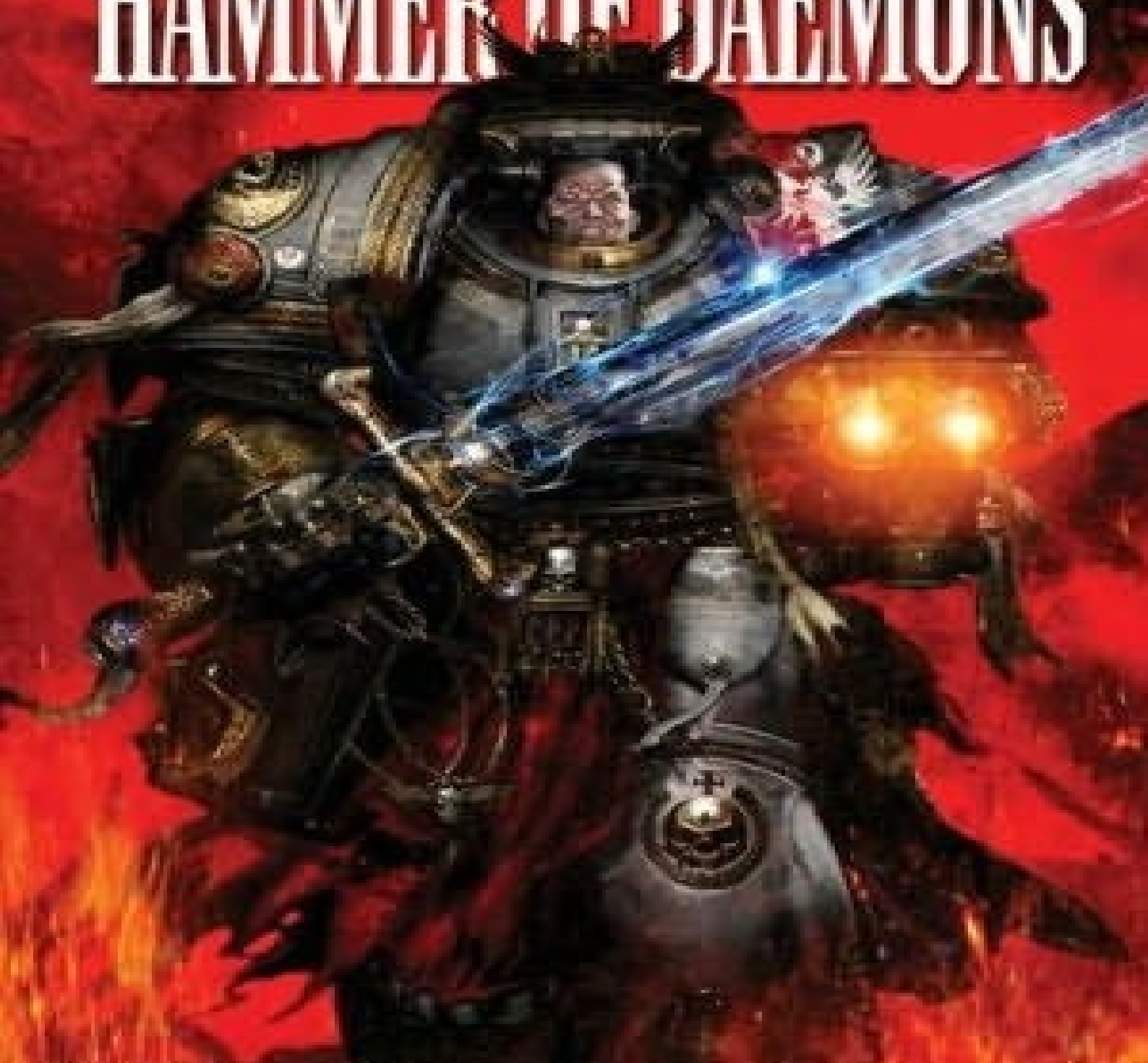


WARHAMMER
40,000

HAMMER OF DAEMONS



The third blood-soaked Grey Knights novel!

BEN COUNTER

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.

ONE

The floor and walls of the medicae bunker were painted dark green, so the blood just looked like dark water pooling under the beds.

'He's at the back,' said the medicae orderly. Her face was grey with fatigue, but her eyes were alert. 'Then let's hurry,' said Colonel Dal'Tharcken.

The medicae led the colonel between the rows of beds, each with its wounded man lolling semiconscious with sedation, or grimacing as an orderly bent over his wounds. Some of the men managed to nod or even salute to the colonel as he walked by, and he returned their greetings with a moment of eye contact. Most of the conscious ones, though, were focused on the man who followed the colonel. He was huge, and armoured in gunmetal, something the Hathrans had never seen before. They had come to this world. Indeed, he was someone very few of them had ever seen up close. He seemed to take up what little room remained in the bunker.

'Three came in,' the medicae continued, casting a curious glance at the armoured figure behind the colonel. 'One made it. We had to burn the others.' Her manner was short and efficient, as if all her compassion had been drained away.

Colonel Dal'Tharcken didn't have to ask how the survivor was doing. At the back of the bunker there was a row of beds with mesh insect nets, useless in the arctic climate of Sarthis Majoris, but enough to create a barrier between the recovering and the most severely wounded men, the ones who hadn't realised they were dead, and the sights of suffering around them. The patrol's survivor was going to die, and soon.

'If it matters, he's in no condition to talk,' continued the medicae.

'Is he conscious?'

'In and out.'

'That'll do.'

The medicae pulled back the netting from a bed at the back of the bunker.

The smell of burnt meat and hair welled up from the bed.

'Arse on the Golden Throne,' swore the trooper who lay there. 'I must really be in trouble.'

Trooper Slohane?'

'Yes, sir.'

'Officer present.'

'Sorry, sir. Can't salute.'

Trooper Slohane was missing most of his lower jaw. It had been replaced with a temporary prosthetic that was just mobile enough to allow him to talk. The face on the damaged side was raw meat. A wad of bandage was taped over the ruins of one eye. The jacket of his fatigues had been cut away and a wound swallowed up most of his chest. A transparent slab of gel-skin lay over the wound to staunch the bleeding, but the injury was far too severe for Slohane to be saved. There was so much blood on the floor and soaked into the bed that blood loss would get him even if his organs held out.

Slohane's eye focused on the shape towering over the colonel. For a moment, he didn't seem to focus, as if the figure was too big to fit within the confines of the bunker.

Slohane smiled with what remained of his mouth. 'You. Heh, I never thought I'd actually get to be face to face with one of you: a Space Marine.'

When... when I was a child I thought you were just a story.'

Justicar Alaric stepped forward. In full power armour he was almost twice the height of a man. He

armour was ornate steel adorned with devotional texts picked out in gold, and one massive shoulder pad bore the heraldry of a black and red field with a single starburst. The symbol of a book pierced by a silver sword adorned the other shoulder. Alaric wore no helmet, and his face seemed too human for the size and ornamentation of his armour, even with his scars and the service stud in his forehead. He had a halberd in his hand, long enough to scrape the bunker ceiling, and on the back of his other hand was mounted a double-barrelled storm bolter.

'No stories,' said Alaric simply. 'We are here for the same reason you are.'

'This is a world worth saving.'

'What did you see, trooper?' asked the colonel.

Slohane arched back and coughed. The wet mass of his lungs was visible through the ruin of his chest. 'Six of us went out. The captain said we were heading... heading through the southern route to get to the foothills before nightfall. Avalanche must've come down the day before, because the route was blocked, so we skirted up along Pale Ridge.' Slohane looked at the colonel. 'We should've turned back.'

The medicae picked up a handful of the printout that had spooled out of a monitoring cogitator. Slohane gave the colonel a meaningful glance. The irregular life signs on the printout meant Slohane didn't have long.

'Go on, trooper,' said the colonel.

'Things started... coming out of the ground,' said Slohane. He was looking up at the ceiling. There was too much in his mind's eye to let him focus on anything real. 'Hands, and faces. They started screaming. And there was fire. The captain died. We had to let him go. He was melting into the ground. Tollen went crazy and started shooting. I just ran, sir. I ran away.'

'And then?'

'I was heading up the ridge. I was on fire, I think. These dark things were coming up through the snow. I got to the top of the ridge and kept firing.'

The damn lasgun was red-hot. I ran back along the ridge away from it all. I just looked back once.'

