was that a dreadful loss to the Chapter, but it also was no way for a warrior to die.

Through his vision slit, Arkelius could only see the rear of the tank in front of him. He wondered how high up they still were.

His right ear was attuned to the *Scourge*’s internal frequency. His crewmates – Corbin and Iunus – were comparing what they knew about the Death Guard, mostly tales of past Imperial victories over them. If they felt any tension at all, they didn’t show it – or perhaps, thought Arkelius, this was their way of dealing with it.

He couldn’t see the expressions of either of his brothers to judge. He had ordered ‘helmets on’ as soon as their Thunderhawk had launched.

Galenus had emphasised this point in his briefing. They were facing disciples of Nurgle, the oldest and foulest of the Ruinous Powers. They were worshippers of pestilence and decay, and their deadliest weapons were neither their blades nor their guns.

‘I’ve seen whole companies ravaged by the diseases they spread,’ the captain had said grimly. ‘I do not wish to see that happening again.’

That was why he had requisitioned all the heavy artillery possible, including some fresh from the assembly yards on Ryza. That was why he had placed as many men as he could inside those tanks. That was why he had broken up Arkelius’s squad and thrust him into a new, unfamiliar role.

Inside the *Scourge of the Skies*, Arkelius was as well-protected as he could be. The tank was fitted with oxygen filters; most of the air inside it was recycled, anyway. His power armour – for as long as it remained intact with the helmet in place – provided him with a strong additional layer of defence.

Arkelius understood this and was duly grateful for it. All the same, he preferred to fight without the helmet. He was told he had an intimidating countenance, with his shaved head, flattened nose and the duelling scar that ran the length of his right cheek. He liked to let his enemies see it. He liked to lock glares with them, let them see he had no fear of them.

He liked to feel their warm blood on his face.

‘What do you think, sergeant?’ asked Iunus.

Arkelius had no idea what his gunner was talking about. He had been tuning out his crewmates’ voices, lost in his own thoughts.

Corbin filled him in, ‘Orath. It’s an agri planet, a breadbasket world, with no real strategic value. We wondered what the Death Guard could possibly want with it.’

Arkelius’s only answer was a noncommittal grunt.

‘We also wondered,’ said Iunus, ‘since the crops down there and the farmers too are dead anyway, and contaminated–’

‘–then why send us in at all?’ Corbin concluded. ‘What does the Imperium have to gain from a ground assault at this point? Why not just fire off a salvo of rockets from orbit, or blast the whole world to ashes? Stop the rot from spreading further?’

‘Unless,’ said Iunus, ‘perhaps there’s something about Orath, about this “breadbasket world”, that we don’t know?’

‘The captain doesn’t have to explain his decisions to you,’ Arkelius growled.

‘No, sergeant,’ agreed Corbin. ‘Of course he doesn’t.’

He fell silent then – Iunus too – and Arkelius was left to his own thoughts again.

The fact was that he couldn't have told them anything if he had wanted to. He had put the same questions to Galenus himself earlier – and received the same curt answer. Whatever Orath's secret was – because Arkelius, like Corbin and Iunus, was certain it must have one – it was considered too sensitive for his ears.

A new voice crackled over the *Scourge's* frequency: their Thunderhawk pilot. He advised the Hunter's tank commander and crew that – at last – he was putting them down. Arkelius acknowledged him gratefully, and told Corbin to restart the engine. For the second time, he realised that his driver had pre-empted his order.

Runes blazed into life on the control banks around Arkelius, bathing him in a muted glow. He held onto his seat as the Thunderhawk decelerated sharply. A moment later, the *Scourge of the Skies's* chassis let out a groan of relief as the clamping arms released it.

It fell the last few metres to Orath's surface, and landed with a violent jolt.

Raising his head, Arkelius peered through one of the vision slits above him. He saw more Thunderhawks, swooping down around his tank like giant metal birds. They laid their equally giant metal eggs, then shot away into the overcast sky.

He couldn't see much else, so he turned to his tactical displays for information. They had put down in a field, thirty kilometres to the north-west of their objective: Fort Kerberos, one of Orath's former listening posts, now the Death Guard's base of operations.

Arkelius instructed Corbin to release the brakes and step on the accelerator pedal. The Hunter's tracks spun for almost a second before finding traction in the ashy ground.

Then, the *Scourge of the Skies* surged forwards. It smashed its way through blackened, wilting sorghum sheaves that grew almost as high as Arkelius's main vision slit and crushed them into pulp beneath its armoured-metal weight.

A new voice came over the vox-net: Captain Numitor of the Eighth Reserve Company. He instructed the Ultramarines artillery to form up into an arc, with their most powerful units – like the Hunters, the *Scourge* and the Stalkers – towards the rear.

Eyes on his displays, Arkelius voxed directions to Corbin. The driver brought the *Scourge* around and manoeuvred it into position, on the right-hand flank of the most impressive array of artillery that Arkelius had ever seen: at least twenty tanks, by his count. They were flanked by a Predator Destructor ahead of them

and a Stalker behind.

In the field in front of the tanks, two hundred Space Marines were forming up too. They were loading up their bolters, performing litanies of accuracy and hatred over each shell. Arkelius felt a fleeting pang of jealousy, wishing he was out there with them.

Behind him, Iunus was preparing the *Scourge*'s weaponry.

The next voice they heard was Galenus's, voxing from the orbiting *Quintillus*. He reminded his brothers of their mission: to retake the captured fort, despite the fact that – according to the battle-barge's scans – the Death Guard had reduced it to a ruin. Arkelius could guess what his two crewmates would make of that.

The captain then gave way to the company Chaplain, who bestowed the blessings of the Emperor upon the assembled force. Then, at last, Captain Numitor gave the order that Arkelius had been waiting for, and which he immediately relayed to his eager driver.

‘Artillery – advance!’

Galenus strode brusquely into the *Quintillus*'s strategium.

His senior staff were waiting for him around its U-shaped table, as was Captain Mikael Fabian of the Third Company, flanked by his own entourage. Numitor of the Eighth was already down on Orath, of course, but he too was represented by several aides.

Terserus stood quietly in one corner, but dominated the room all the same. Galenus liked to have him present at these meetings – after all, he was the Fifth Company's most venerable and experienced member. He valued his wisdom.

Terserus had led Galenus's first squad as a fully-fledged battle-brother. Galenus had often said that everything he knew, Sergeant Terserus had taught him. Three-quarters of a century ago, he had tried to overrun an enemy tank. In the process, he had been struck point-blank in the chest by its autocannon and blasted to shreds.

He had refused to die – he had always been stubborn, even by Space Marine standards – though his body had been beyond saving. His remains – some would say his very soul – had been interred in Dreadnought armour, so that he could continue to serve.

Galenus took his place at the top of the table – at the apex of the U's curve – but didn't sit down. He rested his fists on the table instead.

He studied the hovering tactical hololith that almost filled the space between the table's arms. It showed him nothing that he hadn't already known. His army

had set down to the north-west of Fort Kerberos and begun their march towards it.

‘This is what we know,’ said Galenus. ‘Two ancient eldar artefacts were found beneath the surface of Orath. We call them – Librarian Appius Vabion called them – the Great Seals. He believed that the Seals secure a warp rift of unknown magnitude. Their purpose is to hold that rift at bay. What we don’t know...’

He straightened up and pursed his thin lips. ‘What we don’t know, frankly, could fill tomes. Even Vabion, who devoted his life to the study of the Great Seals – even he confessed to me, in his final report before he died, that he had hardly begun to unpick their secrets.

‘What we can deduce is that the Great Seals were fashioned for a purpose. What we suspect – what we fear – is that the Orath rift... It could be big. A second Eye of Terror, perhaps.’

Several human aides shuddered at the very sound of those words, and traced the sign of the Imperial aquila across their chests.

‘We suspect that, were the Great Seals to be destroyed...’

‘But hasn’t one of them been destroyed already?’ Captain Fabian spoke up.

‘Another thing we don’t know,’ Galenus conceded. ‘Two listening posts were constructed on this world, two centuries ago. Fort Kerberos. Fort Garm. Their purpose – their primary purpose – was to justify the presence of an Imperial garrison on Orath. The men stationed there were never told what they were really guarding. For two hundred years, the Great Seals remained hidden underneath those forts – until now. Now, clearly, the secret is out.

‘Two days ago, a Death Guard army attacked Fort Kerberos.

‘They reached the Great Seal underneath it and attempted to destroy it. However, according to the latest information we have, they were unsuccessful. A shard of the Great Seal remained intact. The current Orath garrison – two Doom Eagles squads – were all but wiped out. But the enemy paid dearly for their victory.

‘Their leader, their Plague Champion, was slain and Fort Kerberos collapsed. The Great Seal – what remains of it, if anything at all remains – was buried.’

‘But the rift–’ protested Fabian.

Galenus nodded. ‘The warp rift, as doubtless you have seen, has already opened. Or perhaps it has only just begun to open. Again, we don’t know. We do know – from our orbital scans – that the Death Guard are busy excavating the Fort Kerberos site.’

‘What about Fort Garm?’ asked Fabian.

A tall, armoured figure stood in the shadows behind him. He stepped forward now and requested permission to speak, which Galenus granted. The figure wore the horned-skull symbol of the Librarium on his right shoulder and the rank insignia of an epistolary was stitched into his blue and yellow robe.

‘Librarian Vabion believed,’ he said quietly, ‘that the Great Seals worked in concert. It could be that, with either one of them destroyed, the other would simply break too. The full force of the rift would be unleashed.’

‘Or it could be, Emperor willing,’ Galenus added, ‘that the Death Guard don’t know about the Fort Garm Seal – in which case, it would be folly for us to draw their attention to it. For the present, we can only assume the worst.’

‘We must assume that the Kerberos Seal remains partially intact, and that, to some extent at least, it still holds the rift in check. That the Death Guard intend to destroy it and have the means, and that the results of their so doing would be...’

He paused to suck in air between his teeth before he uttered the word, ‘Apocalyptic’.

Another voice spoke, then: a rumbling, augmented voice, a little slurred but ringing with confidence and authority. ‘Our enemies want whatever lies beneath Fort Kerberos,’ said Terserus. ‘Our sacred duty is to keep it from them.’

Nobody argued with him. The Dreadnought armour that Terserus wore – that he had earned – commanded the utmost respect and even reverence of all those present.

‘An atomic strike was considered and ruled out,’ Galenus explained. ‘We can’t take the risk of further damaging either of the Seals. That has left us with only one option. As Brother Terserus says, we have to hit the Death Guard hard and hit them fast. We have to rout them and ensure they don’t return – else, God-Emperor knows exactly what they might unleash.’

The captain’s steel-grey eyes had been darting between the various members of his audience and the tactical hololith between them. As new information had come in from his pilots in the field, the display had been remotely updated.

‘And with that, gentlemen,’ he announced, straightening his back and squaring his shoulders, ‘you know exactly as much as I do. Any questions?’

If there were, Galenus didn’t wait to hear them. He was already halfway to the door and nodded to Terserus, who followed him. His lurching footsteps shook the metal deck plates, and a couple of aides were forced to sidle out of his path.

‘Captain Fabian,’ Galenus rapped over his shoulder. ‘I want you to remain aboard the *Quintillus* and coordinate our efforts from here. I want to know if

anything comes out of that warp rift – or of any indication that it may be increasing in size.’

Fabian pushed himself to his feet. ‘You’re going down to the planet?’

‘Hit them fast,’ Galenus reminded him, pausing in the doorway. ‘So far, our tactics are working. The bulk of the enemy forces have been drawn out from the fort site to meet our army, but not all of them. I kept two squads in reserve – one of them my own – and a Thunderhawk, for precisely this purpose.

‘I – we – will put down as far behind enemy lines as we can. We may be outnumbered, but our aim is simply to keep the Death Guard busy, too busy to dig for the Great Seal – until our battle-brothers can break through their defences and stop them permanently.’

Chelaki felt sick. He told himself that the mere sight of the rancid followers of Nurgle had soured his stomach, but he knew that wasn’t the truth.

He had reached the small rise beyond the field in which he had crash-landed. He lay flat on its leeward slope and peered cautiously over its crest.

He saw huge metal machines picking through the wreckage of Fort Kerberos. He recognised some of them as agricultural vehicles, once used by Orath’s farmers. He saw a couple of old Imperial Rhinos too. They had been defaced by blasphemous symbols and had dozer-blades fitted to their front ends.

In between the machines, he saw hunched, shambling figures, wielding shovels and pickaxes. Filthy, ragged clothing hung from their bodies; diseased skin was peeling from their bones. Their eyes, their expressions, were vacant; they tackled their labours lethargically, like failing automata, only going through the motions.

He realised what the shambling creatures were: the former farmers of Orath, along with their wives and children. Their bodies and minds had been ravaged by disease. They looked as if they should be dead, and perhaps they were.

Was this the fate that awaited him too, he wondered?

The creatures – the zombies – worked under the direction of a force of Death Guard. Plague Marines. Their armoured suits were neglected, rusted to the point where it seemed impossible that they could still function, although they did. Their original colours were long lost in a murky morass of greens and browns.

One of their number seemed to stand above the others. His armour had a greater number of adornments – presumably, his sick idea of battle honours – including a belt of human skulls slung low about his hips. His head was uncovered and looked hardly more healthy than the dead, rotting skulls did. He

was missing an eye and a nose; fat, wriggling maggots had infested the empty sockets. Occasionally, a maggot would pop out of its crowded nest, bounce off its host's chestplate and burst as it hit the ground.

Chelaki trained his auto-senses on the ghoulish figure. According to his range finder, he was half a kilometre away. Too far for a kill shot to that tempting bare head, even if he had a working bolter with him. And, with the zombies and the Plague Marines in between them, he knew he would never reach him.

He could still see dark, flying shapes through the ever-present haze, further from him now than they had been before. He glimpsed a pair of shapes larger than the others with jagged, razor-edged wings, leaving smoke trails, and he remembered the machine-creature – the fire-belching daemon engine – that had wrenched him out of the sky.

The bulk of the Death Guard army, Chelaki supposed, would be marching beneath their fliers, to the north-west, closing with the Imperial forces that had landed in that direction. He could hear the grinding engines of their tanks and even glimpse the backs of some of them as they set up a defensive line in front of the excavation site.

Chelaki and his brothers had been charged with protecting this world. They had failed, and this part of it at least had been claimed by Chaos. But the Emperor had given him a chance to expunge his shame; Chelaki had no doubt that he had been spared and placed here in this spot at this time for a reason.

Now, he only had to work out what he was meant to do; how best to utilise the fragile gift that he had been given. He had to make the rest of his life count for something.

‘I have eyes on the enemy, sergeant,’ reported Corbin.

‘I see them too,’ Arkelius growled. ‘Maintain formation. Turn us six – no, seven – degrees to port and ease up on the pedal a little.’

They were just about visible through his forward vision slit: the first ranks of the plague army who were grotesque, man-sized daemon creatures, grey-skinned and so badly deformed that from this distance it was hard to tell where one of them ended and the next one began.

They were like a tidal wave of putrid flesh, crashing over the horizon, and Arkelius knew from the vox-chatter that filled his helmet – from the reports of the Ultramarines Stormtalon and Thunderhawk pilots – that there were worse horrors to come behind them.

Ashen-skinned daemons were appearing in the gloomy sky too. They were

riding on the backs of huge, hideous winged insects, wielding swords.

Arkelius heard the familiar rattle of autocannon fire. The sound was muted by the *Scourge of the Skies*'s armour plating and almost drowned out by its engine. Still, the signal it sent out was clear enough. Battle had been joined.

The Predator Destructors ahead of him strafed the enemy while they had the chance, and the daemon creatures – scores of them – surged forward, snarling and salivating. On Captain Numitor's orders two hundred Space Marines broke into a full charge, and the opposing forces met in a savage explosion of fire, metal, entrails and blood.

Arkelius dragged his eyes away from the grisly spectacle.

He couldn't be distracted by what was happening on the ground. Not today. Today, his primary concern had to be with what was happening above it. His new charge was named the *Scourge of the Skies* for a reason.

