



# Daemgathos

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Daenyathos

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*My esteemed Brother Reinez,*

*It is my fervent wish that I was writing to you again under more auspicious circumstances but alas, recent events have cast yet another shadow over those of us who lay rightful claim to being true sons of Dorn. The Soul Drinkers Chapter, long a thorn in the side of all loyal servants of the Throne, sit rotting in cells aboard Phalanx and preparations for their forthcoming judgement continue apace. I trust that as Chief Persecutor your case against them is also at an advanced stage and it is to this end that I felt compelled to contact you.*

*What you now hold in your hands is a tome we recovered from a Soul Drinkers Chaplain, though it pains me greatly to use that term to describe one who has turned away from the Emperor, beloved by all. The wretch had sought to keep it concealed but upon confiscation of his power armour he was forced to give up the book along with the secrets it contained. I must warn you that this makes for difficult reading and only one with the conviction and purity of a true servant of the Emperor, beloved by all, should be allowed to cast eyes upon it. Manifest are their treacheries, and the revelations you will find within damn the Soul Drinkers utterly. What sickens me, and any other noble son of Dorn, is that these acts of sedition and murder were carried out in the Primarch's name.*

*I am certain that you will share my view and make use of this evidence to condemn their entire debased Chapter as nothing more than heretics.*

*Dominicus*



# Part 1

313.M36

*Terra! Holy Terra, Mother World, Terra Most High! Cradle and Throne of Man! The Emperor's Watchtower, the Orb of His Majesty, the Eye of the Heavens! Sacred Earth Herself!*

So the chanson-serfs had sung as the *Glory* had first come into sight of Terra, a sphere of clouded gunmetal inlaid with the silver of orbital docks. So they had sung as the Thunderhawk gunships, their paths latticed with laser fire, had descended through the grey veil of cloud and glimpsed unobscured the glories of the Ecclesiarchal Palace. Hundreds of verses they had sung, their minds wired together through the comm-nets of the dozen Thunderhawks, extolling the magnificence of this storied and beautiful place.

By any moral standards, the Ecclesiarchal Palace was an ill-starred place that day. It was infested with heretics and served as the lair for a madman. But it also possessed a sacred beauty more profound than petty concerns like morality. It was eternal. It would stand forever. Many believed it had already stood there, straddling a whole continent of ancient Terra, since the beginning of time – for the human race to exist was unthinkable without the mother of all cathedrals to venerate the undying Emperor.

The Ecclesiarchal Palace stretched from one horizon to the other. Only the Imperial Palace, on the other side of the planet, was bigger. Huge swathes of Terra's surface were taken up by the two edifices. The Cathedral of the Emperor Deified was a titanic dome, as high as a



mountain and as broad as a city, rising far into the distance. Endless warrens of naves, cloisters and gilded fortresses surrounded it in an ornate cityscape. It had canals and spaceports, mausoleums and crematoria, slums and mansions. It might as well have gone on forever.

The serfs' chanson continued as the Thunderhawks left long burning contrails across the sky over the palace's eastern sectors. The song turned from the magnificence of Terra and the Ecclesiarchal Palace, as it always did, to the many glories of the men the Thunderhawks carried. They were not properly men in many respects, although they had once been, long ago. The Chapter serfs were men, but while they were less than they had once been – subservient, with body parts removed to make them more suitable for their tasks – the warriors aboard the Thunderhawks were more than human. It was their livery that could be glimpsed adorning the gunships from the battlements of the palace as they descended, vertical engines roaring columns of flame, towards the body-strewn courtyard marked out as their landing zone. A thousand men lay dead in the courtyard and the cloisters surrounding it. Columns had been toppled to clear the zone.

Anti-aircraft fire spattered up from somewhere to the west. The serf-pilots, hard-wired into the controls of the Thunderhawks, wrestled their craft between the streaks of fire. The pilots were good. The Chapter had made them that way.

Twelve Thunderhawk gunships descended, one at a time, hovering two metres above the courtyard. Their rear ramps opened and armoured figures far taller than a man leapt down, ready to fight the instant they landed. Each gunship's complement was an army in miniature – ten warriors, each one capable of any fight the enemy might throw at them, as willing to hammer the enemy from afar as they were to tear them apart face to face. Thunderhawks dropped their passengers, then roared up again to bank through the tracer fire and lend support from the air.

Each Thunderhawk bore the symbol of a golden chalice against its purple hull. The armour of the warriors was purple, too, trimmed with bone-white, and they all bore the chalice on one shoulder pad. They



were Astartes, Space Marines, Angels of Death, and they were warriors as feared as Terra was holy.

They were from the Soul Drinkers Chapter, and they had come to free Terra.

GUNFIRE HAMMERED LOUD enough to deafen a man. Brother-Sergeant Daenyathos backed against a ruined gargoyle, a hunk of carved stone the size of a tank, that had fallen from the cliff-high walls alongside.

'Cover!' he yelled into his squad's comm-net. His fire-team, four more Astartes under his command, ran across the processional through a rain of explosive fire and slid into the lee of the gargoyle.

'Press on!' came Captain Garn's voice on the all-squads channel. 'Cover and move! Onwards! Onwards!'

The gate up ahead had been attacked before. Six times the Imperial Guard of the 914th Sevayin Reavers had pushed along the processional, a wide avenue flanked by monumental statues, and six times they had been beaten back. The solid walls of the processional formed a valley that had funnelled them into the firing zones of the gate's defenders, and the road was strewn with bodies. The earliest attack had been long enough ago for bones to be poking through the rot-blackened skin and torn khaki fatigues. The newest bodies were still fresh, blood wet and glistening, skin yet to bloat.

The Imperial Guard had failed. They had failed because they were men. Men ran away, men faltered, men fell back. Astartes did not. That was the difference. A man might have put on power armour – he might even have hefted the boltgun or the chainsword an Astartes wielded. But he would still be a man. He would still lose this battle. An Astartes would win.

Daenyathos checked the positions of his fire-team. They were well-drilled – he had seen to that himself. Daenyathos did not have to give them the order to follow him as he ducked under a broken stone claw and into the open.

Fire sprayed down in reply. Laser fire, mostly. Some heavy weapons, mounted up around the enormous gate towers and among the statues crowding on the gate's lintel. Daenyathos put his head down, bolter

*Lies, lies, damnable lies! The Soul Drinkers were not on Terra at this time, as my own Chapter's records will attest.*



clutched to his chest, and sprinted through the fire. Shots impacted against his shoulder guards, one ringing against the side of his power armour's helmet. His autosenses swirled with static.

Brothers Kalynos, Torlo, Yelt and Daggeran were behind him. They were the Astartes of his fire-team, his command. Each one had a human side – a personality, quirks and habits, things that would make them angry and things that would slide off them when other battle-brothers would spark to anger. But in battle, they were only Astartes. There was no room for human failings. They had a trust only an Astartes could have. Daenyathos knew Daggeran would be compensating for the bulk of his heavy bolter, barrelling along on Daenyathos's heels. Torlo and Yelt were joined at the hip, covering their rear and flanks. The fire streaking back up into the murder-holes studding the gate tower ahead was coming from Kalynos, Daenyathos's best shot.

Daenyathos slid into hard cover at the base of the gate tower. The sheer surface was impossible to scale, even to the first level of murder-holes from which smouldering gun barrels protruded. The only way the Soul Drinkers would take the gate was to get inside, and the only way inside was through the front door.

The rest of the Soul Drinkers force was advancing, too. Heavy weapons squads were set up among fallen statues and chunks of masonry, swapping fire with the Frateris in the gate towers. Astartes fire-teams were using their covering fire to converge on the various barricaded entrances to the gate towers. Demolition charges erupted in *crumping* explosions of black earth and flame as the first squads to reach their targets blew up the fortified doorways.

The doorway closest to Daenyathos's team was his target. It was ill-defended compared to most. It had been used as a sally port in earlier battles, when the Frateris had emerged to cut down the Imperial Guard. Its plasteel surface was scored with las-fire.

'In position,' voxed Daenyathos to Garn. He received an acknowledgement rune in reply, flickering against the back of his retina. Daenyathos looked back along the path they had come and saw Garn's command pinned down, sheltering in a series of massive craters in front of the gates as fire stitched through the road around them.

Daenyathos would get no help from that quarter. With the anti-aircraft fire on the top of the gate towers, the Thunderhawks could not support them this close in, either.

'No wonder this was not breached,' said Brother Torlo, looking up at the stretch of gun-studded tower above them. 'The enemy has burrowed in deep.'

'Is that desperation I hear, my brother?' said Daenyathos. 'You think we cannot enter this burrow?'

'Nothing could be less true, brother-sergeant!' snapped Torlo, a little too quickly.

'Then lend your words the strength of your arm!' said Daenyathos.

Torlo took his combat knife from its sheath, holding his bolter one-handed like a pistol. He backed a pace away from the door and rammed a foot into the spot beneath the lock of the plasteel door. Torlo was strong – not as strong as Daggeran, but it was enough. The door boomed open.

Torlo yelled a wordless war cry and sprayed fire from his bolter on full-auto. Gunfire lit the inside like bursts of lightning. Torlo dived in, knife held blade-down – an Astartes habit, to make it easier to stab down at an enemy who did not share his great stature.