Alaric knelt down beside the colonel, so he was the height of a normal man. 'What did you see?'

Slohane's eye rolled around. Tears welled up. 'There were millions of them,' he said, 'millions, all standing on the other side of Pale Ridge.'

'Men?' asked Alaric.

'Men,' said Slohane, 'and things. Huge things. Monsters, waiting there like animals on the slaughterman's ramp. Then the clouds blew by and stars came out, and the whole valley was covered in blood. The mountain streams had thawed and they were blood, too. I could hear them chanting.'

It wasn't no language like a man might speak. It was words straight from the warp.'

'What about artillery?' asked the colonel. 'Armour?'

'I don't know,' replied Slohane, *but* there were monsters in the air, too, with wings. And a tower... I was up in red... and him up on the battlements, like a king.'

'Who?' asked Alaric urgently, leaning down so his face was close to Slohane's. 'Who did you see?'

Slohane tried to reply but his words came out as a painful gasp. A tear of blood ran from his remaining eye. The medicae dropped the printout and fiddled with the controls on the monitor.

'He's unconscious,' she said. 'He's losing blood faster than we can pump it in. You won't get any more from him.'

'Pale Ridge,' said Colonel Dal'Tharken. 'Right under our bloody noses.'

'We knew it would come to this,' said Alaric.

'That we did.' The colonel turned to the medicae and pointed to Slohane's convulsing body. 'Burn him, too.'

'Of course,' she replied.

Alaric met up with his squad on the fortifications above the medical bunker. The night had been even colder than usual, and cloaks of ice clung to the rockcrete battlements. Wisps of vapour rose from the pillboxes and weapon points, from the breath of the Hathran Guardsmen huddled beneath the greatcoats. The Grey Knights were standing watch at the right of the line, where the medical bunker met the ice wall of the mountainside. The rest of the line stretched across the pass, manned by the Hathran soldiers who still stole half-fearful glances at the Grey Knights. None of them knew what a Grey Knight was, but they had all heard of the Space Marines, humanity's saviours, the greatest soldiers in the galaxy. A Space Marine was a symbol of the Imperium, a reminder of what they fought for.

'What news, Justicar?' asked Brother Haulvarn as Alaric trudged through the slush of the night ice-fall.

'It's coming to an end,' replied Alaric.

'Good,' grunted Brother Dvorn. Dvorn, along with Haulvarn, had fought with Alaric since he had first been elevated to the rank of justicar. Where Haulvarn was a born leader, Dvorn was a pure warrior. His nemesis weapon was in the form of a hammer, a rare weapon that perfectly suited Dvorn's brutality. Alaric was glad to have both of them at his side on Sarthis Majoris. If Trooper Slohane's testimony had any truth in it, he would need them soon.

'Do we know what we're facing?' asked Brother Visical. 'Not yet,' said Alaric.

'Looking forward to finding out,' said Dvorn.

'Don't be too eager,' replied Alaric. 'It's bad. The enemy must have been gathering strength since we made landfall. They're massing past Pale Ridge right now. The colonel is mobilising every able-bodied man as we speak.

And it'll happen soon. The enemy can't keep a force like that in check for long.'

'Will the line hold?' asked Brother Thane. Thane and Visical had been drafted into Alaric's squad after the losses it had suffered on Chaeroneia.

'That's not for me to say,' said Alaric gravely. 'The Hathrans will decide that. We must show them how the enemy must be resisted, and help lead them in their prayers. After that the battle will fall on them.'

'Not if we get there first,' said Visical with a smirk. While Thane had only recently earned the armour of a Grey Knight, Visical was a veteran.

The gauntlets of his power armour were permanently blackened by the flame from his incinerator in spite of the wargear rites supposed to keep them spotless. 'We'll show them how it's done.'

Dvorn nodded in agreement. Some men just fought like that, Alaric had decided; they simply threw aside all concept of failure and trusted in their training and determination to carry them through. They were, after all, Grey Knights, some of the Imperium's best soldiers, but Alaric could not think that way.

'Thane, lead the prayers,' said Alaric. 'Our bodies are prepared, so ensure that our souls are the same.'

A sound reached Alaric's ears. The voices of the Imperial Guard, low and mournful, rose as one in the death song of Hathran.

Fate had seen fit to place Sarthis Majoris in the path of the most terrible Chaos incursion since the ancient days of the Horus Heresy. The Thirteenth Black Crusade had erupted from the warp storm known as the Eye of Terror, led by the greatest champions of the Chaos Gods. The initial campaign had seen Cadia besieged and whole Imperial armies annihilated as they tried to stem the tide. Only the sacrifices of the Imperial Navy had kept the Black Crusade from reaching the Segmentum Solis.

itself. The Inquisition had made appalling decisions that not even a hard-bitten Guard general would stomach: bombing Guard regiments into dust for witnessing the predations of the Enemy, sacrificing whole worlds to slow down the Chaos hordes, betraying Emperor-fearing citizens at every turn to buy tiny slivers of hope. The whole galactic north was mobilised to barricade the Imperial heartlands against the Black Crusade.

Chaos brought with it daemons. The Ordo Malleus, the most secretive and warlike branch of the Inquisition, had sent unprecedented resources to the Eye of Terror. Whole companies of Grey Knights had been thrown into the cauldron of the Eye. The Eye of Terror drew in the Imperium's daemon hunters, and more often than not it spat them out mutilated, mad or dead.

Yet still they fought, because that was what it meant to be human: to fight when any sane man would say the fight could not be won.

Sarthis Majoris supplied fuel to the Imperial Navy. Its refineries turned the radioactive sludge of the planet's mantle into the lifeblood of the Segmentum battlefleet. Maybe that was why a fleet of Chaos ships, ancient things shaped like filth encrusted daggers, was diverted to invade Sarthis Majoris. Or perhaps the millions of colonists huddled in the refinery cities were simply too tempting a sacrifice to the Dark Gods. Either way, if Chaos took Sarthis Majoris, the engines of Imperial battleships would fall silent, and dozens more Chaos ships would break through the Imperial blockades.

The Hathran Armoured Cavalry were close enough to be landed on Sarthis Majoris shortly after the Chaos forces made landfall on the southern polar cap. The hurried strategic meetings confirmed that the Chaos army's northwards march would have to take them through the ice-bound pass in the towering Reliquis Mountains. Once through the mountains, there was no telling which refinery city would be sacrificed first. So the pass had to hold, and the Hathran Armoured Cavalry had to hold it.

Imperial commanders requested assistance from any quarter to help deliver Sarthis Majoris from the enemy. The Ordo Malleus heard these requests and performed astropathic divinations that confirmed the presence of daemons among the hordes landing on the planet. In a perfect galaxy they would have sent armies of Space Marines and storm troopers led by daemon hunters to crush the Chaos forces on the polar cap, but the galaxy was far from perfect, and those legions and inquisitors were spread across a thousand worlds threatened by the Black Crusade.

The Inquisition's contribution to the defence of Sarthis Majoris consisted of Justicar Alaric and four Grey Knights.

TWO

'Movement!' cried one of the sentries. Two kilometres! West face!

The Hathrans stationed on the wall hurried to their posts, peering into the breaking dawn light. It was running down the sides of the valleys in a thin, greasy film, turning the ice of the peaks far above into an angry gold. The depths of the valley sketching southwards were still veiled in the dying night darkness.

'I see them,' said one of the officers commanding the watch. He pulled magnoculars from his greatcoat and looked through them down the valley.

Shapes were moving in the darkness, scrabbling along the side of the mountain. A human could not climb like that, especially one almost naked, clad only in its own flayed skin.

'Is it the big one?' asked another Guardsman, a support gunner, leaning forward on the barrel of his fixed autocannon.

'Might be just another sacrifice,' said yet another. Most of the Guardsmen believed that the Chaos attacks, up to that point, had been deliberately mounted to sacrifice cultists and mutants beneath the Imperial guns, to seed the valley with blood and please the Chaos Gods. A few, more pro-saically, thought the enemy was just trying to use up the Hathrans'

ammunition, but everyone was certain that an attack was coming, after the rumours had spread that a vast Chaos horde, millions strong, was pooling behind Pale Ridge.

'Guns up! Men to your stations!' cried the officer. Sirens sounded as Guardsmen swarmed up onto the battlements. The few who were sleeping jumped from their beds and were still pulling their scarves around their faces as they emerged into the freezing dawn. Their breath formed heavy clouds rolling between the battlements.