A squadron of Imperial Stormtalons had entered the fray, screaming noisily over Arkelius's head, appearing in his limited field of vision a moment later. A couple of daemon riders were riddled by the gunships' assault cannons, thrown backwards from their insect mounts, while at least one of the giant flies too was blasted to pieces.

Several of them kept coming, nevertheless, soaring effortlessly over the melee on the ground, and suddenly it became clear to Arkelius that their targets were the big guns at the rear of the battlefield, the *Scourge of the Skies* and its fellows.

Not a moment too soon came the order from Captain Numitor for all artillery units to halt and to hold their positions, firing at the enemy at will.

'Corbin, step on the brakes, but keep the engine ticking over,' Arkelius instructed. 'Iunus, pick a target – an airborne target – and lock onto it. Find a mount with a rider if you can. That way, we have a chance of scoring two kills with a single hit.'

Corbin voxed him, 'If there's time, we should plant the stabilisers before we—'

'Yes,' said Arkelius, tersely, 'thank you, brother, I am aware of that. Lower the stabilisers.'

'I have a target lock, sergeant,' reported Iunus. 'Permission to—'

Arkelius interrupted him, 'Yes, do it, just—'

Something small and round came spinning towards his vision slit – a grenade? It looked more like a skull to him. Presumably, one of the daemon insect-riders had flung it, though Arkelius hadn't seen it. The skull bounced off the *Scourge*'s prow with a blinding flash, and the Hunter was rocked violently. Arkelius planted his hands on the bulkheads around him, to brace himself, as warning

runes flashed red across his control banks.

‘Damage report,’ he snapped, ‘quickly.’

‘I’m running diagnostics now, sergeant,’ reported Corbin.

Behind Arkelius, Iunus had been jolted almost out of his seat by the explosion. Catching hold of a grab rail, he levered his armoured bulk back into position. ‘Do you still have that target lock?’ Arkelius asked him, and, checking his monitors, Iunus confirmed that he did.

He tightened his hand around a trigger, and the *Scourge* was rocked again, this time by a punishing recoil from its rooftop missile launcher. Had its stabilisers not been sunk into the ground, it might well have been toppled onto its side.

A sleek blue rocket shot away from the Hunter towards the stars. Arkelius craned forward to follow its exhaust trail with his eyes. The missile smacked into its targets – a fly and its daemon rider – and consumed them in a bloom of flame.

The hit must have registered on Iunus’s monitors too, because he couldn’t hold in a curt exclamation of triumph. He was still young; at least, he appeared so to Arkelius. Iunus’s face, he had noted that morning, was smooth and unscarred and his eyes were still blue and clear.

A perusal of his record had confirmed it: he had been a scout until as recently as four years ago, and since then had served only in his current role. As a tank gunner, Iunus would not have experienced combat as Arkelius knew it. How often, he wondered, had Iunus stood toe-to-toe with a heretic or a perverted mutant freak – or an ork – with the stink of its blood in his nostrils and throat and no time to think, his only options to fight and kill or to die?

‘We can toast your marksmanship skills later,’ Arkelius grumbled.

‘Yes, sergeant,’ agreed Iunus. ‘Reloading the Skyspear now, sergeant.’

‘Corbin, how are those diagnostics coming?’ asked Arkelius.

‘We had a little overheating in the engine,’ his driver answered him, ‘but I’ve pumped some coolant down there and it seems fine. We’ve lost external temperature sensors. Oh, and there’s a crack in my vision slit. The *Scourge* has coped with worse, a lot worse.’

‘Got another target lock, sergeant,’ Iunus boasted.

‘You know what to do, brother,’ Arkelius told him.

Iunus fired, and, once again, the Hunter shuddered as it spat out its deadly payload. The target this time – another daemon rider – was alert enough to see its reckoning coming. It spurred its mount into a neck-breaking dive, and the missile almost grazed the insect’s tattered wings but missed them by a hair. It soared away into the clouds and was lost.

‘Bad luck,’ Arkelius commiserated. ‘Still, two clean kills out of two shots is—’
‘The final count isn’t in yet, sergeant,’ said Iunus. ‘Ten o’clock, high, look!’

It took Arkelius a moment – but then he saw it. The *Scourge*’s missile had turned itself around in midair. It was coming at the insect and its daemon rider again. At least, Arkelius assumed it was the same insect, the same rider – and the very same missile.

He had been familiarised, of course – via hypno-conditioning – with the Skyspear’s unique properties. To see those properties in action, however, was something else.

This time, the daemon didn’t get a chance to dodge. Thinking itself safe, it had taken on a Stormtalon in single combat and swiped at the Imperial ship’s engine pod with a double-bladed sword. It barrel-rolled out of the way as the Stormtalon’s guns responded – and straight into the teeth of the missile that it hadn’t seen coming up behind it.

Arkelius was tempted to let out an exclamation himself.

By now, Orath’s sky was a writhing mass of wings and bodies, both organic and mechanical in nature. They were spinning, twisting, wheeling around each other in a dizzying dance; one in which the slightest misstep could result in a sudden, explosive death for the dancer.

A sustained barrage of gunfire from the ground only added to the lethal confusion.

The Ultramarines had two Hunter tanks and two Stalkers, each of the latter sporting an Icarus stormcannon array: two triple-barrelled cannons. They were peppering the flies and their riders with solid rounds whenever they saw an opening. They were forced to hold back a little, however, lest they strike an ally.

The Hunters’ gunners, with their unerring guided missiles, had no such problem. ‘Another target lock, sergeant,’ Iunus reported.

Behind his helmet, Arkelius smiled to himself as he gave the order: ‘Fire!’

A wave of nausea took Chelaki by surprise.

It swept over him, blurring his vision and robbing him of his sense of balance.

His oculobe – the implant at the base of his brain that blessed him with superhuman eyesight – tried to compensate, but only worsened matters. Before he knew it, he had sunk to one knee, one hand on the ground. He cursed himself under his breath for his weakness.

He felt his secondary heart kicking in, pumping frantically to compensate for his primary heart’s weakness.

He had given the ruins of Fort Kerberos a fairly wide berth. If only he had had more explosives about him, he thought, or a working gun, if he could have seen a way to get up close to the enemy commander. He had concluded, however, that he could best serve by joining the newly arrived Ultramarines on the battlefield, who were just a few more kilometres to the north, close enough that he was able to tune in to their vox-chatter.

Chelaki pushed himself back to his feet. He fixed his sights on the billowing cloud of smoke ahead of him, just on this side of the horizon.

He forced his leaden legs to move, one after the other, settling into a pounding rhythm as he ploughed through one infected and dying field after another. He crashed through the smouldering ruins of a brick-built farmhouse without breaking his newly regained stride.

In the smoke, he could now see the silhouettes of writhing figures. They grew larger, slowly gaining in colour and definition, as he drew closer to them. Now, he could make out the proud blues of the Ultramarines armour, and the shapes of the ghastly, grey-skinned creatures they were fighting.

Chelaki had glimpsed these daemons from his cockpit earlier, but this was the first time he had been able to get a good look at them. Like the zombies at the fort, they seemed to be in the throes of some virulent illness. Their limbs were wasting away, while their stomachs were horribly distended. They didn't act as if they were ill, however; quite the opposite.

Each of them possessed a single, bloodshot eye, an ork-like snout and a slavering mouthful of yellowing, chipped teeth. They had horns too – a single horn each – growing out of the tops of their heads. They did their fighting, however, with massive, rusted swords, which they appeared to wield with supernatural strength.

Five daemons had outflanked a Space Marine squad on the edge of the melee. Their numbers were even, but the daemons were winning the encounter. In the time it took to reach them, Chelaki saw two Space Marines – and only one of their opponents – falling. He howled a litany of vengeance as he thumbed the activation rune of his chainsword.

Up close, the daemon creatures had a stink of death and decay. Swarms of tiny, black flies buzzed about them; their flesh was lousy with so many writhing parasites that it almost seemed to be alive. Most horrifically of all, their bodies were bursting open at the seams like old cushions, exposing their rotten innards.

Chelaki aimed for one of those exposed spots: a gaping rent beneath the shoulder blades of one of the daemon creatures. His chainsword bit into an

overripe, black organ, but it was as if the daemon didn't feel any pain at all. He staggered it, at least, with the force of his blow and it rounded on him, swinging its rusty blade at him. He dodged its thrust, but not the offhanded swipe that followed it. The daemon's filthy talons sliced into his wounded side, and Chelaki was unable to bite back an agonised grunt.

Blood rushed to his head, his eyes failed him again and for a second he was blind.

He could still hear the daemon creature. It was chanting an unholy catechism in some ancient, unspeakable language. He felt as if the words were worming their way into his brain, like the infinite miasma of the warp, threatening his very sanity. At least the chanting told him exactly where the daemon was, and he threw up his sword and blocked its next attack.

He heard bolter fire, and, as his vision cleared, he made out the shape of the daemon creature lying dead at his feet. One of the Ultramarines – the squad's sergeant – had finished it off. Chelaki could take pride, at least, in having been a useful distraction. The odds had shifted now: four to three in the Space Marines favour.

One burst of a heavy flamer later, and the odds were four to two.

The daemon creatures fought to the bloody end, surviving blows that would have parted an ork's head from its shoulders. Inexorably, however, they were defeated. The last of them, backing away from Chelaki's chainsword blade, fell onto the teeth of another and collapsed in a disgusting heap of steaming offal.

A gruff voice broke over Chelaki's helmet vox-link, thanking him for his intervention. 'Thank the Emperor,' he replied, 'for putting me here.'

He had guessed that the speaker was the Ultramarines sergeant, whose face was hidden behind his bright blue helmet. His guess was confirmed as the sergeant stepped forward and clapped him on the arm. 'Beyus,' he introduced himself. He gave Chelaki his squad's vox-frequency, so they could talk more privately.

In the meantime his brother with the flamer was cremating the daemon corpses, along with the ticks, worms and insects still crawling over them, and any part of the trampled ground that they had touched.

Beyus noticed the jagged rent in Chelaki's armour. 'I'd see a Techmarine if you can,' he suggested, 'and get that patched up. The daemons' swords are coated with deadly poisons and worse. It only takes the slightest scratch to—'

Chelaki nodded. 'Yes, sergeant. I will. If I get the chance.' He couldn't bring himself to voice his darkest suspicion, almost a certainty now, that any such

precautions would be futile in his case. It was already too late for him.

‘You’re a member of the Orath garrison? A Fist of the Fallen?’ asked Beyus.

‘The last of them, sergeant.’

‘I’d be honoured if you would fight with us, my brother.’

‘To the death!’ agreed Chelaki, knowing that his death could be imminent.

His words were almost drowned out by a sudden, bloodcurdling screech. He looked up as jagged, razor-edged wings passed above him.

More brothers were fighting and killing and dying to the north; to the west, he could make out an obdurate blue line of Imperial tanks. In the midst of the raging combat, he saw a Chaplain in jet-black armour, brandishing his holy symbol and fiercely mouthing litanies of cleansing as he swung his powered mace.

An Apothecary, in white, loomed out of the drifting smoke. He dropped to one knee beside the first of Beyus’s fallen men. Chelaki couldn’t tell if he was ministering to him or merely harvesting the precious gene-seed from his dying body.

A fresh wave of daemon creatures was surging towards them. There were more of them, this time, but Chelaki’s newfound squad was more than ready for them. Bolter fire sliced through the daemons before they could even get close; they shrugged off most of it, but not all. Three daemons fell and only one of them rose again.

Chelaki ignored the dizziness in his head and the sickness in his gut. He planted his feet as firmly as he could in the ground and swore to let no force on this blighted world move them. He set the teeth of his chainsword whirling and met the Emperor’s enemies head-on.

‘I saw Fabian’s face, at the conference table.’

Galenus was squatting in the belly of a flying Thunderhawk, with the other four members of his command squad gathered around him. Only one of them could hear his voice, however; the captain had his helmet on and was talking to Terserus over a private vox-channel.

He would never have spoken in such a way to anyone else. He would never have let anyone else hear the slightest trace of doubt in his voice.

‘He disagreed with my decision,’ Galenus continued. ‘He thought I should have been the one to stay behind and coordinate our forces from orbit. But, Emperor damn it, someone else can sit behind a desk, poring over tactical hololiths and waiting for the Librarians to divine some information we can use.’

Our brothers are fighting tooth and nail for the Emperor, laying down their lives in His service, and they need—'

'They need to know their leader is with them,' rumbled Terserus.

Galenus glanced up at his old sergeant, rather, at the hulking adamantium shell in which his scant remains were entombed. Sometimes, he forgot there was a vestige of a man inside that shell; a man whose face he hadn't seen in over seventy-five years. Galenus's oldest, best friend was just a voice inside his helmet.

'You have the makings of a captain,' said Terserus. 'I always said so.'

'I've been a captain for over forty years,' Galenus reminded him.

The Thunderhawk's copilot reported in from the cockpit. They had dropped beneath the clouds now, he advised, and were on their final approach towards Fort Kerberos. So far, they had encountered only minimal resistance. The Death Guard had committed most of their aerial forces to the north-west front, but now they had started to pull some of them back, too late.

The Thunderhawk swooped on the ruined fort from the east, and strafed it with lascannons and heavy bolters. 'It's no use, sir,' the copilot voxed. 'The creatures they have digging for them, it's as if they have no minds of their own. They see us coming, but they don't even try to run. It takes a direct hit – we have to kill them – to stop them from working.'

'Acknowledged,' said Galenus. 'How long until we are in position?'

'Estimating... Two enemy contacts approaching from the north-west and coming fast. I don't know what they are, but... Almost within bolter range already. It's going to be close. We're coming around now, sir, and approaching the drop zone in...'

The copilot switched vox-frequencies so the rest of the squad could hear him. 'Prepare for landing in twenty seconds, nineteen, eighteen...'

Galenus signalled to a battle-brother, who yanked open a hatch in the hull beside them. The Thunderhawk's airbrakes had been applied, and Galenus braced himself in the hatchway's circular mouth against the inertial forces that threatened to bowl him over. They were coming in low, so low that the ground was no more than a grey and black blur to him.

'Hover mode engaged in five, four, three, two...'

Then Galenus gave the order, 'On my mark... Go!'

He leapt through the open hatchway and simultaneously activated the jump pack strapped to his back. Its rocket engine fired and caught him at the apogee of his leap, sparing him an unceremonious landing.

He put down, almost gracefully, at the edge of Fort Kerberos's ruins.

As he straightened up, the ground shook with a series of heavy impacts. Three members of his squad – and all five members of another, who had jumped from the Thunderhawk's port side – had landed around him. He glanced up to see the last of his brothers – Terserus – plummeting towards them like a meteorite.

No jump pack would have been able to bear his weight, nor, in his Dreadnought armour, did Terserus need one. Two battle-brothers had to leap aside or risk being crushed by him. He slammed into the earth in between them and the dust settled to reveal him crouched at the epicentre of a self-made crater.

In the meantime, their transporter was in trouble. Hovering above their heads, the Thunderhawk was a virtual sitting duck. Its attackers – the copilot's two 'enemy contacts', presumably – had jagged, razor-sharp wings and grapple-like claws. Galenus couldn't tell if they were creature or machine; more likely, he suspected, an unholy fusion of both.

The daemon engines had the aspects of mythical dragons, an impression only enhanced by the goutts of fire belching from their elongated maws. The Thunderhawk couldn't pick up the speed it needed to evade them, and, blasted by infernal flames, its armour plating melted into so much slag and its engines burned.

By the time it could bring its weapons to bear, the damage had been done.

A sustained blast from the lascannon scorched a daemon's tail and caused it to withdraw, momentarily, but the other had alighted upon the Thunderhawk's wing and was tearing it to shreds with its metal talons. The best its crew could do now was stave off the inevitable crash, and keep the daemons occupied a while longer.

Galenus and his small team on the ground had troubles of their own.

The captain saw the Death Guard's zombie slaves ahead of him, still shovelling rubble as if the firefight above them wasn't happening. Any minute now, he feared – any second – they could break through to the underground shrine in which the first of the Great Seals was housed. They had to be stopped.