Daenyathos followed Torlo in. The fire-team did the same, Daggeran last, covering their rear with his heavy bolter. Images came to Daenyathos in a flash – the tangled confines were indeed like the inside of a burrow, narrow corridors choked with rubble and lengths of structural girders torn from upper floors. Crude spikes sprouted from the walls. Rolls of razor wire garlanded everything. The enemy wanted to make this a difficult place to fight through.

Torlo simply kicked his way through it. Wire snapped against the ceramite of his greaves and rubble crunched under his feet. He put his shoulder down and put his whole bulk against a wall up ahead, crashing through it and sending its stone blocks tumbling into the room beyond.





Daenyathos sized up all this in a moment. He saw the enemy, too, in the levels above, crouched among the stripped-out halls where once an army of scribes had kept the names of those who passed through this gate. Piles of scrolls were everywhere, illuminated parchments spilling through the holes in the floor opened up to turn the ground level into a kill-zone.

'Daggeran!' yelled Daenyathos. 'Above us!'

The enemy opened fire. Daggeran did the same. Laser fire fell as thick as rain and Brother Yelt fell under its weight, his armoured form slumping against one wall. Daggeran's heavy bolter slammed shot after shot into the floor above and what remained of the floor disintegrated, the explosive bolts ripping chunks from the walls and ceiling beyond. One enemy, already shredded by bolter fire beyond recognition, tumbled down in a wet red mess.

One of the Frateris screamed. It was a signal. They leapt down, afraid of Daggeran's fire, hoping they could save themselves by fighting up close.

Rarely, thought Daenyathos, had a sentient creature been more wrong.

The man that leapt down at him was naked to the waist, his torso ornate with intricate scarification in the shape of the Imperial eagle, and the haloed skull that represented the Emperor Himself. He had a powerful, muscular build, built for athleticism rather than raw strength. His head was shaved and the lettering of a High Gothic prayer had been carved into his face and scalp. Around his waist was a half-robe of silk and velvet, embroidered with gold. On one hand was mounted a lasblaster, a rapid-firing, short-ranged laser weapon. In the other he held a sword with a gilded hilt and a blade of haematite.

His image was shimmering as if through a heat haze. Daenyathos knew this was the effect of the energy shield that surrounded him, generated by a device grafted onto his spine.

He was one of the Frateris, the army of the Ecclesiarchy. The Imperial emblems inscribed into his skin were works of heresy, for he fought for a corrupt church.



All this Daenyathos saw and comprehended in the time it took the Frateris to fall to the ground level. Time slowed, as if the violence itself weighed it down. Daenyathos brought his bolter up and parried the first blow from the blade as it curved down towards him.

The Frateris's teeth were each illuminated, carved with tiny devotional images which flashed as he opened his mouth to yell another war-cry. His tongue was tattooed with a prayer. His eyelids, too. Lettering spiralled up the inside of his nostrils and into his ears. He was a walking prayer book.

Daenyathos stamped down with his front foot. It was a deliberately inelegant move, made against an enemy that did not deserve to die a handsome death. The Frateris's leg shattered below the knee and he fell forwards. Daenyathos grabbed the Frateris under the chin and hauled him off the ground.

The energy shield was powerful protection against ranged fire. That was why the gate towers had continued to crawl with Frateris no matter how much fire the Imperial Guard had poured into them. But once



an enemy got inside the shield, got face to face, it was useless. A Frateris had to rely on speed and skill at close quarters. He could not match an Astartes in either.

Daenyathos drove the Frateris down into the floor, dropping to one knee as he slammed the man's head into the rock. The back of his skull caved in and blood spurted from between his illustrated teeth. Daenyathos hauled the body up again, dangling from its broken spine, and it jerked as laser fire sizzled into it from the other Frateris leaping down to engage.

Yelt was on his feet again and plunged a combat knife into the back of another Frateris. The monomolecular blade's tip appeared in the centre of the Frateris's chest, sawing through his sternum.

The gunfire halted. Half a dozen Frateris had died in a few moments. A body fell from two floors up, one arm blown clean off by Daggeran's heavy bolter.

Yelt pulled off his helmet, one side of which had been blown apart by laser fire. He had a grin on his scorched face.

More commotion came from above. More Frateris moving to engage. 'Climb,' said Daenyathos. 'Push on. Push forwards.'

The Frateris were fanatics. Their purpose was to die for the Emperor – they were grossly misguided, pledged to a maniac, and they had to die. All of them. They would not give up.

So that, thought Daenyathos, is how it is going to be.

The gunfire began once more.



THE GATE FELL four hours after the Soul Drinkers had landed. Daenyathos had linked up with the other squads that had forced their way into the western tower and once they reached the top and silenced the anti-aircraft guns, the Thunderhawks had swooped in and riddled the east tower with more fire than even the Frateris could cope with.

The gate was open shortly afterwards and the Sevayin Reavers marched through the vast doors before which their friends had fallen in their hundreds.

A short distance away, a similarly sized force of Astartes had fought an action of their own in capturing an arena in which passion plays and devotional choirs had been performed for audiences of cardinals. These Astartes were not Soul Drinkers but Fire Hawks, from one of the other Chapters that had come to Terra to end what some called the Wars of Apostasy.

A man named Goge Vandire lived in the Ecclesiarchal Palace. Quite where no one was sure, because the palace was too huge to be properly mapped and much of it had fallen into ruins. But he was definitely in there. Every day, often every couple of hours, his words would shriek from vox-casters all over the palace as he ranted about the corruption of the Imperium and how only a man of his vision could guide it on the right path. The Guardsmen pulled down the vox-casters whenever they found them. They had plenty of nicknames for Goge Vandire, but his proper title was Ecclesiarch Goge I, 361st Master of the Administratum, Lord Protector Spiritual of the Imperium of Man.

Goge Vandire had usurped the role of Ecclesiarch, and used it as the basis from which to become dictator over the Imperium. The Imperial Creed itself had huge military and naval power built up by previous Ecclesiarchs, and Vandire, for all that he was demonstrably insane, had a great skill for finding malleable commanders in the Imperial Guard and Navy. As a result, any whim that had come to him had been executed and there was no one to stop him. Vandire's ambition had grown within him until it surpassed the bounds of human logic and became insanity. It was that insanity he went on to inflict on the Imperium. The random executions, enslavements and orbital bombings he ordered had sparked such religious mania that more had died to self-enforced pogroms and apocalyptic suicides than Vandire could have inflicted with all the troops at his command.

He was the propagator of a moral disease. He was an arch-heretic, an icon of sin. He had to be destroyed.

The Adeptus Astartes, the Space Marines, had stood aloof from Vandire's reign. They cared nothing for temporal power. They had no interest in ruling the Imperium themselves. But enough was enough.

The Fabricator General of Mars had sent Titan Legions and tech-guard to bring Vandire to task. Regiments of Imperial Guard, those not loyal to Vandire, had rallied to their banner. Then the Astartes had joined them, and Vandire's destiny was decided.

SERGEANT DAENYATHOS took off the helmet of his power armour and let out a deep breath.

'Holy Terra,' he announced, 'smells of gun smoke and sweat. A hint of incense! A tang of spilt fuel! That is the stink of sacredness, brothers! Was there ever a stench so holy?'

'What need have we of chansons and scribes,' said Brother Torlo, 'when we have such a poet for a sergeant?'

Daenyathos's fire-team had mustered with the rest of Captain Garn's command in the rear areas set up by the Imperial Guard just beyond the gates. Here the palace was in the form of enormous cloisters with ceilings so high it sometimes rained inside. Ancient censers, long dry of incense, hung from shadowed, vaulted ceilings supported by enormous columns. The Imperial Guard had set up tents and ammunition dumps, an engineer station to receive the tanks and a medical station

with a hundred bloodstained beds. The commanders had selected a side chapel to serve as their domain, with nests of vox-caster wires trailing through the gilded doors.

The Astartes stayed apart from the Imperial Guard. The Guard were in awe of them – most of them had never seen an Astartes in the flesh before this battle and even the seasoned and grim amongst them could do little but



stare at the Space Marines. To them, an Astartes was an aberration, a sight that could barely fit in their minds. They were human in form, but not human – too tall, too muscular, too deadly in every aspect and motion.

The Soul Drinkers gathered and prayed. They made their wargear rites, cleaning their guns and armour, reciting battle-drills to keep their minds honed. This was not rest – it was preparedness. A Space Marine did not rest.

A few of them, those who had made notable kills in the battle, were permitted to crack open the skulls of their victims and take the brain material from inside. A quirk of the Soul Drinkers' gene-seed had rendered the organ in their stomachs, the omophagaea, unusually sensitive, and as a result the genetic memories they could absorb had powerful emotional and spiritual resonances. It was a religious observance, then, for a Soul Drinker to swallow a goblet of that bloody pink mass, and to experience the memories and sensations that streamed from it.

Pains were taken to ensure the Imperial Guard did not witness this ritual. A Guardsman was morally simplistic, and could not be trusted to see the blood rites of the Adeptus Astartes and not come to a wayward conclusion.

Vandire had surrounded himself with men as insane as himself. After recruitment, the Frateris were first broken down, their humanity and personality stripped away, and then they were built back up again with the Imperial Creed the whole of their consciousness. When they closed their eyes, they saw Goge Vandire. When they opened them, they saw enemies that Vandire desired dead.

