




WARHAMMER
40,000

A SPACE MARINE BATTLES NOVELLA

ACCURSED ETERNITY

SARAH CAWKWELL



A NOVELLA FROM *ARCHITECT OF FATE*

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A WARHAMMER 40,000 NOVEL

ACCURSED ETERNITY

SARAH CAWKWELL



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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.



I

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*Amaranthine encrypted message, code Theta Gamma Four Three Nine.
Captain Tanek of the Star Dragons Sixth Company, presently designated
commanding officer of Containment Fleet Kappa, hear this on the order of the
Ordo Malleus. I send you greetings and demand your immediate compliance.
There has been a reported sighting of the vessel matching archive description of
the Accursed Eternity.*

*By the power vested in me and through my position within the Holy Ordos,
you are ordered to bring your fleet to the coordinates I will transmit following
this message. This sighting warrants an immediate investigation and your fleet is
the closest available. I will speak with you in person upon your arrival.*

Message ends.

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It drifted without direction, carried by the endless tides of space. Partially
curtained by a swirling dust cloud, it loomed out of the darkness like a
monstrous leviathan surfacing in a ponderous climb from the mighty deeps for a

lungful of life-giving air. The analogy was not entirely without basis.

Surrounded on all sides by ruthless escort vessels, the ship was a thing of legend and myth. It may once have been a battle-barge – but since nobody had ever destroyed its companion fleet, no one had ever gotten close enough to find out exactly what it was, or who it belonged to. It responded to no hails. As soon as any fleet was sent to investigate, inexplicable warp storms blew up and the thing was gone. At most, it had only ever remained visible for five hours: barely long enough for its presence to even register. Chaos, however, inevitably followed in its wake, along with other companions: madness, corruption and death.

It had earned itself the name *Accursed Eternity* over the many years that it had been spotted. Most people dismissed it as a ghost story, a tale whispered by the ratings who toiled in the sub-levels; tales that were shared with amusement by junior officers. Veterans of the void found little laughter in such things. They knew better than to dismiss the evils of the warp so easily.

A ghost ship. The spectral echo of a vessel lost to the tides. Perhaps, the stories went, it was filled with the shackled spirits of its former crew, bound in eternal torment. Perhaps seductive sirens of ruinous powers inhabited its empty decks just waiting to lure an innocent victim to a death most unworthy.

Whatever was on board had to be a product of the warp. On that, the stories all agreed. There had to be something or someone deeply important hidden within its twisted hull to warrant the escort that it brought with it, but it was not a prize that mortal men dared attempt to reach out and snatch.

One hundred years had passed since the last time the full fleet had been spied. One hundred years, during which the tale of its nature had had time to evolve and distort, until it became something it was not. It became a legend. It became a myth. The recovered records of the battle a century before had never been corroborated. It was believed that nobody would ever truly discover the facts of the deaths at Balanor.

In the past few decades the appearance of the lone ship itself had increased in regularity and yet it had only ever been sighted in passing, a glimpse – an *idea* – of something that may or may not have been a battle-barge. Descriptions of the ship never suggested anything physically abnormal; it was the same as any other of its kind, despite the legends surrounding it. No external markings of allegiance had been reported and the overall condition of the ship remained largely unknown.

It became synonymous with bad luck. To see the *Accursed Eternity*, even if

only for a fleeting moment, was a premonition of doom and destruction.

In the wake of the fleet's sudden, unexplained appearance, the astropathic choirs of the Imperium of Mankind came to urgent life as a suitable, expedient response was sought. Increasingly frantic messages were transmitted back and forth, and were then met by a cool, calm and very deliberate response.

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By the command of the Ordo Malleus of the Holy Inquisition, the Balanor system and all vessels therein are deemed traitoris in extremis. In His name, we come.

This situation is now under our control.

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The situation was anything but under control. The small Ordo Malleus fleet had ripped into real space with its guns already fully charged and ready to unleash the wrath of their kind. Batteries of weapons pounded relentlessly against the encroaching Chaos fleet, constant streams of light razoring through the endless darkness. For a time, a brief and incredible moment, it seemed that they would achieve their objective. For a fleeting second it seemed that they had the upper hand. The Chaos ships looked as though they were preparing for a retreat. But they weren't.

There were five vessels in the Chaos fleet, each one unidentifiable but for a proudly displayed eight-pointed star emblem emblazoned across their prows, and as one they peeled from the ship they escorted. Turning with excruciating slowness, they broke from their prescribed path and plunged headlong into the Inquisitorial fleet. Four escort ships were destroyed instantly, caught in the path of the cruisers as they accelerated and torn to pieces. Debris, fuel and corpses dribbled from the broken vessels and briefly cluttered the path of the strike cruisers. The Chaos vessels cut a steady path through the carnage.

Not a single shot left the gunnery decks of the Chaos fleet. Every death they caused came from the fact that they rammed without hesitation into the ships of

the Ordo Malleus.

Doggedly determined, the Inquisition held their ground with implacable and commendable ferocity. They re-engaged the Chaos ships and eliminated two of them with a savage and unrelenting volley of fire from their main cannons. Yet, when the ships were destroyed, there was nothing to prove that they had ever existed. No twisted, broken metal, no trails or wisps of smoke... Nothing. It was simply as though they had never been.

It was only when the Inquisition fleet had battled the enemy down to equal numbers, that they put the call out for Containment Fleet Kappa.

Mistress Kerys Jabiru, Primaris Astropath on board the Star Dragons flagship *Ladon*, was a thin woman. At one time in her life, she might have been considered slim, willowy and graceful, but the simple fact of the matter now was that she was almost painfully undernourished. The years in service to the Imperium had robbed her of any youth, beauty and vitality that might once have been admirable. Her life in servitude to the Throne of Terra had taken its toll on her, physically and mentally. But despite that, she was still able to hold herself proudly.

There was nothing even slightly womanly in her motion as she walked at great speed through the ship's dimly-lit corridors, no sensuality or feminine fluidity in her stride. She walked in a manner not unlike a strutting, long-legged water bird. Even her head bobbed slightly with every step she took. It was a gait that might have been considered comical by those whose dispositions tended towards the unkind.

Even blind as she was, her psychic senses guided her with skill and effortless ease through the sprawling vessel. Her speed only began to hint at the true sense of urgency she felt. Since she had received and relayed the message from the Inquisition, orders had begun flying back and forth, but this one was a personal missive for the captain and she was, if she would only admit it to herself, curious to see how its contents were received.

Kerys had served the Star Dragons for more than twenty years, girl and woman, and whilst she retained the proper sense of awe and respect for the Adeptus Astartes, she had, over the years, built up a comfortable rapport with the captain of Sixth Company. She was not afraid of him.

Not *too* afraid, at least.

It was hard not to like Captain Tanek. Although a fierce, stern and allegedly brutal warrior on the field of battle, when the armour came off and the other side

of him was in force, there was a certain affability about him. He treated his company – and those who served them – with fairness and he actively encouraged those aboard to speak their minds. Such openness, he declared, was an important trait. His men virtually idolised him; the mortal crew component of the *Ladon* actually *did* idolise him. He found it faintly uncomfortable and did whatever he could to dissuade such adulation. Such modesty was becoming and, if anything, made the situation worse.

Kerys turned a corner and slowed her pace. The skin of her pale cheeks, papery and dry as a result of the recycled air of the *Ladon's* environment, was touched with two spots of pink from her exertions. Her greying hair, tied back in a severe knot at the back of her head, had come free and thin, wispy strands hung untidily around her pinched face. Pursing her lips tightly, she spent a few moments tucking the escaped hair back into the knot. It would not do to present herself before Captain Tanek looking so dishevelled.

The ship, which had been ripping through the warp for several hours since the receipt of the initial message, was not travelling smoothly and a sudden shifting of the floor beneath her feet made her stumble. She threw out her arms to balance herself and the ship lurched immediately in the other direction throwing her completely off-balance. Before she could fall, however, a hand reached out and caught her. A strong hand that fully encircled her upper arm with room to spare. One of the Star Dragons.

‘Mistress Jabiru.’ A rich, warm voice sounded and a flicker of a smile came onto her face.

‘Sergeant Korydon.’ She was pleased by the tone of respect and concern in the warrior’s voice and she turned her blind face towards him. Her hands came up in the sign of the aquila and she bowed her head to show equal respect for the Adeptus Astartes.

‘I presume you are walking to the Clutch? I would consider it an honour if you would let me escort you. The passage through the empyrean is rough and I would be deeply distressed if you were to fall.’

His manners were impeccable and she could not find it in herself to be offended. She had never seen Korydon, but she conversed with him often. He was a serious warrior with a dry, often sarcastic sense of humour that complemented Tanek’s straight talking style admirably. She had never been able to gauge the age of any of the Star Dragons, but all the clues she had pulled together from his presence at the Clutch had led her to deduce that Korydon was comparatively young. This close, she could smell the unique aroma that seemed

to accompany all of the Adeptus Astartes: a mixture of gun oils and armour abrasives, and the faintest hint of sweet incense that suggested he had not long left the ship's chapel. She straightened her shoulders.

'I would be equally honoured for you to escort me, Sergeant Korydon.'

'Of course, Mistress Jabiru.'

She felt him take her hand and place it on his bare forearm so that he could guide her safely through the unsteady corridors of the *Ladon*. Although she would never openly voice the opinion, she was rather glad of his strong, steady support. The speed with which the Star Dragons and the Blood Swords were heeding the Inquisition's call was both alarming and unsettling. The news she brought now to the ears of the captain was equally disturbing.

Suddenly, she felt *very* glad for Korydon's presence. She had a deep-seated feeling that today's Clutch was going to become complicated very swiftly.

The Clutch was the name given to the daily meeting of the *Ladon's* key personnel. During the Clutch any and all problems were brought to the table and orders shared out. It was a functional thing, rarely coloured with any sort of excitement. But a vessel the size of the strike cruiser needed to run smoothly and Tanek, whose sense of organisation was second to none, ran an exceptionally tight ship.

Led into the strategium by Korydon, Kerys paused before the statue of the Emperor. There was such a palpable aura of faith around it that it was not hard to locate it. She almost absently muttered the litany of guidance and thanked the sergeant as he led her to her given place at the table.

It was several minutes later that she heard the captain's voice. It arrived into the strategium a moment before he did and Kerys turned her head towards the sound, her ears working to gauge what her eyes never could. The years of blindness had finely tuned her other senses to be far more receptive to her surroundings. There was a measure of impatience in his voice that suggested he was fractious and annoyed, but he tempered it with customary politeness.

He was not alone as he entered; other footfalls echoed his own. Captain Khorvash of the Blood Swords, no doubt. The other captain had been on board the *Ladon* when the call had come from the Inquisition, and rather than travel back to his own vessel he had saved valuable time by remaining on board the Star Dragons craft. He had attended several Clutches over Kappa's tour of duty and had always treated Kerys with due deference, albeit with the clear distrust so many showed towards those of a psychic bent.

Her sharp thoughts almost absently brushed the minds of the two captains, and she marvelled at how two such god-like beings could project such different personalities without ever speaking a word. From what she understood, Khorvash was the younger of the two captains by several decades and it was clear, even to one as blind as she was, that he wore his youth proudly. There was arrogance in his voice and attitude that had not yet been tempered by experience. He was smart and he was eager. Yet, despite the shared rank, he obviously deferred to the older warrior. From the cadence of his voice, and the extra distance it had to travel, she sensed that he respectfully kept a step or two behind Tanek, falling into place eventually at the captain's right shoulder.

There was another presence too; Kerys could hear him walking, but he chose not to announce himself. She inhaled and coughed slightly; whereas Korydon had smelt of incense and the chapel, the other newcomer positively reeked of it. Iakodos, she deduced. The only one of the Star Dragons she felt true fear towards.

'Thank you all for your patience,' said Tanek. He spoke in slow, almost indolent tones but offered no further explanation as to why he had arrived late. He was captain. It was his prerogative, and there was never any sense of haste or urgency about him. Kerys, who had heard many tales of Tanek's battlefield valour knew that he was a deeply thoughtful soul who ensured that he had the full measure of his enemy before he ever took up arms. It was a trait endemic amongst the Star Dragons; they were fierce, implacable fighters.

The Clutch continued as normal, each member present delivering any pertinent news. However, as Kerys had anticipated, due to their travels through the warp there was nothing that any of them could add. Korydon provided an update on the readiness of the company's squads and the state of the armoury. Kerys was sure that the rest of the Star Dragons found it compelling but she found it painfully dull. Surprised at how bored she felt and realising this was due to the earlier anxiety at the need to deliver the latest message, she allowed her attention to drift.

'Mistress Kerys? Any further communication?'

Tanek's voice had a slight hint of amusement and Kerys's cheeks flushed as she realised he had already spoken her name once. She patted the back of her hair and coughed politely to clear her throat.

'A repeat of the original request for help, my lord, perhaps sent on a relay. But, yes, there has been a further message received. It is... personal, Captain Tanek. I am under instruction to give the message to you and you alone.'

‘Personal?’

Though she could not see him, Kerys suspected that the captain’s eyebrow had risen.

‘And who exactly is this “personal” message from?’

‘He gives his name as Inquisitor Shadrach Remigius, my lord.’ The sudden hiss of annoyance from the direction of Chaplain Iakodos did little to calm the churning sea of acid that was in her gut.

‘Personal. I see.’ She heard him tap his fingers on the table. ‘My rule has always been that there are to be no secrets on board this ship. If I cannot adhere to that myself I cannot lead by example. Please continue with the message, mistress.’

‘Do you think that is wise, Tanek?’ Iakodos spoke for the first time, his voice so deep that it felt to Kerys as though the floor beneath her very feet rumbled with the bass pitch of it.

‘I think it is *very* wise, Chaplain.’

A flash of an unspoken battle of wills touched the edge of her psychic awareness and she knew misery. Externally, Kerys looked suddenly unsure of herself, her earlier manner of prim propriety dissolved in the sudden realisation that she was being asked to go against an inquisitor’s wishes. Her senses were on fire as she became slowly aware that everyone was looking at her. She wrung her hands together anxiously and when she spoke again, her voice eked its way out as barely more than a squeak.

‘He was... really quite specific, my lord. I... I’m not sure that I should... It is only very short and will take next to no time to impart to you if you would but retire to...’

‘I will not. Please deliver the message, Mistress Kerys.’

His tone brooked no argument and with her expression becoming slightly more miserable, she let her voice slip into the gravelly tones of the faceless inquisitor.

‘The time has come to collect my due, Tanek. I will take my payment on your arrival.’

Silence descended upon the gathering like dust settling after a flurry of wind. Kerys’s hands were still wringing together miserably, her chest rising and falling swiftly.

It was Khorvash who broke the peace.

‘What does that mean exactly? Tanek? Do you know this Inquisitor Remigius?’

‘It is unimportant. An... existing arrangement between the inquisitor and myself.’ Tanek stared into the astropath’s hollow eyes for a few moments longer, as though he could somehow discern the inquisitor’s full meaning, but eventually took his piercing gaze from her. Standing up, he clasped his hands behind his back and let his gaze roam around the Clutch.

‘Inquisitor Shadrach Remigius is indeed known to me, Khorvash.’ He nodded abruptly. The gesture more than indicated that he had no desire to talk about it in front of the Clutch despite his earlier assertion. He tweaked his pointed beard between thumb and forefinger and considered for a moment before nodding.

‘Very well. Mistress Kerys, make arrangements to respond to the good inquisitor, if you would be so kind. Tell him that his message has been received and understood. That will suffice.’

There was an undercurrent of bitter sarcasm in his voice, but Kerys decided that it would be far more prudent to keep her counsel than speak her mind. She dipped her head in a bow, her long hair falling free once again and framing her face. ‘As my lord commands,’ she responded, taking his order as her cue to leave.

Tanek watched her go, his expression unreadable and his consternation growing. He let none of the concern show on his face but his soul was in turmoil.

The *Accursed Eternity*. Both captains knew its name, as did many of the others present. It was a legend. A thing of myth. Yet, here they were, following the orders of the Inquisition, travelling to verify its existence.

If any of those present at the Clutch thought this was strange, none of them voiced that opinion out loud. Tanek cast a wary eye around the assembly, almost as though daring any of them to question the situation.

‘Estimates put our time of arrival at less than three hours,’ he said. ‘Ensure that the fleet is at full battle readiness and be ready to engage as soon as we translate into the Balanor system. That is all.’

The Clutch dispersed, leaving the two captains and the Chaplain standing alone in the strategium. Khorvash studied the others with open interest. Their shared duty had formed strong bonds of friendship and loyalty.

For now, the Blood Swords and the Star Dragons travelled the wastes of space together. For centuries prior to their deployment here, they had frequently joined forces when a given situation demanded it. The proximity of their home worlds had given them great reason to remain cordial and closely allied. In the wake of the act of shame that had seen the Blood Swords torn from their home

world, the Star Dragons had been there to support them. There had been no question of debt or honour. It merely *was*.

This reciprocal loyalty engendered a rare sense of genuine fraternity between the two that more commonly was confined to battle-brothers of the same Chapter. There was a pooling of similar traditions and history, and this gave rise to friendships that spanned across the two Chapters. Above and beyond this, both the Star Dragons and the Blood Swords fielded stalwart warriors with an eye for tactics that made them a terrifying force to be reckoned with when they took the field of battle together.

Khorvash had been the latest captain to take his place amongst the fleet. It was a duty that was performed on a rotational basis with each Blood Swords company captain expected to spend a preordained length of time serving aboard the Chapter's vessel *Ophidian*. As for the Star Dragons, there was nothing that commanded their presence here. They served alongside their cousins out of choice alone.

Tanek liked Khorvash. He was an eager, enthusiastic slab of pure impulse who frequently gave voice to thoughts that others might consider inappropriate or tactless. To Tanek's mind it was a refreshing honesty that served him well.

'I do not wish to pry into matters that do not concern me, Tanek,' Khorvash began after a long period of considering the others, 'but what is the meaning behind that message?'