In his team's way, however, were the Death Guard themselves.

There were seven of them, the Plague God's favoured number: Plague Marines, kicking their way through mounds of rubble to intercept the new arrivals. In contrast to Galenus's assault team, none of them were wearing their helmets. They showed off their scabrous faces, as if proud of them; proud of their flaking skin, disgusting boils and weeping sores.

Each Plague Marine wielded an equally scabrous knife and a gun that looked

as if it might fall apart if he tried to fire it. Galenus knew, however – from experience, hard-won, a long time ago – that each weapon would work well enough.

He addressed his two squads over their vox-link. ‘Fewer of them than I expected. Ten of us should be able to take them down.’

He asked Terserus to take point. The fibre bundles that powered his armour had just accomplished the arduous task of lifting him upright, and not only was he the most powerful warrior among them, he was also the one most protected against infection.

The Dreadnought raised his left fist. It was wrapped in a gauntlet almost large enough to cover a man’s head. He called on the machine-spirits inside the glove, and it crackled with bright blue energy. He had no right hand or forearm; instead, a storm bolter – effectively, two regular bolters welded together, providing him with double the firepower – protruded from his right elbow joint.

Galenus was harbouring no illusions. He had the Death Guard outnumbered, but each of them was more than a match for the average Space Marine. The captain figured that Terserus made them even. As the Dreadnought stamped forward – and his battle-brothers fell in behind him with their chainswords drawn – he addressed them all out loud. He cranked his vox-grille up to full volume, making sure the enemy heard him.

‘We are the Ultramarines, the Sons of Guilliman,’ he bellowed, quoting the famous words of Chapter Master Marneus Calgar. ‘Whilst we draw breath, we stand. Whilst we stand, we fight. Whilst we fight, we prevail. Nothing shall stay our wrath!’

Sometimes, he forgot that he was no longer a field commander. Not that Galenus objected. Terserus had near-perfect recall of events from centuries ago; his grasp on recent days, on the other hand, was tenuous in the extreme.

Most likely, he had already forgotten his conversation with Galenus in the Thunderhawk – and that was just how the captain liked it.

Arkelius relayed the good news to his crew, who didn’t share his access to command frequencies: ‘The captain and his team have put down behind enemy lines.’

‘I hope they leave a few Death Guard for the rest of us,’ Corbin grunted.

‘Meaning what, exactly?’ Arkelius asked, sharply.

‘No disrespect, sergeant. I just meant that Captain Galenus is well-known for leading from the front. When Iunus and I – and the *Scourge* – were with the

Eighth Company, we heard—’

‘I have another target lock,’ Iunus interrupted him. ‘No, damn it, I don’t. It’s veering in and out of my range.’

Arkelius checked through his vision slits. The sky above his head was almost clear. Both sides in the aerial battle had taken casualties – he couldn’t tell which side had taken more – and the combat zone had shifted eastward. The daemon fliers, he imagined, were shying away from the Hunters and the Stalkers, having seen their capabilities.

He voxed Captain Numitor, ‘Permission to break formation, sir, and seek a better firing position.’

Permission was granted.

Arkelius ordered Corbin to pull up the stabilisers and advance slowly. As usual, his driver anticipated him, and barely had the words left his throat when the *Scourge of the Skies* juddered into motion again. He suspected that Corbin thought he could have commanded the tank himself, and Iunus probably agreed with him.

Arkelius had been warned that this could happen.

Tank crews spent a great deal of time cooped up together. The bonds that formed between them were among the strongest in their Chapters, and each crew tended to bond with its vehicle too, becoming almost like cogs in its machinery. When a crewmember, particularly a tank commander, was lost – in this case, reassigned to a less experienced crew – it could take a while for the others to learn to work with his replacement.

Arkelius had one advantage over his experienced driver and gunner. Between his extra vision slits and the vox reports in his ear, he had a broader overview of the theatre of war than either of them. Corbin had just one slit, which allowed him to see straight ahead, while Iunus couldn’t see outside at all, and he only had the readings on his various monitors.

Arkelius knew that his brothers were gaining ground against their daemon opponents.

He had also learned that Galenus’s Thunderhawk had crashed and burned. He was glad to hear a slightly breathless report from its pilot, confirming that the crew had bailed out.

The pilot described fire-breathing daemon engines, like dragons: two of them. There had been a few garbled reports of such creatures before – they had picked off a Stormtalon on the periphery of the battlefield – but no one had got a good look at them until now.

They had circled the wreckage of the Thunderhawk once, but seemed uninterested in finishing off its former occupants. They had wheeled around and headed back north-west, the way they had come. A moment later, another Stormtalon pilot saw them, bearing down hard on his starboard side.

Arkelius told Corbin to alter their heading and increase their speed. ‘Forget the flies and their riders. We’re hunting bigger game now. Iunus, two targets, roughly four hundred metres ahead of us, larger than the others and faster. Let me know when you have them.’

Another pair of close explosions shook the Hunter.

‘Sergeant, we’re pulling ahead of the other tanks,’ Corbin advised over the vox-channel. ‘We’re making ourselves a target for—’

‘I’m told we’re fairly well-armoured,’ Arkelius snarled. ‘Let’s trust to that and take a chance, shall we? We have a pair of monstrosities tearing through our gunships out there. We’re loaded up with the best, the most accurate, surface-to-air weapons in the Emperor’s arsenal. I say we introduce the one to the other and—’

‘Sergeant!’ Iunus yelled.

Arkelius saw it for himself, on his own monitors: an auspex contact, growing larger, more insistent by the second; the tiny, flickering runes that accompanied it on the screen were blinking red, a warning that the object was approaching them on a collision course.

His gaze darted to his forward vision slit, and he saw it framed there too: one of the mutant flies, without a rider, spiralling out of the sky towards him. He thought it must be out of control as its wings appeared to be damaged. Then he realised that the insect was on a deliberate suicide run, and he saw the reason why: on its tail was a Skyspear missile.

‘Coming in too low, too fast,’ Iunus reported. ‘I can’t get a target lock on it.’

‘Abort that missile, now!’

‘I can’t do that either, sergeant. It isn’t one of our missiles.’

Corbin broke in: ‘The other Hunter must have fired it.’ As if Arkelius had needed telling.

He was already voxing the commander of the *Vengeance of Daedalus*, but before he could speak to him, the fly – at least twice the size of an average man – smacked into the *Scourge*’s prow and explosively disgorged its disgusting innards.

The impact shattered the armaplas pane of Arkelius’s vision slit: its outer pane, that was. The ancient designers of the Rhino and its mechanised offspring hadn’t

let them be so easily penetrated; their vision slits were actually short fixed periscopes, with a vertical tube and several lenses and mirrors separating the user's eye from what the slit showed him.

Arkelius didn't have to worry about one dead, mutant fly. He had to worry about what was coming up behind it.

Brusquely, he informed the *Daedalus*'s commander of his vehicle's predicament; too late, he feared. There was a good reason why Skyspear missiles were as effective as they were.

Unlike other missiles, their flights weren't guided by machine-spirits and cogitators. They were guided by human intelligences. The mummified brains of distinguished Chapter-serfs were entombed within the Skyspears' warheads, still partially aware.

What this meant, in practice, was that they did more than just follow enemy pilots; they could actually outthink them, anticipating their evasive manoeuvres. They almost always hit their targets – sooner or later – as Arkelius had seen for himself. Even when their targets were currently splattered across the front of a friendly tank.

Arkelius could do nothing now but pray.

He wasn't used to that feeling, and he hated it. Even on the worst day of his life; even as the ork axe had cleaved his armour and the dirt of an alien battlefield had rushed up to meet his face; even then, as long as he had been able to cling to consciousness – and to his bolter and chainsword – he hadn't felt as powerless as he did now.

The nose cone of the missile had grown to fill his view through the vision slit.

Then, with a sudden flash of light, it was gone.

The *Daedalus*'s gunner had transmitted the abort codes in time – or perhaps, just perhaps, the embalmed intelligence inside the Skyspear had seen the havoc it was about to wreak and acted on its own initiative. The result, either way, was that the missile had been destroyed, without its deadly warhead being triggered.

The *Scourge of the Skies* had been buffeted by the blast, but had weathered it. Corbin had acted on his own initiative too, lowering the hydraulic stabilisers.

Arkelius already had another problem. The suicidal fly on his prow was – incredibly – clinging to a shred of life. It was stabbing through his broken vision slit with a slender barbed stinger. Its wings, torn though they were, vibrated furiously, creating a loud buzz that seemed to drill into Arkelius's ears.

The stinger, of course, couldn't reach him in his sealed compartment. The fly must have realised this for itself because it squirmed around and showed him its

misshapen head instead. Green pus dribbled from its clicking mandibles. Its three compound eyes seemed to fix the tank commander with a baleful glare through his periscope mirrors.

Then, the fly vomited up a thick stream of viscous green liquid. Arkelius's readouts confirmed his instinctive suspicion: the ooze was virulently acidic. It was eating into the *Scourge's* armour plating. He cursed under his breath.

He threw open his circular top hatch. He levered himself up until his head and chest were above the *Scourge's* roof, and he could see the fly on the front of the tank below him. The fly saw him too – those blasted compound eyes, he realised – and it spat at him. Acidic green ooze splattered against Arkelius's forearm and it began to strip away the topmost layers of his ablative armour. He shook off as much of it as he could.

Then, he emptied a full bolter magazine into the insect's vile, black body.

The fly slid down the *Scourge's* sloping prow and out of Arkelius's sight. He dropped back into his seat and pulled down the hatch behind him. His right forearm was a mass of congealed blue ceramite and plasteel. He voxed Corbin, telling him to pull up the stabilisers and step on the accelerator pedal. He felt no more than a slight bump as they rode over the fly's remains and crushed them underneath their caterpillar tracks.

'Resume course, sergeant?' asked Corbin.

Arkelius checked through the slits in his hatch again. The battle in the sky was showing no signs of abating. Flies and their riders were being battered by Stormtalon assault cannons. It looked as if the tide was slowly turning the Imperium's way.

And now, at last, he saw it: little more than a fleeting shadow, from this distance, a suggestion of outspread wings and an elongated neck. It was twisting and wheeling its way through a mass of blue machinery and chitinous carapaces. One of the blasphemous daemon engines; what else could it have been?

Arkelius gave a new heading to his driver, and an estimated range to his gunner.

'Let's bring that affront to all that is holy down!' he snarled.

The Thunderhawk had gone down behind a hill to the north.

A thick plume of smoke spiralled skyward from the crash site, and Galenus monitored the vox-chatter in his ear until he knew that the crew had escaped with their lives.

To him, every man who fell under his command – every brother who died

before Galenus did, while following his orders – was a cause for regret. He knew he couldn't fight all his company's battles for them; he could certainly fight the biggest ones, however.

He had gone toe-to-toe with the broadest-shouldered, strongest-looking of the seven Death Guard at the ruined fort. The traitor's exposed head was little more than a mouldering skull, with scraps of grey skin fluttering from it like tattered banners. His charnel stench made Galenus want to retch. Of the Imperium's many enemies, there were none that disgusted him more than these: former Space Marines themselves, turned to the Ruinous Powers.

The Plague Marine parried Galenus's chainsword with the stock of a plasma pistol, and, somehow, it wasn't sliced in two by the slashing blade. He thrust his pox-ridden knife at the captain's guts. Twisting out of its way, Galenus fired his bolter at the Plague Marine's skull. An unexpected swipe jarred his firing hand and sent his shot awry.

Galenus had taken the measure of his opponent now. The Plague Marine was stronger, if a little slower, than he was. He was confident, however, that he could defend himself against the enemy, keep him occupied, for as long as he had to.

His battle-brothers – on the captain's orders – had partnered up, each fighting a single opponent, all apart from Terserus, that was, who had taken on two Death Guard by himself. They were trying to keep out of his reach – understandably – and concentrating their bolter fire on Terserus's chest in the vain hope of punching through his armour.

Galenus's sealed helmet buzzed with urgent vox reports.

He picked out a voice from among them: a Sergeant Beyus from the Eighth Company. He had found a surviving member of Orath's garrison, who had set eyes – briefly – upon the enemy leader. He described a Death Guard a head or more taller than the others, with a missing nose, a maggot-infested eye socket and a belt of skulls.

A Plague Champion, thought Galenus. That was what they called themselves.

Artorius – the commander of the Fists of the Fallen – had spoken of such a being in his final reports from Orath. It was believed, however, that Naracoth had died: locked in combat with Artorius himself beneath Fort Kerberos, when the building had come down on their heads. The description of this new figure didn't fit him, anyway.

So, this has to be a new Champion...

Galenus voxed Beyus directly, 'Where is he?' Beyus patched him through to the Doom Eagle, Brother Chelaki, who answered his question.

‘I should be able to see him,’ concluded Galenus. ‘Why can’t I see him?’

Chelaki couldn’t answer him. Galenus warned his two squads to be wary; there could be more enemies – more powerful enemies – yet to show themselves. He contacted Captain Fabian on the *Quintillus* to ask if he had detected any troop movements in the area.

Simultaneously he feinted to the left, drawing an unforeseen opponent into the arc of his chainsword blade and landing a solid blow to his left wrist – the wrist of his knife hand. Another foe might have lost his grip on his weapon, but Plague Marines were abnormally resistant to pain.

Galenus was winged by an answering burst of plasma, which heated his left pauldron until it glowed red and seared the flesh underneath it.

The Plague Marine took a step back and brought his pistol to bear again, this time at Galenus’s head. The barrel of the gun was corroded, oozing green pus out of a number of hairline cracks; it could only have been through the application of the vilest sorcery that it functioned at all.

Fabian’s voice crackled in his ear again, ‘You were right. We have engine emissions, a kilometre and a half to the south-east of your current position.’

‘How many?’

‘Two, three, it’s hard to tell. They’re airborne, beginning to fan out... Two. We have two confirmed contacts. Thunderhawks, from the shape of them – but they certainly aren’t ours.’

‘Where are they headed?’

‘Stand by... They’re levelling off at a cruising altitude. Looks like this is a planetary flight then. We have their trajectories and are projecting most likely destinations.’

Galenus mouthed two words to himself, grimly, ‘Fort Garm.’

In the meantime, he evaded another plasma blast and closed with his opponent again. A fierce flurry of cuts and thrusts forced the Plague Marine onto his back foot, a sitting duck for a sustained salvo of bolter fire. Bolts pinged off the Plague Marine’s armour and chipped his skull, but the traitor didn’t bleed, he only oozed more of that bright green pus.

‘We have it,’ said Fabian in Galenus’s ear. ‘We know where those ships are going.’

He spoke two words then, which made his fellow captain curse aloud.

The Ultramarines were beginning to make some real headway.

In Chelaki’s estimation, they had gained almost half the distance to the ruins of

Fort Kerberos from their starting point, across the blackened grain fields. Now, however, the second wave of the Death Guard army – at least thirty Traitor Marines in discoloured and encrusted power armour – had entered the fray. They carried with them a tattered banner fashioned from flayed human skin, and their arrival was turning the tide again.

Sergeant Beyus and his two surviving original squad members were battling a mutated fly that had pounced on them from above. Before Chelaki could join them, however – in a moment of fever-induced distraction – a daemon leapt on him from behind.

It had him in a chokehold, forcing him down onto one knee. He managed to grab its deceptively bony wrist, but it took all the strength he had to keep its hand – and the sword it held – away from his throat. He heard Sergeant Beyus's shouted warning – 'Incoming!' – but there wasn't a great deal he could do about it.

Something was coming up through the field behind him. Something big. Something metal. He could hear its engines screaming even over the clamour of the battle. He could hear its hull protesting as it bounced and scraped along the ground. The daemon must have heard it too, but apparently it was happy to be crushed if it could hold him here for just a second longer and ensure that he was crushed too.

It was still chanting throatily to itself. The words were gibberish, but at the same time there was an ineffable sense of wrongness about them. The sound of them, clawing their way into his ears, made Chelaki's eyes itch and his head hurt.