Sothelin, Daenyathos's novice, found him through the crowds and activity of the cloister. 'My brother,' said the novice. 'Have you deeds to record?'

The novice wore the semi-armour that other Chapters gave to their scouts. In the Soul Drinkers, novices did not serve as scouts in the field. Instead, they earned their understanding of war through attending on their more senior brothers, and learning from them the example of what it meant to be an Astartes. Sothelin, with his sharp

eyes and quick hands, was easy to teach. Perhaps he would be judged fit to become a full brother. Perhaps not.

'None of any note,' replied Daenyathos. 'It is not the deeds we accomplish, novice, that make us what we are. It is what we learn. If you wish to pen another line in the chanson of Daenyathos's deeds, note that he came to understand our foe a little more.'

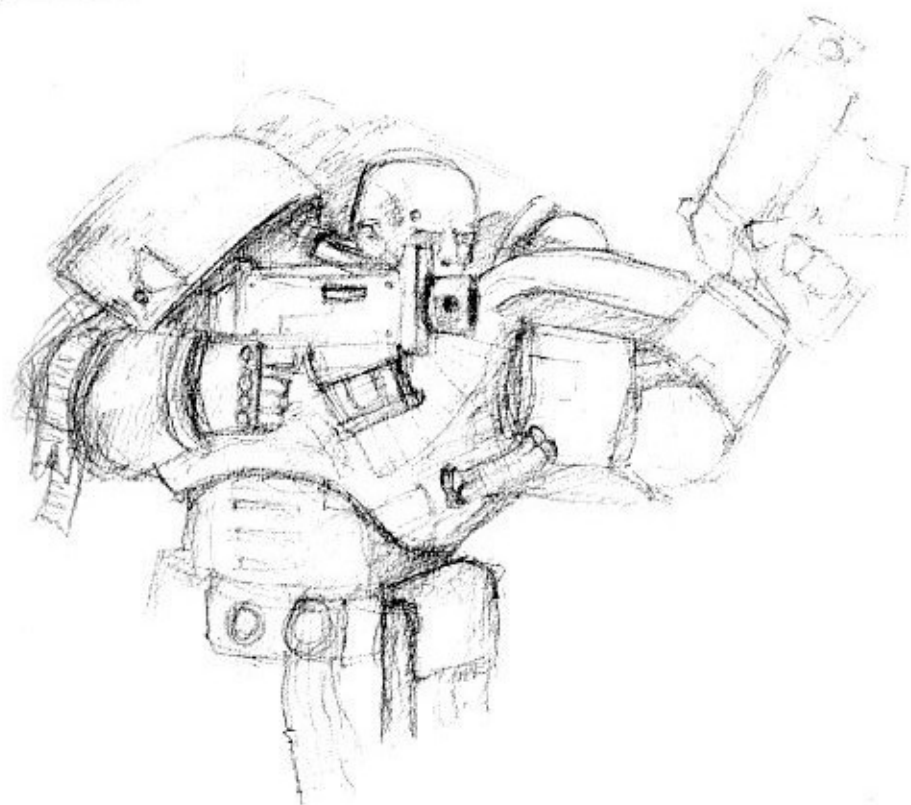
'I shall, brother-sergeant,' said Sothelin. 'And what, pray, did you learn?'

'That we shall be triumphant,' said Daenyathos. 'What greater truth is there than this?'

Sothelin wrote with a quill on the data-slate he held, glowing green words in Low Gothic streaming across the screen.

Kalynos clapped Daenyathos on one shoulder pad. 'The brothers wish you to lead their rites,' he said. 'Our aim was good this day. We would preserve it.'

cf: *The Borders of Moral Endurance*, p1876



'Take the rites, Brother Kalynos,' said Daenyathos. 'It is not your aim you wish to attend to. There is nothing wrong with how you shoot. Rather, your spiritual understanding is lacking. The hours you spent running bolter drills should have been shared with meditation and study of the Chapter scriptures. The rites shall be your responsibility from now on.'

'Very well, brother,' said Kalynos.

Kalynos took the other three battle-brothers of Daenyathos's fire-team and knelt with them. They laid their bolters and Daggeran's heavy bolter on the ground and commended the machine-spirit of each gun for its service, offering it acknowledgement and the spilling of enemy blood in return for further service. So much of the Chapter's life was tied up in such things, in the minutiae of ritual. It was what held the Soul Drinkers together. Without them, the Soul Drinkers would just be mere soldiers.

Across the cloisters, Daenyathos saw Captain Garn and Colonel Racalar of the Sevayins heading for the chapel. They were in conversation, probably coordinating the next stages of the attack. This pause would not last more than a few hours, only enough for the rearward area to be properly set up before the Guard and the Astartes were on the move.

Ahead of the cloisters lay the Tomb of Maleador. Maleador the Sigillite was not buried there, of course, but somehow this part of the palace had acquired his name and was now treated as if Maleador indeed lay there in state. The tomb was a warren, and by all accounts the Frateris and Vandire's own bodyguard, the Brides of the Emperor, had fortified it at every junction and bottleneck. It would be brutal. Many Imperial Guard would die. A few Soul Drinkers, too. The Fire Hawks were already pushing forwards to flank the tomb and cut off reinforcements from reaching its defenders. The thud of distant explosions sounded every now and again through the stone of the walls and floor.

Something else caught Daenyathos's attention. A group of Sevayin soldiers were sitting and singing, as drunk soldiers would except no drink seemed to be flowing. They were toasting one of their number – which one, Daenyathos could not be sure.



'He does not fear!' cried one. 'This man, this more than a man! He looked the Grand Gorebeleher of Charadon in the face and he did not falter!'

'He was made a prisoner of Lord Druvan the Foul,' exclaimed another, 'and when he returned he was carrying the Foul One's hide!'

'We cannot fail while he still lives!' came another voice in agreement. 'Not when he who fought from Chiros to Janna is with us! He rode twenty thousand kilometres to slit the throat of the Desert King! He beat a bloody tune on the skull of Cardinal Borean!'

They cheered as one, and Daenyathos understood this was their ritual, a crude approximation of an Astartes's devotions which helped re-order their minds after battle.

Daenyathos approached them. The first to notice him seemed to grow smaller as Daenyathos came near. The others stopped their celebrations and just turned to watch him. Daenyathos was head and shoulders taller than the biggest of them, and twice as broad in his armour. His shaven head, though still relatively youthful for an Astartes, had enough scars of war to mark him out as a veteran experienced beyond any of them.

'Of which man,' said Daenyathos, 'do you speak?'

They were silent for a long moment. They looked Daenyathos up and down, at the gilded chalice on his shoulder pad, and the eagle wrought into the ceramite of his breastplate and the triangular campaign marking on one greave.

'Fidelion,' said one of them.

'Fidelion!' said another. 'The greatest soldier that ever lived! Everyone on Sevayin knows his name.'

'Is he here now?' asked Daenyathos.

'He is! He killed four Frateris with as many blows. He even has the head of a Bride.'

'Where is he?'

One of the Sevayins turned and pointed towards one of the pillars. There a small camp had been set up – a bivouac, a fire, a few tins of supplies and ammunition.

Daenyathos left the soldiers and headed for the pillar. A single Guardsman sat there on an ammo crate by the fire, heating a tray of corpse

rations. His lasgun leaned against the pillar behind him. The soldier wore a fatigue vest and trousers, his arms bare. They were covered in tattoos forming tally marks, which went under his vest across his torso and back. His face was long and thin, his hair pale. He had evidently run out of space on his chest for all his medals – instead, he had threaded them onto his dog tags or pinned them to the belt of his fatigues. Some commendations hung from the stock and barrel of his lasgun.

'You are Fidelion,' said Daenyathos.

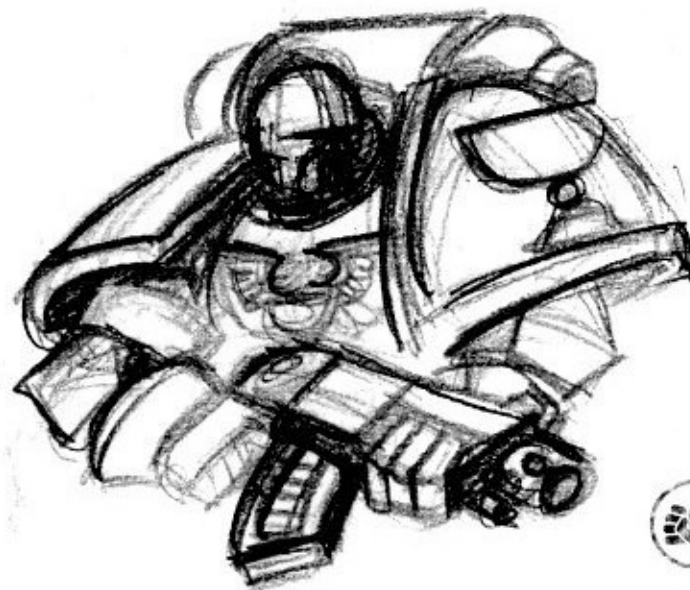
The man looked up. He only had one eye. The other was a bionic – not a fine device such as Kalynos had been fitted with in the Chapter forges. Instead, the soldier's was a relatively crude bionic fitted to a steel plate that took up half his forehead.

