

**WARHAMMER**

40,000

A SPACE MARINE BATTLES NOVELLA

# FATEWEAVER

JOHN FRENCH



A NOVELLA FROM ARCHITECT OF FATE

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**A WARHAMMER 40,000 NOVEL**

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JOHN FRENCH



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## WARHAMMER 40,000

It is the 41st millennium. For more than a hundred centuries the Emperor has sat immobile on the Golden Throne of Earth. He is the master of mankind by the will of the gods, and master of a million worlds by the might of his inexhaustible armies. He is a rotting carcass writhing invisibly with power from the Dark Age of Technology. He is the Carrion Lord of the Imperium for whom a thousand souls are sacrificed every day, so that he may never truly die.

Yet even in his deathless state, the Emperor continues his eternal vigilance. Mighty battlefleets cross the daemon-infested miasma of the warp, the only route between distant stars, their way lit by the Astronomican, the psychic manifestation of the Emperor's will. Vast armies give battle in his name on uncounted worlds. Greatest amongst His soldiers are the Adeptus Astartes, the Space Marines, bio-engineered super-warriors. Their comrades in arms are legion: the Imperial Guard and countless planetary defence forces, the ever-vigilant Inquisition and the tech-priests of the Adeptus Mechanicus to name only a few. But for all their multitudes, they are barely enough to hold off the ever-



present threat from aliens, heretics, mutants - and worse.

To be a man in such times is to be one amongst untold billions. It is to live in the cruellest and most bloody regime imaginable. These are the tales of those times. Forget the power of technology and science, for so much has been forgotten, never to be re-learned. Forget the promise of progress and understanding, for in the grim dark future there is only war. There is no peace amongst the stars, only an eternity of carnage and slaughter, and the laughter of thirsting gods.

*'We know no fear. It was cut from our souls at birth. We can feel it only as an absence, as an empty shadow cast by the light of annihilation. In the face of a future of atrocity I stand mute, numb to the only feeling that would make me human. But I remember what fear was: its cold pulse in my veins; its echo in my ears. I remember fear, and remember that I was once human. I look towards what must come to pass and I wish that I could meet it as my ancestors did, with fear. The future deserves that, it deserves fear.'*

Epistolary Cyrus Aurelius, unheard confession



## I

# SUMMONED

The vision unfolded into the present in a cascade of sensations.

*The sword is hot in his hand, the fury at its core bright with his rage. He cuts, feeling his armour move with the surge of his muscles. The edge meets deformed flesh, the sword shuddering in his grip as power flows through it. A bloated creature with a face like a flayed skull dissolves into smoke. Threat runes spin across his vision, pulsing red, swarming. A taste like burnt sugar and ruined meat fills his mouth.*

*He is a figure in blue armour the shade of a clear sky, standing at the centre of a turning circle of countless twisted creatures. They close on him, pacing forwards, claws clicking on the stone floor. He can feel the creatures' raw power, feel them thirsting for his soul. A death light fills their eyes. He stands alone and knows that he has failed.*

*A shape with a wide mouth of glittering needle teeth comes at him, its limbs flowing into new shapes as it moves. The storm bolter roars in his fist, muscle fibres swallowing its kick. Detonations turn warp bloated flesh to red pulp. A threat rune blinks out. He turns, finger still squeezing the trigger, watching the ammunition count fall as the weapon trails a line of fire.*

I have failed, *he thinks*, and there will be nothing after this moment.

*The gun clatters silent. He raises his sword. A clawed hand bites through a leg joint. He feels the warm fluid pooling inside his armour. He steps forward, ramming the sword into the open mouth of a bird-shaped creature until its blade disappears in flesh. The power flows through him like a storm rush. The half-feathered body explodes in a blaze of light. He realises he is screaming.*



*Lightning gathers around his body in a crackling spiral. The creatures fall back for a brief moment, turning their lidless eyes from the light. He raises the sword. His limbs are shuddering. Inside his helmet he is weeping blood.*

*They come for him again, a tide of teeth and claws. He is striking, each blow a thunderclap. Many of the creatures fall, their distorted forms sliding back into shadow and smoke. But they are many and he is alone.*

This has not come to pass yet, *he thinks*, this is not happening. I am not dying. This is my fate, what shall be. This is the future, it has not happened yet. *But the thought dies.*

*The creatures around him howl and he feels the psychic crystals haloing his head shatter. He is blind.*

*The world goes quiet and warm.*

I am dying, *he thinks*, I have failed and there will be nothing left, nothing but ash and hungering darkness.

*Something within him dims, fluttering to nothing like a flame fading to cold embers.*

*He tries to raise his sword.*

*He is falling...*

*He was...*

... running the ashes of a dead world through his fingers. The vision faded, bleeding away into the grey present. He blinked, pushing away the sensations that remained coiled in his mind like a fever's touch. He had seen echoes of possible futures before, but this had felt different; stronger, more instant, like a memory of something that had already happened.

'Epistolary?' said a voice, its sound flat inside his helmet. Cyrus looked up from the grey dust falling from his armoured fingers.

He flicked his eyes across the green runes at the edge of his sight; the four green cruciform marks of Phobos's squad winked back at him. He turned to look back at his escort spread behind him in a loose diamond. The white of their armour was bright beneath the shroud grey sky.

Like him they were clad in monstrous Terminator armour. Their genetically enhanced physiques wrapped in layer upon layer of adamantium, their movements augmented by sheathes of fibre bundles that ran through the armour like a second set of muscles. The suits were relics of a lost time, their components replaced and repaired so many times that they were like walking scar tissue. To wear such armour was to feel the past as a cold shroud against one's skin. Hundreds of his Chapter ancestors had worn Cyrus's suit before it

had passed to him. Most of those ancestors had died wearing it, he recalled.

‘Is everything well, brother?’ said the red-helmed sergeant.

‘Yes, brother. An errant thought, nothing more.’

‘As you say, Epistolary.’ Phobos’s tone was clipped and respectful, but Cyrus could feel the sergeant’s questions unspoken behind the blunt snout of his helm: why had they come down to the surface of this planet?

A flat, grey plain extended away from them, its surface undisturbed by wind, rain or the tread of feet. Runes flowed across Cyrus’s vision, his sensorium searching for movement, heat, life, and finding nothing. Two hundred and thirty million people had died here. He blink-clicked away the questing runes; this world was dead, and it had died at its protector’s hand.

It was called Kataris, an agri-world of processing cities and endless plains of crops, ripening under a bright sun. It had died in less time than it took that sun to circle the sky. Something had drawn the eyes of the daemons to it, and they had come from beyond reality. Millions had died in the first assault. Their deaths had prepared the world for the arrival of more of their kind. More and more had slipped across the shadow divide between reality and the warp. The few, the very few people who had not died then became a defiant clutch of humanity clinging to the planet’s last fortifications. There they had muttered prayers, tears rolling down their ash-dusted cheeks, and waited for the end.

An astropath had sent a desperate call out through the warp. It had called for help, for the protection promised by the priests of the Imperial Creed. ‘The Emperor protects’ had been the last words of the message. And a single word of execution had answered that message: Exterminatus. The death sentence of a world and all who lived on it. Kataris had pleaded for aid and been answered by death falling from the tortured sky. For a moment the wide plains of ruin had been still, the sound of thunder settling with the dust. Then the inferno came, rushing across the world from horizon to horizon, consuming the tainted air in a roar like the war-cries shouted at the end of time.

Cyrus could almost taste the pyre.

‘This was no victory,’ he murmured to himself.

Decades before, Cyrus and his brothers had fought on Kataris against a raiding force of eldar. They had defeated the aliens and broken their hidden witch-gate. It had been a vicious war, but they had won and the world had lived. This time their answer to the dead world’s plea was too late. They had arrived many days after the ships of the Inquisition execution force had departed.

If we had been here, could we have saved this world? The question had no

answer, but that did not stop Cyrus asking it to himself. Unlike the rest of his brothers he could feel what had happened here as echoes lingering in the immaterium. He was a psyker, gifted with an ability to channel and manipulate the power of the realm beyond reality. The warp was a nightmare other realm of psychic energy, but the mind of a psyker could tap and shape that energy. To some it was sorcery. To others it was a step in the evolution of humanity. To Cyrus it was a weapon. It was a gift that allowed Cyrus to do things beyond even his brother White Consuls. But the gift also set him apart from the rest of his Chapter; it could not be otherwise. How could it be, when he felt the death of this world resonate over him like dust blowing over bare skin?

That is why I ordered us to come to the surface, he thought. Because someone needed to witness what had happened, someone needed to touch it and remember the price of survival.

‘Epistolary,’ said a voice washed in static. It came from the bridge of the *Aethon*, the battle-barge that hung above them in high orbit.

‘Speak,’ said Cyrus.

‘We have received a signal. It seems to be another plea for help.’ The voice paused. ‘It includes the word “Fateweaver”.’

Cyrus closed his eyes for a moment. It could only mean one thing.

The world he stood on was only the latest to be subject to a daemonic incursion. World after world had fallen in this crescent of stars that edged the Eye of Terror. Thousands of millions had died as the Inquisition attempted to contain the incursion. And in the wake of this destruction a name followed like whisper made with a dying breath: Fateweaver.

‘Where?’ asked Cyrus.

‘The message is garbled but we have an origin location. An astropathic relay fortress in the Claros system.’ The vision of the future resurfaced in Cyrus’s mind. ‘What are your orders?’

The astropath’s voice sounded like the rasp of a dying man. ‘.....report... Claros... the enemy beyond...’ The robed figure turned in a cone of cold green light, mouth flapping in a thin face as it spoke words which were not its own. ‘... lies.... Fateweaver, we... blinded.... failing...’ The man’s lips twisted, breath wheezing as he tried to say incomplete thoughts. ‘... soul... that hear this... send.... help.... accursed eternity.’

Cyrus sat alone and watched the holo-recording. He wore no armour; his suit of blue Terminator plate was being cleansed and re-blessed after his journey to

the surface of Kataris. A cowed robe of white covered his hunched form, its edges woven in blue and with the names of Chapter ancestors. Within the cowl's shadow his gaunt face looked as if it were carved from white marble. Around him the battle council chamber was dark, the pale light of the holo-recording showing the outlines of a wide stone table and chairs. Beyond the circle of light the darkness hummed with the roar of the *Aethon's* engines as it cut through the warp.

As soon as he had stepped back onto the *Aethon*, Cyrus had asked for a recording of the signal. As an Epistolary of the Adeptus Astartes, he was capable of receiving the psychic messages that passed from the mind of one astropath to another. Passing through the warp, these messages crossed the vast distances of space faster than the light of stars. This message, though, had arrived while he was down on the surface of Kataris. Amongst the death echoes surrounding that world his mind had been deaf to such subtle telepathy. The *Aethon's* own astropath had received it and now Cyrus looked at a recording of that moment.

Something about the signal disturbed him. It was garbled, chewed by its transmission from one mind to another, but he felt as if he could almost hear the words that hung unsaid in the gaps.

'It won't change you know.' The voice came out of the gloom towards the chamber's door.

Cyrus looked up. His eyes turned the darkness into monochrome shades of light and shadow. The figure standing at the other end of the deserted council chamber wore a tunic of white fabric. His blunt head was shaved smooth and snaked with scars, and there were two chrome studs above his left eye. Bare forearms, thick with muscle and looped by heavy copper vambraces, hung loose at his side.

'Phobos,' Cyrus said, smiling as the figure walked forwards. 'Come to shake me from my melancholy?' Phobos said nothing but stopped on the other side of the circular stone table. Between them the holographic astropath still turned and spoke in its cone of light.

Phobos stared at the projection. 'You still judge it best to follow this?'

Cyrus frowned: there was something wrong with his old friend. There was no trace of the usual stone dry humour in his words, just a tone that Cyrus could not place.

'Yes, brother,' said Cyrus, standing up from the iron backed chair. 'You did not raise an objection when I ordered the *Aethon* to the Claros system. Is there something you wish to say now?' Phobos was silent, but Cyrus could see

emotions playing across the sergeant's blunt features.

Cyrus was commander of the force aboard the *Aethon*; he had no need to listen to the sergeant's misgivings, but he would. As a psyker he had always stood apart from others. It was as true now as it had been when he was a shunned boy on a long forgotten world. But Phobos had never shown the remoteness that was common in his brothers. A sergeant of the First Company, a Proconsul, bearer of the *Crux Terminatus*, he was a warrior to the bone, and the closest thing to a friend Cyrus had ever known.

'We have been wardens out here for three decades,' said Phobos slowly. 'Three decades of war.'

'That was our oath and our duty,' said Cyrus.

'Yes, and a duty we paid in blood,' said Phobos. Cyrus nodded. It had been paid in blood indeed. The *Aethon* was a battle-barge, a vessel for making war amongst the stars. It could carry three hundred *Adeptus Astartes*, their vehicles and tools of war. When it had left Sabatine it had been close to its full strength, but three decades of war in the margins of the Eye of Terror had demanded its price. Captains and veterans of hundreds of years of war lay dead on lost worlds, or drifting through the cold void. Silence filled the ship, its crew reduced to servitors, and its systems to the bare essentials necessary to serve the remaining White Consuls.

Yes, and we paid that price many times over, my friend, thought Cyrus. 'Is there any other way for the *Adeptus Astartes* to fulfil their duty?' he said instead, with a sternness he did not feel.

'We are White Consuls.' Phobos leaned on the table looking at the raptor head emblems carved into the stone surface. 'We are inches away from extinction. The Chapter calls and...' His words fell away.

'And what?' Cyrus watched his friend swallow.

'The Chapter calls, but we linger.'

'You think that is what we do? Linger?'

'I think that our Chapter needs us,' said Phobos.

Cyrus felt ice run through him at the words. It was true. The Chapter had gathered in great numbers to face a terrible foe, and it had been wounded to the point that its future hung by a thread. The call had come, drawing all the sons of Sabatine back to their home.

'And what of the purpose of our Chapter, Sergeant Phobos?' said Cyrus, and Phobos looked up at the coldness in his voice. 'We are White Consuls, Primogenitors of Guilliman. We shepherd and guard mankind. That is what we

were created for. That is our duty to our Chapter.'

'And if the Chapter is no more?' growled Phobos. 'If it is destroyed and we are not there?'

'If we forget our purpose, my friend, then there will be nothing but ash blowing across dead worlds.' He thought he saw a flash of sympathy in Phobos's dark eyes, and knew that he had seen the echo of lost Kataris in his words.

'It had fallen,' said Phobos, his voice softening. 'There was nothing that could have been done to save it. Were we there, or ten times our number, there would have been no option but Exterminatus.'

Cyrus thought of the dead world's last scream for help before it burned.

'We could not have saved it, and we will not be able to save Claros if the daemons come to it,' Phobos added.

'There is always something that should be tried before you step into annihilation.' Cyrus growled. 'Pay for the survival of humanity with atrocity and there will be nothing left.' He shut down the holo-display, and walked away leaving Phobos alone in the dark.

The Aethon cut towards the bronze-hulled space station, its auspex nodes filling the void around it with overlapping folds of sensor fields. It was over eight kilometres long, a blunt barb of off-white armour and macro weaponry folded in crackling void shields. The roar of its plasma engines at full burn made the bridge vibrate under Cyrus's feet.

'No signs of enemy activity, or battle residue, my lord,' said the logistician bound into the main sensor dais. The man turned his green bionic eyes to Cyrus. 'The station seems to be intact and unharmed. They are acknowledging our hails and have accepted our request to dock.'

'Very well,' said Cyrus. He had expected to find the station wreathed in the fires of battle and shouting for help with its last breath. But looking at it on a viewscreen it was clear that it was far from falling.

Claros station looked a great wheel turning in starlight. Its armour gleamed as if forged from polished bronze. Five wings extended spoke-like from the station's central hub, each resembling the transept of a cathedral and over two kilometres long. Buttresses and towers tangled the station's surface, light glinting from the faces of vast statues that gazed out on the void with blank eyes. At its centre a tower extended above the central hub, its domed tip a mass of antennae masts. A thick collar of stone ringed the base of the tower, its surface blistered with shield generators and gargoyles the size of hab blocks. To Cyrus's

eyes it looked formidable.

Beside him Phobos shifted. Freshly attached purity seals hung from his shoulder guards, and he held his crimson helmet in the crook of his arm. Cyrus had not spoken to him since their words in the command chamber.

‘I will prepare an honour guard, if you intend to go aboard,’ said Phobos.

Cyrus could feel the question held in check behind Phobos’s words: if we came here to save this place and it does not need saving, why waste more time?

The memory of the vision he had seen on Kataris slid into Cyrus’s mind: the stink of warp, the wet warmth of his blood. The memory was as fresh and raw as an unhealed wound. He was a haruspex, trained in his Chapter’s tradition as a diviner of meaning in visions and omens. To an oracle there was no such thing as blind chance. The arrival of the signal and his vision were linked. Fate was pulling him to this place, he was sure.

‘Yes,’ Cyrus said. ‘Prepare the battle force to stand in armour. There is more here than meets the eye.’

The docking bay rumbled. Beyond the bay’s blast doors, the hull of the *Aethon* met the armoured dock of Claros with a sound like the tolling of an iron bell.

Before the doors the White Consuls stood in ranks, their armour bright under the light that filled the docking bay. Cyrus stood at their head, his force sword resting point down, its psy-active core quiet without his will to give it life. Parchments hung from his shoulders and greaves, and white cloth fell to the deck from his torso. In deference to the occasion his helmet hung from his waist so that his pale face looked out uncovered from its collar of crystal nodes.