'Allow me to share some of my greater experience with you, Brother-Captain Khorvash.' Tanek gave the younger captain a faintly benevolent smile and made a point of addressing his battle-brother in full. 'If you start a sentence by stating that you have no wish to pry, then you would be well advised not to. The details of the matter are unimportant. Suffice it to say that the inquisitor is owed a favour by my Chapter.' His eyes were clear and steady. 'Evidently he feels that the time has come to settle the debt.'

His gaze met that of Iakodos and there was concern in them. 'For now at least, that is all you need to know.'

The return to real space from the warp was hazardous at the best of times, but to emerge straight into a void war was far more so. Manifesting from the empyrean, the small fleet was instantly caught up in the very heart of the battle that raged between the Chaos ships and those of the Inquisition. Two of Kappa's small escort vessels were incapacitated instantly by the guns of the Ordo Malleus, merely by dint of being in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Furious words from both Imperial parties were exchanged. The Inquisition had not been expecting the Containment Fleet to arrive with such alacrity, they claimed, and conversely, Kappa had not anticipated arriving into a hotly fought battle-zone. With obvious reluctance, the Inquisition ships altered their position and held fire long enough to allow the *Ladon* and the *Ophidian* to take position and lend much-needed supporting fire.

The *Ladon* opened up every gun port on her port side and unleashed a barrage of deadly fire on the traitor vessels as they traversed the void of space. As the streams of destruction burned their way towards the enemy, the Inquisition sent a security-coded message. Its contents were conveyed with all haste to the Adeptus Astartes. Tanek took the data-slate from the crewman who brought it to him and read it. His brow creased in confused irritation.

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Do not fire on the anomalous vessel. Inquisitor Remigius and his retinue will make their way to you with all expedience. Repeat, hold your fire.

+++

By Tanek's calculations, Inquisitor Shadrach Remigius was at least in his mid to late sixties. However, the augmetics and assorted juvenat treatments that he had undergone made him seem far younger. It had been at least twenty years since Tanek had seen him last and in that time he seemed not to have aged at all.

Unless you looked directly into his eyes. Then you saw the truth of it. In the very heart of the inquisitor's cold, emerald stare was intelligence and the wisdom of his years, and the power and ability to coerce that had served him so well. But Remigius generated an aura of such inherent disdain that it shrouded his true self. People did not voluntarily meet the inquisitor's stare; they did not look into the depths of his eyes. Staring at the floor was eminently preferable to looking directly at him.

Those, like Tanek, who did possess the wherewithal to hold his gaze saw a tall, slender man with a mane of greying hair that was pulled into false order by a tattered ribbon of red cloth. His narrow face was dominated by a long, thin nose and those hard, green eyes. The right side of his face was a mass of ugly

scar tissue that even the juvenat treatments had failed to disguise and his lip was drawn upwards in a permanent sneer.

One arm had long ago been severed at the elbow and its mechanical replacement was clearly the work of an artisan: beautifully made and polished to a high sheen. Not for Remigius the pretence of covering it with a sleeve. This was who he was. He was proud of it.

He wore a sword in a scabbard at his waist and as he stepped into the strategium, he kept one hand on its pommel. Tanek watched him enter and kept his voice carefully free of anything other than neutral tones.

‘Greetings, inquisitor,’ he rumbled. ‘Welcome aboard the *Ladon*.’

‘Captain Tanek. Who would have thought our paths would cross again so soon? And for such a great purpose.’ His voice, when he spoke, was surprising. For such an ugly man, it was rich and almost lyrical in its quality. He turned his penetrating gaze onto Khorvash.

Before Tanek could introduce him, the inquisitor spoke again. ‘You would be Captain Khorvash of the Blood Swords. You are presently serving with Containment Fleet Kappa as part of your Chapter’s ongoing penitence.’

Khorvash bristled visibly and Remigius’s sneer split in a parody of a smile. ‘I mean no offence, of course.’

‘Still yourself, brother,’ murmured Tanek. He knew that Khorvash would most certainly have taken Remigius’s words as a personal slur, but they could ill-afford to draw the ire of the Ordo Malleus.

‘We will take this discussion to the strategium. My Chaplain awaits us.’ Without further statement, Tanek spun on his heel and began marching away.

‘Captain Tanek.’ The inquisitor’s words halted the Star Dragons captain, but he did not turn. Remigius took a few steps towards him. ‘My retinue...’

‘Dismiss those you do not need and retain whomever you deem necessary, inquisitor, but make it swift. My time is precious and I need a damned good explanation as to why the Containment Fleet has been denied its right to destroy that ship.’ Tanek’s jaw was so tight that it was aching.

‘All in good time. You have nothing to fear from the *Accursed Eternity*. At least... not at this moment.’

At that statement, Tanek did turn. His dark eyes were blazing with fury.

‘The Star Dragons fear *nothing*.’

‘Perhaps that will change.’

The inquisitor would not be drawn any further and he was led to the strategium in stormy silence. As he entered, Iakodos rose from his seat in a show

of respect for a servant of the Inquisition. His calm gaze took in the inquisitor and his lackeys, seemingly without interest. Remigius considered Iakodos with equal attention. The Chaplain was shaven-haired and otherwise entirely unremarkable in appearance. Had it not been for the varicoloured las-tattooed dragon scales on the left side of his face and neck, he would have looked like nearly every other Adeptus Astartes Chaplain he had ever come into contact with.

‘Chaplain Hektor Iakodos.’ There was a reverence in the inquisitor’s tone that he certainly hadn’t demonstrated to either of the two captains, and Khorvash’s eyebrows lifted curiously. ‘The pleasure is mine, I’m sure.’

‘Inquisitor.’ Iakodos returned the greeting in a similarly polite manner, echoing that of his captain. ‘Welcome aboard the *Ladon*.’

The formalities over, Tanek indicated all present to be seated. Remigius’s retinue continued to fuss around him, but the inquisitor merely dismissed them with a wave of his hand. They retired to just outside the strategium.

The inquisitor leaned back in the oversized chair, which had been designed for a warrior more than twice his size. ‘I will dispense with pleasantries and get straight to the point.’ Leaning forwards on the table, he steepled his fingers beneath his chin and let his gaze wander from captain to captain, and then to the Chaplain. ‘Historically, the *Accursed Eternity* has only remained visible for a few hours, enough time to sow its seeds of discord. However, this time...’ His smile was unnerving. There was something reminiscent of a predator in it. ‘This time, it has remained for longer than usual and we cannot possibly afford to turn down the opportunity that presents.’

‘Opportunity?’ It was Iakodos who asked the question and Tanek was content to let the Chaplain take the floor. ‘Since we have been ordered not to destroy it, perhaps you would care to elaborate on what such an opportunity might be?’

‘Of course, my dear Iakodos – you don’t mind if I use your name in this way, do you? Or would you prefer to be addressed by your full title?’ Iakodos tilted his head in a gesture that suggested he did not particularly care either way, so the inquisitor continued. ‘I plan a mission aboard the *Accursed Eternity*. My order has come into possession of vital information concerning its origins and how to end its threat.’

‘And what relevance does that have to my Containment Fleet?’ Tanek asked softly.

‘Containment Fleet Kappa is made up of loyal and noble warriors of the Adeptus Astartes. Fine, upstanding representations of your great brotherhood.’

You are... uniquely placed to give me the assistance I require.'

'You want protection.' Tanek's expression did not change one bit.

'So simple. I could not have put it better myself.' The inquisitor rubbed the palms of his hands together. 'Yes, indeed. I want protection. I must travel to the *Accursed Eternity* and deal with the threat, but I must ask for your assistance in this matter.'

'Ask?' Tanek's brow rose. 'That is not something you usually do, Remigius.'

'I am pleased that you remember the tenets of my order, Captain Tanek. I have the decree here if you wish to check it?' Remigius took out a data-slate and offered it to the captain, who ignored it in favour of staring at the inquisitor.

'If we do not agree?'

'I believe you will find that you are not in a position to refuse my request.' Remigius's smile could have frozen oceans. 'Or have you forgotten the terms of the agreement we made the last time we met?'

'No, inquisitor. I have not forgotten.'

There was a long pause, before Iakodos spoke. 'What is the nature of this vessel? What would we expect if we were to travel across to it with you?'

'Trials that will test the very depths of even your faith, Chaplain.'

'I will ignore that slur.'

'None was intended. My research leads me to believe that what we might face on board the *Accursed Eternity* will test and try you to the very limits of your undoubtedly considerable resolve. A challenge? Yes, I think so. But one which I am sure you are more than capable of meeting.'

Remigius got to his feet and moved down the table until he was standing before a viewport, staring out into the darkness of space. 'Agree to aid me and I will consider the debt the Star Dragons Chapter owes to the Ordo Malleus paid in full. We will wipe the slate clean, to coin an old Terran turn of phrase.'

Khorvash looked curiously at the two Star Dragons in response to this, but no explanation was forthcoming. The Blood Swords captain sensed that here was another matter into which he should not pry, so he remained silent. In the pit of his stomach, an unprecedented sense of paranoia began to squirm. It could not be denied that there was a history between the inquisitor and his cousins of the Star Dragons.

Was there more to the Star Dragons' eagerness to serve alongside the Blood Swords?

As quickly as the thought surfaced, Khorvash chased it down. He had come to like Tanek in the time the two captains had spent together. He could not

imagine for one moment that the Star Dragons were acting as some kind of intermediary between a penitent Chapter and the Inquisition. Coupled with the obvious rage that the Chaplain was keeping under control, it was a foolish thought and Khorvash forced himself to purge it from his mind.

Tanek shook his head and spoke, breaking the Blood Sword's train of thought. 'No. I cannot agree to this. I would have the truth of it before I commit my forces to anything, inquisitor.'

'The truth of it. Oh, you shall have the truth of it.' Without turning to face the Space Marines at the table, the inquisitor seemed to consider his words for a while. When he did finally turn around, his expression had lost its former arrogance and there was an earnest honesty there for all to see.

'The *Accursed Eternity* is what can best be termed as a daemon-ship, though that is a crude description and not one which fully conveys its true nature...'

The admission provoked an immediate response from Khorvash, who bounded to his feet, hand on the hilt of the ceremonial sword he wore belted at the waist of his tunic. His voice boomed around the strategium, echoing against the plain walls and bouncing back to them. 'Then we should bring an end to its unholy existence! Containment Fleet Kappa is strong enough to obliterate the thing. It will take no effort at all on our part to destroy it.'

'Sit down, Captain Khorvash.' Remigius looked up at the eager warrior with an air of superiority. 'If you open fire on the *Accursed Eternity*, it will end the same way it has done for so many other servants of the Imperium across the years – in your destruction and in the ship's inevitable re-appearance once again. It is not something that can be purged through the crude and conventional methods your fleet would employ.'

Khorvash bristled and Tanek laid a hand on his forearm. The Blood Sword took his seat again, but his face was creased in a scowl.

Remigius nodded gravely. 'I'm glad that you feel so strongly about the level of threat this craft possesses, Captain Khorvash, and your enthusiasm is to be commended. Such an attitude will prove invaluable in aiding me to eliminate its threat once and for all. To defeat the *Accursed Eternity*, it will be necessary for me to exorcise the daemon bound at its heart. My order has granted me the means and the method to accomplish just that. What I do not have – and where I must look to you – is the might. Spare me a number of your warriors, ensure my safe arrival at the machine's core, and you will see this evil banished once and for all.'

Iakodos was watching the inquisitor carefully. There was complete honesty

in the man's tone, in the stance he had adopted and in the words he was speaking, and yet he still sensed that the entire truth was being withheld. It was nothing he could explain beyond a gut instinct; he was no psyker.

‘That is all you require of us? A bodyguard detail?’

‘That is all. I do not ask for your Librarians or your Chapter champions. I ask merely for a reasonable detachment of men to ensure that I arrive alive to carry out my task.’ The inquisitor looked from Khorvash to Tanek and back again. ‘It can do neither of your respective Chapters any harm at all to grant me this boon. Tanek's debt will be wiped out and Khorvash will earn great respect for the Blood Swords, which will go a long way to restoring a gravely tarnished reputation. These are worthy rewards in themselves, are they not?’

‘Are there not other Adeptus Astartes brothers whose skills are more suited to dealing with such situations?’

‘There are, of course. However, the more – how shall we say – the more *militant* wing of my order does not have a presence in the Balanor system. The Star Dragons and Blood Swords however...’ His smile would perhaps have been considered charming by some, but not by the Adeptus Astartes who saw nothing on the inquisitor's face but slyness and the half-truth that Iakodos had noted. ‘The *Accursed Eternity* is a difficult problem. It comes and goes without any pattern. There is no way we can predict when it will arrive and I have to use any and all tools at my disposal when it does.’

Khorvash's scowl had not lessened any, and he traced idle patterns on the surface of the table with one finger whilst he studied Remigius. ‘Our numbers are low already, Tanek,’ he said after a few moments of silence. ‘But if you agree to this, I would be able to spare at least one squad for such a task. Sergeant Ardashir and his men would be the perfect choice.’

‘I would not ask for more from you, my friend,’ came the reply. ‘The Star Dragons can spare two Scales at least. The Blood Swords need to retain their numbers. All the while you are unable to recruit to your number...’ He did not continue. He did not need to, and he trusted enough to their friendship that Khorvash would not take offence.

‘I will go also,’ interjected Iakodos. ‘If this daemonic entity is truly as challenging as the inquisitor suggests, then they will need reminders of their faith.’

Tanek eyed the inquisitor. ‘Thirty battle-brothers and the Chaplain. More than generous, I think you will agree. Is this acceptable?’

‘More than generous.’ Remigius dropped into a low bow that showed great

deference, although all three Adeptus Astartes could not help but consider it slightly sarcastic.

‘I tell you this now, Remigius,’ Tanek said in a low and dangerous voice. ‘The first hint that you have betrayed us will lead to consequences far beyond those you believe us capable of.’

‘I speak only the truth, captain.’

Aye, Tanek thought. Only the truth you think we need to know, though.



II

It continued on its aimless course, drifting through the void of space, and made no attempt to attack or impede the boarding torpedoes in any way at all. Even when they connected with the *Accursed Eternity* and the grinding teeth chewed into its hull, there was no response. The ship was, to all intents and purposes, dead.

Chaplain Iakodos stepped out of the nose of the first torpedo, already wearing his distinctive skull-helm. An exquisite cloak, hand-stitched by Chapter-serfs from the skins of the reptilian *draconae* of the Chapter's home world, Draconith, fluttered behind him. As thick as chainmail and gleaming iridescent in the half-light, the cloak was a valuable Chapter artefact and as much a mark of Iakodos's office as the crozius arcanum in his hand.

Iakodos looked around at the interior of the so-called daemon-ship. Its emergency lights were at their lowest possible ebb and the sensors in his helm adjusted accordingly. Temperature sensors registered at almost freezing.

Behind the sergeants, Inquisitor Remigiue stepped out of the torpedo. A tiny figure next to the assembled Space Marines, he was wearing a thick robe and cloak that he pulled around himself with a shiver. The re-breather mask covering most of his face rendered his expression impossible to gauge.

Sergeant Korydon of the Star Dragons Third Scale squad and his counterpart, Sergeant Evander of Ninth Scale, resplendent in their royal blue battle-plate, had been mustered for the expedition. A squad of crimson-clad Blood Swords who had been assembled under the command of Sergeant Ardashir joined them once the second boarding torpedo opened to let them out.

Iakodos watched as Korydon gathered the warriors together and further noted

the way in which he eyed the inquisitor with caution. As the senior sergeant present, the overall command of the military detail had fallen to him and the Chaplain was well aware that he had been subjected to a private briefing from Captain Tanek before they had departed the *Ladon*.

The three sergeants had not yet put on their helms and their breath ghosted in front of their faces as they called their squads to order. Korydon considered Ardashir carefully. Whilst there was an undoubted kinship between the two Chapters, he had never personally fought alongside Ardashir and had no idea of the other's capabilities. The Blood Swords warrior had initially shown some resistance to the idea of deferring command to a sergeant of the Star Dragons, but a word from Khorvash had silenced his complaints.

Like his captain Ardashir seemed eager and energetic, a trait that both Korydon and Iakodos found pleasing. He rallied his squad with ease and they responded to his softly-voiced commands without hesitation, presenting a professional, efficient and well-ordered front. The Blood Swords had a good reputation on the field of battle. In the best possible way, Korydon fervently hoped that it would not be put to the test.

His own squad, Third Scale, and Evander's Ninth were standing ready, their bolters slowly panning left and right to cover the gloomy corridor into which they had emerged. Iakodos walked amongst the Star Dragons first, laying his hand on shoulders and speaking words of benediction and cleansing in a clear voice.

'The Blood Swords are ready for your command, Sergeant Korydon,' Ardashir said, and there was nothing but respect in his tone. Iakodos nodded in approval. Whatever disgruntlement Ardashir had known before departure had evidently been set aside in favour of duty.

'Very good.' Pulling his helm on over his close crop of fair hair, Korydon turned to Remigius. 'Inquisitor, this is your mission. We are here to guide and support you if it is needed.'

'Oh, it will be needed, Sergeant Korydon. It's not a question of "if" but rather "when". Ensure your men are prepared to handle anything that they encounter... It will not all be corporeal.' The inquisitor's musical voice, muffled by the mask across his face, carried through the silence of the ship. 'Our targets are the enginarium and the bridge; the daemonic heart of this ship is most likely to be situated in one of these locations.'

'Most likely?' Korydon snorted. 'That is a little vague, inquisitor.'

‘The activities of daemons do not conform to any sort of exact science, Sergeant Korydon. Guard your temper. Your impatience won’t serve you well in this situation...’

Iakodos had watched the exchange silently, his eyes unseen behind his skull mask, but at Remigius’s statement he stepped forwards, his hands raised, one palm directed at the man and another at the warrior. His face was hidden but his manner was clear.

‘Peace, Brother-Sergeant Korydon. Carry yourself with decorum.’ Korydon turned his face away from the Chaplain and Iakodos noted the tell-tale clenching of his fists. ‘Mark my words, inquisitor.’ Iakodos’s gravel tones rumbled, made inhuman by the helm he wore. ‘All of the battle-brothers here assembled attended me in the chapel before we were despatched. Their faith is as strong as it ever was and as their guide in all matters of a spiritual nature, I see no reason to doubt them.’ He turned to the others. ‘Trust in the words and the litanies we shared before we left, brothers. Trust in the Emperor and trust in the warrior beside you, and we will end this threat to the Imperium forever.’