'I am,' he said.

Fidelion was the first man Daenyathos had ever met who could meet the gaze of an Astartes. He did not falter, just as the soldiers had said. He regarded Daenyathos as he might any other soldier.

'I have heard you are a hero.'

'I have been called that,' said Fidelion. 'I am fortunate my brother soldiers have named me such.'



*Regimental records, albeit incomplete, show no record of any man of this name ever serving in any Sevayin regiment.*



'There is no fortune in a soldier's fate,' replied Daenyathos. 'He makes it for himself.'

'Then I have made for myself quite a fate,' said Fidelion. 'I have earned myself the chance to die on Holy Terra. How many Guardsmen can say that? Hardly any since the Heresy, I'd wager.'

'You have come here to die?'

'I have come here to fight. Because I was ordered to.' Fidelion poked at his rations, which were starting to sizzle on the fire. 'The same as you and all the rest of these men. We are all soldiers here. Ultimately, we are all the same.'

'I do not think you are the same as the rest of these Guardsmen,' said Daenyathos, waving a gauntlet at the other Sevayins resting or cleaning their weapons. 'They all but worship you.'

'You seem unusually interested, Astartes, in the affairs of a mere man,' replied Fidelion. He said it without malice, as he stirred the corpse rations. They were a grim stew of protein and nutrients. The Guardsmen took delight in propagating the story that they really were made of corpses.

'I am interested in the qualities of someone others call a hero,' said Daenyathos. 'The men say you killed Lord Druvan, and wore his skin.'

Fidelion shrugged. 'It was cold,' he said.

'Why do they say the things they do? What is it that makes you stand apart?' Daenyathos knelt so he towered only a short distance over Fidelion. He was more earnest now. The looks in the Guardsmen's eyes as they spoke of Fidelion had ignited a curiosity in him he did not fully understand.

'I am not scared,' said Fidelion. 'I am not gripped by the fear that makes men do stupid things. Even when the enemy is great, I do not forget that fleeing from them is usually more dangerous than standing to fight. And I remember why I am fighting. There are powers greater than I who have sent me to kill in the Emperor's wars. I have faith my fighting will do His will. I take comfort in prayer and in the fact that my lasgun hasn't burned out on me yet. I suppose that is all.'

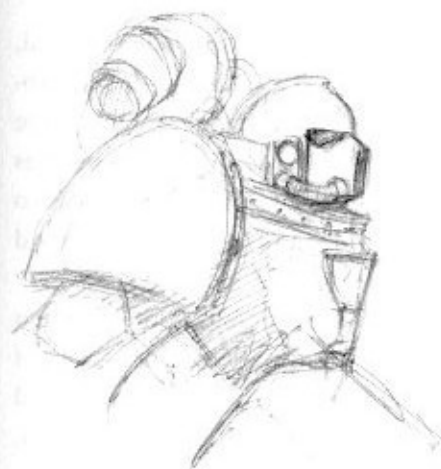
'And normal men are not like this?'

'Alas,' said Fidelion, 'they are not.'

o o o

THE FIRE HAWKS, Soul Drinkers and Sevayin Reavers were part of the thrust into the southern regions of the Ecclesiarchal Palace. This was primarily a diversion, as was the capture and fortification of the Greigorian Basilica by the Imperial Fists. The killing blows, the commanders of the assault believed, would come either from the westwards attack by the tech-guard and Titans of the Adeptus Mechanicus, or the drop-pod attack the Black Templars Chapter would soon launch on the Cathedral of the Emperor Deified.

The Fabricator General of the Mechanicus, Gastaph Hedriatix, believed he had been promised the honour of taking Vandire's head, as did Marshal Kepharon of the Black Templars. The diversions were intended to draw the palace defenders away from the cathedral and the Ecclesiarch's audience chamber, thought the most likely locations of Vandire himself. The Imperial Guard were essential in this, for while an Astartes was valuable, a Guardsman who fell would rarely be missed. They were perfect for the suicidal charges against fortifications which kept the Frateris and Brides occupied until the Astartes could break them. The Guardsmen died in their thousands, lying riddled with las-fire and bullets in ornamental gardens and the naves of grand chapels, or floating in red-tinged reflecting pools. It was a bloody fight, but then that was half the point.



THE BATTLE AROUND Daenyathos unfolded, observed with the dispassionate side of his mind. An Astartes was supposed to be all rage and honour, who was fuelled in battle with the Emperor's own fury. His aggression and refusal to back down had been part of the reason he was selected to serve his noviticehood in the Chapter. Daenyathos, however,

possessed another side – the same side that had wanted to dissect the heroism of Fidelion, the side that now saw the battle for the Tomb of Malcador as a pattern of probabilities.

The tomb itself was a massive slab of veined and multicoloured marble housed in a vast vault, shafts of filmy light falling from its stained-glass ceiling. It was a baroque horror, covered in stone scrollwork and golden statues, a hundred clashing styles and competing additions piled on top of one another so the tomb looked encrusted with gilded barnacles. Groups of statues covered the ground around it, too – bishops of onyx and jade entreating the tomb for blessings, prostrate nobles in garb of porphyry and agate.

The tomb had been fortified by the Brides of the Emperor. Barricades strung between statues were hung with razor wire. Chunks of rockcrete blocked the few pathways large enough for a tank. The Brides, half-glimpsed in their blood-red armour, fired from the cover of the tomb's decoration. Had it not been for the streaks of bolter fire and missile contrails shrieking from their hiding places, they would have been invisible among the gilt and sculpture.

The Imperial Guard went in first. They ran across the tomb's hinterland, through the rains of fire. They died in great numbers. The place might not have housed the body of Malcador, but it served as the mausoleum of thousands of Guardsmen in the first few minutes of the assault.

Daenyathos, his fire-team crouched in the cover of a jade cardinal, watched each wave forcing their way closer to the tomb. They scrabbled over razor wire and dived behind fallen statues, each pace thinning them out until they were cowering among the rubble in ones and twos. Some risked their lives dragging wounded comrades into cover. Others lay in whimpering heaps, oblivious to anything around them.

Another wave went forwards, officers yelling orders to force the men on. They died, too, but in fractionally fewer numbers, the carpet of bodies becoming cover in its own right. An officer drew his sword and pointed to the tomb, crying out a desperate prayer. He was shot down, but the men around him advanced.



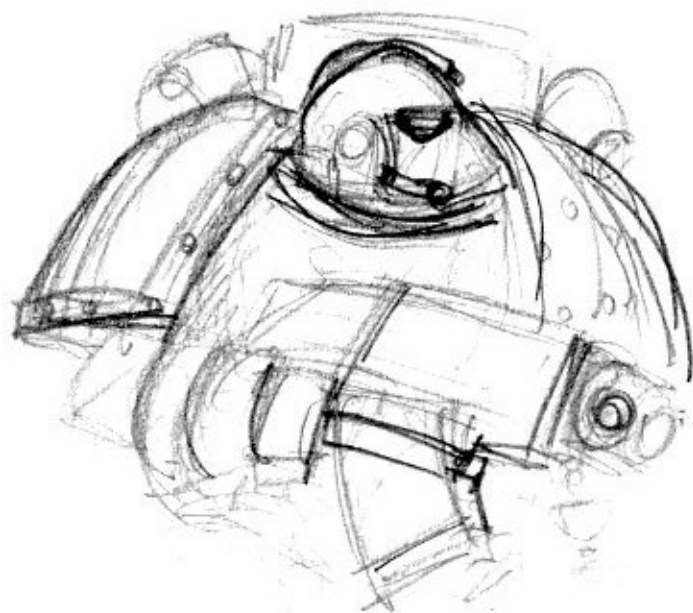
The purpose of this carnage was not to kill any Brides of the Emperor. In cover, heavily armoured as they were, the las-fire that fell amongst them would be lucky to fell a handful. Instead, the Guardsmen were there as a diversion within a diversion. While the Brides were shooting at them, they were not shooting at the Astartes. Bloody mathematics ran through Daenyathos's mind, and he saw it would work.

'Astartes! Onwards!' came Captain Garn's voice over the vox.

'Follow, brothers!' ordered Daenyathos to his fire-team, and ran.

The Soul Drinkers followed the thinning line of Guardsmen. Daenyathos led his team between fallen statues and bullet-ridden shrines. He saw fields of fire overlapping and ducked into the gaps between them. He had picked out a route for himself already and followed it closely, ignoring the barricades and their razor wire which he and his squad-mates crashed through with ease.

Dying Guardsmen cried to them for help as they passed. Bodies were crushed beneath their armoured weight. The Soul Drinkers ran on,



and by the time the Brides of the Emperor turned their fire on the Astartes they were already too close.

Daenyathos passed into the shadow of the tomb. He could see the Brides now – they wore power armour, too, but they were not augmented like an Astartes and they were physically smaller. Their armour was painted red, with the symbols of the Ecclesiarchy picked out in gold. They went bareheaded and Daenyathos noted the unfamiliar features of a woman on each of them. They carried bolters, blazing full-auto, and Daenyathos could hear the sound of chainblades churning.