He put everything he had into one final, desperate effort, pushing himself backwards and over onto his back. He landed on top of the squirming daemon creature and, taken by surprise, it loosened its grip on him.

He tore himself free of it. He scrambled through the infected stalks of grain on his hands and knees. The daemon lunged after him and caught his ankle. Chelaki kicked out at it, and his boot sank into the soft tissue of its single eye.

It let go of him again – as a bright blue mass of metal came ploughing through the field and right over the prostrate creature. Had Chelaki been any closer to it – had he not been able to withdraw his foot in time – he would surely have shared its grisly fate.

He lay flat on his stomach, buried in the black grain. He was short of breath and his hearts were pounding in his ears. The burning pain from the wound in his side had spread, until he felt as if his every nerve was on fire. He longed to close

his heavy eyes, but he knew that if he did he wouldn't be able to open them again.

He pushed himself up, laboriously, letting his armour do most of the work.

The mass of blue metal had come to rest, about a hundred metres behind him. It was a Stormtalon, as he had already deduced. It had come down hard and left a burning furrow in its wake. From the rear, however, it didn't seem too badly damaged.

Sergeant Beyus and his men had despatched their insect opponent and were clambering over the gunship's nose. Its pilot must have been alive and in need of assistance. Indeed, a moment later, they lifted him out through the shattered glacis. The pilot was unconscious, and Chelaki heard the sergeant voicing for the services of an Apothecary.

Chelaki was still struggling to draw breath. He removed his helmet; what good was it doing him now, anyway? The cold air hit his skin like a bucket of water, and he realised that his face was drenched in sweat.

Numerous tiny parasites were crawling over his armour. They must have jumped to him from their former host, the daemon creature. He brushed them off, disgusted, crushing as many of them as he could underfoot as they scuttled away from him.

Somehow, he made it to the front of the Stormtalon. He hoisted himself up into the empty cockpit and dropped heavily into the pilot's seat. The gunship's engines had been killed, but the dashboard runes were still lit up.

Sergeant Beyus voxed him, 'Chelaki, what are you doing?'

'I think...' he said, flicking a few runes, running a few tests. 'I don't think there's too much damage.' It must have been the pilot, rather than the ship, that had been critically wounded, and he must have clung to consciousness long enough to complete a safe, albeit bumpy, landing. A better landing than Chelaki had managed, anyway.

'I can get this ship back in the air,' he declared.

'Are you sure?' asked Beyus, doubtfully.

'This is what I was trained for, sergeant,' Chelaki told him.

He held his back straight, with an effort, looking Beyus in the eye. He couldn't let him see how weak he truly was. Had his sergeant suspected that he had become infected, that the rot had spread to Chelaki's very soul, he would surely have had him executed on the spot.

He wasn't ready to die just yet.

All the years he had served he had spent at a gunship's helm. He didn't think

he had the strength to swing a chainsword any longer, but Chelaki could have flown a Stormtalon in his sleep; and the Emperor had seen fit, at this moment of all moments, to drop a Stormtalon virtually at his feet.

Beyus nodded his assent. ‘And may the Emperor go with you,’ he said, as he turned to rejoin his battle-brothers in combat against more plague daemons.

Chelaki felt ashamed of himself, unworthy, for having deceived a superior officer, but he had no doubt that the Emperor was with him indeed. He expected yet more from Chelaki than he had already given – just one final act of service, perhaps – and the Doom Eagle could better oblige him in the air, in his element, than he could on the ground.

A fresh explosion rocked the *Scourge of the Skies*.

Arkelius saw a maggot-ridden Death Guard on the battlefield ahead of them. He had lobbed a grenade at the Hunter and was preparing a second one, taking aim.

An alarm screamed out from Arkelius’s instrument banks, and Corbin reported in, ‘We’re overheating again, sergeant. Systems failing across the board.’

Arkelius had Iunus fire a volley from the hull-mounted storm bolter. Several of his bolts struck true. The Plague Marine didn’t fall, but his grenade detonated in his hand and he took the full force of its blast. Frustratingly, however, he remained standing.

The Death Guard’s explosives were fashioned from the shrunken skulls of their slain enemies. They were low on concussive force, but loaded with toxic spores. They were deadly to Nurgle’s enemies, but far less so to the Plague God’s already diseased followers.

Two Ultramarines closed with the shaken traitor, their chainswords singing. Arkelius instructed Corbin to keep the *Scourge* moving forwards, but then Iunus spoke up as his instruments sounded a chirruping alarm. ‘We’re coming into weapons range of the enemy’s artillery, sergeant. I suggest we–’

A rune panel beside him exploded, venting pressurised steam into his compartment.

Arkelius scowled behind his helmet. ‘Very well,’ he conceded. ‘Put on the brakes and lower the stabilisers, and, Iunus, target the flies and their riders again, but sparingly. Don’t fire until you’re sure of a kill.’ They only had so many Skyspear missiles – too few to waste any.

He leaned forward to look through his main vision slit again.

His eyes widened at the last sight he had expected to see: a daemon engine,

one of the metal dragons. All this time, he had been hunting it and suddenly it had appeared from nowhere. More accurately, it had emerged from the blast field of an exploding missile. It flattened its razor-edged wings and lowered its triangular head as it began to dive.

‘Iunus!’ Arkelius yelled.

‘I see it, sergeant. It’s coming right at us. No, strike that. We aren’t its target.’

The dragon soared over the *Scourge*, and alighted upon a Predator Destructor. It tore into the turret of the Imperial tank with its claws, shredding its guns in seconds.

Arkelius heard the urgent voice of the Predator’s commander, reporting that he was abandoning his vehicle. Its hatches flew open and three power-armoured figures stumbled out of them. Iunus, in the meantime, was scrambling to get a lock on the Predator’s attacker. He lowered his missile launcher as far as it would go – until it was near-horizontal – but Arkelius could see his problem: while his target was still attached to the abandoned tank, his auspex couldn’t differentiate one from the other.

The dragon breathed fire at the Predator’s withdrawing crew before returning to the sky with a raucous screech. One of the crewmembers – the commander, to judge by his numerous honour badges – was hurt, badly burned, and the daemon engine was getting away.

‘As soon as you have that lock, Iunus...’ said Arkelius, tersely.

An age seemed to pass before, at last, Iunus’s fingers snapped shut around his launch trigger and the *Scourge of the Skies* trembled with the now-familiar sensation of recoil. Arkelius held his breath as he followed the Skyspear missile’s flight. The utmost silence of his crewmates suggested that they were holding theirs too.

The missile quickly dropped onto the daemon engine’s tail.

The dragon saw it, and tried in vain to shake it off. It looped around behind a Stormtalon, banked steeply and threaded its way sideways between two giant flies. But the Skyspear evaded both friend and foe alike in dogged pursuit of its programmed target. The daemon had the edge over it in terms of manoeuvrability and it occurred to Arkelius that it was also guided by an interred intelligence. The missile’s smaller size, however, compensated for that advantage – and it was faster too. It was homing in on the daemon engine’s debased emissions.

The missile struck its fleeing target, right up its exhaust pipes.

The daemon engine exploded – and several monstrous flies in its vicinity were

knocked off-balance or injured by the force of the blast and by razor-sharp pieces of shrapnel. Inside the *Scourge of the Skies*, three voices were raised in triumphant roars.

Arkelius had despatched many enemies of the Emperor, of course. He had lost count of the number long ago. To have destroyed a creature so monstrous, however, so powerful – it felt different. He felt that he – together with his vehicle and his crew, of course – had just accomplished something special, something bigger than he had ever accomplished before.

It was a heady realisation, enough to make him forget the discomfort – the mild itch of claustrophobia – that had lurked on the periphery of his awareness all day.

There was only one thought on the tank commander's mind at that moment, and he clenched his teeth in a grim smile as he voiced it, '...and one to go!'

Two of Galenus's battle-brothers were down.

A Plague Marine planted his foot on the chest of one of them, and plunged his infected knife through a crack in his bright blue armour. He leered across the battlefield at Galenus, with his blackened stumps of teeth, as he twisted his blade in his enemy's guts.

A Plague Marine had fallen too, and, at that moment, Terserus drove his power fist through the stomach of another, splintering his armour and his spine.

Two casualties apiece, then. With their greater starting numbers, that meant the Ultramarines were gaining the advantage.

Sergeant Thalorus and Brother Filion came to their captain's assistance, giving him a welcome respite from his relentless, skull-headed opponent. He used it to converse with the orbiting *Quintillus*, specifically, with Captain Fabian's epistolary, who had taken charge of the Librarians of all three companies.

'I need answers now,' he barked. 'Why do we have two Chaos transports – one carrying, we have to assume, a Plague Champion – headed for the second Great Seal?'

'We have been trying to divine the answer to that question, and—'

'Don't tell me what you've been doing. Just tell me what you know.'

The Librarian drew a breath before he answered. 'No doubt remains that those ships are en route to Fort Garm to destroy the Great Seal there. This may be good news for us.'

Galenus raised a cynical eyebrow. 'How so?'

'It could be that our assumptions were... incorrect.' The word was spoken

reluctantly. ‘It could be that, in order to unleash the warp rift fully, both Great Seals must be broken.’

‘Because why else would the Death Guard divide their forces this way,’ Galenus mused, ‘when they’re so close to unearthing and destroying the Kerberos Seal?’

‘The problem, captain, is that the eldars’ ancient technomancy is still beyond our—’

Galenus tuned out the Librarian’s voice. The skull-headed Plague Marine was holding off his two attackers; they couldn’t seem to penetrate his defences. Galenus, however, had spotted that a patch of the armour between his ribs had rusted away, and that there was a fresh-looking, suppurating wound behind it.

He holstered his boltgun and drew his gladius. Like Terserus’s power fist, the short sword’s blade fizzed with energy. Of course, it was smaller and less powerful than the fist. However, at close quarters and in skilled hands – like the captain’s – it was a highly effective weapon.

With a forward lunge, he thrust his gladius into the Plague Marine’s side.

He was pleased to elicit a grunt from the traitor’s throat – the first sign of pain or weakness that he had displayed. Galenus stepped back and left the rest to his battle-brothers. He was thinking about what the Librarian had told him.

It was certainly an appealing notion, he thought, if they were to achieve their evil goal, the Death Guard had to win on two fronts, while the Ultramarines had only to beat them on one. It would mean he could forget about the southbound enemy forces. An appealing notion indeed...

‘But what if it’s the Death Guard who have made the wrong assumptions?’

‘Captain?’

‘What if we were right before and wrong now?’ Galenus asked. ‘We could win the battle here but lose the war. Can you guarantee that won’t happen? That, if we allow the Garm Seal to be destroyed, it won’t mean the end of everything?’

‘I have a team of Codicers consulting the Emperor’s Tarot as we speak to determine—’

‘I’ll take that as a “no”, then,’ said Galenus.

A death’s-head grenade exploded against Terserus’s armour, enveloping him in a pall of smoke but hardly shaking him. The skull-headed Plague Marine gave way to the inevitable at last, and was decapitated cleanly by Brother Filion’s chainsword.

Galenus voxed the sergeant in charge of his aerial forces. He asked him how many ships he could spare from the ongoing battle. With its greater speed, a

Stormtalon could easily catch up to the southbound Chaos-controlled Thunderhawks, although its cannons would be little use against their near-impervious hulls.

‘I want them to run interference,’ Galenus explained. ‘Do whatever they can to slow those plague ships down. Whatever it takes.’

Next he voxed Fabian, ‘Contact the surviving members of the garrison at Fort Garm. Tell them to lay explosives throughout the building and to blow them the second they see the enemy coming. Let them dig for the Garm Seal too.’

He knew he was only buying time, at best. He just prayed that it might be time enough.

Chelaki felt better than he had in several hours. He was calmer, more focused. He had the wind in his face and he could finally breathe again.

The ground dropped away beneath his cockpit. Within seconds, the Ultramarines and the daemons fighting down there were little more than blue and grey specks to him, like icons on a hololithic projection.

He didn’t like the sound of his port engine, which was grumbling hoarsely. It must have been damaged in the crash-landing. He ought to have known that, but he had had neither the time nor the energy for his usual preflight checks.

No matter, he told himself. He didn’t need much more from the engines than they had already given him. They had already lifted him up here, back into the sky.

A vox-grille in one of his control panels crackled. A voice – the voice of another Ultramarine sergeant – addressed him by the call sign of his vessel and ordered him to identify himself. Chelaki complied, and at the same time he eased his joystick forwards and plunged into the midst of the ongoing aerial battle.

He pointed his nose at a cluster of giant flies and let rip with his twin-linked assault cannons. He pumped scores of rounds into the hideous creatures in a matter of seconds. A couple of flies survived, but he had shot away the wings of one of them. It could no longer keep its revolting bloated body aloft and was dropping like a stone.

The remaining fly flew at him with a furious buzz. Its mouth gaped open, wider than seemed physically possible. He remembered seeing one of these creatures on the ground. It had been slain, its stomach split open, and the partially digested corpse of a Space Marine had spilled out of it. Chelaki was only too painfully aware of his cockpit’s shattered glacis – he had nothing, no shielding, between him and his vengeful attacker.

He threw the Stormtalon into a sideways spin. The fly didn't react to his sudden manoeuvre in time. Instead of landing on the flimsy framework of the cockpit canopy, it glanced off the hull and was stunned. A moment later, it burned and finally expired in the backwash of the starboard-side engine pod.

'Welcome to the team, brother,' said the sergeant's voice from the vox-grille.

There were fewer Imperial ships in the air than Chelaki had expected, fewer than he had seen from the ground. It had seemed to him before that the battle was almost won. From up here, however, the odds looked a lot less favourable.

He glanced at his targeting auspex. He saw that two larger shapes with Imperial signatures – more Stormtalons – had broken off combat to fly southward. He didn't know why and he didn't ask. It wasn't his business. At least they hadn't been shot down, as he had briefly feared. 'Glad to be of service, sergeant,' Chelaki voxed.

He had picked up another large shape on the auspex – and this one was no ally. He slammed his joystick hard to the left and banked around. He swooped past another fly. Its rider hurled a grenade in his direction, but missed.

And now he saw it: the metal dragon, the daemon engine that had ripped him out of the sky once already. He was sure it was the one: its right wing had lost one of its metal panels. He had noticed that before, as his gunship was blistering in its infernal fire and his cockpit had crumpled around him.

The daemon's wound didn't seem to have slowed it down. It was jousting with another Stormtalon – and it was winning. It sideswiped the Imperial gunship with a claw, causing black smoke to pour out of its engine. This was it, thought Chelaki. He knew what he had to do now. He knew why the Emperor had kept him alive this long.

The other Stormtalon was already badly damaged; the blow to its engine must have been the final straw. The pilot ejected. It seemed like everything was happening in slow-motion. The Stormtalon spiralled towards the ground. Its former pilot was suspended in midair, in that fraction of a second before gravity took hold of him. The daemon engine was wheeling towards him again, throwing open its maw to release its searing hellfire.

And Chelaki's thumb was poised over his missile launch rune.

The Typhoon missile launcher was underneath his cockpit. He felt the vibration through the soles of his boots as it spat out three rockets in quick succession. His hope was to ram them down the daemon's open throat.

The first of the missiles flew wide. The daemon engine twisted out of the way of the second, but straight into the path of the third. It unleashed the stream of

flames that had been meant for the falling pilot, and the warhead blew before the missile could reach its target. The daemon was battered and flung away by the shockwave, but – as far as the disappointed Chelaki could tell – it wasn't damaged.

At least he had saved his brother pilot's life. The jets in his seat were flaring to control his descent. He had also got the daemon engine's attention.

He had already begun to take evasive action. He plunged into a nearby cloud bank and dived steeply. The daemon engine was faster and more manoeuvrable than Chelaki was. His only hope of shaking it off was to deny it line of sight on him.

Dropping out of the clouds, he saw the Death Guard's tanks underneath him. There were over a dozen of them, plastered with filth, festooned with rotting bones and sprouting arcane weapons like swollen tumours. They were holding their ground in a line in front of Fort Kerberos. They were letting the Imperial invaders come to them, although a few of them were already straining forward, like wolves against a leash.