Several of the warriors made the sign of the aquila at Iakodos’s words. Korydon shrugged slightly, then shouldered his bolter and turned to Remigius. His expressionless helmet lenses fixed on the inquisitor giving away nothing of his thoughts or feelings. His voice, when he spoke, was composed and neutral.

‘Lead on, inquisitor,’ he said. ‘We have your back.’

It became swiftly apparent to all of the Space Marines and their human charge that the *Accursed Eternity* was devoid of any signs of life. There was no indication of any sort of battle that had ended lives. No bloodstains, no tell-tale scorch marks that would suggest gunfire. There was simply nothing.

‘It is as though the ship just came from the shipyards,’ observed Evander across the vox. ‘It is... pristine. Untouched.’ His words were accurate. There was a shining newness about the walls of the corridors through which they walked. The clean, desolate halls of the ship made it seem slightly unreal; something about it didn’t feel right. Not one of them could fully explain what they meant but the feeling, it seemed, was universal.

Evander received no reply, but one or two of the warriors nodded agreement, Evander having merely put into words what they were all feeling. After some time, Brother Mehrak offered up a further and decidedly hesitant opinion, his words carefully chosen and tinged with doubt.

‘If someone wanted to recreate the interior of an Imperial ship but did not

quite know how to apply the wear and tear of age and use, it would look just like this.’ He laughed without humour. ‘My apologies, brothers. That is fanciful and ridiculous to even consider.’

‘There is nothing to apologise for, Blood Sword. You are merely expressing your thoughts on the matter. Do not feel that you cannot do that. Do not hesitate to externalise your feelings in this place, brother,’ said Iakodos without turning to look at the warrior. ‘The inquisitor has suggested that this is a ship that has been taken by daemonic powers. None of us here can truly comprehend what they may or may not be capable of. Better by far to say what your concerns are than to brood upon them.’

‘It feels and looks real enough. Although given its nature, it is hard to believe that is anything but an illusion. Something woven from warp-stuff. A fragment of the immaterium.’ Evander gave a light chuckle. ‘Fanciful, I know.’

‘Be reassured, sergeant. The *Accursed Eternity* most definitely exists.’ Remigius’s voice cut across the vox conversations. ‘Its machine spirit has been broken and compromised, but it exists nonetheless. It is solid and very real. The fact that it continues to exist despite the best efforts of the Imperium is why we are here.’

They continued down the corridor in silence, the only sounds those of the booted feet of the Space Marines ringing out on the decking, the constant hum of their energy packs and the occasional creaking of a joint of power armour. Iakodos moved down the corridor at the back of the assembled squads, his cloak billowing as he walked. He too felt the discomfort that the nature of the ship was instilling in the others.

‘He does not know where he is leading us.’ The Chaplain glanced sharply at Korydon who had seemingly switched to a private vox-channel. ‘I am no psyker, but I sense that our charge is more than a little anxious.’

‘Patience, brother. I appreciate your own need for haste, but we need to let this situation play out however it will.’

‘He does not know where we will find our enemy, Chaplain. How can we believe in his claim that he knows how to deal with it?’

Iakodos was robbed of his chance to reply as, without warning, Remigius came to an abrupt halt at a junction in the corridor. It was only because Korydon had ensured a respectful distance that the inquisitor wasn’t trampled by three squads of Adeptus Astartes.

‘Here is where we make a choice,’ the inquisitor said, looking first one way and then another down the corridors that intersected their current path. ‘The

enginarium or the bridge.’

‘There. You see what I mean? I rest my case.’ Korydon’s frustration was wearing and decidedly uncharacteristic. Iakodos scowled beneath the skull-helm and spoke aloud.

‘How certain are you that we will find what we seek in either of these places, inquisitor?’

‘As certain as I can be, Chaplain.’

Despite the inquisitor’s confidence, Iakodos recognised tell-tale signs of uncertainty: a slight tremor to the voice, a brief clasp of the hands.

‘Perhaps...’ For the first time, there was genuine hesitation in Remigius’s manner. ‘Perhaps we could consider splitting our efforts?’

‘It is not an ideal solution, inquisitor, and given what you have told us about this ship I cannot say that I approve of the idea of isolating a squad from the others.’

‘It would certainly speed this process up, Chaplain.’ Korydon stepped forwards. ‘We can stay in constant communication and, if necessary, the squads can join back up.’

‘The final say is yours, sergeant. You have command of this mission.’ Iakodos stepped back again. Despite his seniority in years, he deferred easily to the sergeant’s command.

Korydon raised a gauntleted hand and rubbed it against the jaw of his helm. His red lenses stared down the corridor ahead, first to the left and then the right. The same featureless white expanse met his gaze wherever he looked. He came to a decision.

‘Third Scale, we will head for the bridge and make an assessment of the area. Evander, you take Ninth and Sergeant Ardashir. Stay with the inquisitor.’ There was a heavy emphasis on the final command and Evander nodded his compliance.

‘We will move towards the command deck,’ Korydon confirmed, his tone forceful and compelling. ‘We will remain in constant contact and in the event that we run into difficulties, or if you require our extra support, we will fall back to this position and reunite our forces.’

Third Scale moved apart from the others and gathered at the head of the right-hand corridor. Iakodos switched to the private channel again.

‘This is a rash decision, sergeant, and one that seems ill-advised in this environment. I will come with you.’

‘It is my decision to make, Chaplain. And no, you must remain with the

inquisitor. I apologise for speaking so of one of the Ordo Malleus, but I do not trust him. You need to be with him. Those were Captain Tanek's express orders. He did not require the rest of us to be present, however.'

Iakodos clicked his tongue against the roof of his mouth. 'Very well, sergeant. As you command. Keep your faith strong, Brother Korydon. Keep your wits about you and heed your own warnings about falling back if you encounter difficulties.'

'I will, Chaplain. Fire and fury.'

'Fire and fury, brother.'

The two Space Marines clasped arms in a warrior's grip and, without another word, Third Scale peeled off from the main group and turned right down the corridor junction. Iakodos had no doubt that they were strong, faithful souls to a man and that they would cope with anything that might be thrown at them, but he still felt a creeping unease at their forces having been split.

'Sergeant Evander... We are now under your command, I believe.'

'Yes, Chaplain.' Evander nodded and moved ahead of the inquisitor, leading the larger of the two battle forces left towards the engine room.

As they walked, the corridor began to take a slight slope downwards. Iakodos considered again Evander's words from earlier. There was something fundamentally unreal about the design of the ship's interior. There should have been more bulkheads, more doors barring their passage, but there was nothing but the seemingly endless white corridors. The Chaplain laid his hand against the wall and could not even feel a distant vibration from the ship's engines. The sensors in his gauntlet returned no movement, and as he passed his hand across the wall it seemed smooth and almost frictionless. No casting or welding lumps or rivets, just a stark, sterile surface.

'This vessel is dead,' he observed. 'I have never been aboard a ship that is so utterly devoid of life and soul.'

He would learn, to his great cost, that the *Accursed Eternity* was anything but dead.

Korydon strode ahead with great purpose. He had felt the unease of his battle-brothers from the moment they had exited the boarding torpedo. It was an unease he shared and the urge to complete this duty and return to the *Ladon* was strong. He had disliked the inquisitor from the moment they had met and felt a certain sense of relief now that he was out of the man's presence. Since they had boarded, a niggling voice at the back of his skull had tried to convince him that

were they to lose the inquisitor, it would be no tragedy.

‘What exactly is it that we are seeking, sergeant?’ Arion asked. This corridor, like the embarkation one along which they had previously been walking, was spartan and empty.

‘Anything at all would be a start,’ muttered Tylissus. This drew a hesitant chuckle from Third Scale and even Korydon cracked a brief smile beneath his helm.

‘Have you ever known anything like this place?’ Tylissus continued, the bemusement in his voice expressing what Korydon suspected all of them felt. ‘When we were told this was a daemon-ship, I expected some sort of engagement the moment we set foot on the deck. Not this endless nothing. Is it possible, do you think, that the inquisitor is wrong in his assessment?’

‘I do not know, Tylissus,’ replied Korydon thoughtfully. ‘It is more than evident that this ship is not normal. But like you, I wonder exactly what it is we should expect. I feel this sense of...’ He trailed off, unable to articulate the feelings he had. It was almost like a premonition of what was to come, but that was impossible. He was a warrior. He did not have precognitive powers. ‘A sense of discomfort.’ It was a pitiful word compared to the depth of feeling he described, but it was the best he could manage. ‘If the inquisitor asserts that this is a daemon-ship then who am I to question that?’

A daemon-ship. Korydon let out a soft snort of derisive laughter. He didn’t know what he had been expecting either. Certainly not metre after metre of expansive, clinically white corridors. Perhaps he had been anticipating attacks from misshapen warp entities. Perhaps he had been expecting the walls of the ship to be oozing ichor and blood...

The thought dissolved into the ether and he shook himself. Fanciful, foolish thinking that had no place in the head of an Adeptus Astartes sergeant. ‘Move onwards,’ he ordered, waving with his bolter. Best to leave such ridiculous and fantastical imaginings to others. He could not allow such things to taint his duty.

He abandoned the thought and the Star Dragons continued forwards. In the wake of their passage, something held onto the ethereal wisp of Korydon’s abandoned idea. With an inhuman appetite, it devoured what it needed to give itself the strength to take form. It had been left starving for so many years that the single thread of imagination was a veritable banquet. It was gorged upon and fed the invisible horrors of the *Accursed Eternity*. When it had finished, it wanted more.

There was a saying from Old Terra that held truth in this place. Careless talk,

so the saying went, costs lives.

The future began to shape itself. In the corridor behind Third Scale, a dark and viscous fluid began to seep slowly from the walls, going entirely unnoticed by the Space Marines as they passed.

‘The corridor is all wrong.’

The Chaplain’s observation put into words what all present were thinking. They had marched for far too long down the endless white hallway and there was no sign of its end. There had been nothing but the unblemished walls and the sound of their feet on the decking. Iakodos moved ahead a few more metres and, utilising the sensors in his helm, scanned ahead down the corridor. He focused his attention on the relevant readout, but there seemed to be something preventing the runes from giving him a fixed response. The numbers flickered and changed repeatedly.

‘Look, there.’ Ardashir stepped forwards. There was a hint of anxiety in his voice and the Chaplain watched him sharply. He looked to see what it was that the Blood Sword indicated.

‘I moved too close to the wall and made a mark just like that when we took the corridor from the crossroads,’ he said. The scrape mark of red armour on the wall of the corridor was almost like a smear of blood. ‘It must be a coincidence.’

‘I wouldn’t be too sure, sergeant,’ murmured Remigius. Iakodos turned to look at him. His words sent a muttered ripple of uncertainty through the Space Marines.

‘Are you suggesting that we are trapped in this corridor?’ Ardashir stared down at the inquisitor. ‘That we will not be able to find our way out of it?’

‘I’m suggesting that there is a possibility the daemon at the heart of this ship is utilising the opportunity to play with us. Chaplain Iakodos, you need to ensure your brothers’ faith remains strong. If they begin to doubt, then we will be lost.’

‘We need to keep moving,’ interrupted Evander. ‘But to give us a clearer idea, let us be certain of what we are dealing with, shall we?’ With a metallic *screech*, he dragged the forearm of his armour in a cross-stroke over the red mark, adding a blue stripe to the marking on the wall. With caution, they proceeded down the corridor.

It took them barely five minutes to return to the red and blue mark on the wall.

‘It was no coincidence, then.’ Ardashir slammed his balled fist into the wall in frustration. ‘We are trapped.’

‘Movement up ahead.’ The snapped announcement from Evander drew Iakodos’s attention and he brought his crozius up automatically, ready for an attack. Evander’s bolter was brought to bear and he pointed directly down the tunnel. The Chaplain followed the line of the sergeant’s gun and stiffened slightly as he too caught the motion. Again, his helm refused to feed him any data.

Evander took a few steps forwards, then halted, raising his bolter again. ‘Moving towards us. Something... A lone figure. A huge form. Adeptus Astartes size at least.’ A thought came to him and he activated his vox-bead.

‘Third Scale, report in. Korydon, do you have any sort of visual contact?’

‘Negative. We have found nothing at all, brother. Is there a problem?’

‘Nothing we cannot handle.’ Evander cut the link and ratcheted the slide on his bolter. Without needing to speak the command, the entire squad, with the Blood Swords close behind, began to move to contact.

The route to the bridge was remarkably uneventful for Third Scale. Apart from the single vox communication from Evander, there had been nothing to break the monotony of their investigation. They had reached a half-open bulkhead door that two of them were able to easily breach and had left the corridor behind.

Korydon’s unease had not left him, however. Periodically, he had experienced the sense of shadows moving just out of the corner of his eye and had paused in his stride to turn his bolter towards something that only he could see. His behaviour was starting to cause similar actions amongst the rest of Third Scale and he silently berated himself.

On leaving the bulkhead, they had entered a darker and much lower corridor with side rooms leading from it. Each of the Adeptus Astartes had to hunch slightly in order to fit their massive bulk into it. It was a puzzle and nothing at all like the layout of a strike cruiser that they had come to expect. The air was hazy and particles of dust twinkled in the light cast from the lumen-globes mounted on the walls.

Inhaling briefly, Korydon caught the faintest hint of an aroma carried in the air. He could not quite identify it, however, and dismissed it as nothing more than stale air of an aeons-old ship. It was a musty scent, something that reminded him of the Librarium back home on Dracolith where the precious, ancient tomes of generations long past stood in preservative stasis bubbles.

‘Old books,’ supplied Tylissus. Korydon turned to him, both surprised and suspicious that the warrior had just voiced the very thought he had been

harbouring.

‘What?’

‘It smells like old books in here,’ replied Tylissus, crouching low enough to peer in through one of the side rooms. It was empty but for a small cot in the corner of the room and several small piles of dust on the floor. He straightened up again and moved to look at the room radiating off on the opposite side. The same picture met him there.

‘Why would it smell like old books?’ It was a rhetorical question and Korydon got no response. ‘More to the point, why is this ship laid out in such a bizarre way?’

‘These may be the serfs’ quarters. Or may once have been,’ offered one of the squad, and Korydon nodded slowly. It made some sense that that might be the case; after all, the human element of a fleet’s complement did not require accommodation on the same scale as the massive post-humans.

‘Check all of these side rooms, then we press onwards to the bridge,’ he ordered. Hunkering to a crouch, he scooped up a handful of the dust on the floor. It had a faint ochre cast to it, almost as though it was rusted metal that had simply crumbled into its component atoms.

He watched it thoughtfully as it trickled to the ground between the fingers of his gauntleted hand. It was fine and powdery and had he not been wearing his helm, which filtered the air to keep it passably breathable, he would have inhaled it with every lungful of oxygen he took.

Korydon rubbed the dust between the fingers of his gauntlet, noting how it stained the blue ceramite with its ochre shade. Tylissus, who had completed his sweep of the side room, moved to stand beside him.

‘I am going to take a guess that all this dust might well be whatever is left of the former crew,’ he suggested in a low tone.

The sergeant looked up at him and then back down at the dust. There was something unpleasant about the thought. He had stalked amongst the eviscerated and beheaded dead on battlefields like a spectre of death and had never felt revulsion. But to think that the very air he was breathing was filled with desiccated remains made Korydon wrinkle his nose in disgust.

He got back to his feet and absently wiped his gauntlet down the length of his thigh, leaving a red streak.

When the squad reassembled they confirmed that there was nothing to be found within the side rooms at all. Korydon had expected nothing less and so this came as no real surprise to him.

Before he could give the order to press on, something caught his attention: a strange movement from out of the corner of his left eye. He turned to face the wall and recoiled as a thick trickle of blood began to run down its length. It dribbled its way in a perfectly straight line to the floor and then, incredibly, began creeping along its length, through the dust, towards the gathered Space Marines.

He stepped back into two battle-brothers who were standing directly behind him and with a loud clatter of armour, they crashed unceremoniously into the wall.

‘Sergeant?’ Tylissus was alert instantly, his blade unsheathed and at the ready. ‘What is it?’

‘There!’ Korydon pointed at the rivulet of ichor that had been oozing towards them. Only when he looked back, there was nothing there.

Tylissus looked. He shook his head and Korydon momentarily tasted shame.

‘My apologies, brothers. I thought I saw...’ He shook his head and gave a gruff, humourless laugh. ‘Nothing. My mistake. Something in this place is attempting to get to me. We press on.’

That was when the whispering started; and it was not just confined to the interior of Korydon’s skull. Wordless noises that ranged between hissing and cackling laughter reverberated throughout the small chamber. Every weapon came to the fore and every Star Dragons warrior tensed ready for an ambush that didn’t come.

The noise built to a crescendo, an almost deafening roar of sound that filled the densely packed room in which the Adeptus Astartes stood. Then the first of the figures rose from the dust on the ground. Coalescing with alarming speed, the ash flowed into a solid figure that was humanoid in shape but featureless. It wavered for a few seconds, tipping this way and that, balancing itself. Eventually it ceased its rocking motion and stopped dead.

A hideous gash split its head almost in two in a horrendous parody of a mouth. It held out a hand towards the Space Marines, a finger creating itself particle by painstaking particle. The digit extended and pointed towards Korydon.

You die now.

The words entered every battle-brother’s mind though none had been spoken, and Korydon waited no longer.

‘We will not,’ he replied, squeezing the trigger of his bolter. The shell lodged in the torso of the dust-thing, and it dipped its head to look at it. The slit mashed

itself together and with creeping horror, Korydon got the uncanny sense that it was laughing. It raised its head again.

You die now.

Seconds later, it detonated. The ash exploded outwards, showering the squad in red dust and eliminating the creature. Only now more of them were appearing, flowing upwards into the same humanoid form.

They inched forwards slowly as though movement itself was a difficult task. Korydon destroyed two more before bellowing the order to move through the chamber and leave through the other door. In short order, they were surrounded on all sides by the creeping wraiths. Bolt shells either passed through them or destroyed them in the way that Korydon's shots had with the first.