The attacks had come nightly. The enemy had thrown handfuls of men at them. It was simpler to call them men. The officers called them 'cultists', a useful catch-all for the mutated, heretic and insane that made up the bulk of the Chaos army. Their bodies, frozen solid, were dark red smudges below the latest snowfalls. Some of them had been robed madmen who chanted in inhuman tongues. Others were scrabbling things that had presumably been human before their skins were removed and nailed back onto their wet, red bodies in scraps. Some of those had made it onto the walls, and most of the Hathrans wounded in the medicae bunker, or in the grim frozen heap of bodies on the fortification's northern side, were the result of those leaping, screaming creatures.

Sometimes red lightning had struck from the heavens, searing men to charred meat. Sometimes soldiers had gone mad and killed their brother soldiers, and no one could tell if it was some sorcery of the enemy or old-fashioned battle psychosis. Many of the patrols sent out to locate the enemy had not returned, or had crawled back burned, mutilated or mad.

The enemy wanted the Hathran line bruised and tender, its teeth ground down, its men exhausted and its guns well-worn.

There had been enough petty death. The gods wanted a spectacle.

'You there!' yelled Colonel DalTharken at the closest officer, as he stormed out of the command bunker. 'Get some men into that firepoint!'

And get the engineers up on the battle cannon. The damn things jam every three rounds. The Guardsmen were scrambling to their posts, including the tanks iced in at the ends of the line. The Hathrans were an armoured regiment but the fuel had frozen in the engines of their Lemman Russ battle tanks and those that still worked were dug into the ice to be used as fixed gun points.

'Colonel,' said Alaric as he pushed his way through the soldiers now thronging up onto the battlements. 'Where do you need us?'

'Hold the right,' said the colonel. In truth he had no right to give orders to the Grey Knights attached as they were to the Inquisition, but protocol was less important here than the battle plan. 'If they get explosives between the medical bunker and the valley wall they can blast a breach. That's what you have to stop.' The colonel's features softened for a second. The man underneath the soldier's helmet showed through for a moment. 'Good luck, Justicar.'

he said. Colonel Dal'Tharcken, alone among the Hathrans, had some understanding of what the Grey Knights really were and why they had been sent to Sarthis Majoris.

'The Emperor is with us,' replied Alaric, and turned to join his men.

The Grey Knights were already in position. The medical bunker on the extreme right of the line was crowned with battlements like the jawbone of a stone-toothed dragon, but it was still the line's weak point. The enemy would pool here, forced wide by the crossfires of Hathran guns, and sooner or later the fanatic cultist would throw a demo charge or a bundle of grenades into just the right place to shatter the line and blast a gap wide enough for men to pour through. Then the line would be surrounded and everyone defending it would die.

Except, the Grey Knights were there. As far as the Hathrans were concerned, nothing could destroy them as long as there were Space Marines still alive to fight.

'It's not another sacrifice,' said Brother Visical. They're holding back.'

'Not for long,' said Alaric. The enemy isn't that patient. They'll hit us here and now.'

'Justicar,' said Thane, 'it's the Blood God, isn't it?'

Alaric glanced around at the youngest Grey Knight. Thane was right. The symbols, the chanting, the crazed desperation to die, the blood: the Blood God's hand was on Sarthis Majoris. However many Grey Knights had died in battle through thinking that they understood the enemy, and Alaric was not going to be one of them. 'Chaos has infinite faces,' said Alaric.

We won't know which one it has here until we look it in the eye.'

'Armour,' said Haulvarn, pointing into the darkness at the southern end of the valley. The ice-cold sunlight was picking out ridges of snow and rock amid the shadows, and as Alaric followed Haulvarn's gaze, he could see vehicle hulls, corroded and barnacled like ancient creatures from the sea being lumbering through the seething darkness.

Then this is it,' said Alaric. Thane?'

'I am the Hammer,' began Brother Thane, because in Alaric's squad, the newest recruit led the others in their prayers. 'I am the point of His spear, I am the gauntlet about His fist...'

The drone of prayer joined the faint hiss of the wind along the Imperial lines. The Hathrans were praying too, old war songs from their home world of endless plains and violet skies.

In reply, the sky overhead turned purple, then black, and then red. Clouds heavy with blood rolled across, and the valley was bathed in deep rust-red, the colour of dried blood. The ridges of the mountains were picked out in scarlet. A sudden flash of red lightning burst overhead and, for a split second, Alaric took in the scene revealed at the southern end of the valley: tangles of limbs, heaving masses of robed bodies, lumbering contraptions like ancient metal spiders, and a tower carved from frozen blood with an armoured figure leaning from the battlements. Even that briefest glimpse somehow conveyed an infinity of arrogance and evil.

Even the wind changed. It was drumming against the battlements in a terrible rhythm, carrying with it voices speaking a language that burned the ear.

They're praying,' said Haulvarn.

'It's not a prayer,' replied Dvorn bleakly. They're begging. They want their god to be watching when they die.'

The Hathran prayers rose in competition with the heretic drone. Thane's voice rose as the wind battered more blasphemies against the Imperial lines. The wind was hot now, stinking of old blood and sweat, and slowly the darkness was creeping forwards.

The horde was hundreds of thousands strong. Deformed and insane, robed or stripped naked even their skins, some carried guns or knives, while others wielded the bloodstained bones of their fingers as sharp as blades. Alaric saw a war machine anchoring the horde. Its pitted hull was held up by four mechanical legs, and it waddled through the melting snow like a fat metal spider. Banners held over the horde bore symbols of stylised skulls and parchments of flayed skin carved with bloody prayers.

Mutants twice the height of a man were whipped ahead of the horde. Their torsos were pierced by iron spikes on which were mounted the heads and hands of fallen Hathran soldiers, and these walking trophy racks lowed like cattle as the cultists drove them forward.

The blood from thousands of self-inflicted cuts stained the snow and the valley sides before them. It was as if the valley was a bleeding wound, the Chaos army a welling up of gore rising to drown the Hathrans in its madness. The sun of Sarthis Majoris struggled to shine down through the gathering clouds, fighting its own battle in a sky dirtied by the sight of flapping creatures circling overhead.

'Let us be His shield as He is our armour,' Thane continued. 'Let us speak His word as He fuels the fire of our devotion. Let us fight His battles, as He fights the battle at the end of time, and let us join Him there, for duty ends not in death.'

All along the line, the Hathrans were taking up their firing positions. The battle cannon swivelled to point at the centre of the horde, icicles scattering from its massive barrel as it moved.

'Flares up!' yelled an officer, and several bright flares were fired to land on the snow between the line and the advancing army. Thick plumes of green and red smoke curled up. They marked the furthest accurate range of a lasgun, the line beyond which an enemy could not be permitted to advance without having to wade through las-fire as thick as rain.

The battle cannon fired, rocking back in its mounting above the line. The battlements shook. Shards of ice fell from the mountainsides. Even after weeks on the line, Hathran soldiers flinched at the appalling sound. A grey tongue of snow and pulverised rock lashed up in front of the horde, carrying body parts with it, sending out a Shockwave through packed bodies as cultists were thrown to the ground by the impact. Yet the horde advanced all the faster, the front ranks breaking into a run.

Alaric took his position behind the battlements. Brother Haulvarn was beside him. If Alaric fell, Haulvarn would take command of the squad, and Alaric could think of no one he would rather have next to him in a fight.

'They'll get in close,' said Alaric. 'They won't run. We'll have to take them on face to face. Visical means that means plenty of fire.'

'It would be an honour,' said Visical. The pilot flame of his incinerator flickered, ready to ignite the blessed promethium in the weapon's tanks.

The fuel had been prayed over that very night, and the Emperor implored to manifest His will through the holy flame. Fire burned the enemy's flesh, but faith burned its soul, and faith was the weapon of choice for a Grey Knight.

The horde reached closer. The stench of it was choking. The tower of frozen blood was visible in the distance, all, and it was warping, its front folding down like an opening jaw to form a flight of steps. A man in black armour, lacquered in red, descended from the battlements to the ground. He carried a two-handed sword with a blade as long as he was tall. He was noble and arrogant, his face so pale and angularly handsome that it looked like it had been cut from the ice. The warrior was as tall as a Space Marine and carried with him an air of such cruelty and authority that it took a conscious effort not to kneel before him. The horde parted as he descended, hulking warriors in rust-red plate armour gathering in a cordon around him. The tower was still well beyond lasgun range, but the lord of the

Chaos host was obvious, like a beacon in the horde.