He was closer to the fort – closer to the warp rift – than he had thought. A little too close for comfort. Had any of those tanks had sky-strafting weaponry like the Imperial Hunters and Stalkers did, he would have made an irresistible target for them.

The daemon engine was above, still searching the clouds for him.

A fly and its rider came at him from the right, but Chelaki wasn't interested in engaging either of them. He banked away from the arc of the rider's swung blade – but the fly spat a plume of green goop in his direction, which he couldn't evade.

His starboard engine pod took the worst of the spray. A second later, predictably, his instrument panels flared red with warning runes. In the meantime, he had outpaced the mutant fly easily enough. He fixed his true nemesis – the dragon, the daemon engine – in his gun sights, and he opened up his throttle.

The acid was eating its way through Chelaki's starboard engine, while the damaged port engine couldn't take the additional strain. He might have made an emergency landing – he *might* have – but for what purpose, he asked himself grimly?

For the second time today, his ship was done for – and so was he.

He could feel the infection coursing, burning its way through his veins.

Right now – if Chelaki could believe the whispered rumours – a new seed pod

was ripening in Nurgle's sickly garden. A budding daemon was leeching off his dwindling life force, weakening him further by the second. If he let the rot take him, then the daemon would have the rest of him. It would have his very soul.

There was only one certain way to stop it; one way to keep the disease from running its course and ensure that the daemon was stillborn.

Chelaki came up behind and beneath the daemon engine. At the instant that it heard his spluttering engines and began to turn, he hit it with everything he had.

The nightmare creature let out a terrible shriek. It tried in vain to twist and roll its way through an impossible gauntlet of exploding rounds. It was clipped by some, buffeted by the blasts of others. Its armour plating was scorched and cracked, but not shattered. The daemon made sure to protect its wounded wing, where it was most vulnerable.

Chelaki loosed off his Typhoon missiles, one after the other. There was no point in worrying about conserving his resources now. He scored a direct hit with his first shot, but missed with the second. The next two, he sent wide of the mark on purpose.

His opponent was finally looking hurt. It had lost more armour, exposing rotting purple flesh. One of the pinions on its right wing was broken, hanging limply. It wasn't enough, and Chelaki had used up his element of surprise.

The daemon engine swooped low and came around, beating its left wing vigorously to compensate for its crippled right. Chelaki knew what it was trying to do, and against a lesser flyer it might have worked.

He had fired those Typhoon missiles wide for a reason: to give the daemon engine only one safe way to go. With the help of his auto-senses – but mostly, his years of training and combat experience – he had predicted its flight plan precisely.

His opponent sheared right as it pulled out of its dip, and if only Chelaki had fallen for its lure he would have been in serious trouble. No doubt, the daemon engine had expected to catch him, side-on, in its sights. He could only imagine what the machine-creature felt as, instead, it found his Stormtalon screaming head-on towards it.

It couldn't avoid a collision with him; there wasn't time. The dragon threw open its mouth, and Chelaki found himself staring past its teeth and its coiling metal tongue. He saw the fireball building there, an instant before the searing flames streamed out towards him.

His starboard engine was bleeding promethium, which ignited – too late to save the fire-breather. Chelaki rammed his gunship at full speed down its throat,

even as it exploded and he felt shrapnel tearing through his body.

His last thought was that he had done it. He had accomplished the task for which the Emperor had spared him: slain the daemon that had slain him in turn. A ghost's revenge. He could think of no more fitting fate for a Doom Eagle.

He died fulfilled.

When Arkelius heard, he felt a brief twinge of disappointment. He suppressed it, of course, knowing it was an unworthy reaction.

He ought to have been gladdened – he *was* gladdened – by the annihilation of another foul daemon, another great victory won in the Emperor's name. He passed on the news to his crew, who welcomed it unreservedly.

With the daemon engines gone, the Death Guard forces in the air suddenly found themselves outmatched. The few remaining Imperial Stormtalons made short work of several more flies, while even more were picked off by the Stalker tanks beneath them.

The *Scourge* fired off just one more Skyspear missile. It breezed past its target and looped around for a second run at it. In the meantime, however, the fly met its fate in a hail of cannon fire. By the time the Skyspear struck it, it was already dead and the missile, with its guiding intelligence, was sacrificed in vain.

Arkelius told Iunus to hold his fire and conserve their ammunition. He lowered his sights to survey the ground ahead of them. The battle was going the Imperium's way there too; more slowly, but just as surely.

The one-eyed daemons had, for the most part, been dispensed with and Imperial casualties, while not exactly minimal, so far had been comparatively light. The Ultramarines certainly had the advantage of numbers now. Most of their remaining foes, however, were Plague Marines, and Arkelius knew better than to underestimate their strength.

The *Scourge's* missiles were of no use in this situation. There was no way the Hunter could fire into the melee and not take out more friends than it did foes.

For the first time in a while – since before the destruction of the first daemon engine – Arkelius felt a familiar itch. He longed to be out there, fighting alongside his brothers. He longed to feel the trembling of a chainsword in his palm as it bit into a stinking traitor's armour. An irrational part of him felt unworthy, even, watching from inside his plasteel and ceramite bunker while others put their lives on the line for him.

He threw open his top hatch again. He stood up on his seat and levelled his bolter across the *Scourge's* roof. He squeezed the trigger whenever he had a clear

shot at an enemy, which wasn't nearly as often as he would have liked. At least he was doing something useful.

In between shots, Arkelius prayed that the Emperor would lend strength to his battle-brothers' arms and precision to their weapons. He prayed that for each brother cut down by a Plague Marine's sword, his gene-seed at least might be rescued.

The Death Guard were outnumbered, yes, but each one of them fought to the last breath in his festering body, refusing to surrender even a centimetre of ground.

Once again, Arkelius wondered just what it was they were fighting for. What was it that made Fort Kerberos a prize worth the having, even as it lay in ruins?

The battle seemed to rage forever, Arkelius's enforced inactivity making every second seem to stretch into a lifetime. Then, the field in front of him began to clear at last, and Captain Numitor's voice came over the vox-net again.

The Imperial tanks started forward on Numitor's order. The *Scourge* was still out a short way ahead of the pack, so, as Arkelius dropped back into his seat, he told his driver to give the other vehicles a second or two to draw level.

It was just as well. Corbin had switched off the engine while they were stationary, giving it a chance to cool down. It took him three tries to restart it, and, when he did so, warning lights flashed across the instrument banks again and Arkelius smelt something burning.

Corbin voxed him, anticipating his commander's question, 'I can hold it together, if we take it slow and steady.'

For the first time he sounded stressed, and, as the Hunter ground into reluctant motion, Arkelius felt it pulling insistently to the left.

They rolled past a Plague Marine, still on his feet and holding his own against four Ultramarines. Then, suddenly, another traitor emerged from the smoke in front of them. His face was hidden by a rash of vile mutations and grafted-on augmetics.

He saw the *Scourge* bearing down on him, and braced himself as if to halt it with the strength of his own arms. Arkelius had Iunus train the hull-mounted storm bolter on the Plague Marine, and they blasted him with explosive rounds.

Then the Plague Marine leapt, a jump pack on his back firing, and he landed with a thump, spread-eagled across the *Scourge*'s prow. He was holding a death's-head grenade, and Arkelius realised that he was trying to jam it down the Skyspear missile launcher's barrel.

He was dragged from his perch by a pair of Ultramarines and shot at point-

blank range in the head until he stopped twitching. Arkelius recognised one of the slayers – recognised the markings on his sealed armour, anyway – as Valerion, a former squad-mate.

The *Scourge* rolled over something its weight couldn't crush – a hillock, or, more likely, an armoured corpse – and, briefly, his vision slit pointed up at the overcast sky. He saw the jagged warp rift and quickly wrenched his eyes away from its purple glare. At least its close proximity told him that they were finally nearing their objective.

Standing in their way, of course, was a line of enemy tanks.

There were several Chaos Predators among them. Most of the tanks, however, were Vindicators: siege engines, fitted with Demolisher cannons and dozer-blades. Their Death Guard owners had modified them in other ways too: more bizarre and horrifying ways.

Directly ahead of the *Scourge*, one tank had slimy tentacles sprouting from its hull and it was coughing up gouts of flame; another daemon-engine, it seemed. Most of the tanks were daubed with blazing Chaos runes, which made them painful to look at.

They had played little part in the fighting thus far, and had waited in silence for their enemies to come to them. As the battlefield began to clear, however – as the risk of causing collateral damage diminished – they were bringing their guns to bear.

Two Ultramarines were struck by Demolisher shells and vaporised.

Arkelius held the *Scourge of the Skies* back, alongside its sister Hunter – the *Vengeance of Daedalus* – and the two Stalkers. He let the Imperial Predator Destructors edge ahead of them. Their autocannons blazed, as did the lascannons in their sponsons, to which the enemy artillery were quick to respond in kind.

The enemy tanks were well within the Skyspear's range now – and close enough for Iunus to get a target lock on any of them, despite the intervening smoke haze. So, Arkelius had his driver step on the brakes and lower the stabilisers.

Iunus asked permission to fire a missile. As Arkelius gave it, he heard sobering news through his earpiece: a Predator, one of theirs, had already been destroyed, struck by one of those Demolishers. Its crew hadn't had time to get out; they had perished in flames.

'All right,' he snarled, addressing his own crew, 'this is it! Captain Galenus is dealing with the Death Guard at the fort. That just leaves these unholy machines for us. Blow our way through them, and it's over. We'll have done the Emperor

proud.'

As the leader of an infantry squad, he had often given similar speeches before. In the past, though, he had usually believed them.

The *Scourge*'s first Skyspear missile hit the Vindicator in front of them. Arkelius was sure that it had cracked its armour plating, but the tank's hull flowed like ooze, reforming into a new and even more hideous shape. Its turret spun around to face its attacker.

A pair of searchlights on the Vindicator's prow snapped on, glaring through the smoke of the explosion like malevolent eyes. To Arkelius, it seemed as if those eyes were looking right through the front of the *Scourge* and directly into his soul.

Galenus learned of Chelaki's fate over the vox-net.

He hadn't known the Doom Eagle, but he would certainly mourn his passing; later, when he had the time. For now, he was just grateful for the gain that his sacrifice had bought.

He had lost three men from his own small force of ten, but the Apothecaries could probably save some of them, if they could reach them. On the other hand, the bodies of three of the seven Death Guard lay broken and half-buried in Fort Kerberos's shifting rubble.

Galenus closed with another of them. As he did so, the Plague Marine's hollow eyes darkened and he jabbered insanely to himself. Suddenly, a cloud of filth erupted around him, filled with hundreds of thousands of tiny flies. Galenus's auto-senses went wild, warning him of the threat of infection, and, reluctantly, he fell back.

His battle-brothers nearby were having more luck. Brother Filion, with a sweep of his chainsword, opened up a fourth Plague Marine's stomach, and, as the traitor sank to his knees coughing up black bile, Sergeant Thalorus sliced off his head.

Terserus broke away from his own opponent and stamped into the cloud of pestilence, which clearly held no fear for him. Galenus and Thalorus took over from him, flanking the traitor that the Dreadnought had been fighting. As Filion moved to join them too, the captain voxed him.

'No. Deal with the diggers.'

Filion followed orders. He loped sure-footedly across the shifting wreckage, towards the spade-carrying zombies, which didn't react to his approach at all. He announced his presence by sending a grenade ahead of him, pitching it into the

heart of the largest zombie grouping.

That got their attention. The explosion scattered the ungainly creatures and put a stop to their labours at long last. Some of them were hurled up to a hundred metres away, and more than a few were brutally dismembered. Hardly any of them, however, stayed down.

The zombies climbed to their feet and came shambling towards Brother Filion.

He pumped them full of bolter fire, putting some down but only staggering most. The first zombies reached him and he greeted them with a screaming chainsword, but the zombies were almost as resistant to injury as the Death Guard themselves.

The zombies swarmed Filion, overwhelming him through sheer weight of numbers. They were scrabbling at his armour, seeking out its seams – or any fresh cracks – with grimy, splintered fingernails. They pinned his right arm to his side, impeding his use of his weapons. His chainsword blade was cutting into a zombie's ribcage, but it didn't seem to care.

Galenus planted his boot in his latest opponent's stomach and pushed hard. Taken by surprise, the Plague Marine sprawled backwards. Galenus had the opening he needed to rush to Brother Filion's assistance. The Plague Marine recovered faster than he had hoped and began to follow him, but found the massive form of Terserus blocking his path.

A rockcrete block shifted under Galenus's foot, almost making him fall. His reaction time seemed a little off; his head felt light, but his stomach was heavy. He feared he might have been infected by the stinking cloud after all.

Then, his eyes flickered upwards to the purple storm raging high above him. The warp rift. He was directly underneath it now. He fancied that he could feel the foul horrors of the immaterium, scratching at the furthest edges of his mind, looking for a way in. He swallowed hard and told himself not to think about it. He had to be able to concentrate on the task ahead of him. He had to stop that rift from opening any further.

He had to hold the horrors at bay.

Galenus reached Filion's side. He had sheathed his gladius and wielded his chainsword two-handed so that each blow would have the strength of two servo-assisted arms behind it. The zombies were easy enough to hit – they hardly made an effort to defend themselves – but, as Galenus had already seen, near-impossible to kill.

His best bet, clearly, was to carve them into small chunks.

He drove his whirling blade through rotten grey flesh and brittle grey bones.

He had saved Brother Filion's life; at least, for now. His one-man cavalry charge had kept his battle-brother from going under. The zombies still had a significant advantage of numbers, but it was much harder to surround two Space Marines – when each of them was watching the other's back – than one.

Galenus risked a backwards glance, aware of the powerful enemy he had left behind him. He saw that Terserus was keeping the Plague Marine occupied, subjecting him to a sustained barrage of bolter fire. He had turned his back on his previous opponent, however – the one who had summoned the cloud, and who now aimed a meltagun at the Dreadnought's back.

A concentrated blast of superheated air caused Terserus's armour to shed blue molten tears. He didn't skip a beat in delivering his retaliation. The storm bolter that had taken the place of his right forearm swivelled vertically, a hundred and eighty degrees, to point behind him. It spat hot metal at the Plague Marine, punching new holes through his armour.

Galenus had one ear tuned to the voice of a southbound Stormtalon pilot. He was on the edge of vox range, fading in and out, but the captain picked up the salient details of his report. The pilot had just laid eyes upon the Death Guard's Thunderhawks.

There were two of them, as the *Quintillus*'s scans had suggested. There was something else too. Another daemon engine – the same as the first two, dragon-like in appearance – had been clinging to one of the transporter's hulls, which was why the scans had missed it. It had disengaged now and was coming at the Imperial Stormtalons, breathing fire.

The pilot's voice cut out altogether then, drowned in static.

Galenus tried to contact the *Quintillus*, but received no reply. He spoke to Terserus over their private channel instead. The Dreadnought confirmed that, no, he couldn't raise the battle-barge either; the fault wasn't with the captain's equipment.

'The warp rift,' Galenus muttered. 'It's directly between us now. It must be interfering with our vox signals.' He wondered, for the first time, if Captain Fabian had been right. Should he have stayed in orbit? He didn't like being out of touch with his forces like this.

'You'd rather be up there,' asked Terserus, as if the captain had voiced his thoughts, 'not knowing what was happening down here?'

This happened sometimes: a glimmer of his old self surfacing from the mist – the Sergeant Terserus of old, who knew Galenus better than anyone ever had – and, as usual, he was right. The captain had made his decision. He had to fight

and win the battle he had chosen to fight.

He swung his blade and cut both legs off a zombie at the knees. It fell, but dragged itself back towards him on its stomach and elbows. It tried to bite Galenus's ankle; he kicked it in the head repeatedly until the last of its mouldering teeth fell out.

There was more help on the way too. Another battle-brother had broken through the Plague Marines dwindling ranks.

Galenus only wished he knew what was happening elsewhere on the planet.