Phobos and his Terminators stood a step behind Cyrus, and behind them were the Devastators of Valerian alongside the Vanguard and Tactical squads under Galba and Vetrano. All stood below the strength demanded by the *Codex*. But they were still a battle force of the Adeptus Astartes, an assemblage great enough to break armies.

The blast doors split open with a hiss of pressure. A void-cold wind spilled into the docking bay, stirring the parchments on Cyrus’s armour. Two figures waited in the growing breach at the head of a sea of kneeling figures. One was a man with a hawk-thin face and a wash of gloss black hair pulled back into a braided tail. The burnished gold of his chest armour – worked with laurels and eagle wings – caught the light as he bowed. Beside the man was a tall woman with a wrinkled, withered face, the bald skin of her scalp tattooed with swirls of faded text. A high-collared blue coat covered her thin form, and she held a staff



in her right hand. An eagle topped its black shaft, a blue crystal eye clutched in its claws. She looked at Cyrus with an expression of rank dislike, a sneer edging her mouth.

‘Hail in the name of the Emperor.’ The man’s voice trembled in the cold air. Behind the man the kneeling ranks echoed the words.

Cyrus bowed his head briefly; he disliked such moments. To most people of the Imperium the Space Marines were a breed apart: terrifying beings of protection and destruction made at the dawn of history by an Emperor they called a god. Such crawling deference was to be expected, but to Cyrus it ignored the reason for his existence: to protect these people and the realm of which they were a part.

‘Rise,’ he said, stepping forwards and offering the pair a smile. ‘I am Cyrus Aurelius, Epistolary of the White Consuls, and we come in might as we were called.’ The man looked up and Cyrus saw curiosity mingled with anxiety.

‘Rihat, colonel commander of the Helicon Guard.’ There was a tremor of fear in the man’s voice. Rihat gestured to the woman at his side. ‘And this is Hekate, Savant Imma—’

‘*This* can speak for herself.’ The woman’s voice cut through Rihat’s words like a knife.

She looked straight at Cyrus; there was no fear or awe in her eyes. He could feel the strength of the woman’s mind, the tamed and tethered psychic power held within her.

‘You see the confusion in his eyes, Space Marine?’ she said. ‘The fear he feels at the presence of the Emperor’s angels of death?’

‘My lord, we are honoured by your presence...’ blustered Rihat, his face paling.

Cyrus kept his gaze locked with Hekate’s. He felt the contest in that look, the challenge.

‘Why are you here, Space Marine?’ she asked, tilting her head, and Cyrus knew that she had seen his kind before, had perhaps seen and survived more than most humans could imagine. She was a primaris psyker, a battle psyker and occult savant who might be his equal or superior in power. He wondered at the dislike and anger that radiated from her like an icy cloud.

‘We were summoned, lady,’ said Cyrus calmly. ‘We intercepted a call for aid that indicated that this station was under threat. We came to answer that call.’

Rihat flicked a puzzled look at Hekate who broke Cyrus’s gaze to return it. Rihat shook his head, frowning. ‘My lord, no signal was sent.’

Cyrus flicked the bone cards over one at a time. His eyes took in images while his mind danced with inferences and possibilities. He did not like any of them.

The chamber around him was echoing and bright. Pillars of white marble rose from a floor of pale green stone. Light shone from clusters of glow-globes which hung by chains from the arched roof. Sentences of High Gothic covered every inch of the chamber. Rihat had said that they were the words of lost messages heard by astropaths over the thousands of years the station had existed. The lost words filled many rooms. Some, he had been told, believed that they formed a kind of oracle, that fate could be divined in their broken fragments of meaning. That belief had seemed fitting to Cyrus.

On the brass-topped table, beside the pile of bone cards, the holo-recording of the astropathic message turned and spoke. Cyrus had been listening to it again and again since his arrival. He believed that the signal had come from the station he stood in, but it was also clear that the station had not called for help. He would not leave, though, not yet; there were too many unanswered questions.

Phobos had nodded at the order to remain, but Cyrus had felt the sergeant's dissent in his dutiful response: why waste more time? Because of a vision and a feeling that I cannot share with you, was the answer that had gone unsaid. The sergeant had withdrawn with Rihat to review the station's tactical readiness, while Cyrus had asked for a place of solitude. They had brought him to the pillared chamber and there he had stayed, shuffling through his brooding thoughts for several hours.

A blind man reaching into oblivion, that is what I am, he thought.

The bone cards were slivers of polished ivory the length of a human hand. An intricate picture painted with subtle skill in fading colours looked up from one side of each card. Some showed figures from myth, others patterns of lines and numbers. Words in High Gothic wove through each design. In the hands of a psyker sensitive to how the future echoed through the tides of the warp they could reveal hidden truths about what was and what might be. It was an old form of divination, one that had persisted with variations for millennia. The designs of the cards came from a time before the great darkness of the Age of Strife, an age of lost history and forgotten lore. The bone cards that flicked through Cyrus's armoured fingers had been crafted on Sabatine, the home world of the White Consuls. Cyrus had used this set for over two centuries, and they felt as much a part of him as the armour that wrapped his body.

He turned another card. The Blind Oracle sat over the Nine Blades: confused ends, paradox and lies.

‘...Fateweaver...’ the voice recording crackled next to him. He lifted his hand to turn the last bone card.

The vision pierced his thoughts like a knife.

*The sword in his hand, blood sizzling as it drips down his arm to meet the weapon’s caged fire. The sword twisting in his grip, pinning feathered flesh to the floor. A carrion scream, echoing through him, blotting out the shouts of his brothers around him. Light flowing like water from a face like a flayed bird, flowing into the floor, twisting through metal, changing it, becoming it. Its mouth is opening to say...*

‘You are adept at divination, I see,’ said a voice close by. Reality snapped back into place around Cyrus, leaving him with a dull ache behind his eyes. He looked up from the unturned card to the speaker. It was a man, thin and bent by time, the green silk of his robes falling from hunched shoulders. A stole of black and gold thread circled his thin neck and a skull cap of blue velvet topped a wizened and bearded face. He had no eyes but the empty sockets seemed to be watching Cyrus. In his mind Cyrus could feel the ghost touch of the man’s psychic senses play across his skin. The man smiled, showing Cyrus a mouth of crooked teeth.

‘Never been much interested in it myself,’ the man said. He raised a hand and shrugged. ‘I know. Astropaths are supposed to be concerned with such things: the deeper resonances of the universe, insights into eternal mysteries. But, I must admit I find it tedious, and liable to lose me too much sleep.’ Cyrus found that he was smiling. The man shuffled closer, the tip of a silver cane tapping as it took his weight with each step. ‘I am sorry to disturb you, but I thought I should apologise for not greeting you when you arrived.’ The old man dipped his head, making him briefly even more hunched. ‘My name is Colophon; I am the senior astropath of this station.’

‘Epistolary Cyrus Aurelius of the White Consuls,’ said Cyrus, returning the bow without thinking.

Colophon grinned broadly. ‘Hmm, a Librarian of the Adeptus Astartes. No wonder Hekate is so put out. Can’t stand a rival that one.’

Cyrus remembered the primaris psyker’s challenging gaze when they had met at the docking gate. ‘I am sure that she is a worthy servant of the Imperium,’ he replied carefully.

‘You must have Emperor-given patience. I can’t stand her myself.’

Colophon stepped closer, leaning in to where the recording of the signal still turned on the brass table top. The naturalness of Colophon’s movements struck

Cyrus. Astropaths often possessed psychic senses that allowed them to see the world through a veil of telepathic resonance. But if it were not for his empty eye sockets, Cyrus would have said that the old man could see perfectly.

Colophon cocked his head to one side, listening. The recording rasped through the last syllables of its cycle and began again.

‘So this is the signal that brought you here, the one that has everyone so puzzled?’

Cyrus nodded. ‘Yes, it is what brought us here. It is distorted but it appeared to be a call for help.’ Colophon did not reply but waited while the message finished.

‘Yes, yes. I see what you mean,’ he said finally. ‘But as Rihat and Hekate told you, no signal has been sent from here. Certainly not one of this nature.’ He gave a chuckle. ‘I should know.’ He turned away from the projection, sucking his teeth. ‘Librarians are versed in the basics of astropathic transmission; had you not considered the possibility of temporal distortion?’

The possibility *had* occurred to Cyrus. Astropathic messages passed through the warp, and were subject to that realm’s inconsistent flow of time. A message might arrive millennia after it was sent, or be broken into incomprehensible pieces, or even arrive before it was sent. The message might be a plea from a future waiting just beyond the horizon of the present. It was that possibility of an unknown future that had made Cyrus linger.

‘It had occurred to me,’ Cyrus said. ‘Do you think it likely?’

Colophon shrugged. ‘The possibility alarms you?’

Cyrus thought of the ash of the dead world running through his fingers. ‘Yes, particularly given recent events.’

Colophon’s eyebrows rose. ‘Recent events?’

Cyrus frowned. The incursions were only fragments of a sudden flaring of conflict around the Eye of Terror. Never a place of peace, in recent times it had become a place of all out war, a war that the Imperium might lose. Forces from several Chapters were involved, and the front was spreading.

‘The incursion from the Eye,’ he said, ‘the manifestation of the *Accursed Eternity*. This is a strategic station; word of these things must have passed through here?’

Colophon shook his head. ‘This is a relay station: a hundred of my kind sifting the void for messages, absorbing them and echoing them on far beyond the reach of the original sender. We do not hear the messages that pass through us, any more than a pipe drinks the water that passes through it.’

‘I thought that as senior astropath you might have received word of the war...’

A frown spread wrinkles across Colophon’s face. ‘No, I am simply concerned with the flow of messages, not their content. If anyone knows it will be Hekate. She must have thought it unnecessary to tell me. She is our chief watchdog, our “Savant Immaterium”. An honourable position, though she loathes the fact that a primaris must sit here and look after us less gifted souls.’ He gave a snort. ‘You would never have guessed would you?’

There was a pause and Cyrus was about to speak again when the old man seemed to shake himself of worry. He gave a smile that only looked a little forced and tapped his cane on the floor. ‘Come, let us walk, Cyrus Aurelius of the White Consuls. It will do my bones good and might ease whatever is worrying you.’ He began to walk off, cane tip clicking. Cyrus followed, wondering about echoes and messages from an unknown future.

Colonel Rihat had never seen an angel of death before. He had been a soldier for most of his life – had seen people die: a few pirates during the scouring of the margin worlds, a few deserters – but he had never been in a fight larger than a skirmish.

In his old regiment he had been a platoon officer, though after a few decades he had known that he would never rise any higher. One day the regiment had been shipped to the Cadian Gate. He had been in transit from a garrison duty on a backwater mining world and missed the redeployment. There was nowhere for him to go, so they had sent him to join the Helicon Guard.

The Helicon Guard was a regiment of veterans pulled together from units that had suffered such high casualties that they were no longer viable as a combat force. Recruits took its ochre and red fatigues and bronze battle armour when they joined, casting off their former allegiances. Most were from regiments raised in systems around the Eye: hard people from hives or population sinks on worlds where you could look up and see the Eye glaring back out of the night sky.

Rihat knew that he had no right to the respect of the men and women under him. Command had fallen to him by a technicality: he had been the most senior officer when he joined and had thus been promoted to the role. He was not a hero, he knew that. He did his best, and tried to lean on what experience he did have. But that experience did not include a detailed knowledge of the Adeptus Astartes.

His first reaction was fear. When the blast doors of the station dock opened, he had felt a cold knot tighten in his guts. It was not just the warriors' size – that they were taller than any of the troopers ranked behind him – it was something about how they moved and looked at you. He remembered as a child seeing one of the ice lions of his home world. The beast had padded out onto the tundra road in front of their vehicle, its movements slow, muscle shifting under its patterned pelt. It had stopped and looked at them. Rihat had looked back into the animal's yellow eyes. For a second he had known that he was looking into the soul of something utterly indifferent to him, something whose nature was to kill or not as it chose. Looking into the eyes of the one called Cyrus he had felt an echo of that memory.

His second reaction was curiosity. The one called Phobos had asked to appraise the station, and so Rihat found himself walking beside the angel of death down the station's passages and colonnades. As they walked he could not help but glance at the Space Marine's blunt face. There was a compact ferocity to it, a predator cast to the set of the eyes and brow. He wondered what kind of soul moved behind that face.

'Something worrying you, colonel?' said Phobos, his voice a stony growl.

'No, my lord,' said Rihat, trying carefully to hide his unease.

The Space Marine grunted. 'Phobos, colonel. I am no lord, and you are a commander of men, an officer.' He turned an emotionless gaze on Rihat. 'My given name will suffice.'

Rihat gave a small nod that Phobos did not seem to notice.

They turned into a wide passage which ran around the inside of the kilometre-wide central hub of the station. Walls of verdigris bronze arched up to a central spine hung with glow-globes clasped in eagle claw fittings. This was the largest and greatest of the central passages. Any part of the station could be reached from its circle.

'You have not seen a warrior of the Adeptus Astartes before.'

It was a flat statement, Rihat realised. It was difficult to judge what Phobos intended. There was no emotion in his words, at least none that Rihat could sense. He watched as a woman in the robe of a Cipher looked at Phobos, the mnemonics she was muttering fading to nothing as she stared.

'No, I don't think many here have.'

'The primaris psyker, the one called Hekate; she has,' said Phobos in the same flat growl.

Rihat frowned. Hekate seemed to know a lot more than anyone else around

her and was never shy of saying so. How she had talked to the Space Marines in the docking bay had shocked Rihat. It was almost as if she held them in contempt. 'Perhaps,' he said, shaking his head at how anyone could face one of these creatures and speak to them as if they were ignorant children. But Hekate had done just that.

'Are we so strange to your eyes?'

The question made Rihat blink with surprise for a moment. He almost wanted to smile. 'Yes. To be honest, yes, you are.'

Phobos gave a thoughtful grunt, head nodding slightly in its armoured setting. 'The angels of death walking amongst mortals.'

'Yes, something like that,' said Rihat, frowning. For a moment he had heard a hint of something he could not quite place in the Space Marine's voice.

Phobos stopped and turned to Rihat. Behind them the honour guard clattered to a halt. The Space Marine looked steadily at Rihat, his storm-grey eyes unblinking amongst ridges of glossy scar tissue. His armour was white, but Rihat could see gouges and score marks under the paint. The crux on Phobos's left shoulder was a death's head of dull stone. There were patches where damage had been ground smooth. A sword hung in a bronze-worked scabbard at his waist, its grip bound with hide, its pommel a silver skull. Rihat doubted he could easily lift it.

Phobos's armour clicked and whined as he shifted his posture, leaning closer. A smell of machine oil filled Rihat's nose. He raised an eyebrow. 'Tell me, do I look like an angel?'

'No... No, you don't. You look like the most terrifying thing I have ever seen.'

A ghost of a smile twitched across Phobos's face. 'Very good, colonel,' he said, and turned to walk on, seeming to growl as he moved.

After a few steps, Rihat realised that the Space Marine was chuckling.

'How long have you been an oracle?'

The question had come after they had walked the corridors and chambers of Claros station for several hours, Cyrus striding alongside the shuffling old man. They had talked and Cyrus found himself warming to Colophon's wry remarks and sharp questions.

'For as long as I can remember,' Cyrus said. The brief years of his youth opened in his mind. The fear of his parents at their child's strangeness, the shuddering terror of his dreams: all long ago on a world that existed now only in



his memory. 'It was the first sign of my talent. I would see snatches of things that would later happen.'

Colophon nodded. 'The first awakenings of psychic talent are always the worst,' said the old man softly.

'Yes,' said Cyrus. The Librarian found himself wondering at what might have happened to him if he had not proved strong enough in mind and body to be sent from the Black Ships to the White Consuls. Would he have been shuffling along these corridors, blind to everything beyond his mind's eyes?

They turned to walk down a central chamber of one of the five wings of the station. It was wide and tall enough that a Titan could have strode between its stone pillars. People crowded its black stone floor. Administratum Ciphers hurried past, muttering mnemonic rhyme as they carried information from one part of the station to another. Hooded adepts talked in small groups, their mouths hidden by wide grey hoods. Menials in drab grey carried stacks of brass data sceptres, the tattooed marks of their service bright on their shaved heads. Wide eyes followed Cyrus from the crowd, fear and awe mingling on their faces. Some had knelt until he passed. It made him uncomfortable. He was a warrior used to the company of his brothers, not the grovelling fear of those he tried to protect.

'It must be a burden,' said Colophon, breaking Cyrus's thoughts. 'To see the future, to know what must happen.'

Cyrus shrugged, the gesture magnified through his armour into a massive shifting of armour plates. 'It is a tool, that is all. A weapon that I wield for my Chapter and the Imperium.'

Colophon turned his blind eyes towards Cyrus, and the Librarian felt the old man's psychic senses focus on him. 'Is it a vision of what will happen that makes you wait and worry so, my friend? Do you know that something will happen here?'

Cyrus thought of the omens in the bone slivers, of the snatches of sensation and vision: snarling faces, bird-like cries, his life pulsing away. 'Sometimes an omen is wrong, or open to interpretation,' he said carefully. 'Even if it appears clear, by knowing it and acting the oracle may change that future.'

'A very clear answer to a different question,' chuckled Colophon, turning to point them towards an arched door which led out of the pillared chamber. Beyond the door a spiral of wide iron steps led downwards. At the bottom was a tangle of narrow corridors, and cramped chambers. Most were closed by brass bound doors. Through the unsealed doors Cyrus could see figures polishing data

sceptres by candlelight. In other chambers bent-backed curators shifted piles of parchment scrolls between dusty shelves. They looked up and watched as Cyrus and Colophon passed.