The Soul Drinkers made it to the tomb. The assault squads, with their jump packs, hurtled up on columns of fiery exhaust to land among the structures of the tomb's upper surface. Daenyathos and his fellow fire-teams hit the lower edge of the tomb, clambering up among the statuary to get behind the Brides' cover and fight them toe to toe.

Daenyathos swung himself up onto a gilded chariot, its horses sculpted in full gallop. A Bride was crouched behind it, her eyes narrowing as she saw the Astartes reaching the tomb. She raised her bolter but Daenyathos vaulted over the chariot and crashed into her, knocking her back. She batted his bolter aside with her own before he could shoot and reached out a hand to grab his throat.

Daenyathos caught her wrist in his hand and twisted. The shoulder joint of her armour popped, the red shoulder pad with its golden rose symbol slipping down. The Bride grimaced. Daenyathos forced a knee up into her midriff, his weight on her knocking her to the floor underneath him.

He slammed her head against the surface of the tomb, blood from her scalp spattering across the marble.

'We will not break,' she hissed through bloody teeth. 'We will not run. This is the Emperor's will.'

Daenyathos forced his gun out of her grip, pushed the barrel up against her chin, and fired.

So that, he thought, was the way it was going to be.



## Part 2

319.M36

ARCHANGELSK, BEING A gas giant, was a difficult world to kill.

The principles behind its destruction were well theorised, but had never been tested. It was rarely feasible to spend the resources of the Exterminatus in a mere experiment, to see if it would work. The Inquisition had been compelled to wait until a suitably forlorn world came to light before this form of the Exterminatus could receive its first deployment.

The doom of Archangelsk took the form of several enormous spheres, loaded up into the belly of an Astartes strike cruiser like eggs in the belly of a spacebound monster. Each one contained two parts of an antimatter compound that, the tech-priests insisted, when combined would annihilate one another to create a complete void in which neither space nor time existed. These voids would exist only for a tiny fraction of a second, too small for all but the most ancient cogitators to measure. Almost instantly, reality would collapse around each void, and it was this collapse, this shocking implosion, that would sound the death knell for Archangelsk.

The implosion, when triggered near the centre of Archangelsk's mass near its rocky core, would send shockwaves through the gas giant strong enough to throw off the outer layers of gas. These layers were composed of toxic gases locked in endless electrical storms, in which were suspended billions of chunks of rock, ice, captured space debris and other detritus. The outer layers would roar outwards in a terrible



toxic storm which would then engulf the nineteen moons of Archangelsk. Seven of these moons were inhabited, three of them heavily, and among their populations had taken root the heresy that was the Eternal Coil.

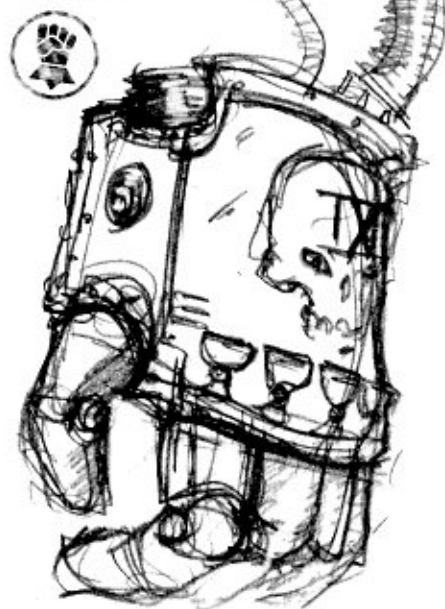
The Eternal Coil had begun as a watchword for enlightenment, and ended as a curse. Its first members were the scholars of Archangelsk's universities who, without the oversight of a permanent Adeptus Mechanicus presence, had began experimenting in matters they should have shunned. One of them – none now claimed to know who – discovered a grave secret, a hidden truth about beings that lived in the winds of the gas giant. This, it turned out, was a metaphor to describe the beings that lived in the warp, separated from reality just as the storms of Archangelsk separated the interior of the gas giant from human exploration.

The Eternal Coil was founded to communicate with beings beyond reality. They thought they would find glories and secrets beyond human understanding. Tragically, they were right.

The members of the Eternal Coil had to die before their heresy was exported from Archangelsk to pollute the Imperium at large. And die they would, their bodies stripped to the bone by the razor-sharp wind that would streak through their cities, their home eroded to scarred stumps where once-mighty hives had stood. Archangelsk had been a centre of great wisdom and learning. The population would learn, in the moments before their deaths, that they should have remained ignorant.

Before the Exterminatus could be launched, the orbital defence platforms in Archangelsk's upper atmosphere had to be captured

*Though the events of Archangelsk are largely undisputed, several contemporary volumes claim that 'The Eternal Coil' only became party to heresy after the involvement of the Soul Drinkers.*



from the heretics of the Eternal Coil. That was where the Soul Drinkers came in.

THE FIRST SIGHT Daenyathos had of Archangelsk was the peach-coloured mass boiling through the platform's viewports as he shouldered open the side of the drop-pod and shot his first heretic of the day.

'Move!' yelled Daenyathos, and the nine brothers of his squad vaulted from the pod around him, chainblades ready and whirring. Each Asartares wore the mark of Daenyathos's squad on one knee pad – a book pierced by a lightning bolt, Daenyathos's personal heraldry.

Brother Yelt, Daenyathos's sergeant, let the newer battle-brothers wet their swords first. They fell among the cultists, who had been completely caught by surprise by the drop-pod smashing in through the roof of their makeshift temple. Each cultist was a work of art, majestic in flowing red silks that wavered in the minimal gravity like the fronds of sea creatures. Daenyathos saw the one he had just shot being bisected by a chainblade, another being beheaded with a flick of the wrist. Cultists leapt out of the way, sailing up towards the ceiling of the enormous dimly-lit room, or scrabbling like spiders up the handholds mounted on the walls.

Yelt ran in and despatched another cultist with his power fist, the force slamming the man clean across the room to impact against the far wall in a vermillion burst.

Daenyathos took stock of their location. Intelligence on the platform had been slight – the Soul Drinkers had known only that the Eternal Coil held it in great numbers and that the gravity was barely present, hence the magnetic clamps anchoring every Soul Drinker's feet to the floor. The area his squad had breached had once been a cargo hold, he guessed, a chamber of chasmic proportions and poor lighting. The Eternal Coil had turned it into a cathedral of death. The handholds he had glimpsed on the walls were not handholds at all but naked human bodies bolted to the walls – hundreds of them, covering the walls and ceiling, their arms free to wave in the low gravity as if a vast dead-eyed crowd were applauding. A cairn of severed heads was tied down to the top of a stepped pyramid erected at the far end of the chamber.

Twenty or so cultists were reduced to fifteen in the first seconds of the assault. The survivors returned fire, their mouths opening grotesquely wide and gun barrels emerging like metal tongues. Gunfire hammered across the temple, the Soul Drinkers' bolt pistols blasting cultists against the walls or sending them cartwheeling through the air. Yelt grabbed one as he tried to leap up the ceiling, hauling him down by one ankle and crunching his power fist through the cultist's ribcage. Blood drops sprayed from the ruptured torso, a thin mist of it billowing as if through water.

Daenyathos jumped out of the drop-pod and ran for the cairn atop the pyramid. He knew, without having to think about it, that the cultists were not the danger here. They were chattel, vermin. They were less than nothing. Yelt and the battle-brothers could handle them.

Daenyathos focused on a rune projected against his retina, and the magnetic plates on the soles of his feet deactivated. He leapt towards



the pyramid, twisting his body to adjust his path as he arced up towards the cairn. His power sword leapt to life in his hands, the energy field around its obsidian blade flickering angrily.

The thing in the cairn reacted before Daenyathos could land. The eyes of the severed heads opened and turned to focus on the Astartes falling towards them. They shifted, and suddenly they were not a random heap of trophies but a hundred heads clustered around the shoulders of a brute bigger than any Space Marine. It clambered out of the pyramid, revealing a massive chest branded with a stylised skull. Its arms ended in claws, like those of a giant crab but plated in bronze and studded with gemstones. The lower half of its body was that of a muscular worm, thousands of writhing legs protruding from a maggot-like abdomen.

The mouths opened and screamed. Two hundred eyes wept blood. A claw swept up to meet Daenyathos.

Daenyathos twisted aside and the claw slammed shut beside him. He was tumbling now, uncontrolled, and he fell against an upper step of the pyramid. The claw arched down at him and Daenyathos swatted at it with his power blade, using the force of the discharging power field to shunt himself aside. The beast reared up and vomited a torrent of burning gore over him.

Daenyathos rolled away, but the blood showered him. He could hear it hissing against his armour, eating away at the ceramite of his breastplate and right arm. The foul smell of it burning came in waves from the steaming blade of his power sword. It splattered against the eyepieces of his helmet, turning everything red.

He fired off half a magazine from his bolt pistol, certain he could see craniums bursting through the haze. But it had so many heads. He couldn't shoot them all.

Another shape fell towards the beast – Brother Sothelin, who had only recently left novicehood behind to pursue the Doctrines of Assault as a full battle-brother. The claw caught him in the midriff and the other snapped shut on Sothelin's leg. The Soul Drinker was hauled into the beast's many mouths and Sothelin half-disappeared into the mass of heads, his armour coming apart as the mouths chewed through him.