He wished he knew for sure why Death Guard gunships were headed towards Fort Garm. He wished he knew how the effort to slow them down was going. He wished he knew the condition of Fort Kerberos's Great Seal, still buried somewhere beneath his feet – was it intact or wasn't it?

He just wished he could be certain that he wasn't fighting for nothing.

Below the wreckage of Fort Kerberos – a long way below – a figure stirred.

His bones were broken. He was pinned to the ground by heavy debris. He had thought himself dead, and, perhaps, for a short time, he had been.

The last thing he remembered, he had been locked in mortal combat with a single foe; no match for him, or so he had believed at the time.

Naracoth had been arrogant and careless, and the memory of it shamed him.

His enemy – Artorius, the Space Marine, although he had been battered and bloodied – had first taken his hand and then swept his feet out from under him.

He had snatched up a weapon from the ground and plunged it into Naracoth's skull with all his fading strength, penetrating his brain. He *should* have been dead.

It seemed, however, that his god was not yet done with him.

The roof of the shrine – the shrine in which he had fought, beneath the fort – had mostly collapsed. An obstinate pillar had held, sparing Naracoth the full force of the cave-in. His opponent had not been as blessed by his own paltry deity. A silver gauntlet protruded from beneath a hunk of rockcrete.

Artorius's head, throat and chest had been utterly crushed.

Naracoth lifted his own bloated head with effort. The sodium torches that had lined the smooth walls had been extinguished. The shrine, however, was bathed in a bright, flickering purple light, the source of which he couldn't see.

His eyes searched for the artefact that had drawn him to this backwater world: the first of the two Great Seals. The shrine had been built around it: a gleaming, crystal rod plunged into a raised stone platform like a key pushed into a lock.

It had been impervious to Naracoth's strongest blows – but not to the sorcerous power of his unclean lord. The blood of one of the Great Seal's keepers had broken the Seal. A shard of it, however, had remained stubbornly intact.

Naracoth had been forced to seek out another sacrifice.

His dry, scabby lips parted. A wheezing laugh bubbled up from his blackened, shrivelled lungs. He hadn't failed in his mission, after all. He may have fallen to his enemy, but he had surely dealt him a mortal blow in the process; the shrine's collapse had only finished the job. Artorius's blood had spilled out of his dying body. Its stain must have spread to the remaining crystal shard; thus the required sacrifice had been made.

Of the first of the Great Seals of Orath, nothing remained; nothing but crystal fragments. The platform into which it had been plunged had shattered too, and it was from somewhere beneath this that the purple light now streamed.

Naracoth reached up with his remaining hand. He gripped the shard of the Great Seal, still lodged within his brain. He closed his fingers tightly around it and yanked it free. The agony was incredible, almost making him black out again, and he screamed.

The fragment was brittle now, and he crushed it in his fist.

The purple light grew brighter, as if it was collecting around him, as if the shard had been keeping it at bay until this moment.

And now, the light was tearing savagely through Naracoth's body. A thousand phantom blades were slicing into his organs; his blood was on fire and he screamed again, longer and louder than before. He had faith, however, that he could endure any pain.

Had he not earned Nurgle's favour, after all?

The Plague God had received his loyal servant's gift, and had chosen to bestow the greatest of all possible rewards upon him. The purple light was tearing Naracoth apart, but at the same time he knew that it was putting him back together.

He could feel the corrupting energy of the immaterium pouring into his veins. His every muscle was mutating, growing larger, more grotesque, more powerful by the second. The rubble pressing down on his legs didn't bother him any longer. He knew he could lift it easily.

The warp was flooding into Naracoth's mind too. His last fragile strand of sanity finally snapped. He neither noticed nor would he have cared. He had spent his whole life working towards this moment and he had no intention of backing

away from it now.

He cast his old persona, his old life, aside with casual glee.

It had been nothing. *He* had been nothing. He could see that more clearly than ever now, as he felt himself, his blackened soul, becoming elevated in the eyes of his approving god, at last becoming something... something *more*...

That burning smell was growing stronger, more pungent.

The *Scourge of the Skies* had its stabilisers planted, but its engine was still idling. Corbin had said that if he turned it off and they had to move in a hurry, he couldn't guarantee being able to start it again. Arkelius had ordered Iunus to target the enemy's well-armed and well-armoured Vindicators and to fire at will. For now, there wasn't much else he could do.

Around him, three dozen metal leviathans jostled ponderously for the best offensive positions. Their tactical options, however, were severely limited. The battle would be decided primarily by the relative strengths of the participants' weapons and their armour plating; factors over which Arkelius had no control.

He couldn't see what was happening ahead of him any longer. The Chaos tanks were pumping out thick clouds of poisonous smoke, forcing most of the Ultramarines on the ground into a tactical withdrawal.

Arkelius found even the vox-chatter difficult to follow. Breathless reports were cut off or contradicted in mid-flow. He heard that a Predator Destructor had been blown apart, then, immediately afterwards, that it hadn't, then, finally, that it had been, after all.

Iunus fired at another Vindicator. Arkelius's rune panels reported a direct hit; however, they couldn't tell him what the damage to the enemy tank had been. He told Iunus to fire again, but then belayed the order as he struggled to filter one voice out of many in his earpieces: the commander of a Predator up ahead of them.

'It sounds like... Yes, we did it. We destroyed their main turret. They're helpless.' Iunus acknowledged the sergeant's information, and adjusted his sights in search of another target.

In the meantime, more reports of damaged and destroyed Vindicators were coming in. The Imperial Stalkers, it seemed, were the most effective against them, with their armour-piercing stormcannons. Along with the Hunters, they could hang back, out of range of those powerful Demolishers. That was about to change, however.

Arkelius relayed the news to his crew, 'They're starting to pull forwards, four

of them, two Vindicators from each of the enemy's flanks.'

'I have them, sergeant,' said Iunus. 'Should I--?'

Arkelius nodded. 'Make them our primary targets.'

'We have a couple of Predators,' said Iunus, with a glance at his auspex, 'intercepting the Vindicators on the left. I'll target the ones on the right.'

Barely had he finished speaking when there was a blinding flash of light through Arkelius's vision slits. The *Scourge of the Skies* was lifted off its tracks – its stabilisers were torn out of the ground – and almost overturned. Alarms screamed and the tank commander's compartment filled up with choking black smoke.

The tank landed with another hefty jolt. Arkelius was slammed sideways into one of his instrument banks, and something exploded inside it.

'What in the warp was that?' he spluttered as he righted himself. A readout in his helmet informed him that his armour had been breached. A twisted shard of adamantium had buried itself in his forearm, drawing blood.

'Felt like a Demolisher shell,' replied Iunus, holding on to a grab rail behind him. 'A lascannon would have had more heat and far less concussive force.'

'Damage report,' Arkelius demanded. 'Brother Corbin?' The console he had hit was on fire. He yanked an extinguisher from a hull-mounted bracket above him, and doused the flames.

His driver's answer was long seconds in coming, and when it did come his voice was strained. He had been hurt. 'They punched a hole right through our armour plating, sergeant,' explained Corbin. 'I took some shrapnel.'

Only one question mattered, 'Can you still drive?'

'I just pulled a shard of ceramite out of my face, sergeant,' said Corbin, 'right by the eye socket. I can't seem to staunch the bleeding. I can drive, but you might have to point me in the right direction.'

It would have to be good enough. Arkelius's only other option was to climb up onto the *Scourge*'s roof again, haul Corbin out through the driver's hatch and take his place, and that would probably have been the death of both of them.

No matter how badly wounded Corbin was – and Arkelius suspected that his injuries were worse than he would admit to – so long as he was stuck inside his cramped compartment, all he could do was soldier on. It was all any of them could do.

'Another problem, sergeant,' said Iunus. 'A blockage in the missile tube. I'm trying to clear it, but--'

'Keep trying,' Arkelius grunted. He pressed his eye to his forward vision slit.

He could make out several hazy shapes through the smoke – the Imperial Predator Destructors – and beyond them, the persistent dull flashes of enemy cannon and missile fire.

He had half-expected to be met by the glare of the daemon tank he had seen earlier, the one that, he imagined, must have fired the shell that had hit them. However, he could see no sign of it. No one seemed to be targeting the *Scourge of the Skies*, for that matter. It was likely that the Death Guard's tank commanders had written it off, believing it crippled.

Arkelius was determined to prove them wrong.

He could hear Corbin shifting in his compartment, which was a good sign. He ordered him to restart the stalled engine, but Corbin reported that the ignition panel had burned out. He was trying to patch it up, half-blind though he was, at least enough for the Hunter's self-repair systems to kick in and do the rest.

Arkelius helped too, by offering up a prayer to the Machine-God. He prayed that they would be on the move again soon. He knew that one more missile strike like the last one, in the meantime, would leave the *Scourge of the Skies* in pieces, and its crew almost certainly dead.

‘This is taking too long!’

Galenus swung his chainsword at a zombie's neck. He had hoped to decapitate it, but his blade choked on its sinew and he had to yank it free.

He had, at least, left a sizeable ichor-spewing gash. The zombie's head was flapping about like a banner in the breeze. Still, it fought on, clawing at the captain's throat.

Terserus's voice boomed in his ear; only he had heard Galenus's frustrated outburst. ‘We are doing the Emperor's work. Be glad of that and have the faith to be patient.’

The Dreadnought switched vox-channels to address the other Ultramarines too. ‘Aim for their heads. That's where they're most vulnerable.’ He had already broadcast the same advice twice, as knowledge gained in old campaigns had drifted in and out of his memory.

As Terserus spoke, he backhanded a zombie with his gun arm and staved in its face. The zombie stayed upright for a second, as if it were too dim-witted to know that it ought to fall. Fall it did, however; it lost control of every muscle in its body at once and crumpled, brain matter leaking out of its nasal cavity.

The last of the Plague Marines was finally down. It had taken three Ultramarines to slice open his power armour and to hack apart the festering,

putrid organs that had all but spilled out of it. Even then, Sergeant Thalorus had lain down his life in the process.

Five of Galenus's ten-strong team, however – himself and Terserus included – were on their feet, with only the zombies now standing between them and their ultimate goal, and their numbers *were* being whittled down, slowly but surely. Too slowly.

The zombies' haggard faces were blank; they betrayed no hint of emotion. Galenus was coming to loathe that more than anything else about them. He had always told his men that with faith, passion and sheer bloody willpower, they could overcome overwhelming odds. The zombies had none of those traits, and yet they were as relentless as any Space Marine.

Had the Death Guard only employed smarter tactics – had they pulled the zombies away from their all-important excavations and sent them up against the Ultramarines earlier – then this battle might have ended very differently.

'Try to draw them out, away from the fort,' the captain hollered.

He matched his actions to his words, falling back a few steps and letting two zombies follow him, snapping and clawing and spitting at him. He had half-thought they might take the chance to disengage and resume their digging, but evidently not.

He kicked the nearest of them and sent it reeling into the other, which bought him time to raise his sword high over his shoulder. He brought it down again in a powerful, two-handed chopping motion. As the first zombie lunged at him, he split its head neatly in two.

The second zombie was right behind it. Galenus deliberately gave a few more steps as he parried its clumsy attack with his armoured forearm. His hope was to get out from underneath the warp rift, to be able to contact the *Quintillus* again.

Too late, he heard the debris from the collapsed fort shifting behind him.

Brother Filion yelled out a warning too; but the zombie was still up in Galenus's face and he couldn't afford to take his eyes off it. He just needed a second – a half-second, less than that – to deal with the immediate threat. He didn't get it.

One of the Plague Marines had clung to a vestige of life.

It was one that Galenus had encountered briefly earlier: the one that had summoned the cloud of filth. He had fallen to Terserus's storm bolter, but dragged himself back up from the rubble: through faith, through passion, through sheer bloody willpower, perhaps even just through the sorcery of his foul deity.

He plunged a knife into Galenus's back, with enough strength to penetrate his armour.

The blade tore through arteries and muscles before puncturing a kidney; then, the Death Guard gave the haft an additional sadistic twist. Galenus gasped. He would have screamed if only he had had the breath, but one of his lungs had collapsed.

His system was immediately flooded with painkillers, which rushed to his head and left him dizzy – too dizzy to defend himself from his other opponent, the zombie in front of him. With a swipe of a supernaturally strong claw, it slashed through his armour's gorget; with a second swipe, it opened up his throat.

He thought he heard Terserus's voice.

Indeed he had. The Dreadnought had released an ear-shattering bellow of defiance. He palmed off two zombies and came thundering towards his stricken captain, pulverising rockcrete beneath his footsteps.

His storm bolter blazed, even though Galenus was between him and his target, acting as a living shield. A few bolts pinged off the captain's pauldrons, but, somehow, a lot more of them found the Plague Marine's head.

As it happened, he would probably have fallen anyway. His dishonourable attack must have used up the last of his strength, because he held onto Galenus like a stanchion to keep himself upright. It was gratifying, all the same, to feel his body jerking, his frantic grip releasing and to feel the Death Guard sliding – once more – to the dusty ground, to know that the Emperor's bullets had finally sent him to an overdue grave.

Too late, of course, to spare his final victim.

Warning runes flashed across Galenus's blurry vision. He didn't need his power armour's life signs monitor, however, to tell him what he could feel for himself.

His wounds were mortal.

In a sickly-looking grain field to the north-west of the ruined fort, the tanks of two powerful armies continued their slow-motion dance around each other.

An Imperial Stalker was baited into a trap. As it wheeled around to strike at a Chaos Vindicator from the side – where its armour plating was weaker – another Death Guard tank came up behind it, guns blazing. The Stalker was immobilised, one of its tracks destroyed. The Vindicator's turret spun around and pumped a Demolisher shell into its stricken enemy.

The Ultramarines had lost a Hunter too: the *Vengeance of Daedalus*. Arkelius was unclear on the details of its demise. He only knew that the crew had, praise the Emperor, escaped with their lives.

The terrain for quite some way around was flat, offering no natural cover. Now, however, the battlefield was becoming littered with burned-out tank corpses, which the remaining drivers scrambled to use to their best advantage. Through his vision slit, Arkelius could make out the remaining Stalker, sheltering behind its dead twin. It edged out to fire off a rapid salvo from its stormcannons, then reversed back into hiding while its gunner reloaded.

In the midst of all this activity, the *Scourge of the Skies* was paralysed. Its gun was silent. To the other combatants, it must have appeared to be a corpse itself. With so many gunners trying to shoot around it, however, it was far from safe.

Arkelius heard Corbin cursing loudly as the engine failed to start again.

‘Try increasing the throttle pressure,’ he suggested.

‘I already did, sergeant,’ Corbin grunted, his tone suggesting that he didn’t like being told how to do his job, even injured as he was. He must have done something right, anyway, because the engine wheezed and turned over and almost caught. It was certainly an improvement, thought Arkelius. The downside was that they had undoubtedly just flared red on the auspexes of every enemy tank around them.

‘How’s that blockage in the missile tube coming along?’ he asked.

‘Cleared, sergeant,’ said Iunus. ‘I think.’

‘You think?’

‘I’m getting some odd readings. Damage reports. I think the fault is probably in the cogitators themselves. I think the launcher *is* cleared and ready for loading. But there’s a chance, a small chance that, when I squeeze that trigger...’

‘What?’ Arkelius barked, impatiently. ‘A chance of what?’

It was Corbin who answered him; doubtless, he had been in similar situations before. ‘There’s a chance of the missile detonating in the chamber,’ he said, ‘and blowing the *Scourge* – and all three of us – sky-high.’

Arkelius took a breath. ‘Iunus, pick a target. Your choice – I can’t see a damn thing out there. Be ready to fire on my mark, which I’ll give as soon as Corbin can get–’

‘I’m trying, sergeant,’ Corbin interrupted.

‘–this Emperor-forsaken, son-of-a-warp-spawn scrapheap–’

‘Can’t see to read the status display, but it sounds to me like–’

‘–*moving* again!’ Hours’ worth of pent-up frustration bubbled up from

Arkelius's chest, and he punched the unyielding bulkhead between himself and his driver.