The creatures made no attempt to attack, merely continuing their slow approach towards the gathered Space Marines. They were silent but for the whispering sound that their movement generated. No more verbal threats came from them, but their very presence was menacing enough.

Arion brought his bolter up again as another creature moved towards him and let a shell loose. It disintegrated his would-be attacker and his entire suit of power armour was covered from head to foot in a layer of the fine dust. In a powdered rush, it poured through the grille of his helm. Much was instantly filtered out, but caught unaware by the suddenness of it, Arion was unable to activate the armour sealing around his grille. He swallowed a mouthful of the sediment whole.

Doubling over, he retched violently, even as his Adeptus Astartes physiology kicked in to deal with the foreign contaminant he had ingested.

Korydon cast him a sideways glance. 'Are you all right, brother?'

Arion put a hand up as though to wave away Korydon's concern and nodded his head vigorously. A few brief moments passed before he was back upright, defending himself once again.

Another creature exploded, then another... until the air of the chamber was filled with a cloying, obfuscating haze. Still the dust creatures made no apparent attempt to attack; they merely moved closer and closer. Then something inexplicable happened. Each one of the creatures threw its head back in a silent scream.

The whispering seemed to grow to a long, sibilant hiss. And then there was silence, and a huge puff of fresh dust as every last one of the creatures simply lost its animation. As one, they broke into a million specks which drifted lazily to the floor, swiftly coating it once again in an ochre carpet.

It had gone.

Whatever it was that Evander had spotted moving at the end of the corridor, it had vanished completely by the time the two squads and the inquisitor had reached the spot where it had been. It had, however, led them to a locked bulkhead, something they had not seen for the entirety of the time they had been aboard this foul vessel.

‘Ninth, this is Korydon. We have just encountered–’

The vox-transmission crackled and distorted, then broke off briefly. When it came back, there was doubt in Korydon’s voice. ‘We have just encountered *something*. I cannot be more specific than that, but whatever it was seems to have retreated for now.’

‘Any injuries, brother-sergeant?’ Iakodos asked the question and received a reply in the negative.

‘None, Chaplain. We will continue proceeding to the bridge, but we have received our first proof that this ship is definitely not dead. Recommend extreme caution for all. Whatever has control of this vessel must surely know of our presence. We will check in regularly. Any contacts to report?’

‘I thought...’ Evander began, then shook his head. ‘Nothing, Kor. I will keep you appraised of the situation.’

‘Understood.’

Korydon broke off the transmission. Evander released a mag-clamp that held a melta charge to his armour and made to begin setting it against the door. The Chaplain laid a hand on his arm and shook his head almost imperceptibly. Turning to the inquisitor, Iakodos stared down at the human through the red eye lenses of his skull-helm. When he spoke there was a carefully measured level of threat implicit in his tone.

‘Inquisitor Remigius, it is my belief that you have been withholding vital information from us regarding the nature of this vessel. If you wish for us to offer further aid and assistance to you, then you will tell us all that you know. Should you refuse to do so, then I will open a channel to Sergeant Korydon and advise him that we are aborting this mission.’

‘You don’t need to fear–’

‘Hold your wrath, sergeant.’ Iakodos was forced to put up a restraining arm to stop Evander from reaching for Remigius. ‘Inquisitor, please refrain from insulting my brothers. We are not demonstrating fear in this matter. Rather, consider that we are exercising extreme caution. You have not been truthful with us. It does not make for a conducive relationship. You can rectify that quite

easily.’

‘There is no need to speak to me as though I were one of your flock, Chaplain Iakodos,’ countered the inquisitor in his irritatingly superior tone. ‘I haven’t strayed from the path of true faith. There is no need whatsoever for you to lecture me on the error of my ways and insist upon guiding me back onto the straight and narrow. I probably have more faith in my body and mind than this entire contingent has put together.’

They were near blasphemous words, and brave ones for a lone inquisitor surrounded by twenty Space Marines to utter. Perhaps it was the realisation of this fact – possibly combined with the suddenness with which the circle around him closed ever so slightly – that made Remigius snarl suddenly.

‘Very well,’ he snapped. ‘The practical truth of the matter is this; I must get to the daemon in control of this ship so that I may speak the words and perform the rites necessary to banish it back to the darkness from whence it crawled. This sword...’ He rested his hand on the hilt of the weapon poking from the finely tooled leather scabbard he wore at his waist. ‘This is a weapon wrought for the destruction of the ancient evil that beats at the heart of this vessel. Hundreds have toiled in the course of its creation and hundreds more have been sacrificed to ensure its purity.’

With a flourish, he drew the sword from its scabbard and lay the flat of the blade against his forearm to show it to Iakodos. Gothic script looped its entire length, delicate and ornate. The litanies and the finely forged blade itself crackled with barely contained power. Remigius studied it with a strangely thoughtful expression on his thin face. ‘Many of my own people have died so that I might stand before you now and show you the fruit of their labours. They were, in a sense, *my* battle-brothers. I owe it to the memory of their names to complete their work.’

The inquisitor looked at Iakodos, who was quietly impressed despite himself. ‘You understand that, don’t you, Chaplain?’

‘I do, inquisitor. Very well, we will proceed. But I ask that you refrain from antagonising my brethren. There is no place for more tension on this mission.’

‘Sergeant! Look at that!’

The call came from a brother of the Blood Swords squad who had been standing behind the inquisitor. He pointed with his bolter to the wall opposite. Where once there had been clinically white, featureless walls of no character, there was now a creeping, spreading line of corrosion. It began where the wall met the floor and was moving slowly but perceptibly upwards in spidery lines.

Where it touched the substance of the wall, the pure white surface was visibly ageing, tarnishing before their eyes as though centuries of erosion were occurring in but a few seconds. The sterile coating of the corridor's walls flaked into little piles on the ground, and as the assembly watched the process, the lines seemed less like cracking, breaking metal and more like veins spreading across the skin of the ship.

A twisted smile flickered over Remigius's face and he sheathed the sword once again. 'Behold,' he said softly. 'The taint revealed. The presence of this weapon brings out the daemon's disquietude. Open the bulkhead, Sergeant Evander. We must hurry.'

All the earlier rage at the inquisitor seemed to be forgotten as the sergeant, with the aid of two more Space Marines, began to prime the melta charges.

'What can we expect to deal with once we pass through this door, inquisitor? What do you know of the nature of this daemon?' Iakodos kept his voice so low and calm that he seemed to be holding nothing but a normal conversation.

Cold, hard eyes looked up at the Chaplain and Remigius shook his head. 'If I knew that, Star Dragon, I could prepare you. Simply... be prepared. It is the best I can offer you. Be assured though that once this deed is done, the name of your Chapter and that of the Blood Swords will be elevated to a position of reverence amongst the Ordo Malleus.'

Aye, Iakodos thought as the party moved back out of the detonation zone. Whether we want that dubious honour or not.



III

‘All is well here. No further incursions.’

Korydon reported back to Evander and got nothing but a burst of static in response. ‘Arion,’ he said without turning. ‘Keep trying to raise Ninth.’

‘Aye, brother.’ Arion dropped back from his position at Korydon’s side and quietly began repeating his sergeant’s words on various vox frequencies.

Not for Third Scale the creeping repugnance of the ship’s inner rot. Since their encounter with the dust creatures, they had seen nothing else. The *Accursed Eternity* had taken on a more familiar aspect and their initial tension was beginning to lessen, although none of them were off their guard.

‘All is well here. No further incursions.’ Arion’s voice came across the vox-bead in Korydon’s ear. There had still been no response from Ninth and that bothered him greatly. A warrior of great honour and resolution, Korydon was not yet quite prepared to abandon his personal mission in favour of following Evander’s squad. The last contact they had received suggested that all was well with his brothers and this could simply be nothing more than a temporary communications glitch. He checked his retinal feeds for details on the current life signs of his distant brothers. That connection at least appeared to be working; all of Ninth Scale seemed to be at full health, their indicator runes green and solid. He did not have the data for the Blood Swords squad, but he felt confident enough that they would be fine.

‘We should reach the bridge in a few minutes,’ he said to his own squad.

There was no response.

Korydon turned around and both of his hearts leaped into his mouth. Where before there had been nine Space Marines behind him, now there was just one.

Arion stood opposite him, arms hanging loosely at his side, his head tipped slightly to the right as though he were carefully considering Korydon. His posture was bizarre and for the first time Korydon feared that one of his squad had been compromised.

His squad.

‘Arion, where are the rest of the squad?’

The Space Marine took a step towards the sergeant, who immediately raised his bolter, levelling it at his battle-brother. ‘Do not make me do this, Arion,’ Korydon said. ‘We have served together for many years. But if you are compromised, you will leave me with no choice. Now answer my question. Where are Ninth Scale?’

Arion stopped and stared down at the black tunnel of the bolter’s muzzle. He reached up and unclamped the seals of his helm. He removed it and it clattered to the floor. Korydon stared in disbelief. Where once his brother’s battle-scarred face had been there was now nothing but shaped dust.

You die now.

Taking several steps backwards, Korydon fired his bolter at the creature that had subsumed his brother and rapidly blink-clicked through to his own squad’s health readings. Arion’s reading was wavering between solid green and a blinking amber. Something of his brother remained, but it would not last. He hurriedly assimilated the rest of the data; Third Scale *were* here. They were alive somewhere, but he could not see them. Repeated calls to them on the vox were returning nothing at all.

The shot he had fired had hammered into Arion’s power armour, forcing the creation to take several staggering steps backwards. But just as it had somehow inhabited Arion’s armour, so it had gained access to his weapons. With a whispering laugh that sounded like leaves rustling in the wind, it raised its own bolter and prepared to return fire on the sergeant.

Korydon felt the impact of the shell on his armour before it exploded, defacing the aquila that decorated his chest. The sergeant stumbled under the impact and received a second shot that scarred the Chapter badge on his shoulder and sent ceramite chips spinning in all directions. Another shell whistled through his field of vision and glanced off his helmet. His head jarred backwards with a crack and he raised his bolter to fire back.

You die now.

‘You first.’

‘Sergeant Evander, this is Tyliissus. Sergeant Korydon and Arion... They have disappeared.’

The explosion had rocked the two squads but had performed its designated task admirably. The bulkhead door lay in molten fragments along the corridor. That the *Accursed Eternity* was a living ship was now a moot point. The veins of daemonic life that had begun to spread from the corridor were now threaded through the floors and ceilings. Some of them pulsed as though they carried blood through them. Ardashir had hacked into one of them with his combat knife and a sticky, tar-like ichor had oozed slowly from it. The fluid had burned a hole through the floor and the Space Marines had from that point onwards made a concerted effort to keep clear of it.

They had barely gotten through the destroyed door before Tyliissus’s transmission had been received.

‘What do you mean they have “disappeared”, brother?’ Evander was already on the cusp of anger and Tyliissus’s words did little to assist in the calming of his mood.

‘We were moving towards the bridge. Arion moved up to stand beside him and then they just vanished. As though they had never been here at all.’

Evander scrolled through his own data-feed and studied Third Scale’s readings. The icons for both Arion and Korydon had winked out. ‘That is impossible,’ he said, more to himself than to either Tyliissus or his own group.

‘No,’ said Inquisitor Remigius. ‘No, not impossible. Highly improbable, but possible nonetheless. Daemons have abilities we can only guess at and we are deep within the realm of a powerful entity. We believe that they can create...’ He paused, attempting to draw the picture in a simple manner. It was, strangely for him, not an act of condescension, but simply because the *Ordo Malleus* themselves had never been able to accurately describe such activity. ‘They can create pockets in the immaterium. Places that exist outside of our awareness that allow them to move unhindered, unseen, until they desire otherwise. Perhaps the sergeant has been pulled into such a trap.’

‘How, exactly, do we undo it? How can we bring our men back?’ Evander turned on the inquisitor, his eye lenses glowing a furious red.

The inquisitor gave a helpless shrug. ‘We can’t,’ he replied. ‘If I had more of my brethren with me, perhaps we might stand a chance of performing the ritual, combining our powers with enough force to pierce this sorcery. But I don’t, and with the greatest of respect, Sergeant Evander, we don’t have the time. There is every chance that the pocket will tear at any moment and your missing men will

return just as suddenly as they vanished, but whether they do or not, we have to move onwards. I'm sorry for your loss...'

This time, Iakodos was not anywhere near fast enough to prevent Evander from grabbing hold of the inquisitor. The Star Dragons sergeant slammed the old man into the wall of the ship causing the pulsing veins beneath the inquisitor's back to throb slightly. A snaking tendril crept forwards and looked for a moment as though it would wrap itself around the man. With a swift move, one of the Blood Swords sliced at the tendril with a blade. More of the tar-like ichor pooled on the floor, sizzling gently.

Remigius laughed, a wheezing sound that suggested it was not something he did well; a sound his vocal cords were unused to making. His face twisted in a snarl and his cold eyes fixed on Evander.

'I am an inquisitor of the Ordo Malleus, charged by the God-Emperor of Mankind with the destruction of daemons wherever I find them. You *dare* to lay hands on me? Release me, you barbaric fool,' he said, wiping spittle from the corner of his mouth. 'What good will killing me do other than to satisfy your own primitive bloodlust? Without me, *Sergeant* Evander, you stand no chance of getting off of the *Accursed Eternity*.'

'Brother.' Iakodos moved to stand behind Evander. 'Do as he says. Let him go.'

Evander held firm for a moment longer, then he snorted in disgust and released his grip on the inquisitor's shoulders. Remigius fell to the floor and got back up, dusting himself off in an exaggerated fashion. Several more tendrils snaked out from the wall, but before any of the Space Marines could deal with the threat, the inquisitor had unsheathed his sword and sliced through them.

And the ship *screamed*. It was a horrific echo of a thousand voices shrieking in unimaginable agony. It was shrill and Iakodos felt a warm trickle from his ears beneath his helmet as blood began to drip from them. The inquisitor dropped to his knees again, doubled over with his hands clamped to his ears. The sword clattered to the floor and another vein-ridden thing reached to grasp it, but Iakodos stood on it. The screaming stopped.

'Sergeant Evander? Did you hear that?' Tylissus's alarmed tone cut into the abrupt silence.

'We move on,' Evander said. He spoke into the vox. 'Yes, we heard it, brother. Continue your investigation, Tylissus. Our... charge suggests that Sergeant Korydon may yet return. Report back to me if you find anything. Do you understand me?'

‘Message received. Understood.’

The Space Marines began to move onwards and Remigius looked up at the Chaplain. He took his hands away from his ears and they were stained scarlet.

‘My tha—’

‘Do not give me your thanks, inquisitor,’ said the Chaplain in a cold, hard tone. He leaned down until his skull mask was inches away from the inquisitor’s face. ‘Your deceit is something that I was prepared to make an allowance for, given the circumstances. Your repeated insults to my battle-brothers, however... Trust me when I say that I can only stay Evander’s hand for so long.’

With those words, the Chaplain began to follow the others. Remigius shuddered, gathered up the sword and sloped along behind them.

Blood. Blood in his mouth. Its coppery taste was unwelcome and yet at the same time served to remind him that he was still alive, that the creature who had murdered and possessed his brother had not won the fight. With the toe of his boot, Korydon kicked aside the crumpled pile of power armour. Not even dust remained. He was alone here – wherever *here* was.

‘Korydon to Third Scale.’

His voice echoed around the corridor and went unanswered. Korydon cycled through the usual vox-channels but every single attempt to contact his brothers was met with crackling static. A further pass through the different frequencies saw no further response, but if he strained to listen, there was something. Half-heard whispers in the heart of the white noise that were indecipherable at first but which seemed then to resolve into distorted echoes of his own words repeated over and over. It was deeply unsettling.

Taking a moment to compose himself, he ran a self-analysis. The breastplate of his power armour was compromised from the bolter rounds it had withstood. Part of it had crumpled inwards, the buckled ceramite pressing against his fused ribcage. He had taken a hit to the side of the helm, much of which had been destroyed in the process and which had led to the facial injury that had put the blood into his mouth.

His retinal feed was completely broken. Not a single rune was visible and yet despite its uselessness, he could not bring himself to remove his helmet. He felt, although he could not eloquently vocalise the thought, that to expose himself fully to the air of the *Accursed Eternity* would be an open invitation to the denizens of the warp.

Keeping his bolter raised before him, Sergeant Korydon moved alone

through a mirror image of the corridor where he had been, unheard and unseen. He had become another one of the daemon-ship's many ghosts.

Evander's fury was great. He stalked the corridor, his bolter ready to fire in a heartbeat. The disappearance of his fellow sergeant, of both of his battle-brothers, weighed heavily on his mind and the anger he harboured towards the inquisitor who had been the cause of those losses knew no bounds.

'You should have killed him when you had the chance.' The voice entered his ear via his vox-bead but he did not recognise it. Perhaps one of the Blood Swords, he thought. He did not reply and neither did he turn around.

'You could see the very lifeblood pulsing through his jugular vein when you had him held up against the wall, couldn't you, Evander? How quickly and easily you could have snuffed out his existence, like a hurricane extinguishing a candle. His very being rested in the hands of a great and mighty Star Dragon...'

'Stop that.' Evander responded into the vox. There was no reply and none of his companions gave any sign that they had even heard him. He called for a communications check and received several responses, including from Tylissus. It did little to satisfy the growing sense of unease he felt. Whose voice had it been? Which one of his brothers dared to speak in such a profoundly disrespectful way?

'Third Scale are dead.' It was the same voice, as light and insubstantial as a bubble, and it sounded delighted with the news it brought.

'What?' This time, Evander stopped and whirled around. He spoke, not through the vox, but through the mouth-grille of his helm. 'Who said that?'

'Sergeant?' Ardashir moved ahead of the group to stand before him. 'Nobody said anything.'

'Someone spoke over the vox and told me that Third Scale...' Evander stared around the assemblage.

'But they are dead. Lost to your Chapter forever and gifted to the master of the *Accursed Eternity*. Third Scale are lost.' The voice came again and he stiffened.