This place exists for the hundred astropaths that sit at its centre, he thought, but here is the blood and muscle of the station, never resting, always moving on the edge of others' shadows.

'Tell me,' said Colophon, and Cyrus heard the shift in his voice, the edge of worry. Cyrus stopped and Colophon turned to face him, flickering candlelight from a side chamber turning the old man's face into a twitching mask of shadow. 'What is it that you see coming?'

'Blood, Colophon. I see blood and ruin.'

The astropathic chamber was a place of whispers. A circular bowl over five hundred paces wide, its sides rose in tiers of grey stone seats to a domed ceiling of black glass. Green-robed astropaths sat on every tier. There were hundreds of them, their minds open to the immaterium like nets cast into the currents of a deep ocean. Gathered in these numbers they could send messages over vast distances. They were a choir of minds acting in concert, but each reacted to their task differently. Some mumbled strings of words, or twitched as if stirring in a fitful dream. Others sat as still as statues, chests hardly moving as they breathed. The air was heavy, filled with the smell of sweat, incense and the static tang of psychic power. Ether-sensors hung from the ceiling above, feeling the flow of power within the chamber, alert for anything abnormal. Even psykers soul-bound to the Emperor were a risk when gathered together in large numbers. Out in the shadow tides of the warp such a gathering shone bright to the predators that swarmed there. The sensors were there to warn of any dangerous levels of psychic activity.

The hush broke without warning as an astropath on the third tier moaned and shivered in her trance. Supervisory adepts looked up from their screens and moved towards her. When the adepts were a pace away she arched her back and screamed. There was a sound of bones cracking as she convulsed. Above them the ether-sensors shattered. A mist coiled from the woman's mouth spreading into the air. It touched another green-robed figure and a new voice began to scream. The adepts froze for an instant and then began to run to the containment system.

More astropaths began to howl. Sparks rained down onto the tiered seats as the sensor arrays exploded. On every tier green-robed bodies spasmed, fingers

clawing at the stone armrests of their chairs, pus running from empty eyes. A heavy stench of iron and raw meat spread through the air. Voice after voice rose into a storm of noise like the call of a choir of the damned. Frost began running across the domed ceiling. At the centre of the chamber adepts and guards fell to their knees. Some of the guards vomited as they felt voices rush through their minds, voices that moaned and pleaded for mercy. Alarms began to sound, but their shrills were swallowed in the chorus of screams.

They began to die. One man opened his mouth and liquid fire poured down his body, his flesh powdering from his bones. Another tried to stand, cables ripping from his scalp. He stumbled and exploded in a wet cloud of skin and bone fragments. Others rose screaming into the air before dissolving into smoke and black dust.

The sound grew louder, screams rolling over each other until a single voice shrieked from a hundred throats.

Beyond the chamber panic spread through the station in the blare of alarms, the clang of sealing blast doors and the shouts of running guards.

In the astropathic chamber the screams became a single word.

Then all was still, except for the drip of blood and softly falling ash.

Cyrus charged through the doors at a run, his strides shaking the floor. Behind him Rihat did his best to match the White Consul's pace. Helicon Guard followed in their wake. Cyrus had been in the station's command chamber when the alarms had sounded and the servitors slaved to the sensors systems began to babble. Rihat had gone pale and then started to run, ordering troops to follow. Cyrus had overtaken him after only ten paces.

The psychic aftershock hit Cyrus as he entered the astropathic chamber, forcing him to stagger. The crystal matrix of his psychic hood was blazing with sickly light as it compensated for the wild power surging around him. A psychic event of huge magnitude had occurred in the chamber and a powerful echo of its fury still lingered. Dark liquid pooled on the floor; crumpled bodies lay in their stone thrones. Behind him, Cyrus heard some of the Helicon Guard vomiting onto the deck. The stink of sorcery was thick in the air: a sharp ozone tang that brought the twisted faces from his vision back into his mind. He scanned the chamber, its devastation lit by sparking glow-globes.

'Spread out,' he called. 'Look for survivors, be alert for any hostile action.' The Guardsmen moved around him, fanning out into the shadows. His storm bolter in hand, Cyrus moved deeper into the chamber.

There were bodies draping the stone tiers in piles of tangled limbs. A powdered layer covered everything, coating the dead so that they looked like grotesque sculptures. Scraps of debris still fell slowly through the air. Cyrus saw a severed hand on the snow-like covering, its fingers twisted into claws. There were lines in the dust, trail marks where people had crawled towards the doors. Dark stains had soaked into the ash in places, and Cyrus's steps left red prints as he moved across the chamber.

A figure staggered towards him, its eyes wide in a face smeared red. Dust spilled from the man as he moved. Cyrus recognised the marks of a senior adept on the man's robes. He mouthed something at Cyrus, his lips moving but his words muffled. Cyrus kept the muzzle of his bolter steady.

'What did you say?' asked Cyrus. The adept's mouth spoke the half sounds again. 'What did you say?' repeated Cyrus.

'He said that they screamed the same thing,' came a cracked voice from behind him.

Cyrus turned to see Colophon limping into the chamber. He looked into the old astropath's eyes, seeing an expression he could not read on the man's face.

Colophon walked over to the adept, who was swaying where he stood. 'I can see it in his thoughts,' he added. 'It is the only thing he is thinking. They screamed the same word at the end.'

Cyrus looked at the adept and saw the silent word in the shape of his moving lips. He felt a cold pulse run through him as he spoke the word out loud: 'Fateweaver.'

The adept nodded, his eyes wide with fear. Cyrus thought of the recorded signal and of the visions that would not leave him. It was all happening as he had feared it must. The daemon came to consume this place, as it had so many others.

Will I fail, he thought, will I be able to defy that part of fate?

'Not all of them are dead,' called Rihat, bent down next to a green-robed figure that lay sprawled on the floor. 'Some survived whatever this was.'

Cyrus saw that a few of the bodies scattered around the chamber were stirring, their movements feeble but signs of life none the less. 'Something is coming,' he said, glancing at the hunched man by his side. 'Colophon, a message must be sent now.' But the old astropath was shaking his head.

'Can't you feel it? The warp around us is... ' Colophon closed his eyes briefly, a shiver running through his hunched form. 'The warp around us is a curtain of pain. No message will be able to break through. Even if any of my

brothers and sisters recover, it would not be possible.'

Cyrus reached out with his psychic senses and tasted the veil of agony surrounding the station. It was as if a barbed web lay all around them, a shadow's width away. The old man was right; no telepathic message could leave.

Colophon trembled, almost falling, before Rihat caught him and lowered him to sit on the edge of the first stone tier. 'We are alone,' the astropath said. The old man looked up, and Cyrus saw the panic overcoming him. 'An evacuation?' A tremor of fear edged his voice. 'Your ship can hold many. We could—'

'No.' Cyrus cut the old man off. 'It could carry some, but what of the rest, Colophon? What of those we left behind?'

Colophon looked into Cyrus's eyes for an instant and then looked down, his hand trembling on his cane top.

'Your orders, Epistolary?' said Rihat.

Cyrus turned, looking at the tiered chamber and the motionless figures that would never rise from their seats. A few survivors were beginning to call out from the shadows. 'Prepare the defences. We are alone, and so we must hold alone.'

'How long do we have until an attack begins?' asked Rihat. His face was pale and Cyrus could see fear in his wide eyes.

Cyrus looked at the colonel, and then at the blood congealing at their feet. 'It has already begun.'



## II

### BLOODED

‘Flesh will fail, Space Marine,’ said Hekate, and Phobos had to bite back his anger at the contempt in her voice. ‘Against the enemy that comes, this is our true defence.’ Hekate raised her staff to point at the black pillar that rose above them. Bundles of humming cables snaked around it, and purity seals covered almost every inch of its surface. Phobos could see a delicate pattern of marks etched into the obsidian beneath the fluttering strips of parchment. The chamber was a narrow armoured cylinder that followed the pillar into blackness above. The air held a greasy static charge that played over his armour in small arcs.

Phobos had been reviewing the station’s defences for hours. His eyes had taken in every readied gun and choke-point, his mind sifting through possible weaknesses. Helicon Guard units waited in each of the five wings of the station. The White Consuls under his and Cyrus’s command formed a force of small units, ready to respond should the enemy break through. The *Aethon* would remain docked to the station, its guns ready if necessary. It was Cyrus’s plan and Phobos could not fault it given their resources, but the key to the defence was in front of him.

The pillar was a Geller field generator. The field it projected was a product of techno-arcana of the powerful kind. Normally used to shield ships as they passed through the warp, here it existed to shield the station from daemonic assault.

Phobos disliked Hekate but knew that she spoke truth. Besides his brothers, there were Rihat’s regiment of Helicon Guard, batteries of macro cannons trained on the void, and layers of void shields that could keep a battlefleet at bay. But, as Hekate had pointed out, they were not facing a battlefleet. She was a

primaris psyker, a savant immaterium who knew secrets that Phobos would never learn. She had shared her thoughts with them over the past hours, and each comment was as accurate as it was barbed. Her latest observation was no less so. The Geller field was the station's true defence.

The field would envelop the central section of the station, closing it off from daemonic assault. There would be sections that would be unshielded, flaws in the invisible wall where a daemon could pass through. These would be the points where flesh and bone would have to stand against the enemy. Should the daemons force a way inside the field envelope then there would be slaughter. Phobos thought of the thousands of non-military personnel crammed into chambers of the central hub, running prayer beads through their fingers, muttering implorations to the Emperor to protect them from their fears.

'Are they at full power?' asked Phobos.

'They are bringing the generator on-line now,' said Rihat, consulting a brass-framed data-slate in his hand. As he finished, the deck began to shake. Bright chains of electricity played up and down the pillar. The purity seals rustled as if in a rising wind. A warning chime sounded in Phobos's ear as his armour detected a growing power spike.

The pillar shivered and issued a sound like a bell tolling underwater. A skin of heat haze formed on its surface. Phobos could hear a high hum like vibrating glass.

'Fields are at maximum strength,' said Rihat, looking up and running a hand nervously across his head. 'I have commanded the Guard here for a decade and the full field mantle has never been activated.'

Phobos heard unspoken fears in the colonel's voice. Rihat was a commander of men, chosen for that duty because of his quality. But he had never faced the kind of enemy that now came for them. A thought came unbidden to Phobos's mind as he placed a hand upon the man's shoulder: maybe you are another weakness in our armour, Rihat.

'These are not our only defences,' Phobos said. The colonel looked up at the scar-twisted face of the White Consul, and Phobos saw the uncertainty in his eyes. 'We must stand whether these fields fail or not. Should they fail, flesh and spirit will have to suffice.'

Beside him Hekate gave a derisive snort. 'That is true, Space Marine,' said the psyker with a grim smile, 'but if it comes to that, the station will fall.'

A pre-storm quiet permeated the pillared chamber where the White Consuls



armed themselves. They gathered in squads, talking in low voices as servitors attached oath parchments to their shoulder guards. The clink of weapons and the smell of incense hung in the air.

Cyrus stood apart, his thoughts drifting back into the past. He was not supposed to have memories from before he became a White Consul. Years of psychic conditioning, and the indoctrinations of the Adeptus Astartes, should have removed any remnants of what he had been. But he did remember. Sometimes Cyrus wondered if it was the shadow of his oracular gift.

He could not recall much from before he became a Space Marine, but he could remember the day the Black Ships came. They had appeared out of the noon sun and had hung in the blue sky like impossible castles. On the mountain sides and on the plains, people looked up from the shadows they cast over the ground. He had not understood what it meant but the old men of the village had. They glanced at him with fear as they clustered around the fire in the meeting hall that night. They said that the shapes in the sky were the Sky God's witch-seekers, and that they had come to take the god's due.

There were many witches on their world. Most were killed or hounded into the wild, but more were born every year. When the emissaries of the Sky God came they took all the witches they could find up to the stars. If they found witches had been hidden their anger would be terrible. Cyrus had heard them talk and knew what would happen.

His mother had kept his abilities secret for several years, but it had not lasted; there was too much strangeness about him. Sometimes he yelled strange things in his sleep, or knew what someone was about to do before it happened. People noticed and people talked.

That night his father had sat amongst the men looking pale, saying little, not looking at his son. His mother had tried to hide him, had argued with his father, raging through falling tears. It had made no difference. The village had waited outside the house until his father led him out. They took him down to the plains where the temples that fell from the sky waited, swallowing long lines of people: confused old men, wild-eyed hermits and weeping children. Cyrus had not cried; there was no point. He knew what was going to happen.

The world had given up its witches, but it had ultimately made no difference. A clutch of uncontrollably powerful alpha plus psykers had been born there a decade later. The Imperium had burned the world from orbit, reducing it to cinders. Far away in his cell on Sabatine, Cyrus had woken with the taste of ash in his mouth.

Cyrus blinked and ran his tongue through his mouth. The memory of the gritty taste was a ghost sensation on his palate. The servitors pulled away, smoke coiling from where the wax cooled on his newly attached parchments. He nodded, flexing his hand inside his gauntlet. His storm bolter cycled to readiness with a metallic snarl. Another servitor clanked forwards on chained tracks, his helmet held in callipered hands. The helmet locked over his head with a hiss. For an instant, blind darkness wrapped him before his vision flickered with luminous readouts.

Now we wait for the storm to come, he thought.

In the gulf beyond the station's hull, the void split like skin slit with a knife. A luminous miasma poured out of the wound, staining the light of the stars as it spread. It coiled in the vacuum, forming folds and tendrils like milk curdling in dark wine. Half-formed shapes moved through the spreading cloud as thousands of hungry eyes turned towards the station. The wound stretched wider and the cloud grew.

Claros station shook with the metal-voiced fury of cannon fire. Beams of energy and lines of shells streamed across the black expanse. They struck the oncoming tide and sliced through it like claws raking through fat. Chunks of solidifying matter cooked to charred fragments. Explosions scooped holes in ethereal flesh. Vast mouths opened in the cloud's surface crying out in silent pain. And the guns kept firing. Auto loaders rammed macro shells into smoking breeches. Las-capacitors shrieked as they built up charge, and plasma generators boiled with overheating ferocity. Behind blast doors and barricades the defenders felt the station quake and prayed for hope, for salvation, for fate to favour them.

The first salvos cut into the sickly pall, but it swelled without pausing. When it reached the station's hull it writhed across it, searching for weakness. Where it found that weakness it poured through in an ethereal wave of extending talons and bared teeth.

Cyrus closed his eyes. Sounds and images faded until he was conscious of only a few sensations: the familiar feeling of his Terminator armour against his skin, the heft of his sword in his hand, and the worn segments of his gauntlets, flexing as he shifted his grip on the hide-wound hilt. The blade was keening, its edge shivering.

He opened his eyes. The dark metal walls of the lift shaft slid past, the red glow of his brothers' eyes diluting the darkness. Galba and his squad stood

beside him. Six figures in ghost white, the blue of their helmets lost in the low light. The top of the lift shaft receded above them. Numbers flickered across Cyrus's vision, counting down the estimated time to engagement.

The enemy had broken through into a tunnel under the fifth station wing. The Helicon Guard defending the unshielded tunnel were on the edge of breaking. Panicked voices washed through Cyrus's vox, and tactical assessments filled his helmet display. It was the sound and measure of a massacre.

This is what we exist for, he thought. This is what we were made for: to step into certain defeat and undo that fate.

The lift platform halted with a metallic clang. In front of Cyrus the blast doors waited. He could almost feel what was beyond those closed metal teeth.

'The Emperor wills it, and we are His weapon,' growled Galba from behind Cyrus.

'The Emperor wills it, and His will is fury,' said Cyrus. Cold power blazed down the sword in his hand, its edge singing in tune with his mind. Chainblades snarled to life. A crackling field enveloped Galba's fist, casting the White Consuls in flickering shadows.

'By His will,' spoke the White Consuls.

The blast doors ground open. A broad, circular passage extended away in front of Cyrus. The pipes and support ribs lining its side made it look like the inside of a vast animal. A shoulder-high barrier of welded plasteel ran across the tunnel's mouth. Behind it, the remains of a company of Helicon Guard were dying.

A wall of sound washed over Cyrus: human shrieks, the crack-fizz of lasguns, and inhuman sounds cried from the throats of daemons. Some of the Helicons were falling back, firing ragged bursts into a glittering fog that rolled across the barricade. Shifting shapes moved like shadows cast by a flickering fire.

Cyrus began to run. He was fifty paces from the barrier, armour shaking with each step. Las-bolts whipped past him, sparkling as they vanished into the boiling fog in front of him. The troops who had not fled the barricade were dying. Distorted shapes with many limbs spun amongst the Guardsmen. Blue flames ate through armour and flesh where the shapes touched. Single-eyed creatures pulled at the barrier with rotting hands. A thick sweet scent reached Cyrus's nose, mocking his sealed armour.

He was thirty paces away. He began firing, his storm bolter stitching fire through threat markers, explosions blooming amongst the coiling fog. A

Guardsmen staggered away from the barricade and took a trembling step towards Cyrus. His face was pale and streaked with blood, his lasgun loose in his hands. A shape flowed out of the fog behind the man. He took another step. The shape snapped into sharp focus. It stood poised on the top of the barrier. Its body was a lithe sculpture of taut muscle and glittering skin. Eyes that were circles of reflective darkness looked at Cyrus and it hissed like a snake. Cyrus drew his sword back.

The figure leaped, its claws closing over the fleeing Guardsman's head as it turned in the air. It landed in a whip spray of blood as the Guardsman crumpled to the floor. For an instant the creature stood, quivering as if in pleasure. It looked at Cyrus, and smiled with a mouth of hooked teeth.