'See him?' asked Haulvarn.

'Yes,' said Alaric.

'The Guard can't take him,' said Brother Dvorn. 'It's up to us.'

'For now, Dvorn, we help to hold the line.'

The horde reached the first of the marker flares. At this range Alaric could see their faces, buried under scars or masks of blood, or just so twisted with hatred that there was nothing human left.

'Open fire!' yelled the colonel, and the air in front of the fortifications was streaked with las-fire. The front ranks of cultists were riddled, fat crescents of laser lashing off arms and slicing bodies open.

Billows of steam rose up where the snow and ice were vaporised. The sound was immense, like reality itself ripping under the fury. The battle cannon fired again, but its roar was almost lost among the gunfire, the explosion of smoke and gore just a punctuation mark amid the slaughter.

Alaric took aim and fired. The Grey Knights around him did the same. A Space Marine's aim was excellent, and he picked out the individual shapes of heads and torsos among the confusion, and spewed explosive bolts into them. Where the bolts detonated, puffs of blood and bone showered. Alaric fired in bursts, picking out a cultist and blasting him apart. The Grey Knights chewed a hole into the end of the Chaos line like a bloody bite mark, and within moments cultists were clambering over the ruined bodies of their dead.

However, the front ranks were just weak-willed fodder for the guns. The true power of the army followed them, ensuring the Hathrans used up ammunition and time killing the scum herded into the firing line.

The tide drew closer. The rhythm became frantic, trigger fingers spasming as the Hathrans sprayed rapid fire into the mass of men swarming towards them. A war machine rose through the fire, its gun opening up even as las-fire rained off it in showers of sparks.

'Visical! They're in range!' shouted Alaric, relying on the squad's vox-link to carry his voice over the din.

Brother Visical leaned between the battlements, his incinerator aimed down the steep slope of the fortifications.

The horde swarmed faster, chewed up and riddled with las-burns and bolter fire, but still numbering countless thousands. Their hands and feet were bloody from tearing on the ice. Pale, frost-bitten limbs reached from tattered red robes as they scabbled to get a purchase on the fortification wall. The skinless ones leapt over the cultists in front, agile as insects.

Alaric looked into the eyes of one of them. They were rolled back and blank. There was nothing human left there.

All along the Imperial line, with a million voices raised in a scream, the Blood God's army hit the wall.

THREE

'For the Emperor!' yelled young Brother Thane as he sliced a screaming robed killer in two with his halberd. The cultist's twin blades clattered to the rockcrete of the fortification as Thane kicked out and knocked another from the parapet. Autogun fire spanged off the Grey Knight's armour as he swept the battlement clear, the arc of his halberd blade taking off a hand, and then a head.

Another blast of sacred flame washed the battlements clear. A once-human shape, now hunchbacked and many-armed, reared up and screamed, cloaked in flame. It collapsed, skin and muscles boiling away.

'The dead,' said Brother Haulvarn, 'they're climbing their dead.'

Haulvarn was right, The Grey Knights' guns and Visical's incinerator had killed so many, so quickly, that cultists were piled up at the bottom of the wall, high enough for the killers behind them to clamber up. They were on the wall now, fighting each other to die by the Grey Knights' hands.

Along the walls, huge mutants had clambered up onto the battlements and were fighting with the Hathrans. Alaric saw one Guardsman thrown from the wall by a deformed giant, and another having his brains dashed out by a foul creature with weeping skin and giant crab claws. A mutant fell from the wall, chest flaming from las-fire, and crashed the cultists below him. The battle cannon fired again, almost point-blank, throwing Hathrans from their feet, and showering them with earth and boiler parts, but it was not enough. Cultists were making it onto the walls to lay into the Hathrans with guns and blades.

Haulvarn's halberd took the arm off a feral warrior with woad painted skin, before he ducked back below the battlements to shelter from the fire of the closest war machine.

'Too many?' he asked.

'Too many,' agreed Alaric.

'Then it's ours to win.'

Alaric looked around at his oldest comrade. The line cannot hold, not against this. Be ready to take command.'

'Why?'

'Because I might not come back.'

'Justicar, your brothers need-'

'My brothers need what the Emperor needs. They need victory. Standing back and letting the enemy kill us will not win us that victory. It is up to us, which means it is up to me. That is a justicar's responsibility. Can I count on you?'

'Of course, Justicar, always.'

Then we need to get to the centre of the walls. Open up a path for me through this rabble.'

Haulvarn paused, just for half a second. He stood to his full superhuman height, holding his halberd up so the squad could see. 'Brothers!' he yelled above the din of battle. 'Forward! Down the line!'

Visical was first up, spraying the blessed flame along the battlements stretching westward. Cultists screamed in the fire. Thane cut them down with his sword, his power armour protecting him as he strode through the burning fuel. They loomed from every side through the fire and smoke, and each scarred face was met by a sword or halberd crackling with the harnessed power of a Grey Knight's mind. Alaric felt bones fracturing under his halberd, and saw wet rains opened up in enemy torsos from his storm bolter.

He barely had to think. He was a Space Marine, a Grey Knight, created almost whole to be a killing

machine. Every fatal movement was hard-wired into him, as if a machine-spirit guided him, as if the Emperor himself was controlling his actions.

However, a Space Marine was not a machine. He was driven by passions that a normal man could not understand. The obscenity leading this horde had to be destroyed. That was the thought that drove Alaric on.

Thane wrestled a giant mutant as they went, something so foully warped there was barely any human left in it at all. A leathery winged creature swooped down to snatch Alaric off the wall. Alaric snatched it instead, crushing its throat in his fist while he tore its wings off and threw it into the fire. It still slathered over the battlements behind him.

'Here!' shouted Alaric. 'Break through them!'

Hathrans were dying all around. The Chaos horde had forced the walls in a dozen places, and knots of combat were erupting everywhere. An explosion tore a massive chunk out of the battlements on the left of the line, and the horde surged forwards, a war machine walking relentlessly over the slope of the rubble, impaling Guardsmen on its mechanical talons.

And there were daemons. They were red-skinned and hideous, leaping amid the carnage, wielding swords of black iron that glowed and smouldered.

'Damn you!' shouted a voice that Alaric recognised as that of Colonel Dal'Tharken. 'Hold to your post, Grey Knights! The flank will fall! Get back to your post!' Alaric caught sight of the colonel covered in burning daemon's blood, wielding his sword and plasma pistol, surrounded by the bodies of friend and foe.

He was a tough and unrelenting servant of the Emperor. The Imperium would miss him. Alaric ignored his words and pressed on.

The champion of Chaos was the key. Chaos adored its champions as much as it despised everything else. It granted particularly foul-hearted men and women with the power to command their forces, and the authority to speak with their gods' own voices. The Imperial line could not hold the enemy. It would barely make a dent in the vast force that had landed to claim Sarthis Majoris. It had, however, achieved a goal that, though the Guardsmen did not know it, was every bit as valuable to the Imperium.

It had brought Alaric and his Grey Knights face to face with the champion who represented the daemon gods on this world.

'Use the Thirteenth Hand,' said Duke Venalitor. His voice was loaded with disdain, for the Thirteenth Hand were the lowest dregs of his army.

One of Venalitor's heralds, black armour welded to its weeping skin, blew a long note from its war horn. The Thirteenth Hand, hunched subhuman creatures dressed in rags, hurried forward for the honour of dying at the wall.

The battle was going as planned. If any truly human emotion could be ascribed to Duke Venalitor, it could be said that he was happy with it. By the time the regiments of proper soldiers reached the front, the battle would be over and the refinery cities of Sarthis Majoris would be Venalitor's.

A messenger descended on tattered wings of bloody skin.

'My lord,' it slurred, 'their flank has fallen. The defenders have abandoned their posts.'

'Cowards,' sneered Venalitor. 'Their skulls are not fit for the Brass Throne.'

'They were from the corpse-emperor's legions,' said the messenger.

'Astartes?' Venalitor's perfect, pale brow furrowed. 'They would not run.'