Ardashir noticed the strange movement and took the initiative. He spoke softly into the vox. 'Tylissus, this is Ardashir. If you witness any other unusual occurrences, be sure to let us know immediately. Received?'

'Message received. Understood.'

'See, Sergeant Evander? They are fine. Control yourself, or do you want to defer command of this group to me?' Ardashir laid a hand on Evander's

shoulder. He felt great sympathy for Evander at the apparent loss of two of the Star Dragons, but he could not stand by when his brother-sergeant was starting to demonstrate such behaviour.

Their attention was snapped away from Evander's erratic mood swings, however, when a low growling noise drew their eyes ahead. A huge beast stood before them, effectively blocking the corridor. It had appeared from seemingly nowhere. It was a dark brown in colour, without fur. Beneath its thin skin muscles and sinew could be seen moving quite clearly. Eight eyes either side of its long snout burned blood-red in the glow of the Space Marines' gun-mounted lights, and its razor-sharp fangs dripped with saliva.

The daemon-beast snarled and crouched low, making ready to spring on the group.

Evander gave a single order which every Space Marine present acted upon obediently and without hesitation.

'Terminate.'

The order came a moment too late. The daemon-beast threw back its head and opened its muzzle. No sound came out, but all of the Adeptus Astartes cringed backwards as a psychic scream ripped through their minds. The inquisitor stumbled and fell, blood dribbling from his ears. The four Space Marines at the front of the group squeezed the triggers on their bolters to no avail. Even as the shells struck the creature, it vaporised. A flow of ethereal mist marked its passage as it tore between them, only to rematerialise at the back of the group where Remigius stood.

Iakodos leaned down and picked up the inquisitor bodily, flinging him backwards out of the way and to safety. Ignoring the faint sounds of protest that he heard, he raised his crozius above his head. The daemon beast shook its head, spittle flying. It bared its lethal-looking teeth again and crouched low. The muscles in its hind quarters bunched and rippled as it prepared to spring at the inquisitor.

Standing bold before the foul warp-spawned creature, Iakodos raised his skull-helmed head and crozius in defiance of its existence. He began to speak, his voice low at first but rising rapidly to a crescendo. His voice was rich and confident, carrying with it the experience of years of battle.

'I am Hektor Iakodos of the Star Dragons. I serve to live and I live to serve. With my staff of office, I mete out retribution and with my fist I deliver the justice of the Imperium. You have no place here, warp-spawn. Begone!' The eagle-headed tip of the crozius began to crackle with energy as he thumbed the

stud that brought its hidden power to the fore.

There was a wet burbling sound as though the daemon laughed in response to the Chaplain's words and Iakodos wasted no more breath. Lunging forwards, he brought the crozius around in a powerful swing. It struck the daemon-beast on the flank and it let out a screech of fury before melting into nothingness again. The trail of mist flowed some way down the corridor before it reconstituted again. The beast stood there, its devil gaze locked with the Chaplain's own.

With a strange shimmering, another of the same wicked-looking creatures came into being, as thick and stocky as the first. Unless Iakodos's eyes deceived him, there was another forming into solidity behind that one. He cursed loudly. The corridor was narrow enough that no more than four battle-brothers could stand abreast, limiting the advantage conferred by their superior numbers considerably. The Chaplain considered the first daemon. A thick, sticky ichor dripped from its hindquarters where he had struck it. Beneath his helm he smiled grimly. Never worry about limitations; focus instead upon the positives.

'It bleeds, my brothers,' he said, pointing an armoured finger at the creature. 'And if it bleeds, we can kill it.'

'You cannot kill it, Chaplain.' It was Remigius's voice. 'It is a daemon. Unless you can banish it back to the warp, the best you can hope for is to... inconvenience it.'

'Then inconvenience it we shall.' At his words and with him in the lead, the Space Marines pounded down the corridor towards the beast. At the same time, the thing uncoiled its muscles and sprang at them. It struck one of the Blood Swords warriors, Kayan, in the chest with its bear-sized front paws and knocked him off balance. Before Kayan could raise his bolter and shoot, the daemon's iron jaws had closed around his leg, and with a single bite it tore the limb clean off.

Kayan's armour fizzed and popped at the thigh joint where his leg had been severed, and two other warriors grabbed him under the arms, preparing to drag him free. The daemon, however, had other plans. With a toss of its head it discarded the disembodied leg and reared up onto its hindquarters, lashing out with its front legs. The wickedly sharp claws at the end of each massive paw gouged into Kayan's chest armour just above the midriff and cleaved through the ceramite. They pierced his ribcage and shredded his internal organs, and with blood bubbling from his lips, Kayan died in silence, stubbornly refusing to give voice to his suffering.

‘Korydon to Evander. Come in.’

Silence met his words.

‘Chaplain Iakodos, can you hear me?’

Static. Nothing but static. His vox was as good as useless to him. Korydon had walked the corridors of this unreality he found himself in and he had encountered nothing. No hostility, nothing. It was as though the whole of the ship was his and his alone.

As he moved, he became painfully aware of the dull ache across his chest where his fused ribcage had splintered. The scratches and gouges he had taken during the fight with Arion were already clotted and healing, but his chest hurt with every step he took. He cursed himself softly and took a moment of respite. His body felt hot, feverish as his implants kicked in to speed his healing and, despite its damage, his power armour infused his bloodstream with fresh stimulants, alleviating the pain.

After a few moments, he loaded a fresh magazine into his bolter and loosened his combat blade in its scabbard. Allowing himself to move at a pace which would grant his physiology a chance to heal his wounds, he continued onwards in the direction of the bridge. It was the only thing he could think of to do. Perhaps he would learn something if he got there.

Three more times the beast appeared and disappeared. The ground beneath the Adeptus Astartes was littered with the spent casings of bolter shells and their weapons were trained on the daemonic entity. The thing’s torso was torn in several places, more of the tar-like ooze leaking from each wound struck by the Space Marines. It was snarling and its eyes blazed with a fury that would not be quenched. Its torso heaved, rising and falling in a bizarre parody of breathing despite it surely having no need to perform such a mortal act.

‘We must press on, Chaplain,’ said Remigius, pushing his way with great difficulty through the throng of Space Marines. ‘I told you. You can’t kill it.’

‘Can you help us or not, inquisitor?’ Iakodos’s reply came through clenched teeth. ‘Because if you have nothing practical to offer...’

As a reply, Remigius took a book from his belt. The tome was small, but thick with yellowing, dusty pages. As he flicked through it, Iakodos could feel his ire growing. Periodically, the sound of another bolter round being fired at the daemon interrupted the comparative silence.

‘In your own time, inquisitor.’

The sarcasm was lost on Remigius, he was sure, but Iakodos made the

comment anyway. The inquisitor seemed in no hurry as he traced a spindly finger down the reams of text on the page. Then he smiled – not a pleasant smile – and pushed to the front of the group. Unsheathing the sword, he held it up in front of him. The daemon’s baleful stare moved to focus on it and once more, its powerful hind legs coiled, ready to spring.

In his musical lilt, Remigius spoke words that Iakodos could not understand and was almost entirely sure he would never *want* to understand. Stuttering syllables and guttural sounds burst forth from the inquisitor’s mouth and with a howl of fury, the daemon began backing up the corridor. Striding forwards in time with its retreat, Remigius was relentless. He spoke the banishment clearly and without stumbling. He knew, as did all of his order, that one mistake could prove fatal. There was a crackling nimbus of power, faint at first but building swiftly to a crescendo, around him. Jagged lightning sparked from the palms of his hands and he thrust one towards the daemon.

With a final howl of rage, the daemon seemed to suddenly contract, and then in a rush it exploded into nothing. No flesh, no blood... just nothing. It may as well never have been at all. Its fellows which had wavered between solid and insubstantial faded away as well.

Silence fell.

‘As I said,’ Remigius murmured, re-attaching the book to his belt and not even looking up, ‘we must press on.’

There was nothing to say in response to that and so nobody replied, until Iakodos finally spoke, his voice low and dangerous.

‘You are a psyker.’ It was a statement rather than a question. ‘And you did not think to tell us?’

‘Think of it rather as you did not think to ask, Chaplain.’

The Blood Sword died because that whoreson did not step in sooner and banish the daemon. Third Scale are dead, Evander. Gone. Remigius could have saved the Blood Sword, but he did not. He could have done that right from the start. But he waited. Too long. Much too long.

Third Scale are dead, Evander. Soon, you will join them.

Evander walked several paces behind the inquisitor, the voice in his head filled with loathing and anger. Occasionally, he would reach up and absently tap at the side of his helmet as though he could dislodge the treacherous thoughts that way. But whenever he tried, they just came back stronger than before.

‘Tylissus, this is Evander. Report.’

Static.

‘Tylissus, this is Evander. Are you receiving me?’ Despite himself, Evander could not help the rising tone of anxiety in his voice. ‘Tylissus, report back to me, now.’ Iakodos looked over at the sergeant, deeply concerned.

More static, but then, through the white noise, came the barely audible sound of Tylissus’s voice.

‘...sage received. Und... ood.’

Evander drew a shuddering breath of relief but started when he felt Iakodos’s hand rest lightly on his shoulder.

‘Let your concerns go, brother,’ said the Chaplain. ‘We are all shaken by the loss of young Kayan, but we must keep our focus. We cannot afford to lose any more of our brethren due to our own distractions. What is troubling you?’

‘Nothing. I am fine.’ Evander shrugged off the Chaplain’s touch, an action that would in other circumstances have drawn grave censure. Iakodos merely withdrew his hand and moved slightly closer to Evander than he had been, all the while murmuring soft litanies of faith in an effort to keep Evander’s mind focused.

It really did very little to help, other than add to the noise that was worming its way through Evander’s skull. His helm lenses bored into the inquisitor’s back and he wondered what it would feel like if he were to reach out and take the man’s neck in his gauntlets and wring it until he heard the satisfying sound of it snapping.

It would be the most satisfying thing you have ever heard, Evander. He has lied to you. He has kept secrets from you. He has caused the death of a brother Adeptus Astartes. And he still lives. Where is the justice in that?

Third Scale are dead, Evander.

The sergeant stopped walking and held his hands up to his ears. Iakodos immediately moved to press him against the wall, bringing his skull-helmed face in close.

‘I hear voices, Chaplain!’ Evander’s words came out in a rushed, panicked babble of sound. ‘They are telling me... suggesting that I... things I cannot let myself fall prey to. But it would be easy. So easy...’

‘Pull yourself together, Sergeant Evander.’ Despite the deep sympathy he felt for the unfortunate sergeant, Iakodos knew that he could not be compassionate. ‘There are no voices. This is all your imagination. The enemy are picking up on your weakness, on your failure to see past the darkness and feel the warmth of the Emperor’s light. See it, brother-sergeant.’

Iakodos turned his skull-helm away from Evander and reached for the strength of the God-Emperor. It came easily, as it always had. When he looked back, his voice had changed. The gently admonishing tone was gone, replaced by the hard practical Chaplain who had fought countless battles. ‘Cast off the daemonic witchery that binds you, brother. Cast it off with the purity of your faith. Take it. Mould it. Control it. Use it as your shield against this foul temptation.’

‘Third Scale...’

‘Third Scale are well. Tylissus reported back to you. Now show your spirit! Remind your men why it is that you above any other rose to take your current rank.’

The Chaplain’s words had a calming effect on Evander and he nodded slowly. He felt a faint whispering as though the voice would try to reach him again, but he used the mental image of the Emperor’s light as a focus. ‘Yes, Chaplain. Yes, of course. I apologise.’

‘Do not apologise, brother. Merely acquit yourself with honour.’

Releasing him, Iakodos let Evander shake himself down and resume his position at the head of the group.

‘We make speed for the enginarium,’ announced the sergeant. ‘We find this bastard daemon and we end this. For the Emperor. Fire and fury, brothers!’



IV

‘Evander, this is Korydon. Talk to me, brother.’

The futility of attempting to raise his battle-brother on the vox was beginning to exert its own pressure on the injured Space Marine. He did not understand what had happened to him but he had gone from believing he had somehow been separated from the others to believing that they had been separated from *him*. He didn't know if he was alive and they were dead or the other way around.

He had retraced his steps to the crossroads and headed in the direction the other squad and the Blood Swords had taken. He thought once that he saw them in the distance and had moved gladly towards them. They had moved towards him too, and then had simply disappeared.

His frustration was growing. Whatever had taken him, plucked him from his own existence and dropped him in this netherworld, was toying with him. Everything was tinged faintly with a soft violet glow, an unreality that he could not start to comprehend. He had considered the possibility that he was unconscious somewhere and so badly injured that he had dropped into healing stasis and was merely suffering some sort of nightmare.

It felt real enough, though.

Since Korydon, like all Adeptus Astartes, rarely required what was termed as ‘True Sleep’, his experiences of dreaming were extremely limited. His mind was so filled with endless reams of texts on xenos biology or weapon maintenance that simple dreams had no place in his resting thoughts. As such, it was easy enough to assume that that was what was happening to him. Simple enough, and strangely comforting. Being able to write off his situation as a dream was actually helping his focus.

For Korydon, the corridors of the *Accursed Eternity* remained empty. He encountered no more of the dust creatures. He was completely alone. It was almost as though he were the only living, breathing thing aboard the dead ship.

His footsteps resounded in a dull echo as he moved onwards towards the engine room. Every step he took thudded through his aching body giving him a fresh reminder of the pain he would have felt had he been denied his painkilling narcotics.

A sudden movement ahead caught his eye and he looked up eagerly. But it was nothing more than his own shadow. He uttered several expletives and took a moment to check the magazine in his bolter. He had one spare left.

He cast his eyes up and down the passageway he traversed even though he had long given up hope of seeing anything or anybody else. Unsurprisingly, there was nothing to be seen. He was quite categorically alone; something he had never been in the entirety of his service to the Golden Throne. He was not afraid, but it was definitely unsettling.

Whilst his attention was thus engaged, he entirely failed to notice the strange manner in which his shadow began to coalesce and reassemble itself. It was a thing of darkness: an inky blackness into which light fell, never to return, and it was tangible. It moved slowly towards Korydon and raised its shadow weapon, bringing it to bear on the unsuspecting Space Marine.

Things were no better for Evander and Ardashir. Their progress, impeded by the attack of the daemonic hound, or whatever it had been, was taking a turn for the extreme worse. The walls, no longer even attempting to look like a clinical ship interior, were quite literally alive. The tendrils that reached out and grasped at them were like lengths of sinewy muscle, tough and difficult to avoid. Whenever they were cut away, more of the black acid dripped from them.

Ardashir scowled beneath his helm as he hacked away yet another snaking vein and watched the pungent acid dissolve the blade of his combat knife into corroded, rusted metal. The second time he attempted to use the knife, it simply disintegrated into a thousand flakes of rust.

But the Space Marines were relentless and pressed onwards nonetheless. Every so often, one of the group would stop suddenly and turn to hack at another groping barb. Iakodos had insisted that the inquisitor walk in amongst the Space Marines rather than separately so that they could at least offer some kind of protection to him. His blessed blade was unsheathed and he had reluctantly conceded temporary ownership of it to the Chaplain. It seemed to be the only

thing that made the tendrils recoil without releasing any more of their destructive bile.

The next attack came far sooner than any of them anticipated. Without warning, half a dozen figures stepped from the walls. Ardashir saw them first, and they were so repugnant and vile – such things of horror – that he hesitated before firing. As big again as the Adeptus Astartes themselves, the humanoid shapes were walking horrors. Ardashir had seen men flayed alive, skin peeling from their bodies to reveal the twitching muscle, sinew and bone beneath, but these abominations were worse. In his mind, a flash of memory came to the fore – the recollection of an anatomy chart of the human body he had seen during his earliest training. The creatures looked like that, blue veins and pulsing arteries covering them in a horrific, crawling network.

No longer insensible with disgust, Ardashir thumbed the activation stud on his chainsword and turned to face the closest creature. The tungsten teeth of his blade whirred into life at his touch and he brought the weapon down in a cross-stroke across its right shoulder. It bit into the daemon and chewed through to the breastbone. Blood and marrow spattered across Ardashir and several others who also turned to face this new threat.

‘Keep going,’ the Blood Swords sergeant urged across the vox. ‘We will deal with this threat. No more time to waste, Evander. Get the inquisitor to the heart of the ship!’

‘I hear you, brother. Join us when you are finished.’

Despite his misgivings about sanctioning another split to the group, Iakodos agreed with Ardashir. The Star Dragons set off at a swift jog and Remigius was hard pressed to keep up with the punishing pace. The Chaplain could see more of the flesh beasts forming from the walls of the ship. The foulness of them stirred his anger and hatred, not all of which was directed at the daemons. For a fleeting moment, he *hated* Remigius. He hated the inquisitor and all his kind. He loathed the fact that the Ordo Malleus had such a hold over the Star Dragons Chapter.

Hatred. It was his cardinal weapon. The Chaplain allowed the smouldering fury to raise his ire. He stoked the flames of rage that burned in his heart, fuelling his desire to deliver retribution to the enemies of mankind. Once the fire caught, it would spill over to his brothers and they too would burn with righteous anger. The familiar weight of his crozius gave him a focus as they reached yet another locked bulkhead. His fingers closed around it and he drew it close to his chest. A litany fell from his lips and several of his battle-brothers picked up the

words and spoke with him.

A calmness descended. The choice had been a good one. Iakodos could feel the tension ebbing away, but the sense of readiness did not leave the assembly.

Evander shouldered his bolter as the others readied more melta charges in order to get through the next bulkhead that blocked their passage. By his reckoning, they did not have much further to go before they came to the enginarium. Once they were there, the Emperor alone knew what would be waiting for them. If what the inquisitor had hinted at was even remotely correct, it would likely be the end of them all.

‘Ardashir, report.’ Evander used the temporary lull in proceedings to check in with the Blood Swords sergeant.

‘We are keeping them at bay,’ came the strained reply. Ardashir’s words were terse, his voice that of a man in the midst of battle. ‘They do not regenerate, but they keep coming. It is like the *Accursed Eternity* can produce an endless supply of these things. Whatever it is that you are doing, you need to do it faster, brother.’

‘Fine words, Ardashir. I am in complete agreement.’