Cyrus charged. The creature pounced, its teeth wide in its beautiful skull, its eyes glinting like moonlight on frost. Cyrus dropped into a half crouch and rammed his sword forwards. The sword tip punched into the creature's slender neck. Glowing blood flowed down its length as the creature's momentum rammed it onto the blade. Cyrus felt the creature's essence dissolve into black vapour. He ripped the sword back. The creature's death in his mind was like the taste of honey and bile.

Another creature blurred towards him, claws clicking, movements coiling. Cyrus cut, armour and muscles flowing. The figure swayed, and Cyrus's sword struck the deck in a shower of sparks. The creature flipped through the air faster than Cyrus could turn his sword, its claws reaching for his face as it spun. He could see the death in its eyes, felt it call him to oblivion.

An armoured fist closed on the creature's body with a crack of bound thunder. Galba lifted the broken creature from the ground and threw it down. The sergeant brought his foot down on its skull, grinding it to fragments.

'They come,' shouted the sergeant to Cyrus. Bolt shells roared from Galba's pistol as he turned towards the tunnel mouth.

The barricade had given way. Rotting figures scrambled through the breach, rusted blades scraping on the decking, their mouths drooling pus. The Helicon Guard who had clung to the barricades fell back. Cyrus felt a buzzing inside his head, an insect touch on his skin. Shells flew from his storm bolter. He kept the trigger squeezed, the gun sucking rounds from its drum feed. Targets vanished and pulsed back into sight. He stepped forwards into the space gouged by the storm bolter.

Cyrus glanced over at Galba. The sergeant was at the centre of a closing circle of leering faces, slime thick blades hacking at his armour. The four other

members of his squad were cutting towards him with their chainblades. Galba punched forwards and gripped a horned head in his lightning-sheathed fist. He lifted the creature and fired his pistol into its eye. The head exploded like an overripe fruit. Cyrus saw Galba back-fist three creatures to pulp before the cage of hacking blades closed over him.

Claws and blades scraped across Cyrus's armour. Rotting bodies surrounded him, their yellow eyes pressed against his helmet lenses. He tried to move his sword arm, felt the press of bodies weighing it down. Something sharp found a join in his armour. He could feel pathogens trying to find purchase in his immune system, radiating pain through his body. Their daemon's reek reached inside his mind. He could feel their hunger. He remembered the vision: the circling creatures, the sword slipping from his hand. Was this the fate he had seen? The thought sunk into him and for an instant he teetered on the edge of doubt.

Anger flared through him, overwhelming his pain and doubt. He would not fall, not here. He would deny that fate.

A pattern of thought and feeling formed in his mind. It burned like a sun trapped in his skull. He held on to it for a moment, feeling it feed on his rage, growing wilder and hotter. He released the thought. Flames burst from him. The creatures around him wailed as their flesh cooked. He poured his anger into the fire, feeling power mirror his rage. It quickened and grew until he was a still figure, at the heart of a white-hot storm. The display inside his helmet dimmed against the brightness. In the inferno the daemons shrieked as he tore their essence apart.

His body sang with the power running through him, and his psychic hood was ice-cold against his scalp. He did not want to let go. He could hear something whispering, calling to him to never let this end, to give himself to it, to hold on to this power forever. It would be right, it would be...

He released the fury in his mind, the burning power collapsing into a dull ember ache in his skull.

Sudden silence and stillness surrounded him. He was breathing hard, his skin clammy and cold in his armour. Around him the floor and walls of the passage glowed. The barricade was a twisted mound of blackened metal, like a crumpled cloth. He turned, meeting the staring eyes of the Helicon Guard who looked up from where they cowered by the lift entrance. Sheathing his sword he reached up and released his helmet. The air smelt of cooked meat and sulphur.

Four members of Galba's squad stood amongst the wreck of the barricade.

The teeth of their chainblades were thick with oozing flesh. Galba lay between them. Congealing blood and yellow mucus caked his splintered armour. His helmet was a ruin of squashed bone and torn ceramite.

Galba's four squad brothers lifted their sergeant onto their shoulders. They murmured the death lament of Sabatine as they moved. They would carry him back to the *Aethon* where he would wait in cold stasis until he returned to his birth planet for the last time. Hearing the old words from a planet that was home but which had not borne him, Cyrus found that there was nothing he could say.

Its new face was dull and uninteresting. It had worn more faces than it could recall, and it would forget this one as soon as it had taken another. The weaker flesh-born moved around it. They were those that they called soldiers. It found the idea of such a title laughable: as if a name could change their herd animal nature into something greater. It had many names, both granted and stolen. *Changeling* some called it, but that was not its name and the description barely touched the essence of its nature. It knew how little a name was worth.

It breathed, feeling the world as the flesh-born felt it, dulled to simple stimuli and base sensations. A giant warrior in blue stood close by. Space Marines: that was what the flesh-born called them. It could taste this one's thoughts, feel their nuances, the characteristics and temperament they implied. Interesting. So much more interesting than the role it played now. There were subtleties and depths of self-deception at play that would make such an identity a delight to play. But it had a bargain to fulfil, and for that bargain the drab face that it wore was what it needed.

During the battle it had worn the form of lesser children of decadence, passing amongst its supposed kind with flawless ease. Isolated and forgotten on the edge of the violence it had found what it needed. The man had been hugging his legs to his chest and weeping silently. An ideal face to wear, it had thought. It had destroyed the original, reducing the flesh-born's body to dust with a touch. Now it wore the flesh-born's shape.

'Harlik,' said a voice close by.

For a moment it stayed where it was, staring at the scorched plating of the deck.

'Harlik, come on, they're pulling us out.'

*Harlik.* Yes, that would be the name that went with the face, a dull name for a dull entity. It turned to look at the speaker. A heavy-faced man, smeared with soot, the ochre and red of his uniform stained by blood and vomit.

‘Yeah, I’m coming,’ it said, its voice perfect, the layer of shocked slowness consistent with what Harlik would have sounded like had he survived the assault. ‘I’m coming.’

It followed the flesh-born, tasting their thoughts as it moved amongst them. Most were struggling with emotions and thoughts it could not comprehend: shock, terror, guilt, anger, hope. It could not understand these feelings, but it could imitate their effects flawlessly.

Shoulders hunched, eyes vacant, it trudged on with the rest. It would need a new face as it moved towards its goal. Yes, it would wear another face soon.

The blind figure talked to Cyrus in his dreams.

‘There is no way out. Your fate is written,’ says the astropath, turning in the cone of hololight, its voice a dry croak. He reaches out but the figure turns, and he sees that it has two faces: one grinning, the other snarling; both blind. He reaches for his sword but feels his hand close on nothing. The two-faced figure laughs.

He is falling through fading shadow, tumbling past stars and moons, drifting through eternity, his body a lie, time a lie.

He stands at the bottom of stone tiers that ascended into darkness. He looks up. Eyes blaze back at him.

His brothers are shouting at him, close by servitors are blurting code in frantic streams. He is raising his sword.

He is standing on the bridge of a ship as it falls through winds that howl with laughter.

Darkness folds over him.

There are Space Marines in blue armour. He can see dragons coiling on their shoulder guards. A figure in black armour moves amongst them, a reptilian cloak hanging from his back in folds of iridescent scales. They are walking through ghost-quiet corridors. Dark liquid seeps out of the walls in their wake. He calls to them, but they are wraiths hovering beyond an impenetrable veil.

He brings his sword down and the two heads of the astropath scream with the sound of a murder of dying crows.

This has not happened. This is the future, *he thinks*.

*The blind figure turns in its cone of cold light, its two faces grinning, laughing from both of its mouths.*

*‘No, this is the past,’ says the blind figure.*

Cyrus opened his eyes with a snarl of pain. A servitor with a skull of polished

chrome cocked its head, looking at him with cold blue eye lenses, a piston hand poised above his shoulder armour. He took a ragged breath.

Shadows surrounding pools of harsh light filled the armoury. He was standing at the centre of a clutch of white-robed servitors, limbs splayed on a cruciform frame that supported the dead weight of his armour. The armour was silent, its machine spirit slumbering while the servitors peeled it from his body.

It had been some hours since the first attempts by the daemons to break through the gaps in the Geller field. The warp still enclosed the station but after the first attacks there had been quiet. It was not peace, though, just an in-breath before the next onslaught.

Scorched and stained by battle, Cyrus had returned to the *Aethon* to have his armour stripped and cleansed. He had hoped that the act would be mirrored in his body and mind, but his temples still throbbed with the psychic exertion of the battle. He had not been able to stop thinking about the signal that had called them here. The more he thought about it the more he was sure he was missing something about it, something just out of hearing waiting beneath the surface. Then the vision had taken him again.

He nodded to the servitors and they continued to unpick the Terminator armour, pulling away plates, and uncoupling system links with cold, mechanical fingers.

‘A hard fight,’ said a voice beyond the stab lights of the hovering servo-skulls.

Cyrus squinted, his eyes cutting into the darkness. Phobos stood in his own armour, the white Terminator plate making him look a marble statue.

‘You look weary,’ he said. There was a hint of a smile on his lips.

Cyrus nodded grimly. ‘We held the breach. It cost us Galba.’

The first cost we must pay, he thought, a cost I have said we must bear.

‘He goes to the ancestors,’ said Phobos, nodding. ‘As must we all.’

Cyrus did not reply but watched as two servitors disconnected a series of bio-readout cables from plugs in his side. They burred to each other in machine code as they worked. In over two centuries of war he had seen thousands die. Brothers had fallen at his side, and he had made decisions that had both cost and saved lives. But the first tangible price of coming to Claros troubled him. He felt as if he had sleepwalked into a cobweb that bound tighter around him with every move he made.

‘Does it still trouble you?’

Cyrus looked up at Phobos, seeing the look of friendly concern on his



brother's face.

'This?' Cyrus winced as the servitors pulled the blood-streaked greave from his leg. 'It will not slow me.' The flesh underneath was livid, black veins crawling out from a suppurating wound.

'No, not that.' The sergeant frowned. 'You are brooding on something; you have been since you decided to come here.'

A servo-skull drifted close to Cyrus's wounded leg, extending a red-hot cauterising blade. Cyrus nodded and the blade lanced into his flesh. He did not make any expression as the smell of burnt flesh sizzled into the air.

'You said before that there was nothing we could do even if this place was attacked. That it would burn anyway.'

Phobos shook his head gently. 'I misspoke. I spoke as I felt I must, but you lead us and you led us here, and here we have an enemy to stand against.'

Cyrus was suddenly aware of how worn his friend looked, his face weathered by war and framed by white armour older than memory.

'You were right, old friend,' breathed Phobos heavily. 'You were right. Don't let my words weaken you for what we must do now.'

Cyrus shook his head. Beside his temple a servo-skull buzzed as it unlinked the crystalline mesh of his psychic hood from his scalp. There were blisters and lesions in places where it rested on his skin.

'The signal and the omens worry me. They are why we are here and I still understand neither fully. That... ' He paused sifting through words to sum up his worry. 'That makes me wonder if it was not bait, if I have not led us into a trap, if I should not have chosen differently.'

It was Phobos's turn to shake his head, armoured shoulders turning his chuckle into a ripple of armour. 'The enemy did not come here for us; they came here for the light of the astropaths and the souls on the station. If we weren't here they would already have fallen. And we are not here for omens, brother. We are here to fight and to win.'

Cyrus frowned. 'And we bear the price of that chance for survival?'

Phobos grinned, his scarred face splitting with grim humour. 'That, brother, is why we were made.'

It began with one man.

Guardsmen crowded the vaulted chamber that ran down the centre of the fourth wing of the station. They had been there for several rotations, not sleeping, just looking nervously into the shadows. No one had explained what

was happening. Station command had said only that the station was under attack, and that they were a primary reserve if the enemy broke through from other sections. No one had said who the enemy was, and that only made things worse. Rumours of attacks in other areas had come some hours earlier, but the lack of details created spaces filled by fears and rumour. No two rumours agreed on anything other than a single fact: it was bad. The lack of any solid information only confirmed it.

Private first class Ramiel straightened up from his crouched position and flexed his shoulders under his bronze-plated armour, trying to work the tightness from his back. Over a decade ago he had been a gang boss, lording it over his own chunk of the Vortis underhive in the distant Mandragora sector. He had killed how he liked, and who he liked. It had been a good life. Bad luck had seen him lose that life and gain a rank of flat nothing in an Imperial Guard regiment that went on to lose ninety per cent of its numbers in its first campaign. Ramiel had survived though, he always did.

He had been watching a sealed door that led off the broad colonnade for over four hours. It was supposed to lead to an unshielded section, whatever that meant. Nothing had happened and nothing was going to, just another waste of time. Sure, he had been jumpy when the alarm had come through and they were deployed on maximum alert. They said there were Space Marines on the station, that the station had already been attacked. With every hour spent crouched watching the unmoving door he had believed it less and less. There was no attack, no Space Marines. It was just a drill, a waste of time, and the more he thought about it the more it had started to piss him off.

‘Get back on post, Ramiel,’ the sour voice of the sergeant spat from a few yards behind him.

Ramiel ignored it; the sergeant was a straight-backed son of a bitch who scared most of the squad. Not Ramiel, though. He knew that the sergeant was a nothing, no real fight in him. Let him shout, he thought, let him try whatever he liked. He pulled his helmet off and dropped it next to his lasgun. He rotated his neck stretching out his muscles as he reached into a pouch and pulled out a lho-stick. He heard the sergeant marching up behind him as he lit the tip of the stick.

‘Pick up your gun and get back into position, soldier,’ growled the sergeant next to Ramiel’s ear.

Ramiel turned and looked the sergeant in the eye. A reckless anger was coursing through him now. He did not know where it had come from: he just knew it felt good. He took a long draw of the lho-stick and grinned at the

sergeant.

‘Pick it up or—’

Ramiel’s fist slammed into the sergeant’s guts and he brought his knee up hard as the man doubled over. The sergeant went down with a wet noise and lay on the floor, blood pooling around his mashed face. There was a soundless pause; men were staring from other positions across the colonnade.

‘Well you’re down there now, sergeant. Why don’t you pick it up?’ He smiled and took another drag of his lho-stick.

The sergeant came to his feet faster than Ramiel could blink. There was the polished glitter of a knife in his hand. Ramiel jumped back but the tip of the blade stabbed up under the edge of his armour. Suddenly there was blood splattering the floor. Ramiel lashed a kick at the sergeant, ignoring the pain flaring in his guts. People were running towards them. Suddenly all Ramiel wanted was to see the sergeant’s blood pulse away, to see his head become a skinless skull. He came forwards fast and the sergeant lunged, the point of the knife scoring across Ramiel’s breastplate. His hand went to the sergeant’s face, fingers finding the softness of the eyes. The sergeant screamed. There were others around Ramiel, other people shouting, but he did not care. He pulled the knife from the sergeant’s fingers and rammed it up under the man’s chin. Blood gushed over him. He was laughing. There was a hand on his shoulder, pulling him. He turned and sliced a face from eye to chin.

A red haze formed in the air. Angry cries spread around Ramiel, figures bunching into knots of sudden violence. Someone opened up with a heavy weapon, hard rounds pulping through the growing crowd. The stone-tiled floor was slippery with dark fluid. There was a stink of offal in the air.

Ramiel kept moving, kept cutting and stabbing. His skin and armour glistened crimson. Around him fallen bodies began to twitch, dead fingers spasming, muscles bunching. Flesh twisted, bursting skin and venting fresh, bright blood. Ramiel could feel the murder hunger inside him like a beast. He raised his hand to cut again, to feed the beast.

Something sharp rammed through Ramiel’s chest. He looked down at the black blade tip projecting from his ribs. He grinned a dead man’s grin, swaying where he stood. Ramiel’s mouth began to open wider and wider. With a sound of ripping sinew the form of an impossible thing pulled itself from Ramiel’s skin. The creature sloughed off the sleeve of loose flesh. It was slick with blood, its tongue flicking out to taste the air. Its eyes were pits of reflective darkness in a long skull. It stepped forwards, its black jointed legs shaking with the freshness

of its birth, its flesh a raw meat red.

A man who had been firing his lasgun into the fight looked at the newly born daemon and opened his mouth. The daemon bounded forwards, the black blade in its hands leaving a trail of smoke as it cut. The man never had a chance to scream.

The daemon looked around seeing more waiting kills, hearing the pulse of the living calling to it. More of its kin came, pulling themselves from the bodies of the dead and the pools of blood. Lifting the severed head of its first kill the daemon raised its flayed skull face and howled.

It had been the wrong way to clear his mind, thought Cyrus. Walking the station had seemed like a good way to work out troubling thoughts. Armoured in cleaned plate he had paced through the silent halls and the service tunnels where the station's population sheltered as far from the outer areas as possible. They looked at him and he could feel the fear in their eyes. People crowded the service tunnels: menials, prefects, techno-mats, and their families. They formed tight clusters, huddled around a few possessions, talking in low voices as if the sound of raised voices were indecent.

There was a tension in the close atmosphere, panic held just below the surface. He had hoped to gain some clarity of thought, but the atmosphere seemed to infect him with a mixture of fear and caution. He tried to let his thoughts unknot, tried to focus on presenting a soothing presence to the people that looked at him. It was not working. In no small part that was the fault of Hekate.

'It was only the first, and the weakest, attack that we will see.' Hekate's harsh voice rang out. She had chosen this time to impart her thoughts on the situation, following him as he walked the station, staff clicking on the deck in time with her steps.

Hekate had not been present at any of the two assaults on the station. She had been noticeably absent, only appearing afterwards to question survivors and make dire predictions. Cyrus pursed his lips. He could almost hear the look of superiority on her face.