At exactly the moment that he did so, the engine caught with a belligerent roar. The Machine-God had finally answered his prayers.

Iunus loosed off a Skyspear missile on cue. A moment later, he boasted of a palpable hit to the port flank of an unsuspecting Vindicator.

'Corbin, reverse us out of here, one-ninety degree bearing,' barked Arkelius. 'Iunus, reload and fire again. Same target, if you can. Don't give them a chance to—'

He had almost forgotten about the *Scourge's* damaged steering.

As they picked up speed, Iunus yelled a warning that they were about to back into a friendly Predator Destructor. Corbin managed to regain control in time, and Arkelius guided him with an eye on his monitors, 'Adjust course, fifteen... no, eighteen degrees counter-clockwise. Steady on the accelerator pedal, and bring her to rest in three, two, one... now.'

Corbin stepped on the brake. As he did so, Arkelius saw two lights like glaring eyes bearing down on the *Scourge* through the smoke. The same searchlights as before? Almost certainly, they belonged to the Vindicator they had just hit, seeking deadly retribution.

The Chaos tank had them firmly in its sights. Arkelius, however, had guided Corbin into a narrow gap between two Predator Destructors. They ground forward at that moment, to protect the Hunter, its crew and, most importantly, its powerful weapon.

The Vindicator tried to manoeuvre around the Imperial tanks. When that failed, it tried to blast its way through them instead. 'They've bought us some time,' said Arkelius. 'Let's make it count.' He told Corbin to lower the stabilisers, and, the instant he had completed that task, Iunus fired again.

He aimed his next missile into the air, safely over the friendly Predator Destructors' heads. It soared over the Chaos Vindicator too, before it reached the apex of its arc. But then, the mummified brain inside it took over and brought the missile around for a second pass.

It swooped in low and struck its target from behind.

Arkelius had to avert his eyes from the fierce explosion. His auto-senses detected a small, brief increase in temperature, even inside his armoured compartment. Iunus confirmed that the Vindicator had been obliterated. Its icon on his targeting auspex had blinked out.

'Looks like that made a big difference too,' he remarked. 'We punched a hole

through the enemy's line, and our Predators have slipped behind their defences. They just destroyed another Vindicator, and two more have been cut off from the others.'

He was probably exaggerating – about the *Scourge*'s contribution to the turnaround, if nothing else – but Arkelius was happy to believe him.

The vox-net alerted him to another threat. The crews of the stricken and destroyed enemy tanks were coming out fighting. Some of them were Plague Marines, some of them hideous mutant aberrations. Few of them lasted long. They were cut down by the Imperial tanks' autocannons, or by Space Marine marksmen stationed at the edge of the battlefield.

Iunus reported that he had reloaded and had another target lock.

Arkelius felt a grin contorting his concealed face. Of course, he knew better than to ever become complacent – more than most, he knew how suddenly the fortunes of war could change – but still, this war was going very well for his side.

'Next stop,' he muttered, just loudly enough for his crewmates to hear him over their shared vox-channel, 'Fort Kerberos.'

Galenus was on his hands and knees in the rubble.

He was staring at the ground, although he didn't remember falling. He was dimly aware of a figure looming over him: the zombie that had slashed his throat. An instant later, however, it was gone, replaced by the familiar hulking shape of a friend.

Terserus had swiped the zombie's legs out from under it, breaking every bone in them. It was wriggling, trying to stand, but couldn't support itself. It lay helplessly as Terserus planted a foot to each side of it, straddling it. He drove his fist down into the zombie's head with the force of a guided missile. Then he turned his attention to his fallen brother.

Galenus had blood in his throat and couldn't speak. Somehow, he managed to brace his left foot underneath him. He transferred his weight onto it, incrementally, but the effort to stand defeated him too. He pitched forward, dizzily, just catching himself on his hands again.

'Brother Typhus's flamer is cremating the last of our opponents,' reported Terserus, 'while the others are making sure the dead stay dead. Fort Kerberos is ours.'

He hesitated for a moment. Then, his armour's servos whirred as he stooped awkwardly and extended his one hand towards his captain. Galenus squinted up

at him. The Dreadnought's obdurate, blue form was etched against the sky like a hab-block, cast into menacing shadow by the warp light behind it. He didn't take the proffered hand.

'Is the Great Seal... still down there?' he rasped. 'Can you see...?'

Brother Filion's voice broke in on his assault team's vox-channel. 'We stopped the Death Guard in time, sir. They didn't break through to the underground shrine.' Good as that was to hear, it didn't answer Galenus's question.

'I'm in contact with Captain Numitor,' said Filion. 'He reports that the traitor army to the north-west is in rout. Our main force is on its way to join us. I also asked him to relay a message to the *Quintillus*. He'll have them send down servitors and excavating equipment, and more ships to collect the wounded. He... asked after your health, sir.'

'He'll survive,' said Terserus, bluntly.

Galenus wondered what made him so certain. His two hearts were beating an irregular rhythm against his chestplate. He was struggling to stay awake, but he knew he was too badly damaged. His implanted sus-an membrane – the Space Marine's hibernator organ – was beginning to shut his bodily functions down.

Terserus addressed him over their private channel. Once again, his mind had slipped back in time. He sounded like the Sergeant Terserus of the past. 'The Apothecaries will bring you back, I'd stake my right arm on it,' he said. 'The Emperor isn't done with you yet, Brother Galenus. You have the makings of a captain. I always said so.'

Galenus wondered if he might wake up, like Terserus, in Dreadnought armour. He wondered if he would be aware of his fate if he did. He imagined it would feel a lot like being buried alive. Perhaps it would be preferable not to wake at all.

He could take consolation in the fact that this battle was won, although his Chapter would be counting the cost of it for decades to come. It would take that long to find and train new Space Marines to replace those lost on Orath: the hacked- and clawed-apart; the victims of bolter shells and explosive shrapnel; the infected.

He only wished he could have learned the fate of the Kerberos Seal. He wanted to know – before he succumbed to what may be his final sleep – that his decisions had been the correct ones, that the sacrifices he had made had counted for something.

Galenus was trembling. Another weakness of his failing flesh, he thought; but then he realised that the ground itself was shaking underneath his hands and

knees.

He collapsed indecorously onto his face and stomach. Terserus was struggling to keep his balance too, but he planted his heavy feet in the shifting rubble and stood over his captain determinedly, as the tremor grew stronger and turned into a fully fledged earthquake.

Galenus realised, with a numb sense of horror, that the battle wasn't over yet.

Then, just as he was on the point of being able to think no more, he heard and felt a tremendous explosion, and the world behind his closing eyelids turned green.

Arkelius felt the early tremors too.

The last of the Death Guard tanks had been despatched. The ragged remains of the Ultramarines army – battered, bloodied but proud – had formed up and were on the march again. At the helm of the *Scourge of the Skies*, he felt at least as proud as any of them.

Of course, they were leaving many dead and wounded behind them: almost two-thirds of their initial force. Thunderhawks had begun to arrive from the *Quintillus* to take them back to its apothecarion. In the meantime, Techmarines patched up vehicles and equipment in the field as best they could, in case of unexpected need.

Corbin was still in the *Scourge's* driver's seat. Arkelius had wanted to leave him behind, but he had insisted, 'I've come this far, sergeant. I can see this through to the end.'

He swore that his condition had stabilised – the bleeding from his eyes had stopped – so Arkelius had given his assent. The fighting had been over, after all. Or so it had seemed.

The ruins of Fort Kerberos were dead ahead of him, across flat land. The jagged warp rift still raged in the sky above it. He was close enough to see blue-armoured figures clambering over the rubble. The largest of them – Galenus's constant companion, Terserus – was unmistakable. He couldn't see the captain himself, though, which concerned him.

Then, suddenly, the world went into a violent spin.

Arkelius ordered Corbin to plant the stabilisers, knowing even as the words left his mouth that they would do no good. The earth itself had erupted under the *Scourge's* tracks; there was nothing left for the stabilisers to hold onto.

He was battered against each side of his compartment in turn – he even banged his head on the roof – before the earthquake finally subsided. By now, he was

well-used to the red lights and klaxon blares of the emergency alarms.

His forward vision slit was clogged with black stalks of grain.

It took a moment for Arkelius to get his bearings and to realise that the *Scourge* had come to rest at a precarious angle, its nose pointed at the ground. He didn't know what was holding its rear end up, but every slightest move he made caused the tank to rock alarmingly.

He voxed his two crewmates. Iunus confirmed that he was relatively unhurt, but there was no reply from Corbin.

Shocked voices were beginning to break into the vox-channels. More than one of them swore that an unholy green fire had burst out of the ground without warning. The epicentre of the blast had been the site of the razed fort, still four hundred metres ahead of them. Even this far out, however, it had tossed both Space Marines and tanks around like children's toys.

Arkelius tried to open his hatch, but it was jammed. The *Scourge's* hull must have given a little, bending its frame out of shape.

The smell of burning inside his tiny compartment was stronger than ever. Arkelius suspected that the engine was on fire, which meant there was a real risk of the flames spreading to the promethium tanks, or even worse.

'How many Skyspear missiles do we have left?' he asked. He didn't wait for Iunus's reply. 'Right now, we're sitting on top of too many atomic warheads.'

He squirmed around until he could brace himself against his bulkheads and get his left foot to the jammed hatch. Then, he kicked it as hard as he could.

Every impact of his boot made the *Scourge of the Skies* shudder violently. He pretended he couldn't feel the slight pain in his hip, from muscles that had recently been shredded and hadn't yet completely healed. Behind his eyelids, however, he could see the snarling eyes and slavering tusks of the barbarian ork that had beaten him and left him for dead. He imagined it was the ork's face he was kicking. He refused to let it beat him again.

One more good kick, and the hinges of the hatch finally snapped. It fell away, and he could see the grey light of the sky behind it.

He clambered out of the Hunter, helped on his way by a firm push from Iunus, who had lowered himself into the tank commander's compartment behind him.

It was only a short hop to the ground, but Arkelius landed in an awkward crouch. His balance was off; that blow to the head had affected him more than he had thought. He blinked away the black spots in his eyes and straightened up.

He could see now that the *Scourge's* back wheels were resting on the crumpled shell of a Predator Destructor. Flames were licking at its underside. As Iunus's

head appeared through the hatchway above him, Arkelius had him throw down the extinguisher.

Perching precariously on the *Scourge*'s tilted roof, Iunus yanked open the driver's hatch. He first reported that Corbin wasn't moving, and a moment later that his hearts at least were still beating and his multi-lung pumping. He asked for his sergeant's help in lifting his battle-brother out of the wreck to safety, but Arkelius's gaze had travelled past him.

He was looking in horror at the site of the ruined Fort Kerberos, now a scene of unadulterated Chaos. The churned-up ground was alight with sickly green and yellow flames. The warp rift in the sky had changed its hue and was pulsing with the same putrid energy, great bolts of it lashing down to create a highly localised electrical storm; and, in the centre of that maelstrom, there had appeared a monster, an obscene mockery of life.

It must have been close to six metres tall, twice the height of an Ultramarine, taller even than the giant Terserus. It was a bloated, squat creature, festooned with boils and open sores. Dead grey skin sloughed from its bones to expose black, worm-ridden organs. Scraps of rusted power armour appeared to have been welded to the monster's hide.

A misshapen head protruded from its chest, as if its neck had melted into its torso. Its near-skinless face was twisted with hateful laughter. A pair of giant, holed and tattered insect wings sprouted from the monster's shoulder blades. Even vibrating furiously as they were, they could barely lift their heavy burden a metre or so off the ground, where it hovered.

The monster was like nothing Arkelius had seen before, but instinctively he knew it for what it was. The mere sight of it was enough to envelop his soul in an icy, nameless dread.

Of the man who had called himself Naracoth, nothing remained.

No longer was he a fragile being of flesh and bone. He had been reborn in a form worthy of his god's affection, more able to spread His gifts of disease, decay and destruction across the stars. His body – his new, magnificent, powerful body – was formed from the substance of the warp itself, and his veins seethed with its untamed energies.

He could utilise those energies, direct them, guide their flow. By instinct alone, he had projected an expanding field around him. He had blasted his way out of his collapsed tomb and scattered his enemies before him.

He glared down on them now, the forces of the vaunted Imperium. They were

battered and weary from their recent travails, and oh-so-small from his newfound loftier perspective. They may as well have been insects, scuttling across the blighted earth in terror, waiting for him to crush them under his heel.

He was as far above his former self now as his former self had been above the ticks and lice that had leeches off his putrescent flesh. He had become as one with the fundamental forces of Chaos. Grandfather Nurgle had blessed this faithful follower, and had turned him into a prince. A Daemon Prince.

More tanks than just the *Scourge of the Skies* had been upended. One had even been completely overturned. More crews than just the *Scourge's* crew were fighting their way out of the wreckage; and, of course, many Space Marines had been knocked over too.

Many of them – like Arkelius – were picking themselves up slowly. Like him, their gazes were rooted to the Daemon Prince hovering over the nearby ruins. They were Ultramarines, however, the Emperor's finest. So they swallowed down their natural feelings of shock and disgust and they got on with doing the Emperor's work.

Galenus's team at the fort were already back on their feet. Their brothers from the main force – those that could – were hurrying to cross the ground between them. They were ready to do battle with this new enemy, no matter how hopeless it may seem, because that was their duty and their honour.

It would have been Arkelius's honour too. He even took a step forward to join the others, acting on instinct. Then, Iunus's voice – 'Sergeant!' – pulled him back, reminding him of his duty to his crewmates.

Iunus had hauled Corbin up through the *Scourge's* hatchway. Arkelius helped by supporting his head as, together, they lowered the injured driver down from the Hunter's roof. The lenses in Corbin's helmet had been shattered and his eyes were badly damaged.

'Emperor, grant him the strength to overcome this,' Iunus breathed. As Arkelius had noted earlier, he was young, and, for as long as he had served with the Ultramarines, Corbin had served alongside him.

He said nothing to his battle-brother, however. He was listening to the latest vox reports, with a sinking feeling. 'The captain...' he muttered. 'The captain's down.'

It hardly seemed possible. Caito Galenus had been a lieutenant when Arkelius had been recruited into the Fifth Company. He had been a captain for as long as Arkelius had been a sergeant. He had always been there, at the forefront of every

combat, leading his men by example, never asking them to take a risk he wouldn't gladly take himself.

Some people – only those who didn't know him – had called him a glory-hunter, albeit never twice within Arkelius's earshot. He had seemed to be invincible.

At the fort, in the captain's absence, Terserus led the charge against the monster. He thundered towards it, his arm-mounted bolters flaring. His bolts pinged off its patches of armour and, equally, off the exposed bones in between them.

The Daemon Prince's bloodshot but fiery eyes narrowed and its twisted maw gaped open. It belched out a thick stream of glistening mucus in its attacker's direction.

Even Terserus was stopped – temporarily, Arkelius hoped – in his tracks.

The three battle-brothers who had been following in his footsteps kept going, but separated, having lost the protection of the Dreadnought's armour in front of them. Their bolters were proving ineffectual too, so they fired up their chainswords.

The first of them reached his hovering foe and slashed at a dangling leg. His blow landed solidly and appeared to have done some damage, although Arkelius was too far away to tell if it had drawn blood. Did a Daemon Prince have blood to draw, he wondered?

The monster let out a contemptuous laugh and dropped heavily onto the rubble, squaring up to its opponent. It was carrying a massive, filth-encrusted flail, with which it lashed out viciously. The Space Marine threw up an arm to protect his chest and head; the flail's twin chains wrapped around it and shredded his armour.

His brothers came at the Daemon Prince from each side, hoping to slam it between them. Its wings droned loudly as they hauled it back into the sky, maddeningly out of their reach.

In the absence of an Apothecary, Iunus was kneeling beside Corbin, patching him up as best he could with the *Scourge's* medi-kit. Once that was done, he looked up at his sergeant for instructions. He was already fingering the haft of his sheathed chainsword, in anticipation of what those instructions would be.