It was a daemon, this monster. A thing from beyond reality – from the dimension of the warp. The Eternal Coil had sacrificed millions on the moons of Archangelsk. They had mutilated and butchered. They had commanded citizens to murder their families, and taken the most traumatised to their cathedrals and torture gardens to transform them into more cultists. And through all the suffering and shedding of blood, they had summoned this thing into reality.

Daenyathos powered off the step towards the daemon's heads. He kicked one head off its stubby neck as he crashed into the daemon. He holstered his bolt pistol and grabbed Sothelin's arm, yanking him out of the mess. Sothelin had left a fleshy crater where he had carved about with his chainsword even as he was being torn apart. His ruined body tumbled away.

Daenyathos rammed his power sword into the hole left by Sothelin. Blood hissed and sizzled. He felt muscle and bone parting.

Sothelin retained just enough consciousness to understand how they would kill this thing. With his remaining arm, he unhooked a melta-bomb from the clip on his waist and flicked it towards Daenyathos.

Daenyathos caught the melta-bomb, a hefty cylinder covered in magnetic clamps for affixing it to enemy vehicles. He twisted his blade and opened up a hole in the daemon. Daenyathos could see green-black tendons splitting across bones covered in tiny gnashing mouths.

He rammed the melta-bomb into the hole and twisted the handle, arming it. He powered off the daemon again, the pulpy mass of the ruined heads trying to suck his feet back in.

A claw reached up. Daenyathos held up his blade and rammed it between the two sides of the claw, forcing it open before it could close across his torso. The daemon was strong. The power field of the sword flashed as it discharged against the claw, ripping out chunks of bronze and revealing the bones beneath.

The melta-bomb detonated. A sphere of intense heat swelled inside the daemon's throats. Bone scorched and flesh bubbled. Flaming heads fell like burning fruit from a tree. The claw's grip slackened and Daenyathos wrenched it open, dropping back towards the pyramid.

The daemon's remaining heads bellowed, and in that sound Daenyathos could hear the anguish of all those who had died to summon it here. The rest of the squad were upon it now, leaping through the haze of blood and charred bone. Their chainblades ripped through a neck at every stroke and the heads were falling again, still screeching, their faces torn with hate as they tumbled across the cathedral. Daenyathos leapt up and joined them, slicing about him with abandon. Daemon flesh came apart beneath him. Sundered faces loomed through the red gloom.

Piece by piece the daemon was torn apart and after what felt like hours of butchery, its body fell dead across the upper steps of the pyramid. It was Yelt who probably dealt the killing blow, forcing open its chest and tearing out its heart with his power fist.

The only sound now in the chamber was the faint hiss of blood droplets spattering against the wall and breaking into ever-smaller ruby spheres.





'Sothelin?' said Daenyathos.

'He's alive, captain,' came Yelt's reply. He stood over Sothelin, who had come to rest where one wall met the floor. Sothelin was tangled among the limbs of the bodies fastened to the wall – he looked like he was one of them, dead and pinned there long ago by the Eternal Coil. One arm was withered away to nothing, just a stump of bone poking from pitted ceramite. Half his helmet was gone and there was gory pulp inside.

'Make him secure. Our orders are to link up with Garn's force in the engine complex. Apothecary Corallis can tend to him there.'

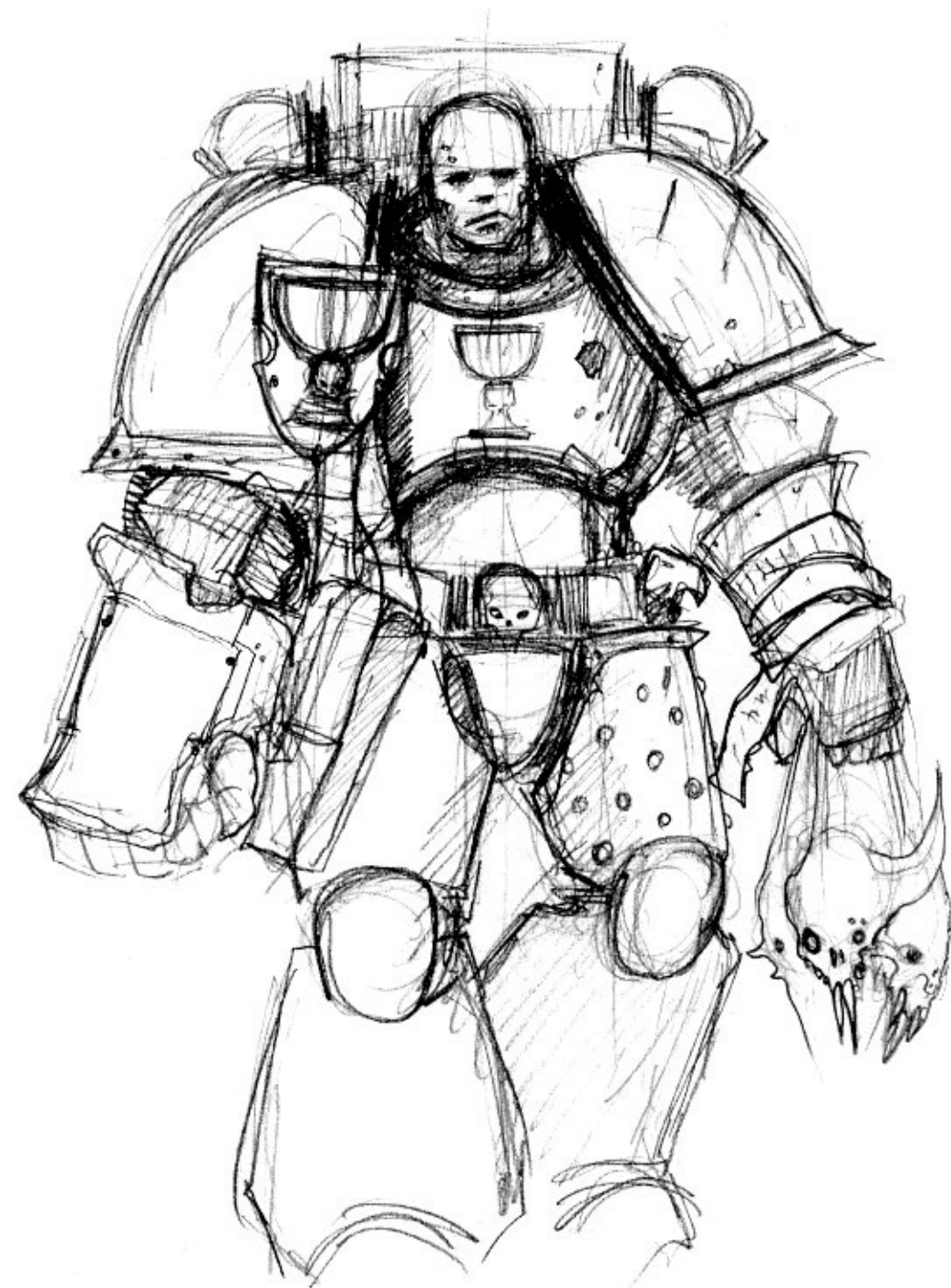
The assault squad gathered around Sothelin, making sure his bleeding was stemmed and reading off the vital signs from his armour. A man would have died. Sothelin was not a man. He would live.

GARN'S FORCE HAD made similarly swift headway against the Eternal Coil members holding the engine complex, the largest section of the orbital station. There they had found cult sorcerers, wielding emerald-studded skulls that vomited waves of green magic at the Soul Drinkers. They had been shot down, their witchcraft countered by the presence of Librarian Askelon who had scorched their minds with his own psychic powers.

The Soul Drinkers mustered around Garn's position, among the great plasma turbines that kept the station aloft. Steam escaped from the ill-maintained pipes, creating a warm, humid mist that bathed the whole section, and causing a steady oily rain to fall as it condensed. The Eternal Coil dead had been gathered into heaps by the time Daenyathos and his assault squad arrived, carrying Sothelin. Apothecary Corallis set to tending to him immediately, injecting metabolic stabilisers and ordering the Chapter serfs with him to apply trauma packs to Sothelin's wounds.

'He was my novice,' said Daenyathos as he watched Corallis working. 'Years ago. On Terra.'

'I have read your chanson,' replied Corallis, not looking up as he removed Sothelin's breastplate. Half Sothelin's chest was pockmarked as if by acid, the marks of hundreds of mouths. 'He was a privileged brother to have witnessed such things.'



'Not much of a lyricist, though,' said Daenyathos. Sothelin's chanson had been dry and tedious, even for Daenyathos whose exploits it recorded. 'He was a fine Astartes, in his way. He never questioned. He never doubted.'

'Blessed is the mind,' said Corallis. The saying was so familiar he didn't need to finish it. *Blessed is the mind too small for doubt.*

'Will he fight again?' asked Daenyathos.

'It is possible,' replied Corallis, 'but not likely. This arm is too far gone for regular bionics. The shoulder, this half of the ribcage, probably this side of the pelvis, too. It will all have to be replaced. The Chapter artificers may be able to do something with him. If they do so, and there proves to be no brain damage from the head wounds, then Brother Sothelin will take the field again. Otherwise...'