'We held the breach,' growled Cyrus.

'No, *we* did not,' she spat. '*You* held the breach. If it had not been for you and your brothers the enemy would have forced through our defences.'

People were looking up at the raised voices, the air tightening. Cyrus had nearly reached the end of his patience. A thick ache had begun to spread across

his head. All he could think about was the holographic image of a blind face repeating a single word just beyond hearing again and again.

He stopped and turned, looking down at the woman, catching the surprised look in her eyes, anger slipping his control.

‘Are you not a primaris? What is it that you fear? You have lent no aid to the defences apart from your observations. Is there something that keeps you in the shadows?’

‘I—’ she began, but Cyrus was in no mood for what she might have said. He leant forwards.

‘You may speak the truth and know much, but you seem blind to the fact that we either stand together or we die. The enemy we face will destroy us from within as easily as it will from without.’ He looked around at the people huddled and silent at the edge of the passage. ‘You do not see this? You know much of the enemy that faces us, more than Rihat, more than I. But you do not see this?’

He looked at the marks of the Psykana tattooed on her scalp and woven into the cloth of her storm coat. An expression that he could not place ghosted across her face. ‘Is there something you fear, mistress? Something you know of this enemy that makes you afraid?’ She held his gaze and a previously unformed question dropped into his mind. ‘What is your purpose here?’

‘I cannot say.’ There was a low almost fearful note in her voice that surprised Cyrus. ‘I tell you the truth that I see. That is what I am here to do. That is the help I give.’

Cyrus gazed at the woman, a suspicion forming in his mind. The Inquisition had servants in many places and drew its acolytes from many quarters. Did such a secret servant stand before him now? There was a regal surety about her that made him wonder what she really was. ‘How long have you been here, Mistress Hekate?’ he said quietly.

‘A little over a month, Brother-Librarian,’ she replied, her voice brittle.

‘And before that?’

‘I cannot say.’

Cyrus smiled but it did not reach his eyes. He was thinking of executed worlds, and the hand that wielded that final judgement. What was she?

Hekate looked away, suddenly appearing hunched and tired as she leant on her staff. ‘Another attack will come,’ she said without looking at him. ‘You should know that the varieties of daemons that attacked were of many orders. Such creatures only overcome their own rivalries when great powers turn them to a single purpose.’

The image of an astropath speaking a broken plea for help flashed through his mind, and a word came to Cyrus's lips. 'Fateweaver,' he said.

Hekate shot him a hard look. For a moment he thought he saw surprise and fear in her blue eyes.

'That is a name that should be spoken with care,' said Hekate with careful control.

Cyrus was about to speak but the ache in his head suddenly blossomed to press against the inside of his skull. The crystals of his psychic hood were sparking. He blinked, opening his eyes to find red light flooding the passage. Alarms filled the air. His vox-link was screeching with panicked voices. He heard the word 'incursion' spit from the static and started running. He had ordered Phobos to be ready as a counter-attack force. The sergeant and his Terminators would reach any breach first.

'Phobos,' he shouted into the vox. As the sergeant replied Cyrus thought he could hear a whispered word repeated again and again.

Overwhelmed. It was not a word Phobos had often needed to contemplate. Layers of ceramite and adamantium, crafted at the birth of the Imperium, and his skill as a warrior made the word as irrelevant to him as a blow from a flint axe. But the word rang in his mind: undeniable, certain.

A lattice of fire overlaid the scene before him, spitting from his storm bolter, interweaving with that of his brothers. Four of them; there were four of them to turn the tide. A killing rage had engulfed the troops in the fourth wing of the station. Hundreds of Helicon Guard had become a churning sea of hate and murder. They stabbed and hacked at anyone in reach, shouting vile words through torn lips. Amongst the men the daemons moved: black iron blades sizzling as they cut through the press of bodies.

Phobos and his three brothers had pushed into the carnage, hurling the mob back with a torrent of explosions. For a few moments the bloody tide had faltered. Then it had enfolded them like closing jaws.

Phobos's shoulders almost brushed those of his brothers, his eyes flicking from target to target, as he aimed, assessed and fired. His mind was focused solely upon the tactical data, which told him that they could not win. But this wing of the station was close to falling, and if it did the murderous tide would spill past all of their defences. He had made an oath that he would stand against this enemy: that he would not let them pass.

'Nevra, firestorm pattern,' said Phobos calmly. He remembered the hundreds

of oaths he had made over decades of war. He had never failed to honour a single one and he was not going to do so now.

A clutch of Helicon Guard came towards them, eyes white, screaming in rage. There was no sanity left in them, no perception of what they had been, only a lust for death and blood.

‘By His will,’ came Nevra’s stony voiced reply. The missiles shrieked from the Cyclone launcher on his shoulders. The first missile hit, then the second, then the rest, each overlapping blast growing into a shrapnel-laden fireball. For a moment the murderous tide seemed to ebb. Phobos smiled grimly to the inside of his helmet as a black cloud mushroomed up to spread dirty smoke and yellow tongues across the ceiling far above. The floor shook and his armour whined as it compensated.

They came out of the fire in a wave of serrated blades and howling faces marked with jagged cuts. Men ran amongst the daemons, their flesh charring as they danced in the flames, howling triumph into the torched air.

‘Close formation,’ said Phobos. His brothers closed on him, shoulder to shoulder, a white armoured diamond amongst the slaughter. ‘Fire on all targets,’ he shouted, his storm bolter already roaring as the tide closed over them.

It was close now. Alarms blared as it walked down the passage through pulsing red light. Clusters of flesh-born in red and ochre uniform rushed past. It could taste the fear in their thoughts. The children of slaughter had begun their work. Perhaps they would succeed, but it doubted they would; they were so unsubtle, only useful in creating terror and spilling blood. It had masqueraded as such beings many times, had mimicked their blink-quick reactions and their death thirst. It understood them from within and without. They would kill and glory in their massacre, but powerful enemies stood against them: the strongest of the flesh-born, the Space Marines. They had the strength to perhaps stand even against the Taker of Skulls’ children. But whether their attack succeeded or not was no matter. Within its multi-faceted mind it smiled. Fear and confusion filled the station and that made the fulfilment of its bargain all the easier. As it had intended.

The hurrying flesh-born passed, paying it no attention. It had chosen this face carefully. The person it had stolen it from was a functionary of modest authority, not high enough to draw too much attention, not so lowly that anyone would question that it walked alone against the flow of movement. It was its third face since it had entered the station, and it hoped that it would need no more.

Turning into an arched door off the main passage it raised a cipher talisman to a sensor panel. A heavy blast door peeled back into the oily walls. It had taken the talisman from the owner of the face it wore. Functioning technology was one of the few things it could not imitate. The passage beyond was quiet and bathed in cold light. It could feel the presence of what it sought. It was close, so close now. Behind it, the armoured door ground shut as it walked into the electric twilight.

‘Phobos?’ Cyrus said in his ear.

Phobos sent a burst of shells into the face of a creature of glistening muscle. He saw movement out of the corner of his eye as a blow flicked towards his shoulder. He brought his sword around to meet it. The power field crackled and spat sparks as it met a blade of smoking black iron.

‘Yes, Brother-Librarian,’ said Phobos, voice straining, muscles and armour bunching as he forced against the inhuman strength of the creature. It opened its mouth and its pink tongue tasted the air. He brought the muzzles of this storm bolter up under the creature’s face and fired.

‘We are almost with you. Hold, brother, for the primarch, hold,’ said Cyrus, his voice distorted by static.

Phobos heard his storm bolter dry cycle as the last round spat from its muzzle. At his back there was a pillar of black stone the width of a battle tank. To his left Nevra was firing short bursts, the Cyclone launcher on his back empty, the teeth of his chainfist thick with viscera. To his right Valens stood, blood streaming from the mangled mass of his helmet; the stump of his severed gun arm dribbled blackening liquid onto the floor. It was barely credible that the veteran still stood let alone fought.

They had driven into the horde of daemons and crazed Helicon Guard, they had thrown dozens back into the immaterium, but it was not enough. Out across the vaulted chamber the horde grew, seeming to swell even as they cut it down. They had lost Gratian, his armour split from helm to gut by a shrieking blade. The enemy had forced them back until they were three figures in gore-painted white, their backs against the pillar. They were too few and the enemy too many. The fourth wing of the station was about to fall.

Phobos met a downward cut at his face, let it whistle past him as he flicked his sword around, slicing a figure from shoulder to hip. Another leapt into the space left by the collapsing body. To his right Nevra’s gun went silent.

‘No, brother,’ said Phobos, his voice low and calm. ‘The enemy will break



through before you reach us. Our oaths will not be kept.'

There was a second of silence, and then Cyrus's voice came back. 'I hear.' There was an edge to his voice.

To Phobos's left Valens staggered, his knee crashing to the ground, splintering marble, blood seeping from rents in his armour. Valens brought his power fist up to meet a black sword in a fountain of sparks.

'You know what must be done, brother,' said Phobos. 'I have failed and now there is only one price to pay for victory.' There was a pause. Phobos could almost see his brother weighing-up what Phobos meant, the implication of his words. 'It was what we were made to do; it is our fate.'

'As you will it,' said Cyrus.

Phobos felt a sharp impact across his right shoulder as ceramite splintered under warp-forged iron.

'I go to the ancestors,' said Valens from beside Phobos, the words a wet gurgle in his throat. They were the words of lament and passing spoken for the dead who could not speak for themselves. The words reminded Phobos of the smoke of funeral pyres trailing across the blue skies of Sabatine.

Phobos stabbed at a creature in front of him. He smiled grimly.

'I go to the ancestors,' repeated Phobos, and the voices of Valens and Nevra rose in broken chorus.

'As they are the past, so shall I be.'

Phobos dropped his storm bolter, hand lunging forwards to grasp a creature's twisting horns.

'As I am, so shall all be.' The words of the three Terminators echoed across the vox.

Phobos brought the edge of his sword up under the creature's neck in a sawing sweep that scattered drops of burning blood into the air. Throwing the severed daemon's head at its kin, he lunged at them.

'I am the dead and I will pass through the gates of my ancestors.'

Outside the station the macro cannon and lances of the *Aethon* began to rotate. Plasma flushed into reactors and energy wells, the fury of suns snarling in its shackles.

Phobos could see Valens beaten down at the edge of his sight, lifeblood trailing from his arm as he tried to raise it.

A blow struck Phobos's helmet, carving through into his face and eye. Blind, he rammed his weight forwards and brought his sword around like a scythe, feeling it bite through flesh and bone. He reached up and pulled the helmet from

the ruin of his face. The daemon tide stood before him.

‘I go to the ancestors!’ he shouted, and the world suddenly filled with bright light.

The beams of energy from the *Aethon* hit the fourth wing of the station a third of the way down its length. The lance strike cut the section from station like a limb from a corpse. The rest of the station shuddered as if in pain. Venting molten debris and burning air, the wing fell away taking the four lost White Consuls to their ancestors. An instant later macro cannon shells hit the severed section and it became a brief blaze of light smeared against the black void.

There were five Space Marines between it and its objective. They wore white armour and blank-faced helmets with red eyes. It had anticipated that they might be a last obstacle to it fulfilling its bargain. Having anticipated them, it was ready.

It came round the corner wearing a new face, the face of a tech-adept long dead and reduced to ash in a dark corridor. The five stood around a sealed blast door covered in strips of parchment attached with red seals. The final door.

‘Halt,’ said a Space Marine with a red helm, and pointed a weapon at it. The rounded muzzle was venting shimmering gas with a rising hum. The other five Space Marines raised their weapons.

‘I come to do my duty, honoured warriors.’ The face’s voice was a plaintive whine filtered through a mechanical throat. ‘See, I bear the writ of service and this is the appointed hour.’ The weapons aimed at it stayed silent but did not waiver. These were no weak-willed creatures filled with doubt and fear. It was within a few paces now. It could feel the decision to fire forming in their minds. *Vetranio*: that was the leader’s name. It took a step forwards and changed its shape.

Its new shape was faster, much faster. It was on *Vetranio* in a single bound, bone claws the size of scythe blades punching through his eye pieces. It changed again, its shape becoming that of the dead Space Marine. It plucked the gun from *Vetranio*’s dead fingers as he fell. It turned, shooting a stream of energy into the heads of two of the Space Marines. Two remained. They fired at the same instant. It felt something that it understood as pain.

It dropped the weapon and changed its form into a boiling mass of flesh and half-formed faces. Blue fire burned from its eyes and along its limbs. Explosive rounds hit it and it felt chunks rip from its unreal flesh. It leapt at the two Space Marines, glittering droplets trailing after it. They tried to fight but its touch

cooked them inside their armour.

When the charred armour no longer twitched, it bent down and picked up the weapon it had dropped. Wearing Vetrano's face it turned towards the sealed portal. The layered doors slid open one at a time, and it saw its prize.

Cyrus watched the fires die and bleed off into the void. The command hub of the station was a circular chamber in the neck below the central astropathic chamber. Light from screens on stone daises diluted the gloom. The crew at each dais stared grimly at their readouts and dials, trying not to look as the remains of the severed part of the station cooled to embers on the viewscreen above them. Cyrus could feel the funereal hush around him, the numb disbelief at what had happened, at what he had ordered done. Beside him Rihat stood at attention, his thin face grey.

Cyrus had come here as soon as he had given the *Aethon* the order to sever the overwhelmed wing from the station. The rest of the White Consuls were in position ready to respond if another attack should come. He, though, had to see it for himself. On the screen the fading explosions were a red-hued ripple in the sickly haze of colour and substance that hung over the station. Looking at the fading after-image he felt empty, unreal, as if he had looked into a mirror and seen someone else looking back at him.

It was the only way, he thought. If he had not ordered the *Aethon* to destroy what was already lost then the rest of the defences would have fallen soon after. It had been necessary, the kind of choice that had angered him when he had seen its results in the ashen wastes of Kataris. He was the executioner this time; his choices had committed his brothers, and hundreds of others, to oblivion.

'Enough,' he said softly. 'Cut the view-feed.' Rihat motioned and the viewscreen flicked to flowing green readouts of the station's systems.

'Do you have any further orders, lord?' said Rihat, looking up at him with stiff formality.

'No, colonel commander. Not at present.' He nodded as Rihat saluted and stalked away, brittle formality overlaying anger and disbelief. Cyrus could not fault his response.

Almost involuntarily Cyrus took the milled disc of the holo-projector out of a pouch. It held the message that had drawn him here, the message that no one had sent. It sat on the palm of his gauntlet for a second, then the cone of green light sprung up from its surface. The ghost-green figure of the astropath rotated again in front of his eyes.

‘...report... Claros... the enemy beyond...’

This broken stream of words had brought him here, it had placed him here. He had watched and listened to these words so often that he heard his memory speak them as much as he heard the recording.

‘...lies... Fateweaver.... we were blinded... failing...’

Something about the signal had troubled him since he first reviewed it. Somehow it felt familiar, almost as if he had heard it long ago.

‘Soul... that hear this...’

Should he have followed its call? Was it a trick?

‘...send... help...’

But it felt so familiar.

‘*Colophon...*’

His vision snapped into focus, senses suddenly sharp. The image continued to rotate and speak through its familiar loop.

‘... accursed eternity.’ The image blinked and began its loop again. Cyrus watched it, his ears straining for the word that he was sure he had heard. It did not occur again. He cycled through the signal but it was as it had always been, a broken string of words spaced with patches of distortion. Had his mind filled a space with a stray thought? He clicked off the projection, looking around at the command chamber without seeing. If he had somehow heard an extra portion of the signal that was not there before, what did it mean?

Colophon. He had not seen the senior astropath for hours. The old man was attending to the recovery of the remaining astropaths in his charge. A stray word heard in a signal sent by no one; could it mean that Colophon would send the signal? That it was a plea from a point in time not yet reached?

Face set into a stone-hard expression, Cyrus strode from the command chamber. A new question had begun to coil around his thoughts like a poisonous snake: what else could the word *Colophon* in a signal from the future imply?

It stood and looked up at the pillar, watching the power crackle over its black surface and stir the strips of parchment. The thing was abhorrent; even being this close made the skin of its stolen flesh crawl. The space around the pillar was filled with eddies of power that tugged at its substance. The pillar projected a veil far out from this chamber, enclosing this place and keeping its kind away from the prey they sought, the prey that they had hunted across worlds and through time. It had seen veils of this kind before, enclosing the ships of the flesh-born as they hurried through the warp. Like riptides woven into a spun

glass curtain, they kept those ships safe. That was until they failed. With the veil around this place gone the rest of its kind could reach their prey. There would be much slaughter among the flesh-born.

For a second it considered whether to keep to its bargain. It would gain much, that was true. An endless amount of possibilities and favours would be its to claim, and bargains with the greater kind were difficult to break. But it was a creature of lies and the delight of the unexpected change was delicious. If it left here now the energies sustaining its kin would eventually dissipate in the poisonous nature of the flesh-world. This place would stand. The flesh-kin would endure. The blind prey hiding amongst them would survive and rise from its weakness again. And what then? What possibilities would there be then, what endless unforeseen new permutations and changes to fate?

Slowly, it raised the weapon taken from the warrior whose face it wore, the glowing ribs along the weapon's back brightening as if sensing its intent.

But, it thought, a bargain was a bargain.

The whine from the weapon rose in pitch until it was a shrill of barely restrained power. It grinned with its stolen face and squeezed the trigger. A bolt of sun-bright light speared from the weapon. The bolt of energy struck the pillar and liquefied the workings at its core.