Evander’s earlier urge to grab the inquisitor by the throat and squeeze the life out of the man’s body had subsided, but he still felt a gnawing hate in his gut whenever his eyes fell on Remigius.

You could snap his windpipe with no difficulty at all. The repercussions of murdering Remigius will be far less severe than what waits for you behind this door, Brother-Sergeant Evander.

He knew doubt then. Perhaps they should...

The melta charges detonated with an echoing *boom*, distracting his attention and splintering his thoughts of retreat into a million shards.

Korydon had no time to avoid the bolter shell as it thundered into the ceramite of his armour. The unexpected attack knocked him from his feet, sending him flying several metres backwards. In its already weakened state, it would not take much more to render his battle-gear entirely useless and it was this thought, more than any other that got him back to his feet again.

His breath came in a ragged, wet rasp now; the damage he had sustained to his ribcage was considerable and he intuitively knew that he had a punctured lung. His enhanced physiology was compensating, but it was at a cost to the rest of his strength. Still it wasn’t enough to stop him from hurling himself with full force into his attacker.

He passed right through it, crashing into the wall. As he did so, he was sure that he heard the sound of a hollow laugh of derision.

You cannot fight what is not there, Korydon.

Had that been a voice, or his own thoughts? He no longer knew – or cared – which it was. The black shadow flickered and wavered in front of his eyes, like a poorly-crafted hololithic image. He got back to his feet again, but it was not there. The shot to his torso had been quite real. He had felt the pain of impact quite solidly and the copper taste of blood in his mouth was no illusion.

You cannot fight what is not there, Korydon.

Had his own mind been so warped and twisted by this vessel that he was now even imagining his own pain? Was it possible for him to imagine his own death? A distant memory, long forgotten, resurfaced in his skull. It was of himself as a child, before he had been given over to the recruiting sergeants of the Star Dragons. Speaking to his mother, asking her a question that she had never been able to answer.

‘If I die in my dreams, does that mean I will never wake up?’

It was the type of philosophical question that his mother, a menial worker, had neither the inclination nor the education necessary to discuss. She had ruffled his hair and smiled indulgently at him. ‘When you are one of the Emperor’s angels,’ she had said to him, ‘you will find all the answers you seek.’

That had been a lie. There were still many things that Korydon questioned, and the memory of this question was now the thing that would save his life.

‘Awaken, Korydon,’ he said, and taking his combat blade he drove it into his own chest.

His world exploded.

I see you.

He is in some kind of trance, some sort of dream state that he cannot possibly hope to comprehend. He is at one and the same time dead, dying and alive. It is a non-state. Everything feels heavy, oppressive and stifling. His own power armour threatens to overwhelm him with its impossible weight. The agonising pain in his chest flares like fire spreading across dry grassland.

His eyes roam desperately, seeking, searching, hunting for something that will tell him what is going on, and they lock with those of another Space Marine. A matrix of exquisite crystal reaches from the gorget of his armour. A psyker.

But we brought no psykers.

His livery, whilst the blue of all witch-kin, is not the rich cobalt of the Star

Dragons. It is softer, paler, more indigo than blue.

I do not know you.

He reaches out a hand as if to touch the psyker, but his gauntlet passes straight through. Another ghost. Another daemon. Not to be trusted. And yet...

You do not know me.

Are you my past? Present? Future?

Despite his misgivings, Korydon takes a step closer.

Time is irrelevant. Past, present, future... All these things are the same and yet different.

A typical psyker response. Half riddle, half philosophy and devoid of any sense at all. Korydon's fists curl in impotent fury.

Though he cannot see it, he knows that the other figure is smiling. He does not know how he knows, but he does. Perhaps it is in the stance, in the way that the shoulders shift position, or in the way that the helmeted head twists slightly. The voice, when it returns, is filled with an emotion he does not recognise and understands even less. It is pity.

For you, they are all the same, brother.

With a shudder, with a jolt of awareness, Korydon wakes. He is lying on the floor of the corridor in which he fought Arion. His brother's armour is still there; he is still naught but dust. But there is no sign of the rest of his squad.

Every movement brings fresh pain. Every shred and fibre of his being screams as he moves, but he moves anyway. What else can he do?

In the distance, there is the faintly resonating boom of an explosion. He is enough of a veteran to know the sound. It is the echo of melta charges. His brothers. His twin hearts gladdening at the thought, he hurries, as much as his battered body will allow, towards the sound.

It is then that he knows, with absolute clarity, what it is that they face behind the final door. His desperate dash to rejoin them becomes a race against time, a race that he has no hope of ever winning.

If only he realised the futility of it he would never push himself harder than he has ever pushed himself before. But then, if he knew the truth of it he would not try at all. Giving up is not in Korydon's nature. It would not end well.

Time has him in its clutches and will never willingly release him. He understands. He can grasp the concept of time immaterial without really knowing how the knowledge comes to him. This is where he has always been. This is where he will always be.

He belongs to the Accursed Eternity.



V

This deep into the heart of the ship, lights were flickering; fizzing and popping as though something was racing across the circuit and causing it to fail. As the Star Dragons, once more surrounding the inquisitor, passed by, the lights flared momentarily into blinding brilliance, causing the Space Marines to turn their heads away, before they faded once again to a dull and slightly pulsating ebb. The sensors in the helmets of the Star Dragons took several moments to balance the light levels out again.

Evander, still plagued by occasional whispers that suggested many glorious ends to the inquisitor's life, had fallen into a sullen silence; it was palpable, a dark mood that was now seeping through the Star Dragons like a slow poison. Evander's fingers occasionally clenched into a fist and then slowly unclenched again as he battled against the words in his mind.

'You should stay here, brother.'

The voice startled him and he looked up into the skull mask of the Chaplain. Shaking his head, Evander did not speak his reply, but in the cant of his head and the set of his shoulders, his refusal was evident.

'You are not yourself. We can all feel it. You are becoming an increasing danger to the rest of the squad, not to mention yourself. Your faith, brother. Where is your faith? Did you leave it behind in the corridor? If you are going to continue to lead this mission, then you must pull yourself together.' Iakodos struck where he knew the sergeant would hurt the most and was rewarded by the other Adeptus Astartes physically recoiling from him.

'He will bring our doom upon us, Chaplain.' The words were spoken so softly that Iakodos wondered if he had imagined them. He leaned a little closer

and tapped his helmet, indicating that the sergeant should switch to a private vox-channel.

‘Who will, Evander?’

‘Remigius. He leads us to a fate *worse* than death. We should abort the mission.’

‘We cannot do that, brother. We swore an oath to serve the Ordo Malleus...’

‘Damn them!’ Evander raised his voice. ‘I have no idea what we owe them, but we do *not* owe them the lives of so many good men from two Chapters!’

‘We are almost at the enginarium. Whatever waits for us there will soon be brought to an end. The inquisitor has the means and he has the tenacity. As to the reasons why we agreed to take this mission...’ The Chaplain’s hand closed around his crozius and his skull mask turned towards Remigius. ‘There are some debts that cannot be ignored. In time, brother-sergeant, you will learn. For now, focus on the mission. The moment he strikes, we will withdraw. On that, you have my word.’

Evander shook his head grimly. ‘It will be too late by then, Chaplain. Far too late.’ He spoke the words with a grim finality and clicked off the vox-channel leaving Iakodos wondering just how prophetic the sergeant’s words actually were. The next vox exchange that occurred did little to settle the uncertainty roiling in his gut.

‘Evander, this is Ardashir.’

‘Report.’

‘The enemy are quiescent once again,’ replied the Blood Sword. ‘No more are attacking.’ He sounded uncertain that this was actually the case and Iakodos did not blame him. There was so little they understood about this entire situation that it was next to impossible to predict what would happen next.

‘Casualties?’

The pause stung and Iakodos dreaded the answer. Already they had lost one of Ardashir’s squad. For a Chapter that were already dwindling, further deaths would be a harsh blow.

‘One dead, three injured, but nothing that we cannot manage.’

‘Hold your position there. Third Scale, begin making your way back to the corridor and head towards the enginarium. We are going to need all the back-up we can muster.’

‘Message received. Understood.’

The exchange, grim though its content had been, seemed to have bolstered Evander’s resolve and the sergeant’s back straightened noticeably. Iakodos laid a

hand briefly on his battle-brother's shoulder and nodded once.

The door to the main deck loomed before them and Remigius pushed his way through the warriors to stand before them. He raised his head up and down, then moved to place his hand on the door. He nodded vigorously.

'Yes. This is where we need to be,' said the inquisitor, speaking for the first time in a while. He retrieved the sword from Iakodos and the dormant runes that ran along its length burned ferociously. 'The daemon is waiting for us. Let's not disappoint it.'

The door opened easily. There was no need for melta charges or violent ingress of any sort. It simply shuddered and slid slowly apart, old hydraulics and machinery grating as though they had forgotten how to operate. Iakodos and Evander stepped up to take point, shrouding the inquisitor and his sword from view. For once, the inquisitor didn't complain. All his bluster and bravado seemed to be turned inwards. There was no sign of fear on his face, only the kind of distracted expression that suggested he was concentrating hard on the task ahead.

'Move on,' said Evander softly, and as a unit the Star Dragons crossed the threshold of the enginarium. Almost immediately, every bolter and every blade came to bear as movement caught their attention.

Ghostly figures drifted in front of their eyes, colourless things without true shape or form but with the size and build of Adeptus Astartes. They moved as though in a trance, seemingly without direction or purpose. On second, closer study, that was incorrect. There was definitely a purpose to the way they interacted. They stopped, they spoke soundlessly to one another and they continued as though uninterrupted. No markings of any kind could be made out on their largely transparent armour. And there were others, barely visible shapes that were far smaller. Servitors. Humans. They all moved around the busy deck.

Iakodos did not believe in ghosts. They had featured heavily in the tales of his childhood – a distant memory now – but his time in service to the Golden Throne had taught him that spirits and ghosts were not real. Daemons and creatures from the warp, they were tangible things that could be put down with bolter and chainsword or, at the very least, the right words from those trained to deal with them. But ghosts?

And yet here they were, right in front of his eyes. They were translucent, silvery grey and wispy things that moved endlessly around the enginarium. Not one of them took any notice of the Star Dragons and the inquisitor; they seemed

intent on their task. All around him, Iakodos could hear the sounds of muttered litanies as his battle-brothers sought to reassert their faith, which had been shaken to the core so many times already during the course of this mission.

Apart from the spectres, or whatever they were, the enginarium was as deserted and forgotten as the rest of the *Accursed Eternity* had been. Taking a few steps forwards to the top of a flight of stairs that descended to the main hub, Iakodos raised a gauntlet. It passed through the misty form of one of the ghostly Adeptus Astartes. He met no resistance as his hand scythed through. The shape simply shimmered, wavering briefly before reforming and continuing about its business as though nothing had happened.

There was no clear sign of aggression but all those present maintained a close eye on the moving figures and a tight grip on their weapons. As they descended into the central area of the enginarium, it became evident that there were still more of the ghosts, seated at stations. Here a servitor slaved to the communications terminal. There a Space Marine surveying an oculus that showed nothing at all.

‘What *are* they?’ Evander’s words gave voice to the question that was on every set of lips. Before Iakodos could respond, Remigius spoke.

‘Echoes of the past,’ he said, and to Iakodos’s surprise and consternation there was an audible tremble in his voice. ‘We are seeing the last living moments of this ship. The Chapter who once called this vessel theirs, before it became the *Accursed Eternity*...’

‘To which Chapter do they belong?’ Iakodos looked more closely. There were symbols etched into the instruments but they were old, corroding and faded, and entirely illegible. The Chaplain took a few more paces and leaned forwards in an effort to make out the symbol he saw ingrained in the surface of the cogitator. He could not make it out at all.

‘We have never been fully certain,’ responded the inquisitor, that same tremor in his tone betraying his fear and anxiety. ‘We are sure that they were loyal to the Golden Throne, however; that a series of complicated events overtook them, and that ultimately they succumbed to the warp.’

‘Succumbed? Or perhaps chose to succumb. Consider that possibility, inquisitor.’

It was a new voice and it was filled with venomous loathing and endless hatred. A voice so sharp it could slice through metal. Its timbre was a sonorous rumble and it was pitched at a peculiar frequency. The inquisitor shook his head as blood began to run slowly from his ears. Iakodos suspected that had he and

his men not had their helmets on, they would also be suffering similarly.

Even as he watched, the walls of the enginarium began to buckle and distort, ripples passing across their unblemished surfaces as though someone had dropped a rock into a calm lake. Everything shimmered and took on a wavering unreality. The inquisitor, reaching up to wipe the blood from his ears, bellowed through the re-breather mask as loudly as it would allow. Any nervousness was gone, and despite his inherent dislike and distrust of the man, Iakodos found himself deeply impressed by the depth of conviction in the words.

‘I am Shadrach Remigius, inquisitor of the Ordo Malleus by the grace of the God-Emperor, and I demand that you show yourself and meet your end at my hands.’

‘In such a rush to die, inquisitor?’ There was an insatiable, slaving hunger in the voice. Iakodos could not say how he knew the thing, whatever it was, thirsted for blood, but he sensed it nonetheless.

Remigius continued, seemingly undaunted. ‘You are an abomination and you are cursed. I am sworn to end your existence and I will do so.’

‘I will snuff you out in a heartbeat.’ The amusement was gone and the daemonic voice had changed pitch. There was now an underlying growl to it that accentuated its hunger. ‘You have nothing that can defeat me. Soon, the only sounds you will hear will be your own bones crunching in my grasp and the sound of your blood as it drips down to feed my master’s unslakable thirst.’

The inquisitor inclined his head, then raised it again, and Iakodos could see the passion in his eyes.

‘I do have something, creature. I have your name.’



VI

The pain had stopped long ago but the memory of it still lingered. As Korydon made his way through the ship, he became aware that he was still over-compensating for the pain in his leg, despite his awareness that it was healing even as he moved. He had no other option but to continue. Despite the increasing knowledge that his efforts would get him no further, it was simply not in his nature to give up.

Occasionally, he made a concerted attempt to raise his brothers on the vox but received nothing but static for his efforts. Once, he thought he heard a voice and had answered it gladly, but he had been forced to conclude that his own mind was beginning to play tricks on him. The idea had occurred to him that this entire situation was nothing more than an elaborate hallucination, in which case there was nothing he could do but ride it to its conclusion.

Whatever that conclusion might ultimately be.

He pressed forwards. The enginarium could not be far now; but then he had been thinking that for a while. Hours, perhaps. Or it could only have been minutes. Time ceased to have any meaning when you never seemed to get any further forwards.

His movement seemed slightly impaired now and he tried to coax himself past the memory of his injuries and into a better mental space. It was then that he noticed the first signs of corrosion on his blue armour.

Pausing in his determined stride, Korydon glanced more closely at one of his thigh plates. Sure enough, there was a hint of degradation there, as though it were old and uncared for. It was something that only happened to a warrior who neglected his armour, or to those who died in battle and whose bodies were

never recovered.

But such was the design and solidity of the Adeptus Astartes' wargear such corrosion did not happen for decades, unless it were in an environment in which the process was hastened. He had not been here for decades, so he had to assume the latter.

'The sooner we get off this ship, brothers,' he muttered to the empty air beside him, 'the better.'

Korydon's armour and body were withstanding the effects of his predicament. His mind was not faring so well.

Iakodos had never been in such close proximity to a daemon of this power before. He had faced them on the field of battle but they had always been small and insignificant things, foul and bloodthirsty certainly, but easily defeated with faith and fire. This thing, this mighty horror that was forming in front of him, was anything but insignificant.

The first sign of its manifestation was a strong scent of coppery blood in the air, as though a body had been freshly butchered. Iakodos and the Star Dragons took up positions beside the inquisitor, ready to fire as soon as there was something to actually fire upon.

'Lower your weapons,' said the inquisitor. There was firm resolve in his stance. 'They will only stoke the daemon's wrath.'

'We are sworn to protect you,' retorted Evander, and Iakodos noted that the words were spat rather than spoken. It was clear that the sergeant's urge to kill the inquisitor was still strong. 'And we will do that,' Evander continued, 'for the honour of our Chapter.'

Evander shifted the weight of the bolter in his grip and whether consciously or not, it ended up with the muzzle pointed directly at Remigius. Iakodos stepped forwards and nudged it discreetly away.

'There is a lust to kill in you, Adeptus Astartes.' It was the daemon's voice again and it broke the tension of the moment. 'I approve of this. My master will approve of you. You may bargain for your life with that bloodlust.'

'Show yourself, daemon,' said Remigius. 'Show yourself so that we may end this charade.' He casually shook the sword in his hand and Iakodos stared at it. The runes that had been burned into the carefully crafted blade were now glowing with a hateful red light. Eldritch lightning crackled along its edges as it responded to the presence of...

...still nothing. Only the same powerful scent of fresh blood and the images

of a body-strewn battlefield it evoked. In his mind's eye, despite the urgency of the situation, Iakodos recalled his last deployment. He remembered with absolute clarity the aftermath; he had walked the ruins where the dead and dying had lain, bringing the words of the Emperor to those beyond the Apothecary's aid. It stirred his ingrained desire to fight. Yet he struggled against it. It would be too easy to fall prey to such a weakness. His judgement would be impaired.

He had little time to linger on it because with a sudden, violent shudder, the *Accursed Eternity* lurched hard to starboard. They all stumbled and the inquisitor lost his balance completely, tumbling to the ground. The sword fell from his grip and clattered to the floor.

'The blade! Recover the blade!' Remigius's scream cut through the calm resolve he had previously demonstrated.

'Why, certainly.' The daemonic voice was filled with amusement.

Iakodos did not know what he had expected from the manifestation of such a daemon, but he had not expected the sudden, raw aura of power that filled the enginarium. He felt an overwhelming urge to turn to those around him, take out his anger on them and smite them where they stood. But Iakodos was a Chaplain. His faith in the Emperor was unshakeable and all of his years of service overrode his basic, primal urges.

'Brothers, control your emotions!' The Chaplain bellowed the order to the few brothers who had not withstood the mental assault. They were drawing their blades or aiming their bolters, turning the weapons on their own kin.