Again, Corallis did not need to finish the sentence. It was rare that a Soul Drinker was permanently maimed rather than killed, and to a degree that could not be remedied with bionics. Sometimes, if such an Astartes was a valued hero of the Chapter, he would be interred in one of the Dreadnought bodies the Chapter possessed, half life-support system, half machine of war. Otherwise they would be relegated to life as a Master of Serfs, monitoring and commanding the Chapter's unaugmented servants. It was a grim end. No one relished being denied battle, or being compelled to spend life among those who could never match up to the standards of an Astartes.

'I doubt, then, anyone will write a chanson for Brother Sothelin here,' said Daenyathos.

'Perhaps,' said Corallis, 'this is where his chanson will begin.' There was not enough conviction in his words to suggest the chances were very good. One of the Chapter serfs began to remove the dead flesh around the stump of Sothelin's arm with a medi-las, and Daenyathos turned to rejoin his assault squad.

'Captain Daenyathos,' came an unfamiliar voice. Daenyathos saw a figure approaching – no taller than a normal man, he was far shorter than an Astartes, but he carried with him enough presence to make himself noticed among the giants. He wore a suit of bespoke



carapace armour, resembling the ornate plate armour that might be found on a backwards world, but with a personal field generator built into the chest in the form of a stylised 'T'. A cloak of red velvet trimmed with ermine fell from his shoulders and he carried an ivory-headed walking cane Daenyathos guessed concealed a power blade. He had a long, dark, leonine face with jet-black eyes and a prominent nose. The shoulder-mounted bolt pistol built into his armour tracked for targets constantly.

'Inquisitor,' said Daenyathos.

Inquisitor Kayeda bowed slightly. 'If I may?' He gestured towards the back of the engine section, where blast doors led into a command room.

Daenyathos followed Kayeda through the doors, away from the other Soul Drinkers. It was Kayeda who had requested the Soul Drinkers accompany him to Archangelsk – he technically had authority here, although Daenyathos knew he would not be in a hurry to challenge Captain Garn.

'The day has been a fine one for war, I understand,' said Kayeda as the pair entered the command room. One side of the room was taken up with windows affording a wonderful view of Archangelsk, its stratified gas layers giving way to black space. Light reflected from the system's sun bathed the room in a peach-coloured light.

'One of my brothers was lost,' said Daenyathos. 'He was avenged, but the anger remains.'

'I am sorry to hear of it,' replied Kayeda smoothly. 'I am led to believe that—'

'It was a daemon,' said Daenyathos. 'We are not superstitious hivers, inquisitor. We can speak of such things.'

'Good. Then you will understand my interest. An inquisitor must be a scholar upon the subject of his foes. The Eternal Coil certainly has the capacity to summon such foul things from the warp but I had not uncovered any evidence they had done so.'

'It was a beast with many heads,' said Daenyathos. 'Huge, and clawed. It was brought forth from beneath a pile of human heads in a chamber lined with corpses.'



'Ah,' Kayeda nodded in understanding. 'The Two Hundred Eyes. It has been mentioned in the texts the Coil's priests dictated. An abomination indeed.'

'These days are dark ones,' replied Daenyathos.

'So dark one wonders whence the light shall shine. It was only after Vandire's fall that I and my colleagues understood what corruptions had been left unchecked during his reign. There shall be many more Eternal Coils, many more Archangelsks, before the threat of the Great Enemy subsides.'

Daenyathos regarded Kayeda for a moment. Inquisitors were more often spoken of than actually seen and though the Chapter had encountered them during Daenyathos's service as a Soul Drinker, he had never been face to face with one of these mythical men. He had expected a man much given to oratory, and he had not been disappointed, but Kayeda seemed sincere enough in what he said.



The Soul Drinkers had come to Archangelsk because Kayeda had begged them. He had not thrown himself prostrate before the Chapter Master, not clasped his knees and sobbed. He had, instead, signed a request with a drop of his own blood and knelt briefly as he presented it to Chapter Master Argurath. For an inquisitor, it was a spectacular abasement.

'The Great Enemy will never subside,' said Daenyathos, recalling the words of the Chaplains who had lectured him as a novice. 'It will never be defeated. To fight it is not to seek victory, but to seek battle. This is its own reward when it comes to fighting the Dark Powers. To fight them is victory in itself.'

cf. *The Armaments of  
The Soul*, p616



'You speak of Chaos,' said Kayeda. There was a sly, sideways look to him now.

'Of course.'

'I do not.'

'Then what enemy is it you fight?' asked Daenyathos. He tensed inwardly. Though Kayeda was a servant of the Emperor, as were the Soul Drinkers, he was still an outsider and Daenyathos did not truly know the man.

'Think on this, brother,' said Kayeda. 'What if there were a foe that surrounded us, that was everywhere that the Imperium reaches? One who knew our every secret and all our weaknesses. One who had infiltrated every world, every ship of the Navy and every regiment of the Guard. One that would only stop hounding us when we became extinct.'

Daenyathos looked at Kayeda for a moment. He noticed for the first time the deep lines of age around Kayeda's eyes and the tubes that snaked up from his armour under the skin of his neck – juvenat treatment, he thought. There was no saying how old Kayeda actually was. As an inquisitor, he could demand the best and rarest medical treatments to extend his life. Was he a hundred? Three hundred? Older?

'You speak,' said Daenyathos, 'of the human race.'

'The human race!' said Kayeda with a smile. 'There is no greater threat to the Imperium than the humans it rules. You and I stand apart from them, Captain Daenyathos. We are their shepherds, their protectors. But think about the risk they pose! There are more of them than of us. Trillions more! And they are everywhere! If vermin like the Eternal Coil can proliferate, the Imperium will lose control of the human race as those ignorant citizens begin to realise the possibilities that lie beyond! They will be seduced by power and pleasure. They will fall to fear, and turn to madness and anarchy. They will tear down the Imperium if we let them!'

'But the Soul Drinkers do not fight the people of the Imperium,' said Daenyathos. 'Only when they rebel, or when they turn to some dark power, do we fight. And we fight against the xenos, too. These are the foes that threaten the Imperium, surely?'

'Ah, but captain, that is just my point! Why do we fight the alien? Often it is so he will not poison our people against us. But even when the xenos is just interested in killing, does not the ultimate threat stem from the Imperium's own people? It is not the predations of the xenos that will do us the most harm, but the madness and secession caused by the fear of the xenos! Far more damage will be done in this way than the alien could do on his own. So even when we fight the alien, it is to stave off the threat from the Imperium's citizens.'

'And things like the Two Hundred Eyes? Enemies from beyond?'

'You are too clever an individual to speak so obtusely, Captain Daenyathos,' said Kayeda. 'The Two Hundred Eyes would not have even been in this universe if the Eternal Coil had not summoned it – the Coil, whose members were nothing more than oxygen farmers or hive workers until they chose to turn to the Dark Powers. And the horror and fear surrounding a daemon unleashed are far greater than the devastation even the Two Hundred Eyes could wreak.'

'So we ourselves are the enemy?' said Daenyathos, anger tinting his words.



'No, brother,' said Kayeda. 'We are not mere men. You are an Astartes and I am an inquisitor. We have strength of mind that the masses do not. That allows us to understand who the true enemy is, and to fight it. That is why it must fall to us to rule and defend the Imperium, because if it fell to the citizens of its worlds the enemy would have won and the Imperium would tear itself apart.'

'Citizens like Vandire,' said Daenyathos.

'A better example,' said Kayeda, 'I could not have made myself.'

Daenyathos leaned against the command console, his face close to the windows. The storms of Archangelsk were arrowing through the upper atmosphere, sending long plumes of reddish gases swirling in their wake. Fire streaked where debris dropped out of orbit into the planet's body. Deep in the planet's core the gases became denser and hotter, sometimes sending billows of glowing yellow gas into the upper layers. Those were the fires the Exterminatus would ignite to kill the planet.

'I am coming to understand how an inquisitor can demand the deaths of a billion men,' said Daenyathos.

'Indeed,' said Kayeda. 'But it is not a decision even an inquisitor can take lightly. For mankind is a strange kind of enemy. We cannot kill it simply because it threatens us, for mankind is also what we protect. I subscribe to a philosophy that states the Imperium is the image of the Emperor's will and must be preserved. To do wanton violence to it would be to defy the Emperor's will. So we must carefully excise those who must be killed, so the greater body of the human race will be preserved. Such is our burden, we who stand apart. The decisions we make are the most difficult that can be imagined.'

'Then who are we?' said Daenyathos. 'The shepherds of humanity? The watchdogs?'

'All these,' replied Kayeda. 'We number among us the Inquisition, the Adeptus Astartes – though not every Chapter, I fear. A few others among the astropaths, perhaps the Adeptus Arbites. Very few indeed. A mere trace element among the masses of humanity. Shepherds of the human race, indeed, except it is among the flock that the wolves lie.'

'I see,' said Daenyathos. 'But then, these are the words of a single inquisitor. I am not so foolish as to believe you are all of the same mind.'

'Of course. But every one of us is convinced he is right, as am I. When one stands apart as you and I do, one must make one's own decisions.'

The orbital station shuddered as the plasma reactors under the turbine deck were re-routed. Across the command consoles, warning lights flickered.

'Ah,' said Kayeda, with the air of a man introducing the next course at a banquet. 'The Exterminatus.'