For a second the pillar quivered, the power it had projected around the station snapping, its tethers broken. It cracked with a sound of shearing iron. Balls of lightning formed and collapsed around the pillar's surface. Parchments charred to black scraps that fell amongst a deluge of sparks. Then it exploded in a wave of brilliant light.

By the time the Geller field generator, exploded the being some called the Changeling had long vanished, discarding its last face without a thought.

For a few minutes no one on Claros station realised what had happened. In the sheltered passages people continued to talk, mumbling worries to each other, stirring food over the flickering heat of chemical burners, and laughing at grim jokes. Behind barricades the Helicon Guard watched and waited as they had for hours, muscles cramping from not moving, wondering when they would be able to sleep. The armour-clad White Consuls stood in a scattered selection of passages, their minds calm, waiting for the next attack to pull them from inaction. In a lightless chamber Colophon sat immobile, the remaining astropaths ringing him in silence.

In the half-lit gloom of the command chamber Colonel Rihat turned away

from the disappearing back of the Librarian. For a moment he had thought he had seen a flicker of emotion in Cyrus's eye, a glimmer beneath cold dark water. He had heard stories of the Adeptus Astartes, that they were mankind's final shield, made by the Emperor at the dawn of the Imperium. He had seen the truth of the stories, seen that those words could never approach the truth. He realised he had not understood them, that he could never understand them.

The shout snapped his head around, his thoughts vanishing at the terror in the voice. 'The Geller field!' The officer looked at Rihat, eyes wide. Crimson runes began to flicker across control surfaces, angry red spreading around the chamber, parchment readouts spewing from the fingers of data servitors. 'It's gone!'

Rihat's first thought was to ask why, but as the icy reality filled him he knew it was a useless question. The truth was blaring at him from every corner of the chamber. Their greatest defence had fallen and the enemy would be coming.

'Arm yourselves,' he shouted and drew his pistol. Alarm sirens began to sound a moment later.

The warp found the genatorium chamber in the seconds after the field failed. Blackened cylinders the height of hab blocks filled its floor. Each was a low-yield plasma generator that fed power to the station's central hub. The machines had functioned for millennia, beating with a steady pulse, holding at their hearts the power of suns. Servitors and engineers moved through the chamber, murmuring machine code and shaking blessed oil over their beloved machines. The first sign that something was wrong was a blurt of angry code from a monitor servitor. The engineers moved to see what had troubled the spirits of their machines. Before they could take more than a step warning sirens filled the air. Runes indicating system failures flashed on control panels. Data parchment spooled onto the floor. The engineers began to run for their control systems.

There was a shriek of shearing metal. Steam poured into the chamber as pipes ruptured. The engineers and servitors close to the generators vanished in a wash of venting coolant. Across the station lights flickered and dimmed.

A generator burst, glowing fuel breaking through its layered metallic shell. Molten metal flowed like wax onto the chamber floor. Jagged-edged fragments of debris spun through the air. The remains of the broken machine began to judder, its wreckage twisting and writhing. Wires and cables coiled, bonding to mangled plates. Pistons snapped together into gigantic limbs. Warp flame flowed from component to component as something aware and alive pulled itself from the reshaping wreckage. It had a scorpion body of machine parts and a torso of

smoking flesh the colour of cooling iron. A long head crowned by spear-like horns pushed itself from its shoulders. It reared up, raising piston-driven arms, roaring at the glory of its birth.

A second generator exploded, the being within it spinning a form from the ruin of its machine womb. The first born did not wait for its kin, but stalked to the chamber's sealed blast door, claws clenching in anticipation. The door was forged of plasteel and layered adamantium, over two metres thick and eight metres tall. The creature paused for a second and then began to gouge through the armoured door, its eyes alight behind a mask of scorched bronze.

Cyrus moved down the central passage at a run. Close behind him Valerian's Devastators followed with the remains of Galba's Vanguard squad. All thoughts of the signal and Colophon had passed from his mind. The Geller field was down and warp entities were breaking through into reality across the station. A dozen desperate fights outlined in snatches of panicked vox traffic scrolled across his helmet display.

'Rihat,' he said, the vox chatter dimming as he linked to the colonel commander. 'This is Cyrus, I am showing massive internal damage data from the secondary plasma generator cluster.'

'Yes, Epistolary. Confirmed: we are seeing the same. Significant power loss and multiple bulkhead breaches moving along the primary access passage.'

'We are moving to the blast door junction on the lower mechanical levels. Whatever is coming down that tunnel, we will meet it there. Order all units in the vicinity to that position.'

'So ordered. I will join you.'

The passage they moved along curved to meet the junction following the circle of the central hub. Ahead, Cyrus could see a cruciform of four passage openings, each many times his height. Arched doors filled a single passage opening. The doors' surface was worked in brass relief with images of vast machines. At the doors' centre was the cog-haloed skull of the Adeptus Mechanicus. Beyond the blast door a broad passage spiralled into the centre of the station where the red-robed tech-priests kept the mechanical heart of the station beating. In that heart something had spawned after the Geller field failed.

A wide semi-circular killing ground was forming in front of the closed doors. In the archways of the other doors Helicon Guard were setting up auto cannons, lifting drum feeds of fat rounds to meet the waiting breeches. Some with the black shoulder guards of unit officers were yelling at Guardsmen to form firing

lines.

Cyrus reached the junction as the first blow hit the doors from the inside. They rang like a gong. All other sound died. Men and women looked up from their weapons, eyes fixed on the door, listening to the sound of the blow fade. Cyrus turned to face the door. To his side the four brothers of Galba's Vanguard squad spread out, the motors of their chainblades growling. Valerian hurried his squad back amongst the Helicon Guard, their bulky heavy weapons tracking to cover the doors as they moved.

'Epistolary, my command is nearly at your position,' Rihat's breathless voice crackled over the vox. Cyrus could tell that the man was running.

A second blow hit the doors. Dust trickled from the brass reliefs. The doors glowed red, a heat haze shimmering in front of them.

Cyrus had opened his mouth to reply to Rihat when the third blow struck. The doors burst apart. A vast shape pulled itself through the molten breach. Cyrus had an impression of eyes burning with a furnace heat above a taurian form fused with jagged spider legs. He felt dizzy, the presence and power of the beast beating on his mind like a forge hammer.

The beast roared, its breath a burning gush of vapour. Lines of tracer leapt to meet it, biting into its skin, scoring lines in its metal plating. Cyrus could hear Guardsmen shouting as they fired, terror mixed with defiance in a stream of expletives.

The creature stood for an instant as rounds and energy bolts sparked off its hide. Then it ran forward towards Cyrus and the first line of Guardsmen. It was fast – insect fast – its claws sparking on the deck, piston arms raised above its horned head.

Cyrus threw himself sideways. He hit the floor, the deck plates buckling beneath his weight. The Guardsmen in the first line were not so fast. The beast rammed through the line of bodies, its bladed forelimbs punching through meat and bone, iron fists pistoning down to mash and sever.

Cyrus was on his feet in time to see a second beast pull itself from the ruin of the doors. It looked on the scene with black eyes, a circular mouth of translucent teeth pulsing as if in hunger. Its flesh was a mottled red, the muscles of its arms fused with serrated splits of metal the height of a man. It gave a booming cry and followed its kin into the growing circle of slaughter.

The Helicon Guard lines fragmented, some holding, some running to die in the beasts' flesh-stripping breath. Cyrus took the scene in a glance, as he drew his force sword, blue fire licking its edge. This was no planned engagement; it



was a bloody scramble against terror. Their opportunities to change the battle were like water spilling through their fingers. The two iron beasts were advancing side by side, vomiting warp fire onto those they did not rip apart. There was no sign of Rihat or his reinforcements.

‘We must split them.’ Cyrus said across the vox, charging towards the nearest creature. ‘Valerian, I will draw one to you. Fire once one is isolated. Brothers of Galba, take the legs.’

‘By your will, brother,’ Valerian growled in acknowledgement.

Beside him, Cyrus sensed the four remaining Vanguard of Galba’s squad follow him. The back of one of the beasts was twenty paces away. He could see the pale cartilage of its spine projecting from the slick sinew of its back. He pulled power into his mind, rolling it around, letting it gather hate from his psyche. He stopped ten paces from the beast. The four Vanguard sprinted past him, their death laments crackling through the vox.

He released a part of the power gathered in his mind, sending it out in front of him in an etheric shout of challenge. The beast paused, ragged blade edges dripping red, and turned to look at him. Cyrus looked into its black eyes as they reflected the light of gunfire, and raised his open palm. The beast charged.

This is not what I have seen, thought Cyrus, the thought a whisper in the cyclone of power in his mind. It will not end now.

Five paces away the beast reared, its back legs driving it on as its arms and forelimbs rose ready to bring its blades down on Cyrus. He let the power go. Power arced from his palm and flowed across the beast’s flesh and iron hide. It staggered, forelegs crashing down to scabble on the floor. Cyrus felt his mind digging into the machinery of the creature’s body, hate and spite writhing through its components, fusing joints and stopping gears. The beast staggered. Cyrus could feel its power gathering to push back at him. He would not be able to hold it back.

The four Vanguard came at the beast’s legs from the sides, chainblades swinging. Motor driven teeth bit into pistons and translucent tendons. Two legs crumpled. A leg whipped up and down, punching a metre-long blade through a Vanguard’s helm and ramming on through his body, pinning it to the floor in a welter of blood.

The beast howled in Cyrus’s mind, shrugging off his psychic shackles. The beast’s body whipped forwards, its jaws closing on the head of a Vanguard with the noise of cracking armour. It lifted the Space Marine off the floor, chewing on

armour and flesh before spitting it out with a gout of flame.

Two more gone to the ancestors, thought Cyrus. Two more gone in as many seconds.

‘Valerian! Now!’ he shouted. The Devastators fired before he had finished the order.

Valerian’s squad carried heavy bolters, suspensor-cradled blocks of oiled machinery that cycled explosive rounds through their breeches in a rolling laugh of thunder. The beast arched back as explosions blistered across its spine, ripping wet shreds from its flesh. Somewhere out in the chaos that filled the junction, a Helicon gunner with more will than fear began to fire. Others followed, sputtering lines of shells and pulses of las-bolts converging on the beast. Armour plates buckled and shredded under the hail of impacts. Yellow ichor bled from the beast’s flesh. It tried to turn, its limbs thrashing as if it was trying to fend off a swarm of insects. It screeched, fire spluttering out with the noise as its legs collapsed. Cyrus was close enough to see the thing’s black eyes as its pulped torso scrabbled amongst the ruin of its metal hide. It gave a final growl of rage and dissolved into wreckage and oozing flesh.

In the centre of the Helicon lines, the remaining beast sensed the end of its kin. It turned, its gaze sweeping across the scene, looking for the cause of its twin’s demise. Its furnace eyes fixed on the seven Space Marines of Valerian’s squad. It ran forwards, chewing men to glistening lumps beneath its strides.

Cyrus was already moving, forcing his way through the press of half-panicked Helicon Guard. He could feel the beast’s rage drawing power from the warp as it ground a charnel path towards the Devastators. It was shredding reality in its wake. Half-formed daemons coalesced around its legs, like lesser fish drawn to the bloody kill of a shark. They were slug-like things, congealed out of split corpses, eyes wobbling in suppurating flesh. More of the Helicons began to run.

Valerian stood his ground with his brothers beside him. He was bare-headed, his bolter loose in his hands, controlled fury curling his lip. Unlike many of his brothers, he was unscarred by his century of war, his sculptural features of Sabatine nobility unmarked. He raised his bolter, its barrel scorched by firing, smoke still coiling from its mouth. The beast raised its arm. Pipes jutted from its flesh, forming an irregular fist of tubes bound together by muscle. The beast sent a stream of molten rounds at the Devastators. One of the rounds found the helmet of a White Consul and punched him off his feet in puff of blood and liquefied ceramite. The rest of the squad did not flinch. Valerian waited for the

target lock tone to steady, for the range to be optimal. The beast took another step.

‘Fire,’ said Valerian, and beside him the thunder of heavy bolter fire poured out towards the beast. It slowed for a moment, then crossed its arms over its head and torso, thick plates and blades overlapping to create a shield. It strode on into the storm.

Cyrus pushed aside a Guardsman. The space around the beast boiled with daemon kind. Creatures formed of a boiling mass of tentacles and rotting flesh enveloped Guardsmen in acid embraces. The fire from the remaining Guardsmen had dropped to nothing: many were running, more were dead.

Cyrus raised his sword. The price he had paid for the power he wielded was a dull ache in his mind. A daemon creature made of boils and yellow tumours turned a slit eye on him. He stepped forwards.

Would this be it? Was this the moment he had seen?

Flames suddenly gushed through the daemons. Thick, oily fire crawled over rotting flesh, melting fat from rotting bones. Las-bolts punched into the dissolving forms in disciplined volleys.

‘Lord Cyrus,’ Rihat’s voice crackled through the vox. Cyrus looked around to see the colonel commander striding forwards flanked by lines of bronze-armoured figures in black-visored helms. Red smears and soot covered Rihat’s face. His right arm hung loose at his side, the sleeve wet and dark. But there was a defiant look in his eye, and in front of him the flamer units burned their way through the daemon spawn. Creatures with too many limbs and eyes tried to pull themselves forwards even as they collapsed into cinders and smoke.

Cyrus realised that the stuttering roar of heavy bolters had vanished. He turned, looking back to where Valerian’s squad had stood. Flames filled his vision, spreading across the junction floor. Beyond the fire the beast lifted a ruin of bloody meat and white fragments in an iron claw. Cyrus began to run through the flames, purity seals burning, armour blackening. His helmet vision darkened, compensating for the brightness of the fire, objects and movements becoming a series of coloured runes overlaying shifting shadows. The beast’s movements were a bladed blur overlaid with a green grid of lines.

The three remaining Devastators backed off, weapons fire spitting up at the beast as it advanced. Cyrus came out of the flames, the world snapping back to brightness. He saw Valerian twist the priming handle of a melta charge, and duck a scything blade. He reached for the beast’s armoured thorax. The beast reached down, piston jaws flicking shut, as it yanked the sergeant from the ground. It

brought the dying Space Marine level with its furnace eyes. Valerian's hand closed on the detonator with the last of his strength. A sun-bright sphere swallowed the sergeant and the beast's arm with a shriek of super-heated air. The beast rocked back, a cry like grating steel splitting the air.

Cyrus took his last strides, muscles and armour straining, his mind pulling power through him in a raw rush. He realised he was shouting; the names of his fallen brothers, of the dead worlds and lost wars, pouring from his lips. The beast sensed him, turned, blades scything downwards. Cyrus struck.

The blow buried the sword to the hilt in oil-black flesh. Inky liquid gushed from the wound. It stank of promethium and decay. A soul-born rage poured from Cyrus into the blade. All he could feel was the tide rolling through him, the anger of his soul given form by the warp. He felt...

*... blood dripping from his armour as he walks through a familiar door...*

*A thing with the head of a vulture is laughing. The sound is like a murder of crows....*

*An astropath turns in a cone of green light. The astropath is laughing. It has two faces...*

*He is fading to nothing...*

Cyrus awoke to fading screams and dimming fires. He lay amongst the ruin of his enemy, the warped machinery draped with tatters of oily flesh that were slowly dissolving to a sickly sheen. His hand still clasped his sword, its edge glimmering with a fading echo of power.

Pulling himself to his feet he felt the fever-ache of the psychic power he had channelled. Every movement brought a dull stab of pain. He looked around, his vision filling with threat assessment icons. The dead were thick on the floor and pools of flame cast the scene in a mottled orange light. No threat icons. They had won.

Cyrus saw Rihat approaching. The colonel was limping slightly, his left arm bloody and cradled at his side.

'Victory, colonel,' Cyrus said with a grim smile.

Rihat did not smile back; he looked grey, pain held back by will alone. 'The enemy has broken through in many places. I am not even sure if some of the defences still hold.' He grimaced as pain shot through his face. 'I do not think they have penetrated into the civilian areas. Not yet.'

Cyrus heard the fatalism in the colonel's voice. 'We will hold, colonel. We will hold no matter the cost.' A surprised look passed across Rihat's face, as if he

had puzzled out a hidden truth. He opened his mouth to speak. He did not get the chance.

The voice spoke inside their skulls. *‘By the power and grace of the God-Emperor of Mankind, and the authority and majesty of His Holy Inquisition, judgement is proclaimed on this place and on all souls within its bounds.’*

It was a single psychic voice made of many telepathic minds all transmitting the same message. It echoed through the warp with such force that it filled the mind of every person on Claros station. It was an announcement of judgement, a herald of intent.

*‘All are judged lost and the hammer will so fall. Exterminatus is here declared. May the Emperor have mercy on all true souls.’*

The voices faded. Rihat looked at Cyrus, fear and confusion playing across his face. Cyrus staggered as a wave of psychic energy hit. It was the bow wave of a fleet punching back from the warp into reality with hammer-blow force.

Around them shocked silence was breaking into blind panic.

*No.* Cyrus would not let everything be consumed by the Inquisition’s judgement. Not again, not after the price they had already paid. He turned to Rihat, ordering the last two of Valerian’s squad to his side with a gesture. ‘The Inquisition is here. Their ships will take some time to get within firing range. Get as many people as you can to the *Aethon*. We will break dock and outrun the Exterminatus.’ He gave a ferocious grin. ‘They can try and stop us but we still have teeth.’

Rihat was frowning. ‘Colonel?’ Cyrus said.

Rihat looked up at him. ‘The Inquisition knew that this place was under attack. But how? You and Colophon said that no messages could be sent?’