The pit of Venalitor's mind dredged up memories from a time when he had been a man. It was a weak and shameful part of his existence, before the Blood God had found him. That man recalled the

Space Marines were the guardians of the Imperium, the last line against all horrors, soldiers who would never flee, never, not even with Venalitor himself bearing down on them.

'Close order!' yelled Venalitor. His sword was in his hand, its huge blade shining in the red-tinged dawn. 'Now! Shields up! Give no quarter!'

He saw them among the carnage, silver-armoured figures picked out in scarlet flame. They had not abandoned the right of the line out of fear.

They had left their posts to effect the only victory they could gain from Sarthis Majoris.

They thought they were going to kill him.

Duke Venalitor laughed. They had absolutely no idea what the Blood God had made from that man. He had looked upon the throne of flaming brass and knelt at the foot of the skull mountain. He had tasted the blood of Khorne Himself. No Space Marine was fit to die beneath his blade, which was a shame, because they would die very soon.

Venalitor saw one of the Space Marines run at the edge of the wall, behead a cultist without a breaking stride, and leap off the wall heading directly for Venalitor.

Venalitor felt every muscle in his warp-blessed body tense, and hoped that this one would at least give him a worthwhile fight.

The battlefield whirled around Alaric as he fell. He could hear the voices of his battle-brothers, and feel the heat rippling off the chains of bolter fire that followed him down.

He hit hard enough to crush a cultist beneath him. Alaric plunged a foot down through the mess to get his footing, and the stinking, subhuman creatures were on him. Filthy nails raked at his armour, trying to prise between his armour plates or drive claws into his eyes.

Alaric swept his halberd around in a brutal arc. He forged forwards, every sweep of his halberd battering back the deformed bodies pressing in on every side. A huge mutant reared up over him, carrying a rock in its paws to crush him. A stream of bolter fire battered its head into pulp and it collapsed. Alaric glanced back to see Haulvarn aiming, the muzzle of his storm bolter still flaming.

The cultists gave way before him. Alaric kicked the last one aside. In front of him, now, stood a warrior in black armour as tall as Alaric himself, a wall of steel. Its shield bore the symbol of a eight-pointed star and its spear was tipped with a huge sharpened fang. The warrior lunged, but Alaric turned its spear away, spun around and shattered its shield with the butt of his halberd. He squared his feet and drove the blade of the halberd into the warrior's face, dropping the tip at the last moment so it plunged into the hollow between neck and chest.

Hot blood sprayed, and the warrior fell to its knees. There were other warriors on either side, forming a circle around Alaric's target.

Alaric half-stumbled into the circle. This was his only chance. This planet would not get another shot at survival. If the Chaos horde continued to march under its leader, Sarthis Majoris would fall.

The gods had seen fit to send to Sarthis Majoris a champion of such presence that Alaric felt himself forcing him back. His armour was impossibly intricate, covered in images of heaps of skulls around a burning throne.

The champion's face was the very image of arrogance, pale and perfect, with eyes like black diamonds.

'Leave us,' said the champion. The armoured warriors around him took a step back to leave an open duelling ground around Alaric and the champion.

Alaric was in a low guard, eyes fixed on the champion's blade.

'A Grey Knight,' said the champion with a smile. 'Khorne's gaze is upon us. I shall give thanks for the warp that the corpse-emperor sent one of his very own daemon hunters to die beneath my blade.'

'Let me help you return the favour, then,' said Alaric, his words sounding like those of a stranger. 'for you will be looking upon your god soon enough.'

The champion smiled. His teeth were ebony black fangs. He lunged forward, and his sword was like chained lightning striking down at Alaric.

Alaric turned the sword aside and suddenly the duel was on. The champion didn't just want blood. Blood alone was enough for the scum who threw themselves at the walls, but not for their leader. He wanted to prove his superiority. It was why he existed. It was in proving his superiority that the champion offered up his prowess to Khorne the Blood God.

It was also Alaric's only chance of survival. If the champion wanted a duel, then that was what Alaric would give him.

Alaric's halberd spun around faster than any normal man could move, its head carving down at the champion. In response the champion's intricate armour opened up like a bloody flower and tendrils of gore reached out to snare Alaric and drag him down. Alaric cut through them and dived clear as the champion's sword sliced down through the frozen earth beside him.

More tendrils snaked around Alaric's arms and lifted him up in the air.

Alaric ripped one arm free and aimed his storm bolter down at the champion, fixing his aim on the champion's face, still impassive with the certainty of victory.

The champion threw him down. Alaric hit as hard as a comet, cultist's bodies splintering under him and then the rock-hard earth shattered. He planted a hand on the ground and forced himself up from the mess of bodies, his other hand groping for his halberd.

He forced the clouds from his eyes. He was battered but alive. It took a lot to fell a Grey Knight. As long as there was life in him and a weapon in his hand, victory was in his sights.

The corpses were moving. The one closest to Alaric burst open like a seed pod, crimson blood flooding out. More bodies were erupting all around him and beneath him, sinking him in a swamp of gore.

The champion laughed. The blood flowed up from the bodies, forming shapes like blocks of melting crimson ice. The champion stepped up onto them as they created a bleeding stairway up into the air. He stooped to pick Alaric up by the collar of his armour and held him up like a scolded animal like a sacrifice. The sword in his other hand was ready to slice Alaric open and let his innards spill out onto the battlefield in a sacrifice to Khorne.

Alaric kicked out and caught the champion on the side of the face. The champion reeled, and Alaric grabbed the wrist at his throat, wrenching it around so that the champion let go. Alaric landed on the platform of blood that had formed below them, and was still rising up over the valley. Below him, he caught sight of the dark mass of cultists flowing around the right end of the line, which the Grey Knights had abandoned. The line was collapsing, the Hathrans surrounded and besieged. Alaric had sacrificed them for this chance at victory. He owed them the champion's death as surely as he owed it to the Emperor.

Alaric rolled to his feet, halberd still in hand. The champion wiped a smear of blood from the corner of his eye. Alaric had opened on his face, and confronted him.

'Duke Venalitor avenges his insults,' spat the champion.

'A Grey Knight avenges his Imperium,' said Alaric.

The sword and the halberd flashed. High above the battlefield on a platform of animated blood Duke Venalitor and Justicar Alaric fought a duel so rapid and intense that the few eyes that looked up from the battlements below could not make any sense of the blur of strikes and parries. Tentacles of blood lashed around Alaric's ankle and threw him to the bloody floor. Alaric's leg kicked out and knocked Venalitor reeling towards the edge. Gashes and scars opened up in Alaric's armour, some of them scored deep enough to draw blood. Alaric's halberd blade rang off Venalitor's armour as the

champion of Chaos turned it aside at the last moment time and again.

Alaric lunged for Venalitor's heart. Venalitor grabbed the haft of Alaric's halberd with one hand, dragged Alaric forwards and brought an elbow down on the back of Alaric's head hard enough to send the world black for a moment. When Alaric forced vision back into his eyes he was being held in the air over Venalitor's head.

Alaric groped down trying to force a finger into the swordsman's eyes.

His hand passed through writhing wetness, a nest of squirming bloody worms that opened up a place of Venalitor's face. Somehow it retained enough features to smile as it threw Alaric down.

Alaric plummeted down towards the frozen ground behind the line. He realised a split second before he landed that below him was not solid earth, but the pile of frozen Hathran dead.

Weeks' worth of casualties shattered beneath him. His armoured bulk blasted a crater in the receding black ice.

Pain slammed up through his body. His head cracked against the rock-hard chunk of a soldier's frozen corpse. The world of Sarthis Majoris seemed very far away. The voices he heard were from a different planet entirely, a different plane, which meant that he had sunk down through the earth into one of the hells to which the Imperial Creed maintained every sinner went.

Reality was slipping away. The pain of his battered body, so familiar to a Space Marine, was ebbing away, and he wished it would return to prove he was alive. The world, to his eyes, was dim and distant. The dawn was bleeding away to leave the valley dark. Something inside Alaric reminded him that he was not supposed to simply die like this, that there was something else he had to achieve, but it slipped away even as his mind reached to grasp it.

He assumed that the cry of despair was the last sound he heard. It was raised from a hundred throats at once and it was so deep that it cut through the gunfire and the screams of the battle.

It was the sound of Hathran. It was a funeral song. Alaric had heard it sung over the same pile of dead in which he was lying.

They were singing their own funeral dirge. The Hathrans knew they were going to die. They knew because they had seen a Space Marine, the Emperor's warrior, defeated and thrown down from the heavens by the champion of the Blood God.