An hour earlier, Arkelius wouldn't have hesitated. He would have led Iunus to the front lines in a heartbeat, and been glad of the chance to exercise his muscles in combat – real combat – once again. An hour earlier, he had prayed for a chance like this.

A lot could change in just an hour.

Again, he turned his gaze towards Fort Kerberos's shattered remains, just as the Daemon Prince's pox-ridden flail claimed its first kill. One down, and it had only taken a matter of seconds. The luckless Ultramarine, at least, had not given his life for nothing.

The Daemon Prince's attention had been drawn away from Terserus, which had given him the chance he needed to recover his strength. The Dreadnought bellowed a fierce litany of hatred as he ran at his monstrous foe like a speeding tank.

The Daemon Prince tried to climb further into the sky, but its wings couldn't lift its considerable bulk quickly enough. The Dreadnought tackled it and dragged it back down to the ground. With one arm, he pinned its wings behind its back; with the other, he emptied two bolter clips into its leering face.

They crashed into the rubble together, the Dreadnought and the Daemon Prince, and, for a moment, the watching Arkelius thought – hoped, prayed – that the battle might not have been as hopeless as he had first thought. Just for a moment.

It soon became clear which was the stronger of the two combatants. The Daemon Prince was slower than Terserus, but its flail, where it hit, was slicing into the Dreadnought's casing, cutting fibre bundles inside it. It looked as if his right arm, his storm bolter arm, was dead, although his power fist had landed a few good punches.

The Daemon Prince stretched open its mouth again, this time to cough up a cloud of buzzing black flies. The Dreadnought reeled as the insects engulfed him; still, he clung to the Daemon Prince's feet as it attempted to take to the air once more, doggedly weighting it down.

Then, the fastest of the Space Marines from the main force reached their battle-brother's side and, for all its size, the Daemon Prince found itself swarmed by a grim mass of blue-armoured avengers. The screams of their angry chainswords rent the air.

They would keep the monster busy for a short time, Arkelius judged. What they needed in the longer term, however, were bigger guns – much bigger.

At least two other tank crews had come to the same conclusion. They had started up their engines and were advancing upon the fort again. Their Predator Destructors, however, didn't have what the *Scourge of the Skies* had. They didn't have the Skyspear missile launcher.

Nor, for that matter, were the Predators sitting with their noses in the ground

and their back ends in the air, their engines and most of their onboard systems burned-out.

Arkelius, nevertheless, met his gunner's enquiring gaze. 'Think you can hit that thing from here?' he asked.

Iunus looked at him, then past him at the ruined fort and the monstrous Daemon Prince and at the upturned *Scourge*. He nodded, 'It's well within the Skyspear's range, sergeant.'

Arkelius broadcast an urgent appeal through his vox-grille. He asked for assistance from the closest available units. A tank driver and gunner – having given up on coaxing their own vehicle back to life – responded to his summons.

They were joined by a Techmarine too, clad in the red armour of the Adeptus Mechanicus. His servo-harness, with its mechanical arms and cutters, was exactly what Arkelius needed.

Five brothers, all told, himself and Iunus included. It would be enough.

He gathered his team beside the crippled Hunter. 'I want this wreck on its wheels again,' he announced, 'and back in the fight.'

Righting the *Scourge* proved to be no easy task.

Not that Arkelius had expected it to be. The Hunter must have weighed something close to thirty tonnes, which was a lot of mangled metal for even five Space Marines to lift.

The Techmarine helped. He employed his cutters to disentangle the *Scourge's* tracks from the crushed Predator Destructor in which they had become embedded. He also braced the *Scourge's* vital missile launcher with improvised wedges to protect it from any further jarring. He positioned each Space Marine along the *Scourge's* hull and calculated the optimal angle at which his force should be exerted.

Arkelius was grateful for the Techmarine's input, and accepted that the work he was doing was worthy. At the same time, he chafed at the time it was taking.

He could see his battle-brothers at the fort, fighting and dying in his stead, and he yearned to go to them. The Daemon Prince was hurling Space Marines away from it as if they were no heavier – and no more of a threat to it – than stalks of grain. Most of them got up again and leapt straight back into the fray, but it was wearing them down, slowly but surely.

The Techmarine announced that, at last, his work was done, and it was time for his brothers to do theirs. The knees and shoulders of five suits of power armour bent and strained, and the back end of the *Scourge of the Skies* was

slowly raised, though not without a protest.

The most difficult part of the operation followed, as the Space Marines had to manoeuvre the cumbersome wreck around until its back end was clear of the Predator. Only then could they lower it to the ground, which they managed less gently than Arkelius had hoped.

The *Scourge* landed heavily on its tracks – and, with a shudder and a wrench and a deathly groan, it settled there, if not exactly standing proud, then at least unbowed.

The Techmarine climbed onto the Hunter's roof. He tinkered at the base of the Skyspear's missile tube with his servo-arms, making sure it was properly aligned. Iunus wrenched open the *Scourge*'s side hatch and retook his seat in the rear compartment.

Arkelius dismissed his other two helpers – they hurried off to join the battle – and waited as long as he could bear before prompting his gunner, 'Well? Damage report?'

Iunus looked up from his monitors, shaking his head. 'We've lost the targeting auspex, sergeant, which means I can't–'

'Don't tell me what you can't do, only tell me what you can.'

'I could aim the Skyspear manually, sergeant – if I could see the target, that is.'

'Or if someone told you where to shoot.'

'There are too many battle-brothers between us. I'd fire over their heads, of course, but without a target lock, the savant wouldn't know–'

'The savant? The brain inside the missile?' Arkelius scowled. 'Are you telling me it couldn't tell the difference between a Son of Guilliman and that warp-spawned–?'

'I... I can't answer that, sergeant. Perhaps.'

Arkelius glanced towards the fort again. There were half as many Space Marines standing as there had been the last time he had looked. 'What if we got you closer?' he asked.

'Without the targeting auspex, yes, the closer, the better,' said Iunus. 'It means less chance for the missile to veer off course or–'

Arkelius didn't wait for him to finish. He stepped back from the hatchway and barked at the red-armoured figure on the *Scourge*'s roof. 'I need an answer, do we have a gun or don't we?' The Techmarine replied that he had done all he could and that the rest was in the hands of the Machine-God now. It would have to do.

Arkelius clambered up onto the *Scourge*'s roof as the Techmarine jumped down from it. The driver's hatch was still open, and he squeezed himself through the narrow circle and lowered himself into the driver's seat. He voxed Iunus on the *Scourge*'s frequency.

'All right,' Arkelius growled. 'For the Emperor!'

The driver's compartment of the *Scourge* was, if anything, more cramped than the tank commander's compartment had been.

Arkelius was hemmed in by equipment. He could barely move without bumping his elbows on something. He placed his hands on the U-shaped joystick and his feet on the brake and accelerator pedals. His main control console was a mess of blinking runes and burned-out panels. He could see light through several fractures in the prow in front of him, doubtless caused by the missile strike in which Corbin had been injured.

As always, vox-chatter filled his helmet, keeping him up to date on the battle outside. He heard that Terserus had picked himself up and launched himself at the Daemon Prince for – what was that now, the fourth time or the fifth? He had staggered it with a series of energised punches, but had been beaten back again by the chains of its unholy flail.

'Hold on,' Arkelius muttered under his breath. 'Just hold on one more minute.'

He punched in the ignition sequence. The *Scourge*'s self-repair systems must have been hard at work – or the Machine-God was listening to Arkelius's prayers again – because, for all the abuse that had been heaped upon it, the engine spluttered into life.

Arkelius eased the accelerator pedal down, and the Hunter grumbled forward. The steering was still faulty, that pull to the left a lot stronger than he had anticipated. The joystick was large and sturdy – an unenhanced human couldn't have handled it at all – but Arkelius feared that, under the amount of force he was having to apply to it, it might break.

Still, he brought the *Scourge* around until he could see Fort Kerberos – and the Daemon Prince – squarely through the driver's vision slit. His helmet's range-finder supplied him with the monster's bearing, height and distance, which he relayed to his gunner.

'But don't fire yet,' said Arkelius. 'Wait for my mark.'

He stepped harder on the pedal and felt the *Scourge*'s frame juddering ominously around him. He eased up again and let the tank crawl forward at a fraction of its usual speed. As long as it was giving him something, he thought;

as long as he was closing in on his target.

The *Scourge* had reached the edge of the ruins now, crushing debris under its tracks.

Terserus, unfortunately, had just gone down for what sounded like it might be the final time, and, from what Arkelius could see, the Daemon Prince's flail was making short work of its remaining opponents. 'That's it,' he announced to Iunus. 'We're out of time.'

He stepped on the brake pedal and lowered the stabilisers. He updated his gunner on the Daemon Prince's position: directly ahead of them and less than two hundred metres away. 'Aim high,' he added, 'and fire at will.'

'I'm still getting warning runes here, sergeant,' Iunus cautioned, 'and what with the damage done to the missile launcher when we—'

Arkelius cut to the end of the explanation. 'Blown sky-high. I remember.'

'Perhaps you should bail out. I can take it from here, while you—'

Arkelius interrupted him, gruffly, 'A tank commander stays with his vehicle, Iunus. My place is here.' He had never expected to speak such words today. He was even more surprised to realise that he had meant them. The Emperor certainly did work in mysterious ways.

The Daemon Prince had thrown off the last of its attackers, and its insect wings were beginning to vibrate again. There probably wouldn't be a better chance than this. 'Now!' Arkelius screamed. 'Now, Iunus! Fire that missile now!'

The order had barely left his mouth when the *Scourge of the Skies* shuddered – but, by the grace of the God-Emperor, didn't actually explode – and discharged its deadly payload.

Iunus was already frantically reloading. In the meantime, the Daemon Prince had hauled its bloated carcass into the air. A lone Imperial Stormtalon had been circling and waiting for a clear shot at it, which finally it had. It swooped to engage the monster. On the ground, the pair of Predator Destroyers that had advanced ahead of the *Scourge* had been waiting for their shots too, and they took them.

The Daemon Prince flinched – it actually flinched – as it was battered by cannon fire from above and below; the worst, the very worst, was yet to hit it.

The Skyspear missile was flying dead on course. Arkelius watched, with a prayer on his lips, as it streaked towards its target, but the prayer turned into a dismayed groan as, at the last possible instant, the Daemon Prince saw its nemesis coming and twisted out of the way.

It had been so close – the monster must have felt the fierce heat of the Skyspear’s backwash on its face – but, of course, close wasn’t good enough.

Arkelius yelled to Iunus to fire again, along the same trajectory. The second missile missed its target too, and by a wider margin than the first one had. The Daemon Prince belched at the buzzing Stormtalon, engulfing it in another feculent cloud. The gunship spun out of its pilot’s control and smacked into a nearby hillside like a flaming comet.

‘Sergeant,’ said Iunus, ‘if these readings are correct—’

Arkelius knew what he was about to say. He had been keeping a rough count of the *Scourge*’s ammunition in his head. He had known this news was coming, although he had prayed it wouldn’t come just yet. ‘How many?’ he asked, tersely.

‘One, sergeant. We have one missile left. It’s in the tube now.’

He nodded grimly. He scowled as he fixed the hovering Daemon Prince in his helmet’s sights again. It had shifted somewhat to the left and climbed a little. He relayed the figures to his gunner in an unemotional tone. ‘...and fire at will!’

Iunus fired.

A third, a final missile, went blasting away from the *Scourge*. This time, it seemed that luck – and the will of the Emperor – was finally with it. The Daemon Prince had been staggered by an autocannon punch to the stomach – surely it couldn’t recover from such a blow and get out of the Skyspear’s way before it hit?

Arkelius could hear movement in the tank commander’s compartment to his left. With no missiles left, Iunus must have scrambled forwards to see what was happening outside. Arkelius heard his voice, ‘Sergeant, look! Look over the daemon’s shoulder!’

He pressed his eyes to his vision slit and saw it too. A second missile – one of the two that had missed its target, it had to be – had turned around and was swooping in for another attempt. Arkelius had been right: even without the benefit of a target lock, it knew its enemy.

‘God-Emperor be praised!’ he whispered.

The Daemon Prince was effectively flanked. Perhaps it could have evaded a single Skyspear missile, but it had no hope of dodging both, and at least one of them would only have stayed on its tail if it had. It looked as if the monster was finished.

Then there was a sudden purple flash of warp energy, bright enough – even at this range – to leave Arkelius dazzled. When his eyes had cleared, the Daemon

Prince had vanished. Just like that, it was gone without a trace. He couldn't quite process what he was seeing.

The Skyspear missiles passed each other, flying through the space that their target had just vacated, while Arkelius was left staring in numb disbelief. It was over.

'What happened?' Iunus sounded dismayed too. 'Where did it go?'

It took Arkelius a moment to come up with an answer for him. 'We fought our way past the Death Guard army,' he said at length. 'We sent their Daemon Prince fleeing back to the unholy realm it came from, with its tail between its legs. We recaptured Fort Kerberos – what remains of it. We accomplished everything we were tasked to do. That means we won.'

It didn't feel like a victory, though.

Arkelius clambered awkwardly out of the *Scourge of the Skies* and jumped down from its roof. When no one was looking, he patted it affectionately on the prow.

The Hunter had given its all – as much as any Space Marine could have given – in the Emperor's service. After a refit, he knew it would serve again. When it did, he intended to be sitting in the tank commander's seat.

He hoped that Corbin and Iunus would be seated beside him. The first ships had arrived to collect the wounded, and casualty lists were being collated. He hadn't heard Corbin's name yet, which meant he was probably a survivor. The same was true of Terserus, whose fate was in the Techmarines hands. The news on Galenus, however, was less promising.

When last seen, the captain had been in a healing coma, but his body had been lost in the rubble when the Daemon Prince had emerged. The warp storm over the ruined fort was still blowing, now purple in colour once more. Arkelius went to join the search for his captain, praying that he might still be saved.

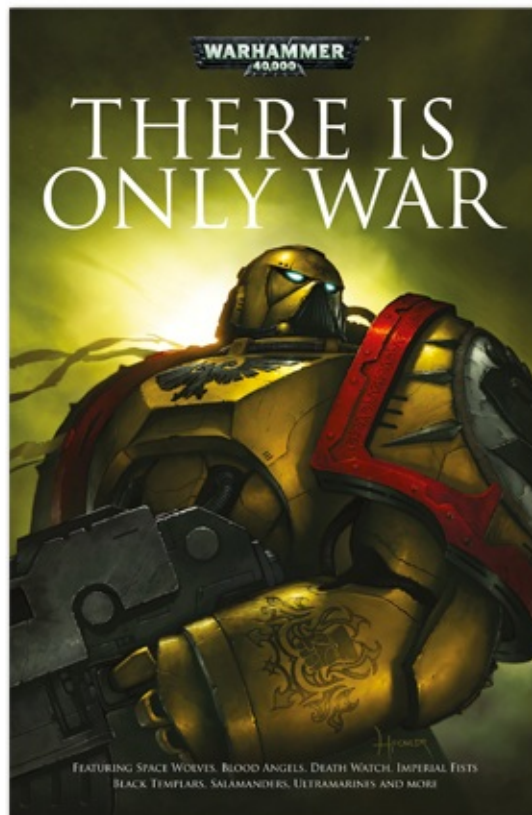
He was contacted on a private vox-channel by Captain Numitor. Arkelius's actions, he insisted, had won the battle and had earned him an honour badge. He accepted the compliment, but he wished he could have done more. He wished he could have made certain that the Daemon Prince wouldn't return.

Arkelius didn't understand everything that had happened here today. He knew, however, that a world – a once-fertile, populated world – had been laid waste by disease, and that an ancient, terrible power had been unleashed and was still on the loose.

He knew one more thing, in his hearts: the war on Orath was far from over.

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STEVE LYONS's work for Black Library includes the Space Marines audio drama *The Madness Within*, alongside the Imperial Guard novels *Ice World* and *Dead Men Walking* – now collected in the omnibus *Honour Imperialis* – and the audio drama *Waiting Death*. He has written numerous short stories and is currently working on more tales from the grim darkness of the far future.



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