Cyrus suddenly felt cold. He thought of his visions, of the sensation of a future growing closer, a vision of an astropath turning in green light. An astropath with two faces. ‘Where is Colophon?’ he growled.

‘I do not know, lord,’ shrugged Rihat.

Cyrus nodded, his eyes focused on nothing, his mind racing. *Colophon*: the word he had thought he had heard in the signal. He felt as if all the threads of choices and half-glimpsed futures were weaving together, tightening into single strand. He looked back at Rihat and his last two brother Space Marines. ‘The station is lost. Evacuate everyone you can, if I do not return you have command.’

Rihat turned and began to shout orders as Cyrus strode away. He knew where he would find what he needed, where fate was leading him.

‘Where are you going, lord?’ called Rihat.

‘For answers,’ growled Cyrus to himself.

There were nine ships. Five destroyers rode on bright cones of fire ahead of their greater sisters. Behind the destroyers were two Adeptus Astartes strike cruisers, their crenellated hulls coloured and marked with the deep sea blue of the Star Dragons. Beside them the spear-sleek hull of a Dauntless-class cruiser sliced through the void. At the centre of them all was a vast craft of black metal, its hull capped with towers, its prow a golden point of swept eagle wings. At its birth it had been named for a hero of a lost past; reconsecrated in the service of the Inquisition it bore a name more suited to its task. *The Sixth Hammer* was an executioner, a slayer of worlds. One day it might return to the fleet from which it had been drawn, but at that moment it served the will of the man who watched Claros station grow nearer from its bridge.

Inquisitor Lord Xerxes watched the magnified view of Claros station on a vast holoscreen suspended in front of his throne. The view was stripped bare of tactical data and information icons. He did not need them, nor did he trust artificial aids to judgement. Judgement was a matter of clear-sightedness, something to be decided with the simplest tools and senses available to mankind. On the screen the warp-rift was a wound leaking swirling colours and tendrils of coiling energy. The station, or what remained of it, crawled with writhing ghost light. There was no hope for it, there never had been.

Xerxes turned the slot eyes of his iron face to the two figures that stood to his left. One wore segmented armour lacquered in arterial red over a powerful frame, his face hidden by a black cloth hood. The other was a spindle-thin form of clicking brass joints and desiccated flesh held together by bundles of tubes. The spindle figure wore no mask because it had no real face. Both were inquisitors, the only remaining two of the cell Xerxes had drawn around him. They had lost two of their number, one to the *Accursed Eternity*, another to folly, but their resolve had never wavered. They had hunted the creature called Fateweaver across the stars, executing the planets the daemon invaded, seeking for a way to cast it back into the warp for another aeon. Where they found the daemon they burned the ground from under it. They were the left hand of the Emperor and it was their duty as much as it was their right.

‘The judgement has been spoken?’ asked Xerxes, his flat voice coming from the horizontal slot in his mask.

‘Yes,’ said the spindle-bodied inquisitor in a mechanical voice. ‘The astropathic choir has transmitted it across the void. Any still alive on the station

will know that judgement will be done.’

Xerxes nodded. ‘When we are in range the rest of the fleet is to begin the attack. Nothing is to be left for the warp.’ He looked back to where the station’s bronze hull writhed in the warp’s grasp. ‘Nothing but ashes and silence.’

‘Astropath.’

The word echoed in the empty silence of the astropathic chamber. The hunched figure in green turned his blind face to follow the fading noise as it reflected from the empty stone tiers.

‘Cyrus? That is you, isn’t it, my friend?’ Colophon’s voice added its own echoes to the empty gloom. The astropathic chamber lay at the heart of the station, a sanctuary as far from the advancing daemon forces as was possible. It was deserted, quiet, and dark. What need did the blind have for light?

Cyrus moved out of the shadowed arch of the entrance, armour purring with every movement. He had his storm bolter in his right fist, its twin mouths pointed at the hunchbacked old man. The blue surface of his armour was charred and streaked with drying fluids. He looked like a revenant dragged from a death pyre.

‘It is Cyrus.’ The Librarian’s voice was a low growl. Colophon twitched towards him, his liver-spotted hands clutching the top of his cane. Bathed in the monochrome tint of Cyrus’s helmet display he looked scared. No, he looked terrified.

‘The Inquisition is coming,’ Colophon stammered. ‘They will hammer this place to nothing and all of us with it. We should g—’

‘Why did you deceive me?’ Cyrus kept his distance from the old man, walking a slow circle around Colophon’s green-robed form. The single targeting rune in his helmet display was an unresolved amber, pulsing over the old man.

‘I have not deceived you.’ Colophon stayed where he was, speaking to the air rather than following Cyrus’s movements. Cyrus carried on, discarding Colophon’s reply without thought.

‘The signal, it has been puzzling me ever since we got here. How could it be sent when we were cut off as soon as the attack began? I am not as adept as you at astropathic transmission, but I touched the warp and felt that we were isolated as you said.’

Colophon drew his green robes around him as if against a chill wind. ‘I don’t understand what you are saying.’ He shook his head and took a few steps towards the door of the chamber. ‘We should go. We could escape on your ship,

we—’

‘But the signal did get sent. It drew me here, drew the Inquisition here no doubt.’ Cyrus gave a humourless laugh. ‘Temporal distortion; you suggested it to me, and I did not consider an alternative.’ The old man opened his mouth as if to say something, but Cyrus kept speaking, suspicion and anger making his voice a low rumble of restrained threat. ‘You sent the signal, Colophon. You brought me here, and you have brought the final execution of the Inquisition down on this place.’

Colophon shook his head, shock and anger on his face.

‘You are mad, my friend,’ Colophon spluttered. ‘You do not—’

‘But how could you veil the warp with pain that even I could feel? And why would you lure people here like playing pieces only to destroy them?’ Cyrus drew his sword. ‘There is one creature that could do such things, that could watch from within while its kin came from beyond...’

Colophon flinched back as the sword kindled with cold light. ‘I am—’

‘A creature that could seem to be flesh and blood.’ Cyrus felt the weight of the sword in his hand, its power icy in echo of his fury. ‘Tell me, *astropath*, if I cut you, how will you bleed?’

‘I...’

‘Fateweaver.’ Cyrus said the name and Colophon flinched as if struck. Inside Cyrus’s helm the threat rune turned red. He took a step forwards, his voice a low rumble of menace. ‘Is that a name you recognise?’

‘I am only an *astropath*,’ wailed Colophon.

Cyrus thought of all the worlds that had been dragged down into the mire of the warp, of the pyre smell of dead Kataris. He felt a fool, he had been manipulated. His visions and his ideals had been turned against him. He did not know why a daemon would play such a game; he did not want to know. The creature in front of him was alone and bound in human flesh that he could destroy. His finger began to squeeze on the storm bolter trigger; his sword glowed brighter in his hand.

His finger froze on the trigger. He could not move his limbs, sweat prickled his skin and he could feel the crystals of his psychic hood become ice-cold as they fought against the psychic power that held him. It had enveloped him so quickly that he had not even sensed its touch.

‘You truly are a fool, Space Marine.’ The voice came from behind him, the contempt in its tone ringing clear in the still air.

‘I am sorry,’ said Colophon, the lie spread across his face in a smile. Cyrus



heard steps and the clicking of a staff draw nearer. He tried to call on his own power, but the influence focused on him was like a flexing coil that shifted and tightened even as he pushed against it.

‘He is not the daemon you call Fateweaver, at least not wholly,’ said the mocking voice, now just behind his back. The willow-thin form of Hekate stepped out in front of him. Her eyes glittered brightly and the winged jewel in her staff pulsed with cold radiance. She stood beside Colophon, the old man appearing all the more bent and vulture-like by her side. ‘The daemon has two heads, Space Marine,’ she said, and smiled.

Cyrus felt as if he was falling, assumptions and truths trailing behind him in tatters.

Colophon was shaking his head as if in sorrow, the wrinkled folds of his thin neck trembling. ‘It will be all right, friend,’ the astropath said, and Cyrus felt the complete falsity in the words.

Hekate blinked slowly and walked closer to Cyrus so that she could look up at him.

‘You will die soon, Space Marine.’ She nodded carefully. ‘But first you must come and see.’ She smiled and the world spun into fragments.

Cyrus was falling, disconnected sensations flicking through him: the taste of spiced wine; the brush of a feather on skin; pain; the face of his father, hollow and broken; the reek of corpses; colours flowing without form or pattern; the sound of the sea throwing stones at a cliff. All surfaced and faded faster than he could grasp. He wanted to cry out but he had no mouth.

The world flickered into being around him.

He sat on the top of a parapet of warm stone under a sky of clear blue. Looking down he saw a tower wall that descended to a settlement. The low dun stone buildings clustered around the tower’s base like young suckling at a mother. Smoke rose from chimneys, scented with flavours of cooking meat and spice. Beyond the frayed edges of the settlement a plain stretched to the sky’s base, its surface rippling as a warm wind stirred the green sea of crops.

The sun was warm on his face, the fabric of a white and blue tunic soft against his skin. He clenched his fist, felt the muscles and bones bunch.

‘Quite real,’ said a voice next to him, and he looked up with a start. Ochre robes swathed the figure that sat next to him, its hunched form hidden by the fabric that stirred and twitched in the wind. Within the shadow of the hood Cyrus thought he saw glimmers of blue, like distant stars in a night sky. For a moment

he thought of pitching the robed figure from the parapet, of watching it fall to a pulped ruin on the ground below.

He looked at the hooded figure and shook his head. ‘Which head speaks? The one that tells the truth or the one that lies?’

The robed figure chuckled. ‘Very good, Space Marine. You begin to perceive truly. A little late it is true but—’

‘Where have you brought me, daemon? I will not bend my knee to your kind.’

The figure laughed. To Cyrus it sounded like the cry of carrion birds across a dead land.

‘I am not here to corrupt you, Space Marine. I have claimed greater souls than yours, and you flatter yourself to think that you could resist if I tried. Corruption is not my intent. I am here to illuminate you, so that you can understand what has happened and what has led you to where you are.’

‘Why?’ he growled.

‘Does a friend and fellow traveller need a reason to grant a gift? A last gift.’

Cyrus thought he could hear the tones of Colophon’s voice in the words.

The figure raised a wide, yellow sleeve as a limb with too many joints extended to point down into the town with a taloned finger. ‘Look,’ it said.

Cyrus looked. Amongst the figures moving through the streets, two walked next to each other. One was a tall woman wrapped in dark cloths, a sour expression on her face. Beside her, a man with a bent back limped to keep up, a worn wooden pole clutched in his wrinkled hands.

‘You,’ said Cyrus.

‘Yes, my two faces.’

‘Where is this place?’

‘When, might be a better question. You know it, though you may not recognise it.’ Cyrus felt suddenly cold despite the sun.

‘Kataris,’ breathed Cyrus.

Beside him the figure gave a clicking laugh. ‘Very good.’ It pointed to the clear sky. ‘Watch.’

A crack opened in the sky. Its edges were silver-white and within it was black. The sky darkened, purple and red clouds spreading like a bruise across pale skin. In the town below, people had begun to look up and the screaming started. Amongst the panic the tall woman and limping man pressed on towards the tower’s base. Out on the plains, fires had begun to kindle and, amongst the smoke, shapes slithered and loped towards the settlement. Sirens began to wail.

‘You caused this,’ Cyrus growled. ‘You summoned your kin to this world and killed it.’

‘Perhaps I caused its extinction. In a broad sense that might be true.’ The figure paused. ‘But I did not summon my kin here. Not intentionally at least.’ It turned its hooded head, the shadowed face twisting further than a neck should allow. ‘See.’

Cyrus turned, realising that it had never occurred to him to look behind them.

It was not a tower they sat on; it was a landing platform. Behind them, the hulls of lighters and heavy lifters baked in the sun. People were already rushing amongst them attaching fuel hoses; the whine of engines was rising to a shriek.

Fights were breaking out amongst those trying to get away. Cyrus saw a man in the robes of a prefect shot in the face when he tried to stop the ramp of a lifter closing. Others were simply battered aside by those that were stronger than them. The man and woman moved amongst the confusion, seemingly unseen by others. Cyrus watched as they ducked into the hold space of a lighter. A moment later it rose into the sky, heading for one of the few ships clustered around the planet. Others followed, the noise of their engines lost amongst the screams of the settlement and the first howls of the daemons.

‘You fled?’ Cyrus looked at the figure beside him.

‘Yes, Space Marine. I fled.’

‘Why?’

‘Because my kin did not come to this pitiful place for the clutch of worthless souls that breathed its air.’ The figure turned its hooded head back to the settlement. Blood was already flowing through its streets. ‘They came for me.’

‘For you?’

‘Yes, for me. I have many enemies amongst my kind. Some are my enemies because I laid them low or humiliated them. And then of course there is jealousy: jealousy of the power I had, jealousy of my favour in the eternal court of change.’ The figure shrugged. ‘We are daemons, fragments of the will of greater beings made of lies and hate. Our grudges are never simple, merely eternal.’ Cyrus saw the implication of what the thing was saying.

‘You were hiding.’

‘Well done, friend,’ said the figure in Colophon’s voice.

‘Why?’ said Cyrus. The world around him faded, its dying screams becoming distant murmurs of horror.

‘That question again,’ came the daemon’s voice from the fading world.

Cyrus could see nothing, He was falling again.

‘Because I am blind, Space Marine,’ said the daemon, its voice becoming faint and distant. Cyrus felt something like feathers brush his skin in the blackness. ‘Because I am blind.’

Cyrus opened his eyes and saw the world of his birth. The daemon stood next to him as he watched the Black Ships come to the skies of his childhood. Its yellow robe fluttered in the wind, the cowl hanging down its hunched back. Its hands clutched the fabric around its tall form, the gesture reminding Cyrus of Colophon pulling his green robes closer around him. It had two heads on long, feathered necks. Each was like the skinless skull of a vulture. Azure blue eyes, without iris or pupil, stared at him from each head.

*‘The past,’ said one head in a voice that sounded like Hekate’s. The other was looking up at the dark silhouettes of the spacecraft drifting in low orbit. ‘Your past, Space Marine. The world that made you before it burned. I can see this because this is the past. These are dead and unchanging moments in the flow of time.’*

*The daemon shivered and the world changed, moving through images like cards dealt from a pack.*

*Here the command chamber of the Aethon, Cyrus watching the shape of an astropath turning in cold green light.*

*Here warships danced amongst lines of fire and spinning debris, their engines roaring as they turned before the ramming prows of spear-shaped warships. They turned too slowly and died, debris dribbling out of their broken hulls.*

*‘The past,’ came the daemon’s voice as Cyrus blinked from one moment to another. ‘All this is past. I am a weaver of fate, an oracle who sees all the paths of the future. That is my power, my advantage over my rivals and the thing that once kept me out of their jealous reach.’*

*Here Phobos, his sword held above him, the death lament on his lips.*

*‘But now I am blind, the future is lost to me. I cannot see past the present. This dead past is all that I can see.’*

*And here Space Marines in blue armour moved through rooms covered in rust brown dust. They have rearing dragons on their shoulder plates.*

But I have seen this, he thinks as he watches. I have seen this and it is not the past. It is the future.

*The daemon continued, ignorant to Cyrus’s realisation.*

*‘While I am blind I cannot stand against my kin and so they hunt me across*

*your worlds.'*

*Cyrus saw something move under the soft layer of dust, like a wave pushed across the surface of water by a shark. A shape is rising from the dust. He shouts but the blue armoured Space Marines do not hear. The shape becomes a figure. It rises from the floor slowly, features forming on its powdered surface. It reaches towards the Space Marines. Cyrus can sense the death hunger of the figure. He shouts again and the mouth of the dust figure moves.*

*You die now, he says with a voice like sand blown on a dry wind. The Space Marines turn to look at him. He is reaching for them.*

*He looks at his hands.*

*They are made of dust.*

*His vision blinked out and Cyrus was falling through swirling starlight and rushing sensation.*

They had returned to the astropathic chamber. Colophon and Hekate stood in front of him.

'You, Cyrus Aurelius,' said Hekate as Colophon nodded. 'I cannot see past you. You are a block in my sight, the point I cannot see past. I never saw you coming here and I cannot see your future now, only your past.'

Cyrus tried to move his limbs but found that they were still locked in place.

'I let you live until now,' Hekate continued. 'You had a purpose in keeping my kin at bay. You might even have won here. But now the Inquisition come and the daemons that hunt me are at my heels, and so I must run and hide again.' She stepped back 'So you must die.'

Hekate turned to walk away, but Colophon paused and smiled up at Cyrus.

'Thank you for the ship that you have so helpfully ordered to run before the Inquisition's fury. It was most kind of you.' He patted Cyrus's unmoving armour and limped after Hekate.

On the highest tier of the chamber silent figures in green robes stepped from the shadows. Warp light shone in their blind eyes. There were eighty-one of them: the survivors of the attack on the astropaths. But he understood then that they had not survived. Those that had resisted had died, those who survived had become bound to Fateweaver. Cyrus could hear a low chattering like the cries of birds and the swish of feathers. Frost was forming under their feet with every step they took down the stone tiers.

'There is one thing you should know before the end, my friend,' called Colophon from the doorway.

'I sent no message,' said Hekate, and both figures vanished from sight.

The astropaths closed on him. Skin flayed from their new forms as the power of the warp reshaped them. Claws extended from hands and feet. Bones snapped and reset in twisted positions. Fur and feathers spread across stretched flesh. Cyrus was at the centre of a circle of snarling creatures.

Cyrus felt the force holding him weaken. Straining with all his will he felt his fingers move on the grip of his sword. His limbs trembled with effort, sweat coating him as he felt muscles shift. Threat runes swarmed his sight.