'No,' gasped Alaric, 'not here. Not now.'

Sarthis Majoris swam back into focus. Alaric was lying on his face in a pile of shattered, frozen corpses. He looked around for his halberd and saw that it had landed point-down, impaled in the earth a short crawl away.

Alaric got to his knees. He would retrieve his weapon and fight on, because that was the only way to victory, however slim the chance might be.

A weight slammed down on his back, forcing him back onto his face. He fought to turn over, and for a moment the pressure was lifted. Alaric rolled onto his back and the foot came back down on him.

Duke Venalitor had one foot on Alaric's chest like a hunter standing over his prey. The magnitude of his arrogance was such that even the corpses recoiled at it, the blood in them heating up and melting at Venalitor's presence. Fingers of blood reached up from the corpses to lick at the boots of Venalitor's armour like the tongues of sycophants. Venalitor commanded all blood, even that of his enemies, such was the esteem in which the Blood God held him.

'My lord Khorne has a use for you,' said Venalitor with a smile. He gestured at the Hathrans dying on the walls behind him. 'Most of them are only good for fodder. Mankind provides little more than distractions for me now. However, there is much more you can do for the Blood God than merely die, Grey Knight.'

Venalitor held out a hand, and Alaric felt the blood seeping from the cracks in his armour. He kicked out, trying to throw Venalitor off him, but his strength was gone. Ribbons of blood spiralled

out of him and his vision began to grey out.

~~As Duke Venalitor drew Alaric's lifeblood out of him chill pain filled him up in its place. Darkness~~
fell all around him, and Alaric was not too proud to scream.

FOUR

Alaric sat for a long time in the Cloister of Sorrows before Chaplain Durendin approached.

'Justicar,' said Durendin. 'The Grand Masters have spoken with me of Chaeroneia. Your faith was sorely tested.'

'It was,' Alaric said. He was sitting on the drum of a collapsed column, typical of the cloister's fallen grandeur.

'The day is fine,' said Durendin, indicating the magnificent sky of Titan, the vast ringed disc of Saturn hovering over the void. 'I shall sit with you a while, if I may.'

The Cloister of Sorrows was open to Titan's sky, its atmosphere contained within invisible electromagnetic fields, and for Alaric to sit there among its age-worn tableaux was to allow the greedy eye of the galaxy to look down on him. The Emperor was a part of that gaze, always examining the soul of every one of His servants. Alaric felt naked and raw beneath it.

'I feel that there is more on my mind,' said Alaric, 'than Chaeroneia.'

'And that is why you have come here,' replied Durendin simply, 'to be alone with your thoughts away from the war gear rites and battle songs, and if a Chaplain were to happen along with whom you could share your thoughts, then so be it.'

Alaric smiled. 'You are very perceptive, Chaplain.'

'It is merely the Emperor's way of using me,' replied Durendin. To be a Space Marine required an extraordinary man, but to be a Chaplain required more. A Chaplain of the Grey Knights was a rare specimen indeed, and the Chapter had precious few like him. He had to minister to the spiritual needs of soldiers destined to fight the most horrible of foes. The men of his flock had looked upon the war and heard the whispers of daemons, and yet, thanks to him and those who had preceded him, not one Grey Knight had ever become corrupted by the enemy.

'Chaeroneia is a part of it, certainly, but I was troubled before that, ever since Ligeia.'

Inquisitor Ligeia was the bravest person Alaric had ever met. The sunburst on his personal heraldry was in memory of her. She had lost her mind to the machinations of the daemon prince

Ghargatuloth, but enough of her had remained pure to give Alaric the knowledge he had needed to defeat the daemon. She had been executed by the Ordo Malleus for her madness.

'Men and women like Inquisitor Ligeia will always die,' said Durendin.

That is the way it was even before the Great Crusade, and it will continue to be so long after both of us are gone. What matters is that we know those sacrifices work towards the goal of safeguarding the human race. Do you believe she died in vain?'

'No, Chaplain, far from it.'

'Then this galaxy seems too cruel for you?'

'If I could not stomach the things I must see then you know full well I would not have been selected for training at all,' said Alaric, perhaps a little too harshly. 'I just feel there is... there is so much for us to do, and I do not mean the battle. I have always accepted that the battle will not end, but there is so much more to our fight than meeting the daemon with swords and guns. I have glimpsed the... the realities behind it all. The words of the Castigator come into my mind unbidden. Ghargatuloth won space and time to create the events that summoned him back, and we were a part of it. I will fight to the end of my days, for sure, but the enemy is not just bodies to be put into the ground. It is a concept, perhaps it is even a part of us. I wish I could understand it, but I know no one can ever understand Chaos without becoming corrupt.'

'So, you do not believe our fight is futile?'

~~'No, Chaplain. How could I, when I have seen the results of the daemon's depravity? But our fight is only half the battle, and I wonder if the other half can ever be won.'~~

Durendin looked down at his gauntleted hands. He was no stranger to the battlefield, and his Terminator armour, ornate gunmetal trimmed in a Chaplain's black, was not just for show. 'These hands,' he said, 'have fought that same fight for longer than you have been alive, Justicar, and not for one moment have I ever believed it was anything but the true and righteous purpose of any human being. What you say is true, however. The daemon is but one manifestation of the enemy and its violence is but one weapon of the warp. The Inquisition battles the plans of Chaos just as we battle its soldiers. Do you not agree?'

'How many inquisitors have we lost?' replied Alaric. 'Though we should not speak of it, Valinov was far from the only rogue in the Holy Orders, and he hid from us for so long. How many other heretics are wearing the Inquisitorial Seal? How many in Encaladus Fortress? How many directing the Grey Knights? I know it is our place to leave the thinking to the inquisitors, but how can we trust them if they delve so deeply into the corruption?'

Durendin sighed. He was an old man and sometimes, as then, Alaric had seen a reflection of those years in him. 'I have led Grey Knights through every trial of the mind that Chaos can inflict upon them.'

You are not the first to doubt, Alaric, and certainly not the first to glimpse the futility in the Inquisition's task.'

'It is not futile,' said Alaric, 'but I feel I am failing if I do not do more.'

The daemon is a symptom, not the disease. I want to be a part of the cure.'

'I had these thoughts, myself,' continued Durendin. 'I spoke with my battle-brothers and the Grand Masters, and with the most knowledgeable inquisitors. None of them had the answer. In the end, I found the answer myself.'

'And what was it?'

'You will find it yourself. You are going to the Eye of Terror, I hear.'

'Yes, when my squad is reinforced.'

'Good. Then that is your answer. The Enemy's atrocities at the Eye know no bounds, and only men like us can stop him. Think about it. In your moment of doubt, the Emperor has sent you to the bloodiest battlefields of the Imperium. That is no coincidence. Throw yourself into those battles.'

See the daemon and butcher him. See the forces of Chaos broken and fleeing. Take those victories and immerse yourself in them. Let victory blot out everything else. Glory in it. Then the doubt will be gone.'

That is what worked for you?'

'It did, Justicar. The enemy has made a grave mistake in bringing the fight to us. Men like you will punish that mistake. This I promise you, Alaric. You will become whole at the Eye of Terror.'

'Thank you, Chaplain,' said Alaric. 'I must see to my squad. I have two new men and we must prepare together before we go.'

'That is good,' replied Durendin. 'Your men's spirits need counsel before they witness the Eye.' The Chaplain looked up at Saturn, deep blue and streaked with storms. Below the planet was Titan's skyline, an irregular toothed band of darkness. The whole of Titan had been turned into an ornate fortress, the moon's surface carved deep with canyons and vaults, and many parts of it such as the Cloister of Sorrows had become ruined and near-forgotten. 'I shall think here for a while. Saturn will set in an hour or so. It helps one think.'

'Then I shall speak with you soon, Chaplain.'

'Until then, Justicar.'

Alaric stood up to leave. The way down through the half-ruined fortress beneath the cloister was long, and it would give him plenty of time to consider Durendin's counsel.

'And Justicar?' said Durendin.

'Yes?'

'You are not dead.' 'That is good to know.'

'Although it may be an idea to wake up soon.'

'This isn't how this conversation ended.'

Durendin smiled. 'No, it is not, but then, I am not really here. I am probably elsewhere at the Eye. Perhaps I am even dead. What matters is that you are alive, and you can still do something about the situation in which you find yourself.'