Appalled at the lack of control that his brothers were demonstrating, Iakodos strode to the closest. He pulled back his clenched fist and struck his brother squarely in the centre of his helmet. 'Orestes, stop this. Remember who you are, brother.' He flung the dazed battle-brother towards Evander who still wavered between pointing his bolter at the inquisitor and the swirling mass of particles that was taking shape before him. 'Sergeant, control your squad or I will take over the command of this mission. Get your men into a semblance of order now.'

Not waiting to see whether or not Evander complied, Iakodos strode over and dragged Remigius to his feet. The inquisitor's eyes were transfixed by the coalescing apparition. Iakodos turned his head to look up on the daemon for himself and was staggered by its immense size. What had, mere seconds before, been a swirling mass of intangibility, was now quite visible.

Twice as tall again as the largest of the Star Dragons, bigger even, perhaps, than one of the Chapter's Dreadnoughts, the daemon burst into full corporeal form as though it had torn its way into reality through nothing more substantial

than paper. Its entire body was a uniform shade of blue and almost translucent, rippling as though warp tides ebbed and flowed just beneath the skin. Its lower limbs were heavily muscled and even the tiniest movement was traced in sinew beneath the surface. Its forearms ended in long and strangely delicate fingers that were tipped with lethal-looking claws. Vast wings, presently folded tightly against its back, sprang from its shoulders. Iakodos suspected that if the daemon were to unfurl them, they would be too big for the confines of the enginarium.

His eyes travelling upwards, Iakodos stared at the two heads of the creature. Avian, with a wicked beak, its eyes burned with something he could not relate to. It was not the hatred of a Space Marine for his enemy, but something unfathomably complex.

‘Kill it,’ the Chaplain said in a hoarse voice. ‘Evander... We must kill it!’

Evander had regained control of his senses and once he had begun issuing orders the rest of the Star Dragons slowly came out of their semi-daze. As a unit, they stepped forwards and opened fire simultaneously. Every bolter shell impacted on the daemon’s scaly body, but none of the direct hits seemed to have any effect.

‘You humans are pathetic creatures. Always so keen to die,’ the daemon said. It stepped forwards, the ground shaking beneath its tread. In a single move it swiped a clawed hand towards the closest Space Marine, impaling him on the end of one of its claws. It turned and flung the unfortunate warrior towards the wall at the far end of the enginarium. Orestes struck the wall with a sickening crack of bone and slumped to the ground, blood surging so quickly from the gouge in his chest that there seemed no way his constitution could hope to withstand it. But there was no time to check if Orestes would live or die. If he lived, he would be useless to them right now. If he was dead then there was nothing that could be done.

Another round of bolter fire sounded as the Star Dragons attempted to vanquish their enemy. Two battle-brothers pressed forwards, their chainswords roaring in hungry anticipation. They were cast back, dashed against the wall as easily as Orestes had been as soon as they got within a few metres.

‘This is not your fight, sons of the Imperium. But I will never turn down such sport. If you wish to die at my hand, then I will not stop you.’

The daemon leaned down and took up the blade that the inquisitor had wielded. It sparked ferociously in its long fingers, red fire burning down the length of the weapon’s blade. Though it growled as the fire curled around its flesh, the daemon seemed otherwise unaffected. There was a stench of burning

meat as it raised the sword to eye level and studied the weapon closely. Its burning eyes considered the weapon's design and the runes burned into its steel.

'An amateur attempt at best, mortal,' it said, directing its comments towards the inquisitor. 'Pathetic at worst.' Without skipping a beat, without even turning its heads, it flung the sword away and it speared through Evander's torso. The sergeant cried out in pain at the sudden impact and toppled over backwards. He lay still for a few heart-stopping moments before slowly sitting back up with a groan, the sword having been stopped in its path through his body by his now-cracked ceramite plate and heavy power pack. He had sustained a severe injury, but with an Apothecary's attention he would live.

Momentarily abandoning his place at the inquisitor's side, concerned far more with Evander's well being than the squeaky, stuttered rage that came from Remigius, Iakodos helped the sergeant to his feet and pulled the sword from his belly. It freed with a sickening *squish*, the blade smeared in blood. The Chaplain voxed both the Blood Swords and Third Scale to make all haste to the boarding torpedoes that had brought them to this place.

'This is Sergeant Ardashir. Message received. Understood.'

There was no response from Third Scale. Iakodos voxed them again. The Chaplain felt a sudden surge of anxiety for Korydon's squad. He had been so caught up in the unfolding drama that he had temporarily put the other sergeant's disappearance to the back of his mind.

'Third Scale, report in!'

'Message received. Understood.'

Iakodos's relief gave way to sudden doubt. He had received nothing but that response from Tylissus for some considerable time. There was no time to linger on the concern, however. They would hold this thing off for as long as possible as they made their retreat. Then he would determine Korydon and Third Scale's fate. He felt increasingly certain that it would not be a good one.

The daemon was massive, so huge that the walls of the enginarium kept it largely contained, preventing it from moving much further forwards to attack. The Space Marines used this to their advantage, peppering it with more rounds from their bolters and bolt pistols. But the shots were little more than a distraction, nothing seeming capable of penetrating whatever warp trickery protected it.

'You said that the sword would end this daemon, inquisitor.' Iakodos was long past pleasantries and cordiality. He snarled at the desperate-looking Remigius even as he turned to face the daemon, his hands gripped tightly around

the haft of his crozius. ‘That does not look to me like the face of defeat!’

Remigius shook his head, seemingly lost for words. His voice recovered enough to stutter out an explanation. ‘It was designed to defeat the daemon at the heart of this vessel. It looks...’ The inquisitor stared up at the daemon. ‘Its appearance. Exactly as we had come to understand. It is everything it should be. The sword was perfect. *Perfect!* The situation is somehow wrong.’

‘Well done, inquisitor. It appears that you have caught me out!’ The daemon ceased its snarling at the inquisitor’s words. With a *pop*, a sudden inrush of air, the creature decreased dramatically in size. One head folded in upon itself in the most hideous fashion, the other moving in a sickening way to a more central position.

‘That shape was a memory,’ it said. ‘A guise that the former – how shall we put this – *controller* of this vessel wore. It seemed the most appropriate way to greet you.’ Its sharp, intelligent eyes fixed on the inquisitor.

‘The blade,’ moaned Remigius, wringing his hands together in horror. ‘The blade must have been forged incorrectly. Such a careful process... One error and everything is wrong. This mission–’

‘This mission,’ said Iakodos furiously, ‘is killing my battle-brothers. We are withdrawing from this fight.’ With Evander down, he had made the decision to take over command of the mission.

The Chaplain turned his head to the inquisitor, his red lenses glowing. For a fleeting moment, to the inquisitor’s increasingly desperate mind, the Space Marine looked every bit as demonic as the thing in front of them had been mere moments before. Now, it was standing there, half its previous size and apparently preening its wings in affected disinterest. No longer too big for the confines of the enginarium, it could attack at any time.

‘Brothers, fall back. We are retreating.’ Iakodos ordered.

‘No! Wait!’ Remigius leaped forwards and grasped the Chaplain’s arm. ‘Let me at least try the banishment. It is a daemon of the Chaos god of change! This could be a double-bluff. Give me a few moments more. Just hold it at bay for as long as it takes me to perform the necessary rites to invoke the power of its name! Let me try that one last thing, then we can retreat! It is your *duty*, Chaplain!’

The heads of the rest of the squad turned to Iakodos, awaiting his orders. Evander was stumbling, but on his feet. The injury had clearly injected sense back into him because his bolter was very firmly trained on the daemon. He flipped the weapon to semi-automatic and opened fire. As before, every shell

impacted harmlessly against the daemon, but this time instead of clattering uselessly to the ground, they were repelled by the thing's invisible defences. Several shells were fired straight back in Evander's direction and only by throwing himself to the floor did he escape their impact. They struck the wall behind him, detonating one after the other. The damage to the walls of the ship repaired itself even as the Space Marines watched.

'How is that possible?' Evander voiced his disbelief.

'This is my ship,' said the daemon, its tone almost conversational. 'I can shape it as I wish. I can shape myself as I wish and that extends beyond my body to the vessel I inhabit.'

Its attention seemed largely focused on the inquisitor now. Remigius had dropped to the floor and was drawing a number of incomprehensible runic shapes on the floor with the tip of his blade. The runes were being drawn in Evander's own blood and the arterial red sigils stood out on the hard, metal deck.

'What are you doing, inquisitor?'

Remigius didn't answer and the daemon advanced, pausing as it encountered another round of covering fire from the Space Marines. It stared at them in irritation and thrust out a hand. Instantly, the walls of the enginarium came to life in much the same way as they had done in the corridor. But no corpses tore free from the walls this time. Instead, disembodied arms stretched from the skin of the daemon-ship and grasped blindly for them. For the first time, Iakodos noted that the ghosts on the deck had stopped moving. They were still, as though someone had paused a hololith in the middle of playback. Perhaps, he thought wildly as he struck at the reaching limbs with his crozius, the daemon only has strength enough to manifest one aspect of this madness at a time.

'What are you *doing*, inquisitor?' There was a strange catch in the daemon's voice and it stepped closer again to Remigius who was scribbling frantically. All the while, inaudible to human ears but perfectly clear to the enhanced aural sense of the Space Marines, he was muttering words in an unfamiliar language.

'Your time is at an end, daemon of Tzeentch,' said the inquisitor as he finished his work. 'With this sword, I could not defeat you. But with this weapon and with the one true word I have at my command, I can banish you back to the heart of the warp.'

With that said, he began to speak the guttural words he had been uttering before. He used the sword to help him back to his feet and raised his head to stare the daemon directly in the face. Iakodos felt an ethereal wind whipping up in the enginarium and despite the distraction of his own battle could not help but

watch the unfolding events.

‘I name you, daemon,’ said Remigius, his voice barely a whisper. ‘Mortal man may know you by the name Fateweaver, but now I invoke the true power of the name which binds you.’

He slammed the blade of the sword down in the centre of the runes he had hastily drawn. A glaring white light spewed forth from the tip of the weapon, boiling around the wards on the deck and around the inquisitor.

It was so bright that Iakodos had to turn his eyes from it. The wind rose to a crescendo of howling and he could not hear the rest of the words that the inquisitor spoke. Then, with a primal scream of terrible rage and agony the daemon dropped to its knees. It buried its bestial head in its claws and roared its terrible fury. It was a sound that caused every hair on Iakodos’s body beneath his armour to stand on end. It was horrific. Yet again, the Chaplain felt blood trickling from his ears. The power of a daemonic name to harm extended far beyond its bearer, it seemed.

The old inquisitor for his part was channelling every last shred of his psychic power through the force sword. The light still roiled from the runes on its blade although it was no longer blinding. Iakodos could see, from the way that Remigius’s body was shaking that he could not possibly support himself for very much longer. But the grasping hands had stopped and been absorbed back into the walls, and the daemon seemed far too concerned with its own horrific and impending demise.

‘This is our chance, Chaplain.’ Evander’s voice whilst wracked with pain was clear and firm. ‘We should leave. Now.’

‘The inquisitor has to finish the ritual. We cannot just walk away.’

‘That thing said that this was not our fight. We cannot harm it. What good can we do by staying here? Look at him, brother. The inquisitor is giving his life for this. He cannot survive that much power. We have done our duty. We should go whilst we still can.’

Evander was right. The inquisitor’s face was a vision of exquisite pain, his psychic power tearing the very essence of his being free. The daemon had stopped screaming now which was a blessed, merciful relief, but its face was contorted in a silent agony. The Chaplain considered his options, then he nodded to Evander.

‘Take the squad and make your way back to the boarding torpedo. Do what you can to establish the fate of Third Scale.’

‘Chaplain Iakodos?’

‘I will cover your retreat. Remigius may be a bastard, I do not dispute that. But he is giving his life to rid the Imperium of this creature. We owe it to the Inquisition to return his body.’

‘I will not accept this.’

‘You are presently unfit for command and Sergeant Korydon is absent. I am therefore in charge of the mission and I am giving you a direct order. Take Orestes and the squad. Get out of here now. If you locate Korydon on the way, then bring him too.’ The Chaplain paused for a heartbeat. ‘Do not linger in your search, though.’ Iakodos spoke softly but with such command in his voice that the only thing Evander could do was nod in acquiescence.

The inquisitor was slowly sinking to his knees, his shaking legs unable to support him any more, and he stared up at Iakodos as the Chaplain came towards him. Weakly, he put a hand up to stop him coming any closer.

‘It’s still wrong,’ he said, his voice barely a whisper. ‘It’s... not working how it should.’

The daemon was furred in a foetal ball, its back to the inquisitor and the Chaplain. It suddenly stopped moving, but an instant later bounded to its feet, a cackling screech of gloating laughter emanating from its beak-like mouth.

‘*Twice* wrong, inquisitor! Your words have no power over me, for I am not the Oracle of Tzeentch!’

‘No... This cannot be.’ Remigius’s voice was a croak. ‘Years of research. You are Fateweaver. You must be. How can you be ano—’

‘Enough of this. What has taken place on this ship is not the business of pathetic fleshlings. Accept the simple truth of the matter. Your precious “research” has led you to your demise. You are *wrong*. And now you die.’ It prowled sinuously towards the weakened inquisitor.

Iakodos closed his grip tightly around his crozius and placed himself squarely in its path.

‘Out of my way, Adeptus Astartes warrior. I told you before that my fight was not with you.’

‘Regardless, you will have to go through me to get to him.’

‘A noble intention. But really?’ With an almost idle wave of its hand, the daemon caused Iakodos to fly backwards into the wall. Undeterred, the Chaplain got to his feet once again and calling upon every ounce of his strength began to charge towards the daemon.

The creature let out some foul epithet in its besmirched guttural language, which took on warp-fuelled substance and crawled over the Chaplain’s armour,

peeling away the ceramite and crippling him with agonising seizures. He watched, helpless to move or act as the daemon reached Remigius. It looked down on him almost as though it pitied him, then took the failing man up in its vicious grasp. Its clawed hands closed around the inquisitor's throat.

'I have a gift for you, Shadrach Remigius,' it said to the stricken man who, unable to respond, stared back at the daemon in horror. 'Since you have gone to so much trouble to track me down, I will give you what you seek. You desire my name? You shall have it. A tragedy that this lesson will be your last. The power of a true name works both ways...'

These last words were spoken in no more than a whisper, but even from the distance he was presently at, Iakodos could feel the raw warp power that came with them.

The inquisitor tried to turn his face away from the shards of sorcery in the daemon's breath as it spoke, but he was held tight and could not move. Iakodos watched with a mixture of disgust and fury as the skin on the old man's face began to peel away. Strips of raw meat that had once been the inquisitor's visage blended with chunks of metal from his implants. His eyes bubbled and melted and eventually all that remained of Shadrach Remigius was a bloodied skull attached to a ruined body.

With arrogant indifference, the daemon crushed the skull in its grasp until it was dust. Then it dropped the corpse to the floor and turned to Iakodos.

'You had a chance to leave and you did not take it. You sealed your fate with that lack of foresight. The others you sent to investigate elsewhere in the ship – their unknowing sacrifice gave me quite a taste for your kind's flesh.' Its eyes narrowed sardonically. 'Message received,' it said in a disturbingly passable impression of Tyliissus's voice. 'Understood.'

A soft groan escaped Iakodos's lips. Now that the fate of Third Scale had been revealed, his desire to exact revenge on this thing grew. But still caught in the coruscating power of the creature's sorcery, his armour smoking, he remained helpless.

Whether to enrage him further or merely out of a sadistic desire to reveal its dark nature, the daemon continued.

'It was their presence which awoke my consciousness. I've been alone on this accursed ship for an eternity. But their minds... were sharp. They were delicious. And their imaginations! They expected bleeding walls, creatures of the warp, and I was all too glad to oblige.'

A sickening knot tightened in Iakodos's gut as he realised that it had been

their very thoughts which had brought about the demise of Third Scale and the deaths of the Blood Swords. He fervently hoped that Evander was heeding his order.

His demise was imminent and he faced it stoically. The daemon considered him for a moment and took a step towards him. Then it stopped short, its eyes narrowing as it looked over Iakodos's shoulder to a point just beyond him.

'What do you mean?' the daemon said, to Iakodos's surprise.

Korydon had reached the enginarium just in time to see the daemon crush Remigius's skull. He had stared at the unfolding scene. His battle-brothers seemed hazy and pale: flickering images that had no substance. Only the inquisitor and the daemon seemed real to him. Iakodos was a pale, shimmering ghost that only the daemon seemed able to communicate with.

The Star Dragons sergeant had stared down at his old, scuffed armour. It was corroded with age and wear. He knew with absolute certainty that he had witnessed this exchange before. It was how he had known what his battle-brothers would find behind the door of the enginarium. Korydon had fathomed with absolute clarity the nature of the *Accursed Eternity* and that, combined with all the hypno-doctrination that had shaped his early years, had led him to a simple conclusion.

'You will not kill him,' he repeated to the daemon. It was not a threat, not a plea. It was merely a statement.

'How do you know?' The reply was filled with deep curiosity. And then the daemon smiled nastily, understanding in an instant what Korydon had taken a lifetime to realise.

Iakodos was released from the trap that had snared him and he fell to the ground with a thud. He paused for a few moments, catching his breath. He gripped his crozius and stood, ready to fight for what he knew and believed was right.

The daemon was distracted by something, though what it was Iakodos could not understand. It seemed to be staring directly at one of the white figures that had bustled around the deck previously. This one, however, was different. Its armour was far from pristine, old and uncared for. The insignia had long been erased. And yet there was something hauntingly familiar about it. It was as still and unmoving as the others, but the daemon's attention seemed intent upon it. Considering his options carefully, the Chaplain reached the conclusion that a tactical withdrawal was rapidly becoming the best course of action.

‘You will not kill him.’ Korydon squared his shoulders. ‘It is not something that you have ever done and you will not do it this time. You are trapped in this course of events just as much as I have been. I have seen that you will not kill him.’ Korydon took a breath. ‘Ergo, you will not.’