I have failed, he thinks. This is no longer the future, it is the present. I have failed and here I fall.



### III

## BOUND

The strike cruisers were the first to fire. Linear accelerators mounted along their spines spoke with one voice. Explosions blossomed off the station's void shields, splashing against domes of energy that shimmered as they collapsed. On the strike cruisers' flank the spear shape of the light cruiser turned on its axis, presenting a flank of macro batteries to the station. Bolts of plasma and explosive shells the size of battle tanks streaked across the void.

On board the smaller destroyers officers waited until the station's shield envelope was on the edge of failing. As the blasts rippled over the last layers of shielding they launched torpedoes. Each carried a melta warhead. They were not intended to destroy but to cripple and burn. For the final killing blow they had other more exotic weapons to unleash.

*The Sixth Hammer* remained silent, like a king of old watching his young knights take the first blood. From his brass throne Inquisitor Lord Xerxes watched as the perfectly timed torpedo volley struck the station at the instant the last void shield collapsed. He nodded in brief satisfaction and raised his sceptre, its golden length worked with High Gothic script, its tip a leering daemon face of jade. He had killed many worlds and he preferred the final blows to fall at the simplest of commands.

'Fire,' he said, and *The Sixth Hammer* shook at his word.

Claws raked across Cyrus's armour. Wild psychic energy lashed at him, slithering from clawed hands searching for weaknesses in his armour. Distorted

faces filled his vision biting at him with pointed ivory teeth. He could hear them laughing and babbling in death-dry voices. His arm moved, lifting his storm bolter, dragging upwards as if pulling against tangling webs. Something sharp and serrated found a weak joint in his armour. He began to bleed.

The deck quaked under his feet, trembling as if in time with distant thunder. The Inquisition had begun its bombardment.

Anger rolled through him, anger at his own stupidity. He knew he must fail: he had seen it. These were not new moments, they were past memories of visions being lived for the first time. A thing with a withered face was eye to eye with him, its clawed fingers cradling his helmet, razor tips alive with warp light as they reached for his eye pieces.

I will not fall to this fate! He bellowed the thought and the fallen astropaths fell back from him. He seized the anger that boiled through his mind and ripped free of the force that held him. Power flowed from him, radiating outwards as lightning spilled from his sword's edge. His storm bolter spat, pumping explosive rounds through the twisted figures.

The sword was hot in his hand, the fury at its core bright with his rage. He cut into bodies with the death lament on his lips.

The station was dying. Rihat knew it. Blood red emergency light suffused the trembling docking corridor, and he could hear the low hiss of atmosphere bleeding into the void through cracks. The doors of the *Aethon's* docking bay remained open as the dwindling stream of people swarmed through them. They had got as many as they could, but there were many more that they had left: hundreds trapped in parts of the station that could not be reached, pockets of Guardsmen surrounded and dying to the creatures that swarmed into the station even as it was torn apart. He had spoken to many of them over the vox, listening to their curses and cries over the spilling static. If he survived he knew he would hear those voices again for years to come, ghost voices cursing him from his dreams.

‘We must close the dock, colonel,’ called one of the last two White Consuls from just beyond the toothed blast doors. ‘The station is coming under sustained bombardment. It will begin to break apart soon. If we are to outrun its death we must break dock.’

Rihat shook his head. ‘Not yet. There are more who may reach us. Your Librarian ordered me to save all I could. I will honour that order.’

The Space Marine paused for a moment then gave a curt nod.



Rihat looked back to the people passing him. Grey-robed menials hurried beside purple-mantled prefects. Bloodied and pale-faced Guardsmen, some still cradling their weapons, jostled beside tech-adepts and slab-muscled ratings.

‘Colonel, we must break dock now.’ The harsh voice made his head snap around. Hurrying towards him were Hekate and Colophon, the bent-backed astropath wheezing as he kept up with the psyker’s long strides. ‘The bombardment will claim the station in moments; you must give the order now.’

Rihat looked from Hekate to Colophon. The old man looked pale, almost shivering with fear.

‘What of Cyrus? He went to find you?’

The old man shook his head. ‘I have not seen him,’ he said.

‘Colonel—’ began Hekate, but he cut her off.

‘We will go at the last possible moment, mistress.’ He gestured at the few people that hurried towards the dock, but kept his eyes locked with the psyker’s stare ‘The last possible moment.’ Hekate glanced at the two Space Marines bracketing the open blast doors, and people still passing through. ‘I suggest you get on board. There is not much time.’

The psyker curled her lip but walked away towards the *Aethon*, Colophon limping in her wake.

They came for him again, a tide of teeth, and claws. His storm bolter was silent and empty, discarded on the corpse-strewn floor. Lightning arced from his hand, leaping from body to body. Many fell but the rest still came forwards, scrambling over the dead with vulture cries. They reached him, claws scoring through armour, opening its polished innards to shine in the light of their dead eyes. Cyrus could feel strength leaching from him through a dozen wounds. With a grunt of effort he raised his sword above his head, both hands wrapped around the worn grip. A withered creature hissed at him as it lunged forwards. His first cut split it in two. The second cut scythed through another’s stomach and spine.

Something struck him from behind, his shoulder armour splitting as pain stabbed through him. His knee buckled to the ground. He could taste his own blood. Around him he could feel the creatures that had been astropaths laugh at him through the warp.

He could feel the worn joints of the armour gauntlet against his fingers, and the dull pressure of his fingers still gripping his sword. He had expended every weapon he had, used every skill he knew, and still he would fall to the fate he had foreseen. The creatures closed on him. He looked up, pulling himself to his

feet. There was one thing, one terrible thing that he had not yet dared to do. It was a monstrous thing, a thing warned against and as difficult to survive as it was to control. Inside his helmet he smiled grimly to himself. With the last shred of his focused will he reached out and ripped a hole through reality.

The creatures fell back as Cyrus stood. The air around him was an accelerating cyclone of flickering power. He ripped the hole wider, his mind holding the vortex in front of him. It opened wider and wider, spinning with distorting shreds of reality. Twisted bodies vanished into the spinning hole, sucked through it with shrieks of anger and fear. For a second Cyrus held the vortex controlled, felt his mind try and grasp the thing he had birthed into being. He began moving a second before he lost control. The vortex broke from his grip with a shriek like shattering glass. Its black maw ripped wider, spinning everything it touched to nothingness.

Cyrus ran for the doors, feeling his wounded body fill with pain as he moved. Behind him the maw of the vortex grew with a hungering shriek.

The station burned. Red fire ate through armour plating, sucking the oxygen from its innards, twisting the bones of its structure until they cracked and distorted like the broken spine of a dying leviathan. Warp fire mingled with the blaze, daemonic faces rising and falling through the flames.

The circling ships of the execution fleet silenced their guns for an instant, pausing before the last blow fell. A narrow spread of torpedoes spat from the prow of *The Sixth Hammer*. Black darts running on bright trails, they carried the most esoteric and dangerous of payloads. As they struck the heart of the station the vortex mechanisms created a rippling chain of holes through reality. Black centred spirals opened in an overlapping cyclone that pulled the station into oblivion.

Cyrus ran through corridors filled with smoke and wreckage. His helmet display was pulsing with environmental warning icons that told him of sudden pressure changes, spiking toxicity and fatal oxygen levels. His torn armour was bleeding air from multiple rents. Some of the fibre bundles running through the armour had been severed. He could feel his muscles tearing as they hauled the armour's dead weight through a limping run.

He turned a corner and saw the armoured doors of the dock still open, the docking bay of the *Aethon* beyond lit by strobing warning lights. There was a figure slumped over the dock controls, a last soul standing guard over the gates

to safety.

Rihat was dying, his skin pale with oxygen debt, but his hand was still clamped over the door controls keeping the doors open to the very last moment. Cyrus paused. Behind him the long passage was beginning to twist and buckle.

‘Colonel,’ he said. The man did not move. ‘Rihat.’ His eyelids flickered and his blue lips mouthed something that Cyrus could not hear. Back down the passage a wide tear opened in the wall, spreading across ceiling and floor, sucking flames and air into the blackness beyond. Cyrus reached down to lift the colonel but the man had stopped moving, his eyes staring without seeing. Cyrus thought of saying something, whispering a last word to the man’s soul. He thought of the station that was being torn apart at that moment, as many dying within it as might have reached the *Aethon*, and could think of nothing that would give the dead comfort.

Cyrus moved the man’s hand from the dock controls. With a sound of hissing pistons the *Aethon*’s blast doors began to close. He walked alone between the closing teeth as the ship broke its bond with the station. Behind him the passage came apart with a shriek of rending metal.

The vortices swallowed the last of the station’s carcass. On their edge, the white hull of an Adeptus Astartes battle-barge turned, engines straining to claw against the forces pulling it back into the waiting mouths of the growing vortices.

On his throne Inquisitor Xerxes saw the ship slip from the imploding debris of the station and make for open space, noting the heraldry of the White Consuls. A noble Chapter indeed but one laid low in recent times. The loss of such a ship would be a blow to a brotherhood fading into history. But he could not permit any to outrun a decree of Exterminatus. He nodded to one of the bridge officers and watched as the destroyers and light cruiser accelerated into a looping course that would cut the ship off before it could reach the system’s edge.

The closed doors to the *Aethon*’s bridge waited in front of him. The carved images of Sabatine glinted in the light of braziers on either side. He paused, tasting the breath that flowed in and out of his lungs.

The daemon would have gone to the bridge to be close to the centre of decisions and authority, to ensure it could influence its own escape. He had hurried through the ship, passing servitors and confused knots of refugees from the station. He had felt tremors run through the ship as its engines fought against the pull of the vortices that had taken the station.

He had stopped in front of the bronze doors. Flickers of half-remembered visions poured through his mind. He knew what would happen, what all the fragmentary glimpses would amount to, the price that would have to be paid.

Slowly he reached up, unlocking his helmet from his armour and tossing it onto the deck. He let out a long breath. The suppressed pain of his wounds was a spreading numbness across his body. He brought his sword up, resting his forehead against the flat of the blade. It was cold against his skin. He thought of the ash of a dead world in his fingers, of his brothers shouting their death lament, of Rihat mouthing unheard last words, of looking up to see a Black Ship in a blue sky.

‘It is what we were made for,’ he muttered to himself and pushed the bronze doors open.

‘Fateweaver.’ He said its name as the doors swung wide. Faces turned to look at him as he strode onto the bridge, his blackened armour grinding with every step. In front of him the command throne of the ship rose at the centre of a long platform. Clusters of servitors sat hunched over system readouts, a few white-robed serfs moving amongst them. Armoured shutters sealed the viewports that lined the walls of the bridge. A spinning holo-display hung in the air before the command throne. Icons moved in the green gridded projection, showing relative positions and trajectories of ships.

Colophon and Hekate stood together next to the empty throne, the two White Consuls beside them. All of them turned as Cyrus walked towards them. Hekate’s face twisted with anger, Colophon’s with shock and surprise. Cyrus opened his mouth to call to his brothers, the order to fire forming on his tongue. He never got to speak it.

With a sound of bursting skin and laughter the figures of Colophon and Hekate exploded. Their flesh came apart, skin and glistening muscle hanging briefly in the air as if pinned out on an invisible dissection table. A rank smell of exposed organs and sweet incense filled the bridge, making Cyrus gag. The stretched faces of the old man and the psyker grinned from the elongating and distorting curtain of flesh. The lengths of muscle and skin began to wind together like strands of twine spun into a knotted rope. The flesh changed colour and form. Feathers and claws sprouted and grew. Blue light surrounded the growing shape, weaving through it in bright coils. Wings formed on a hunched back. Skin hung loose over long limbs tipped with bird-like claws. Two long, feathered necks shook themselves in the spinning light before turning to look

down at Cyrus. Mismatched eyes stared from above hooked beaks. The daemon laughed with both heads, the sound like the cries of a murder of crows.

Cyrus's two brothers brought their bolt pistols up and fired. A rippling shimmer formed around the shells. They turned in their trajectory and began to orbit the daemon like fireflies. Around them the bridge fell to madness. Servitors ripped themselves from their housings, collapsing onto the floor in pools of oil. Serfs and officers doubled over, vomiting yellow bile onto the deck. With a flick of its hand the daemon sent the bolt shells spiralling away to explode amongst the crew. It raised a clawed limb, iridescent fire sheathing its talons as it pointed at Cyrus. The beaked mouths cracked open to speak.

Cyrus charged, his sword raised above his right shoulder. His muscles tore as they drove his armoured form forwards. He felt a calm settle over him; he could see what would happen, his vision of the future riding just ahead of the present. The moment expanded, dragging through instants. It was his purpose to be there, to make the choice that he could sense waiting for him just beyond the horizon of the present. All was happening as it always was going to, as it would always have to.

The sword sheared through the daemon's sheath of energy and bit into feathered flesh. There was a burst of multihued light. The daemon lurched back, screeching in pain, half collapsing to the deck. Cyrus brought his sword up, spinning its long hilt through his hands, and rammed its point down through the daemon's torso, skewering it to the deck.

He paused, looking down at the daemon. The two heads laughed. Its body began to break apart, dissolving into luminous vapour. The glowing daemon essence flowed into the deck of the ship, rooting itself in the *Aethon*, spreading through its bones.

Cyrus let go of the sword hilt. There was nothing he could do about what would happen next, about the fate to which he had condemned the ship and all on board. He had known he could not kill the daemon; not truly. It would always have the power to cling onto existence somehow. But he had broken its psychological form and he knew it would do everything it could not to flee back to the warp. The only way it could now survive was by taking the substance of the ship as its host.

The fabric of the *Aethon* was changing even as he looked at it, distorting as the daemon coiled through its bones. It would change more in the future, becoming something unrecognisable, something accursed. He knew it; he had seen it.

He looked down at the last of the daemon's physical body, its twin vulture heads twitching amongst liquefying flesh and feathers.

'There is something you should know,' he said as the daemon hissed 'You said you are blind, that you cannot see the future. You said you see only the past endlessly repeated. But what you see is your future, daemon. You are blind because the past is your future.' Cyrus smiled at the daemon as it faded into the deck. 'What I see in the future is what you see in the past. You are blind because of this moment, the moment that the future becomes the past. I am the architect of your fate.'

He looked up at the tactical display of the approaching Inquisition fleet, and the slowly collapsing vortices. The spinning holes in reality would take whatever they swallowed into the warp, to ride on wild currents through time and space. Under his feet he could still feel the plasma engines fighting to pull the ship clear of the vortices' embrace.

Slowly he walked to sit on the command throne and spoke his last order. 'Shut down the engines.'

A moment later the ship went silent. It drifted on through the void, carried by its momentum. Then it began to slide back towards the vortices that had consumed the station.

On the bridge Cyrus rested his sword across his knees. The bridge was changing, cancerous blooms of distorted metal expanding before his eyes as the daemon sunk its claws deeper into the structure. He had no illusions about what he did. He was condemning the ship, the crew and those who had fled onto it in hope of escape. He was condemning them to an accursed eternity riding through time, bound to an abomination.

In the depths of his psyker's soul he felt the vortices close over the *Aethon*. The ship had not raised its Geller fields; it was open to the full force of the warp. Raw psychic power washed through the hull in an invisible wave. Those aboard died a thousand times over, their bodies broken down and remade over and over again before being scattered as dry dust through the halls of the ship.

Cyrus kept his eyes open through it all, holding his body and soul together with the last scrap of his will.

He thought of the signal. The signal that had fixed this fate from the moment he heard it, the signal the daemon had never sent, that no one had ever sent. He closed his eyes and sent his voice out into the warp. His words would become a broken message to trap himself and the daemon, binding their fates together. Somewhere in the bones of the ship the daemon heard his words and howled.

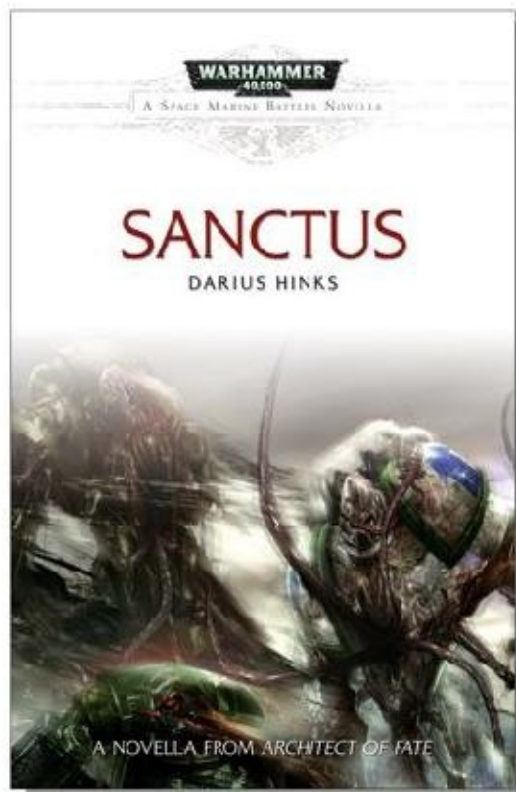
His last unheard confession spoken, he let go and the storm broke his body and soul apart.

The *Aethon* tumbled on, falling back through time, becoming something new, as was fated.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

John French is a writer and freelance games designer from Nottingham. His work can be seen in the *Dark Heresy*, *Rogue Trader* and *Deathwatch* roleplay games and scattered through a number of other books including the award nominated *Disciples of the Dark Gods*. When he is not thinking of ways that dark and corrupting beings can destroy reality and space, John enjoys talking about why it would be a good idea, and making it so with his own traitor legions on the gaming table...that and drinking good wine.





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