'Then, what next?' asked Alaric.

'I cannot answer that, Alaric. I am not even here, after all. However, I think it is very likely that your situation is not a good one.'

The Cloister of Sorrows exploded in pain.

Alaric screamed.

The pain was howling from one of his shoulders. He was hanging from his wrists, which were chained above him. There was nothing else to bear his weight, and one of his shoulders had come out of its socket.

Alaric fought back the pain. He had been vulnerable for a moment and the pain had got to him, as it would to a man without the mental conditioning of a Grey Knight. His armour would normally be dispensing painkillers into his bloodstream, but he did not have his armour. He was naked. His weapons gear had been stripped from him.

As he fought back the pain, he began to hear again. A deep noise like an angry ocean boiled beneath him, and he could hear the clanking of vast machinery, mixed in with sobs and screams from broken throats. The smell hit him: blood and smoke, sweat and machine oil. His mouth tasted as if it was full of iron. He could not see, but that was a problem he would deal with in due time.

He forced his feet up, pulling up on his screaming shoulder. Slowly, he pulled himself up so that his body was almost upside-down. His feet found the roof of the cage he was in. He pushed down with everything he had, and he heard the bars buckling.

The chain holding his hands came loose from the ceiling of the cage and Alaric crashed down onto the cage floor. He lay there for a few moments, catching his breath, gingerly testing the tendons of his shoulder. It was hurt, but it was nothing permanent. A Space Marine healed quickly. He lay on his side and let the joint slide back into place. The gunshot of pain that accompanied it was profound, but there was something triumphant in the fact that he could feel at all.

Alaric reached up and found a blindfold tied around his face. He pulled it away and blinked a couple of times as his augmented eyes reacted to the sudden light.

His cage was one of several hundred suspended from a great iron column down which poured dozens of waterfalls of blood. These fed the sea of blood below him, in which writhed thousands of bodies, slick with gore. It was impossible to tell if they were in agony, or in some ecstasy of worship.

Daemons waded among them, hulking things with red-black skin, lashing the bleeding bodies with their whips. Corpses and parts of corpses bobbed everywhere, fished out and carried away by scuttling alien creatures with lopsided, tumoured forms.

Slowly, the column rotated on gears that ground like thunder. The other cages had their own occupants: human prisoners, naked and weeping, old corpses, half-glimpsed freaks either alien or mutated, all of them suspended above the titanic blood cauldron. Alaric could hear droning alien

prayers, pleading with the Emperor, and the ragged breaths of dying men. Tears and blood fell in a thin drizzle.

Walls of black stone rose around the column and the cauldron. Alaric looked harder and saw that was not stone at all but flesh, rotted black.

High above, the cliff edge was festooned with barrel-sized cages, each holding a body in an advanced state of decay. Flocks of flying creatures, like oversized crows, but with ribbons of flayed skin instead of feathers, feasted on them. The decaying cliffs were riddled with tunnels and caves, and the beetlelike alien creatures scurried through them, chewing at the flesh with insect-like mandibles. The sky above was indigo, almost black, shot through with red, as if the sky itself was bleeding.

He was in hell. Alaric had died at the hands of Duke Venalitor and woken up in hell. He had failed. Everything he had ever done, ever thought or said, and everything he might ever have done had been lived, was meaningless. He had failed as completely as it was possible to fail.

Alaric slumped down onto the floor of his cage. He had never felt such despair. It was made complete by the fact that if he was already dead. He could not die again, and so it would never end.

However, Durendin had told him he was not dead: Durendin, a Chaplain of the Grey Knights, a man he could surely trust completely.

Alaric looked up. Through the bars he could see the cage above. Inside it was a huge humanoid form, one that Alaric recognised. The huge size and surgical scars matched Alaric's own.

'Haulvarn!' called Alaric. 'Brother Haulvarn, can you hear me? Do we yet live?'

Haulvarn did not answer. He was presumably unconscious, or dead, and like Alaric had been stripped of his war gear. Alaric tried to force the bars of his cage apart, and then to rock it from side to side in the hope of grabbing the gnarled metal of the column and climbing up to Haulvarn, but the cage was too strong and suspended too far out.

'Haulvarn! Brother, speak to me!' shouted Alaric.

As if in response, Alaric's cage fell.

Alaric kicked out in desperation as the cage plummeted towards the blood cauldron. He was slammed against the side of the cage as it hit the surface of the blood. Blood closed in around him, and hands reached in, the skin sloughing off them. Alaric kicked at the hands of the revellers, but there were too many of them. The sound of them was horrible, blasphemous prayers spilling from bloodied lips in a hundred different tongues.

Something roared, and a whip cracked. A daemon threw the worshippers aside and stood over Alaric, leering. Alaric recognised its kind from countless battlefields. It was a foot soldier of Khorn, a 'bloodletter' in the jargon of the Inquisition. Alaric remembered they carried two-handed swords as weapons of choice, but this one's whip was just as cruel.

The daemon recoiled as soon as the bodies were clear of the cage. The mere presence of a Grey Knight was anathema to the daemon. Even without the pentagrammatic wards built into his armour, the psychic shield around Alaric's mind pushed back against the daemon's presence with enough violence to make its skin smoulder. The bloodletter snarled and lashed at the revellers around it, slicing off a hand here, a leg there, in its rage. Then it grabbed the bars of the cage with one hand and dragged it through the gore towards the chasm wall.

The daemon hauled the cage out of the blood and into a cave opening.

The smell was appalling, putrescence so heavy in the air that Alaric could see it trickling down the walls in foul condensation. Dark, twisted creatures scuttled towards him. These were not daemons, but some alien species, and their skin carried the brands and manacle scars of a slave race.

The aliens dragged Alaric through the stinking tunnels into a cavern that glowed with a close red heat. It was a forge, where human and alien slaves pulled glowing weapons from vats of molten metal. Other slaves were chained to anvils, their spines twisted by years of servitude, where they beat an edge

into the swords and spear tips. The din was appalling.

Alaric saw Haulvarn's cage being dragged through another opening, a gaggle of aliens following it. Haulvarn had awoken and was raging inside, trying to kick his way out of the cage.

'Haulvarn!' shouted Alaric over the ringing of the anvils. 'We are not dead! We are not dead!'

A crowd of alien slaves pressed around Alaric's cage as he was dragged towards one of the anvils. They were misshapen, asymmetrical creatures with a dozen eyes each, arranged without pattern around their faces, and complex mandibles that dribbled slime as they gibbered to each other in their own language. A bolt was drawn back somewhere and the top of the cage swung open.

Alaric tried to force his way out, but shock prods were jabbed down at him. His own strength was turned back on him as he spasmed. A single shock prod with a semicircular head was pressed down against his torso, and he was pinned in place. His muscles were paralysed, save for involuntary convulsions, and though he fought against it with everything he had left he couldn't break free. At full strength, he would have thrown the aliens out of his way, grabbed a weapon fresh from the anvil and killed everything he saw, but he was wounded and exhausted. He did not give in, he could not, but the back of his mind a voice told him that it was futile.

One of the aliens, larger and darker-skinned than the rest, and evidently in charge, reached a pair of tongs into the closest forge. It withdrew a circle of glowing metal that was hinged on one side so it hung open. It was a collar.

The alien leaned over Alaric. Its caustic spittle dribbled onto his chest.

'Rejoice,' said the alien forge master, its Imperial Gothic thick and slurred through its mandibles. 'for this shall make you holy.'

The alien plunged the collar down onto Alaric's throat. It snickered shut around the back of his neck. His skin hissed as it cooked under the hot metal.

Alaric could struggle no more. His mind felt as if it was suddenly frozen.

He realised what had been done to him. He knew, for perhaps the first time, what fear was.

The human species was evolving.

This was a truth the Inquisition went to great pains to suppress, but it could not be denied by the inquisitors themselves. Some even held the heretical belief that the Emperor planned to shepherd the evolution onwards and help the human race achieve its potential. The emergence of psychic humans created one of the critical tasks of the Inquisition: the identification, imprisonment and liquidation of emerging psykers. Every planetary governor was under pain of death to hand over all the psykers collected by his forces, whenever the Inquisition and its Black Ships came calling. What happened to the great majority of psykers herded into those Black Ships, only those sworn to secrecy knew for sure.