‘A self-fulfilling prophecy. Clever.’ The daemon flexed its powerful shoulders and shifted its gaze to linger on Iakodos. The hunger that lay within the infinite depths of its oil-black eyes was palpable and for several brief moments tension crackled between the two, Adeptus Astartes and daemon-spawn of the warp.

‘Why are you still here, mortal?’

It was all Iakodos needed. He did not understand what it was that had transpired. All he knew was that he had been given an opportunity to withdraw, possibly even the chance to get back to his ship alive, although he was not prepared to trust the daemon in the slightest. Nonetheless, he made his way to the exit leaving the corpse of the inquisitor lying on the floor.

The daemon watched him go, then turned its attention back to Korydon. The Star Dragon’s armour was corroded, where it still held together. The sergeant showed all the signs of having spent decades, maybe centuries, in the same wargear. The warp taint that infused the vessel created things that even the daemon did not fully understand. It had seen this before, though. Mortals caught in pockets of time.

Tricked many thousands of years ago by the daemon Fateweaver, the creature now bound at the heart of the *Accursed Eternity* lived a cursed existence, doomed to live the same sequence of events in endless repetition. Yet every time history repeated itself, something changed. Sometimes it was something small and seemingly insignificant: a word spoken out of place, a head of hair where previously a warrior had borne a shorn scalp. Other times something more important had altered, but the daemon could not quite fathom the nuances of its prison. It was not the warp creature’s nature to understand – or even care – about the nature of causality.

‘You said I would not kill him,’ the daemon said to Korydon eventually. A slow, cruel smile raised its peculiar mouth in a sadistic twist. ‘But the ship itself may have other ideas.’



VII

The first of the boarding torpedoes was already loaded with Adeptus Astartes by the time Iakodos sighted the landing zone. His eyes sought eagerly for Third Scale only to realise disappointment and sorrow at their continued absence. With that came the memory of the dead Blood Swords. He took some comfort from the fact that some of their fallen had been recovered, at least. The daemon's words regarding the fate of his brothers had been truth, he suspected. He slowed from a run to a steady walk and Evander raised a head, nodding at him curtly. The sergeant was clearly feeling the pain of his injury, but he lived.

'Get the first torpedo out,' he was saying to those aboard. 'We will follow as soon as we can. I want to do a final sweep for Third Scale...'

'They are gone, brother. We have to retreat ourselves.'

Evander stared at the Chaplain and his face showed a moment of grief. 'You are sure of this?'

'I am positive. And there is no time to investigate the daemon's claim any further. You know as well as I do. Here.' The Chaplain clapped a hand against his breastplate.

The sergeant nodded abruptly and leaned into the boarding torpedo. 'As soon as you are in communications range, tell the *Ladon* that once we are clear, they should open fire on this cursed ship.'

The battle-brother closest to the open end of the boarding torpedo acknowledged the order and reached for the lever that would seal it closed and begin the retraction process. Gears ground back into life and slowly the tube began to scrape back through the hull of the ship. Whatever it was that passed for intelligence aboard the *Accursed Eternity* acted instinctively, the ship sealing

the gaping hole in its hull like skin closing over an open wound.

The first torpedo had barely completed inching its way into the void of space when the howling began: a low, keening wail that set hair and teeth on edge, and brought with it the banshee promise of certain death. The remaining Space Marines, most of Ninth Scale and three of the remaining Blood Swords, watched in a state of horrified disbelief as the remaining rent in the hull of the *Accursed Eternity* began to warp. It shifted and distorted impossibly before their eyes becoming a fanged maw that closed tightly around the second boarding torpedo.

‘It will tear it apart!’ The Blood Sword who had spoken merely voiced what they were all thinking. But it was nothing so simple. The malformed mouth, a circular series of razor-sharp fangs, merely clamped itself down on the boarding torpedo, locking it in place.

The blood-curdling wail sounded again, accompanied by the sound of many scurrying feet as though the entire corridor was filled with rats or other rodent-like creatures. So vivid was the sound that Evander and several others turned the muzzles of their guns to the floor.

Iakodos held his crozius aloft. With the unswerving devotion and loyalty that had earned him his rank and title, he spoke in a steady voice that fuelled the faith and fire of his battle-brothers. The Litany of Devotion was one of the first things that he had committed to memory as a young novitiate and never had its words felt more true and meaningful than they did right now.

‘Where there is uncertainty, I shall bring light. Where there is doubt, I shall sow faith. Where there is shame, I shall point atonement...’

His voice never changed pitch and never wavered, even as he caught sight of the daemonic pack-beasts thundering at full speed down the corridor towards him. He could hear Evander barking out commands to set melta charges around the sides of the torpedo in an effort to free it, but he focused on the words he was speaking.

‘Where there is rage, I shall show its course... My word in the soul shall be as my bolter in the field.’

The Litany complete, he held his crozius out in front of him and spoke a final time. ‘All of this I say and all of this I am. Die!’

In an effort to buy some of his companions time to blast the torpedo free from the infernal grip of the daemon, Iakodos led a counter-charge against the creatures. Spent shell casings hit the floor like rain as bolters spat out one round after another. When the magazines were spent, the Space Marines resorted to blades and pistols. Every shot that was fired and every blow which was landed

was a singular strike against the dark forces that contrived to keep them prisoner and to overwhelm them.

The first of the two boarding torpedoes had achieved a perfect exit and had cleared the hull. The Space Marines within took a moment to check their weapons. They might have retreated successfully from the ship, but that did not mean by any stretch that they considered the mission to be at an end.

Ardashir switched vox-channel and hailed the *Ladon*. He had his orders from Evander, who had once again taken command in Korydon's absence.

'Boarding party first vessel returning. Complement...' Looking around the interior of the torpedo, Ardashir felt a sting of loss. They had travelled across with three full squads as well as the Chaplain and the inquisitor. Thirty Adeptus Astartes. They had lost the entirety of Third Scale and several others to boot. 'Complement twelve souls,' he finished, his voice heavy. 'Five remaining on board the *Accursed Eternity*. Once they are in transit, unleash hell. Tear that ship from the void.'

Silence followed his report but for a few bursts of crackling static. Ardashir repeated his report, and then the vox officer's voice came timorously across the distance that separated them from the *Ladon*.

'Ship's chronometers have your insertion at less than an hour past, sergeant.'

An hour? They had been trapped in the horror of the daemon-ship for what had felt like an eternity. Had it really been only an hour? For a moment, Ardashir doubted himself. Perhaps he had simply lost his mind. But the gravely injured form of Orestes, slumped in the corner, reminded him that his experience had been anything but based in imagination.

'We will debrief fully when we get back on board. Repeat message. Once Sergeant Evander and his remaining warriors are extracted, destroy the *Accursed Eternity*.'

'Message received. Understood.'

The words, the same that Third Scale had repeatedly responded with across the vox, sent a chill down Ardashir's spine.

There was no way that the melta charges could be placed any faster than Evander was managing. He moved as swiftly as he could, his ears ringing with the jumbled sounds of his remaining four battle-brothers fighting the daemoniac creatures. Their snarls and shrieks of bitter hatred cut through everything and Evander longed more than anything for Iakodos to end the monsters' existence.

Ammunition was running low, but the sheer ferocity of the combined force of Star Dragons and Blood Swords was at least keeping the horde at bay.

‘Charges set,’ Evander said finally, speaking the words that Iakodos was longing to hear.

Pressing forwards, the Chaplain renewed his attack on the daemon-beasts, every one of his brothers, including Evander, joining him. They forced their attack, pushing the daemons back a little further down the corridor but not so far that they were putting themselves out of the range of their escape route. When the charges blew, the hull of the ship would be torn open to space and they would have to move swiftly.

With tremendous force, the melta-bombs detonated, the sound and reverberation shaking the very ground beneath the Space Marines’ feet. The hull of the *Accursed Eternity* ripped apart and the torpedo was freed.

Bellowing the retreat as loudly as he could, Evander called the five Space Marines to the boarding torpedo. Four of them dived in leaving only Iakodos facing down the daemons. With a final roar of defiance, the Chaplain turned, ran and dived into the torpedo. Evander slammed the release lever and the tube closed up even as the creatures hurled themselves at them.

They could feel them scrabbling against the smooth surface of the torpedo but they all held tightly to their faith. They had come too far and endured too much to give up the belief that they would make their way to freedom and that they would see this foul ship destroyed.

A scream of daemonic fury reached them even through the armour-plated hull of the boarding torpedo as it made its way slowly out of the *Accursed Eternity*. Then the scream was joined in a sinister harmony by an answering shriek, then another, and then another. Within scant moments the sound of multiple screaming daemons could be heard as the monstrous host of the vessel threw everything it had at its escaping prey.

It was too little too late. The boarding torpedo dropped into the void and moved agonisingly slowly away.

‘This is Evander. We are clear. Repeat, we are clear of the hull. Fire on my mark.’

‘Received, Sergeant Evander.’

Timing would be critical. If they were too close when the fleet fired, they would be vaporised along with its target. The viewing aperture in the torpedo was little more than a slit and it was difficult to gauge the distance between them and the *Accursed Eternity*...

Far enough. Evander let out the breath he'd not realised he was holding and spoke a single word.

'Mark.'

Both of the strike cruisers, as well as their escort fleet of destroyers and frigates, opened fire simultaneously and a relentless stream of ordnance razored across space, striking the daemon-ship with unerring accuracy. Light flared brightly through the viewport of the torpedo and Evander was forced to turn his face away. Their vox crackled and spat in relation to the proximity of the various weapon discharges, until finally there was nothing but silence.

And in the silence there was nothing. The *Accursed Eternity* was no more. But to Evander, staring over at Iakodos who was knelt in fervent prayer, simple destruction was not nearly enough. He voiced this concern to the Chaplain who looked up at him and reached up to remove his skull-helm.

Iakodos ran his gauntleted hand across his shorn head. 'You may be right, my brother,' he acknowledged. 'But thank the Emperor that it is no longer there.'

The meeting with Remigius's retinue lasted long after the *Accursed Eternity* had disappeared. Nobody could comment upon the veracity of the claim that it had been destroyed, but then nobody could prove that it hadn't been. Careful scrutiny of the augury returns suggested conflicting answers. There were all the signs that there had been a plasma core breach but there was no debris to support this.

Iakodos had taken the burden of relaying the news of Remigius's actions to his followers and had been met with cold anger, the rage of those in denial at news they had half-expected but had never fully prepared to hear.

Shock had turned to disbelief, and that in turn had led to anger. Iakodos had stood patiently through the tears and the pleas and then the barrage of accusations, until there was nothing left to say. He had not lied to the inquisitor's retinue; he had given them a full and frank account of what had occurred there.

It had taken one man to raise a single question for the conversation to come finally to an end.

'What of the Star Dragons' debt to the Ordo Malleus?'

Tanek, who had sat in silence throughout Iakodos's debriefing had stood abruptly at this question. He had leaned across the table that had separated him from the servant. It was that and the captain's exceptional self-control that ensured the man wasn't throttled where he stood.

'My men did everything Inquisitor Remigius asked of them. As a result of this mission, my company has been decimated. I suggest that you learn from

your errors. In future, you should think very long and very hard about the sense of asking a captain of the Adeptus Astartes a question like that.'

An icy look crossed the captain's face and he turned his back on the gathering. His voice, when he spoke again, was low and measured. Iakodos knew his captain well enough to recognise that tone. 'The Star Dragons have more than paid back their debt to the Ordo Malleus. You have precisely two hours to get off of the *Ladon* and to remove yourselves from the vicinity of my vessels. As one of the commanders of the Containment Fleet, I suggest that your foolishness in this engagement has generated enough risk for us to consider you a threat.'

'And if we don't leave?' Remigius's elderly adviser attempted a moment of bravado.

His unfortunately chosen and highly facetious comment was quelled instantly when Tanek turned around. The genial and affable face that they had come to know was replaced with the mask of a tyrant.

'Then you will be disobeying a direct order of Containment Fleet Kappa. And I would heartily suggest that you do not test me to see where that path leads.'

It was a threat, plain and simple. Had the inquisitor still been alive, there would have been resistance to the suggestion but, perhaps fortunately for the demoralised remains of Remigius's followers, he was not. Picking up on the barely shrouded threat, they left with such alarming haste it seemed as though all the daemons of the warp were hot on their tail.

'There will be questions, captain, possibly censure,' Iakodos finally took a seat at the table. 'The Ordo Malleus will not let this go. You appreciate that, I am sure.'

Tanek nodded. 'Let the questions come,' he replied. 'I will answer them honestly and truthfully. We were summoned here to aid the inquisitor and we have done that. I propose we remain in the area for a while. Continue to give support to our brothers in the Blood Swords and monitor for any sign of that ship returning.'

'You do not believe it is destroyed?'

'I simply do not know, Chaplain.' Tanek sighed. 'Our Chapter has taken a great loss today and I have to hold on to the hope that the *Accursed Eternity* was destroyed. Otherwise, what was the point of our Chapter's sacrifice? I cannot allow myself to walk that dark path of thought. Its end is not a good one.'

The Chaplain laid his crozius on the table. 'Brother-Sergeant Evander may be

a concern for a while,’ he said softly. ‘His mind was weaker than I had hoped. He fell easily to the whispers of the daemon. We should watch him closely for a while.’

‘What of the Blood Swords?’ Ardashir and his men had travelled back to their own vessel for debriefing and to undergo care at the hands of their own Apothecary.

‘Exemplary,’ replied Iakodos without hesitation. ‘Those who whisper in the shadows against them, those who scorn them for their penitence should watch their words in future. They are well on the path to redemption.’

‘And you, Chaplain?’ Tanek turned his attentions to Iakodos. He had been through many campaigns with the Chaplain’s words of faith powering him forwards. But he had learned long ago that it did no harm to assess the spirituality of the most spiritual of them all.

‘I am...’ Iakodos sought for the words to describe how he felt. ‘I am cautious. Do I think that the *Accursed Eternity* is destroyed? I do not know either. If I were to speak plainly I would have to say that I do not believe it is the last we – or others of our kind – will see of that daemon-ship. The inquisitor believed he knew its name and its nature, but he was wrong. Those mistakes cost him his life and cost us even more dearly. But if we have banished the vessel, even if only for a time, we must look upon it as a success, high though the cost has been.’

His words held conviction, even if his eyes did not.

‘Aye,’ replied Tanek. ‘For the good of the Imperium. Ours is not to question why, Chaplain. Ours is merely to serve. We have to pick ourselves up from this blow and move forward with renewed purpose. It is our purpose.’

He was lost.

Not in space, but in time. Whatever foul warp magic had seen him step sideways into an entirely different causality had effectively ended any hope he might ever have had of returning to real space.

Staring around the engine room of the *Accursed Eternity*, Korydon finally understood the reason for the ship’s name. In time, he came to know all that there was to know about it. After all, he had lived within its confines for centuries, maybe even millennia. His armour was old and corroded, and he had witnessed its history over and over. He had been here before. He would be here again. Of that, he was certain.

Without the life blood of the Star Dragons and Blood Swords on board the

ship to sustain its physical presence, the daemon had faded back to the warp, trapped within its prison until the next time it was woken. Korydon was alone on board the cursed ship, but for the ever-present shifting ghosts of those who had once called this place home. They seemed unaware of his presence.

He was lost and he was alone. But he was not without hope. Just as the daemon had, Korydon had come to learn that every time events replayed themselves, every time the endless loop repeated, something changed. And one day, the change would come that would mean he could step from the shadows and once again take his place alongside his brothers.

When that day comes, I will exact revenge. Not even knowing if his prayers would be heard by the distant God-Emperor, Korydon swore himself to the moment.

He waited. He was faced with an eternity. It was all that he could do.

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*Amaranthine encrypted message, code Theta Gamma Four Three Nine.
Captain Tanek of the Star Dragons Third Company, presently designated
commanding officer of Containment Fleet Kappa, hear this on the order of the
Ordo Malleus. I send you greetings and demand your immediate compliance.
There has been a reported sighting of the vessel matching archive description of
the Accursed Eternity.*

*By the power vested in me and through my position within the holy Ordos,
you are ordered to bring your fleet to the coordinates I will transmit following
this message. This sighting warrants an immediate investigation and your fleet is
the closest available. I will speak with you in person on your arrival.*

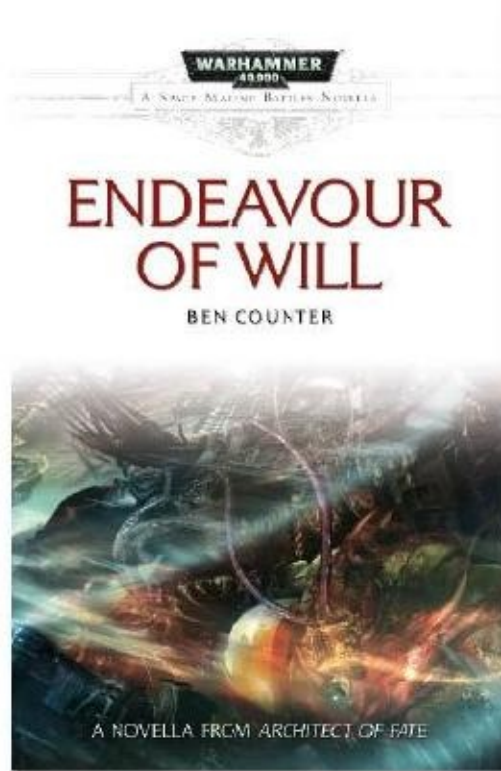
Message ends.

+++

About The Author

Sarah Cawkwell is a north-east England based freelance writer. Old enough to know better, she's still young enough not to care. Married, with a son (who is the grown up in the house) and two intellectually challenged cats, she's been a determined and prolific writer for many years. She hasn't yet found anything to equal the visceral delights of the Warhammer universe and is thrilled that her first piece of published work is within its grim, dark borders.

When not slaving away over a hot keyboard, Sarah's hobbies include reading everything and anything, running around in fields with swords screaming incomprehensibly and having her soul slowly sucked dry by online games. Her minimum bribe level is one chocolate orange.



Captain Lysander leads a desperate defence of the Imperial Fists' starfort *Endeavour of Will* against an attack by the Iron Warriors. To what lengths will he go to ensure victory?

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