A few of the psykers, perhaps one in ten or less, were strong and adaptable enough to be properly trained. An untrained psyker was a dangerous thing, an unguarded mind through which all manner of horrors could gain entry to the worlds of the Imperium. However, a properly trained psyker could guard his mind against such threats, and sometimes even make his mind far stronger than those of his fellow men.

It was an irony, often a cruel one, that such trained psykers were essential to the functioning of the Imperium. They were the astropaths whose arcane long-range telepathy made interstellar communications possible, the soothsayers whose skill with the Emperor's Tarot enabled them to advise on the vagaries of the future. Many Imperial citizens viewed even these sanctioned psykers with fear. Yet, in spite of the fear that followed the psyker everywhere, without him the Imperium could not function.

To most citizens a psyker was a witch, a rogue prowling the shadows of the Imperium's worlds corrupt Emperor-fearing minds or bring forth foul things from the warp. A child foolish enough to display an unusual talent for magic tricks could expect his friends or family to turn him over to the local clergy. Wise women and fortune-tellers were burned at the stake on backwater worlds where Imperial servants rarely visited. Spaceship crews swapped tall tales of night-skinned humans who could rip a man's mind out of his skull, shapechangers, firebreathers and stranger things besides.

Once, long ago, a time before he could remember anything at all, Alaric had been one of those witches.

Alaric was a psyker. All Grey Knights were. While most Space Marine Chapters made use of some psykers, only the Grey Knights required psychic potential from all their recruits. It was what made the Grey Knights capable of fighting the daemon, for a daemon's most potent weapons threatened the soul itself.

Daemons brought with them corruption, and fighting them exposed a Grey Knight to the corruption. They were trained to resist it, taught prayers of will-power so potent that they drove some recruits mad. Their armour was impregnated with sigils against the powers of the warp, the same symbols tattooed on their skins so that their bodies were shielded against corruption, but the most powerful defence was a Grey Knight's psychic shield. Alaric had been taught in the very earliest stages of his training to imprison his soul in a cage of faith and contempt where no daemon could reach it.

It was the only weapon a daemon truly feared: an incorruptible mind, anathema to the warp. The mere existence of the Grey Knights was a victory of sorts against Chaos.

The collar fixed around Alaric's neck was a dead, heavy thing that weighed down Alaric's soul. It was an artefact of Khorne, the Blood God.

The Blood God despised sorcery, and it despised the righteous, holy mind of a Grey Knight.

The Collar of Khorne suppressed psychic abilities. Alaric's shield was gone. He was still a Grey Knight, he had still trained his mind and his body beyond a normal man's tolerances against corruption and possession, but without that psychic shield, he was ultimately defenceless.

FIVE

It was a long time before Alaric could feel anything. He was somewhere infernally hot.

Alaric was standing, and he was chained to the wall. The chamber was lit by ruddy furnaces taking up the opposite wall. Unfinished swords and sections of armour were heaped up either side of a well-scored anvil.

'You're not supposed to wake for a good while,' said a voice behind Alaric. Alaric tried to turn, but he was chained in place. He was dimly aware that he was still in the forge where his collar had been attached, and the iron weight of it around his neck seemed to drag him down towards the floor.

'Where is my battle-brother?' asked Alaric through split and bloody lips.

'I heard there were two of you,' said the voice. It was deep and gravelly, from a throat scorched by years amid the forges. 'He's somewhere in this hole, probably having the collar fixed. They had you down as witches as soon as they brought you in. Not many get the collar, you know. It's quite an honour.'

The speaker walked to the anvil, his back to Alaric. He was a massive man with brawny shoulders and dark skin that gleamed like bronze. Tools hung from his waist. He bent over the anvil and picked up a sword, a magnificent blade, but rough and half-finished. 'I have been down here a long time,' he continued, 'heard a lot of things, but it has been a long time since an Astartes graced this world. A long time indeed.'

'Who are you?'

The speaker did not look round. 'A smith by trade. Too useful a man to kill. I guess I should thank the Emperor for that. If there's one thing this planet needs, Astartes, it's blades, good blades, and lots of them. So this is where I shall stay until I die, and probably well beyond, making their blades. Perhaps you'll end up with one of mine. Believe me, you'll know it.'

'There are no blades like mine on this world.'

'Where am I to be taken? What will happen to me?'

The smith still did not turn to face Alaric. The muscles on his back snaked beneath his dark skin. He laid the sword on the anvil and took up a hammer. 'Not for me to say, Astartes. Not for me to say. I had anything worthwhile to my name, though, I'd wager it on you fighting for your life sooner rather than later. So, I'll make you a deal.'

Alaric laughed, and it sounded as bitter as the taste of blood in his mouth.

'A deal, of course.'

'Ah, hear me out, Astartes, unless you have somewhere better to be.'

Involuntarily, Alaric fought against his chains.

'I'll make you a suit of armour,' said the smith, 'the best you've ever held.'

'I have armour.'

'Not any more, and you've never had armour such as I can craft. Fits like a steel skin. Bends like silk. Toughened by fires as fierce as the heart of a star, strong enough to turn Khorne's own axe aside. How does that sound? Tempting?'

'But it will not be for free. I know your kind. Any promise from the corrupted is as good as betrayal.'

'Oh no, you do not understand. In return, I ask that you seek something out for me. I dare say you will have more luck finding it out in the world than I will down here.'

'End this,' said Alaric. 'No servant of the Emperor would bargain with one such as you.'

'Such as me? And what am I?' The smith turned just enough for Alaric to see his face in profile. His face was as beaten as one of his blades, his nose broken many times, his eyes almost hidden in scar tissue. 'Find the Hammer, Astartes: the Hammer of Daemons. They say it lies somewhere on this world, and with it a hero will rise up and topple the lords of the Blood God. What would be dearer to a slave like me than to see that?' 'Lies.'

The Hammer of Daemons is very real. Nothing more is known of it, but it most definitely lies somewhere on this planet. If I didn't know better I might even say that it is right before me, chained to a wall in my forge. For you are the Hammer. Is that not so, Grey Knight?'

The weight of the collar was too much for Alaric to bear. His head bowed as it dragged him down. Black spots flickered before the forge fires, and he smelled burning iron and bolter smoke.

He drifted back out of consciousness, lulled into oblivion by the ringing of the smith's hammer on the anvil.

KARNIKHAL!

That self-devouring beast! That tumour city, that cancerous glory! A great parasite oozed from the black of the earth!

Some say Karnikhal plummeted to Drakaasi from some distant star, and grew mindless and vast over the aeons. Others claim it as some native thing, some fungus or parasite, mutated to immense dimensions by the ever-present power of Chaos. What fools are they, to seek logic in its form!

The caverns of its entrails, the blood rivers oozing from its wounds, the groaning of its eternal pain, these are a face of Chaos, a face of Khome!

The city built across Karnikhal is a parasite upon a parasite, shanties crammed between the fat folds of its back, spires tumbling at the whim of the beast, temples and slaughterhouses heaving with its titanic breath. All this at the whim of the mindless thing, the idiot monstrosity, the city monster that is Karnikhal!

- 'Mind Journeys of a Heretic Saint,' by Inquisitor Helmandar Oswain (Suppressed by order of the Ordo Hereticus)

'Good crop this year,' said Lord Ebondrake.

'Indeed, my lord,' replied Duke Venalitor.

'Khorne will be pleased to see them die.'

The torture garden gave Venalitor and Ebondrake an excellent view of Karnikhal's slave market. The market was one of the largest on Drakaasi. It was built into the site of a dried-out cyst like meteor crater. Hundreds of slavers' blocks were embedded in the tough skin of the ground, each one with several new slaves chained to it. The shouting of slavers rang out, punctuated by the sounds of whips and cracking bones.

Lord Ebondrake flexed a claw idly, like a stretching cat. The warp speaks of you, Venalitor.'

Then I am blessed, my lord.'

'It says you have brought the Blood God a very particular prize.'

Venalitor bowed. 'It is true. The Imperials fought us at Sarthis Majoris.

They were swept aside, and many were taken alive.'

'More than just Guardsmen, though, so the seers say'

'You shall see, my lord.'

Lord Ebondrake padded to the edge of the torture garden's balcony. The garden was a place of reflection for Karnikhal's elite, where they could consider the dismembered bodies displayed where they had died on the intricate torture devices arranged on the obsidian. A rebel might be granted

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