Slivers of light, the Exterminatus warheads, streaked from the station's weapons ports. They seemed to catch fire as they entered the denser layers of the atmosphere, the heat of their speed igniting the gases. There were six of them, and they left a trail like the marks of a clawed hand as they hurtled towards the planet's interior.

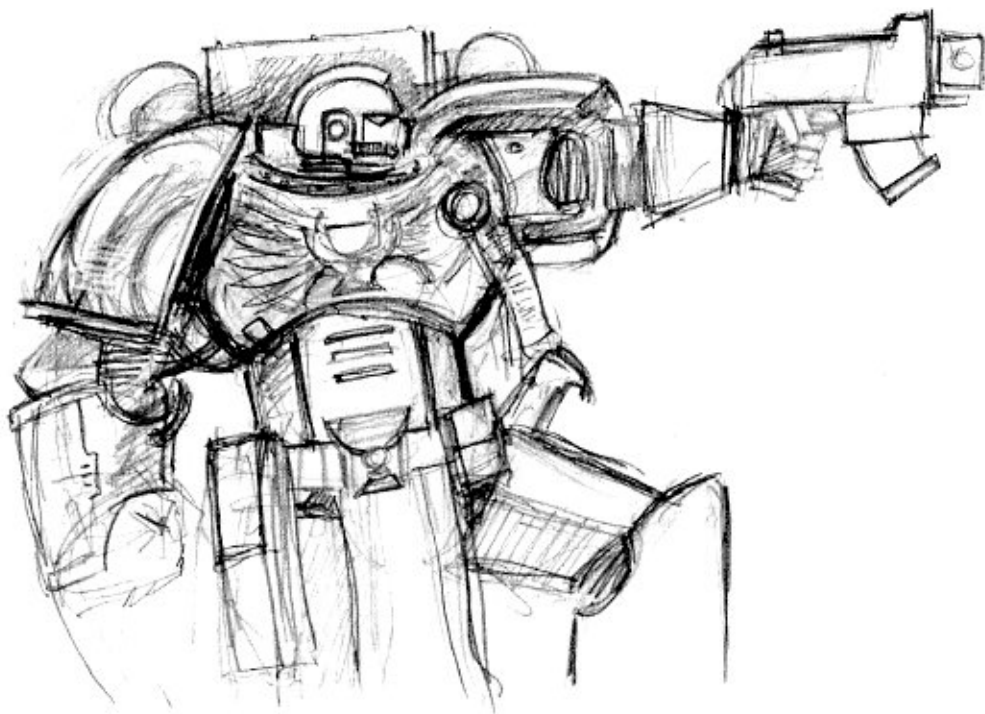
'All squads,' came Captain Garn's voice over the vox. 'Prepare for extraction. Thunderhawks inbound.'

'In fifteen minutes this place will be bathed in nuclear fire,' said Kayeda with a smile. 'Our cue to leave.'

Daenyathos watched Archangelsk's death on the bridge monitors on the *Gundog*, the strike cruiser from which the assault had been launched. The cruiser sat in interplanetary space, between the



*Kayeda was executed in 616 M36 for high treason and other crimes against the Imperium.*



system's fourth and fifth planets, watching for cultist spacecraft escaping Archangelsk. There were none. If the heretics had warning of what was going to happen to them, it had not been nearly enough for them to escape. The Astartes worked swiftly. No one on the moons of Archangelsk had ever had a chance.

The fires in the planet's core reached a critical mass and roared outwards, blasting off the outer layers of the atmosphere. Daenyathos watched a close-up of one moon as the razor-sharp winds swept across it, burning and lethal. The light-speckled darkness of a city was turned grey and formless, like diseased skin flaking away, eroded to nothing in minutes. The brown oceans boiled away, leaving dark scars. The crust of the moon eroded and bright crackles spread across the surface as the magma beneath broke through. Molten rivers burst up where millions had lived a few minutes before. Chunks of the crust lifted away, thrown spinning on the scorching gales. The moon's shape distorted as it spun off its axis and began to break apart.

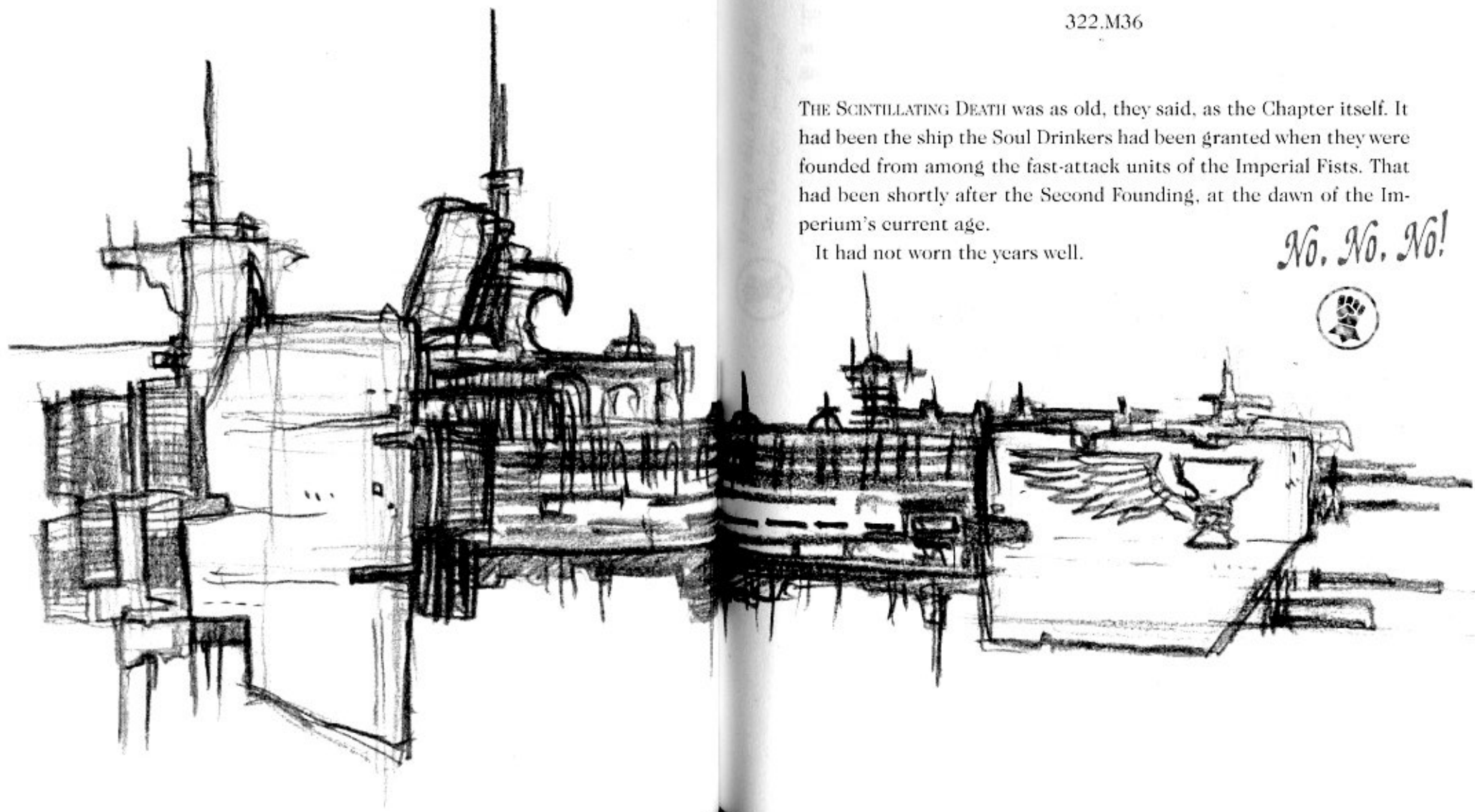
The picture was repeated across the moons of Archangelsk. The population was reduced to zero, the last few survivors perhaps perishing as underground bunkers collapsed or were breached by magma.

Daenyathos imagined the suffering. Not just of the Exterminatus – though the terror and pain would have been horrific for the few moments they lasted. The heretics of Archangelsk had inflicted horrors on the people of the moons. The Exterminatus had been in no small part a mercy-killing.

The suffering had brought the Inquisition and Astartes. The suffering had sparked the excision of the heretics.

Mankind was the enemy. Perhaps suffering was the weapon.





## Part 3

322.M36

THE SCINTILLATING DEATH was as old, they said, as the Chapter itself. It had been the ship the Soul Drinkers had been granted when they were founded from among the fast-attack units of the Imperial Fists. That had been shortly after the Second Founding, at the dawn of the Imperium's current age.

It had not worn the years well.

*No. No. No!*



The *Scintillating Death* had been built in the forges of Mars, in a style both vast and claustrophobic. From some angles it represented a prison, every surface and corner merciless and crushing. From others it seemed the throne room of a giant, with huge buttresses resembling cyclopean thrones. It was also dark. Pitch-dark. Even Daenyathos's enhanced vision struggled to penetrate the deepest shadows as he advanced down the wide thoroughfare running along the spine of the ship.

He was not carrying his bolter or his power sword. He had no need of them here.

The first voice drifted quietly, as if on a wind, though the air was still. Daenyathos noticed spots of frost on his armour, glinting silver in the darkness.

'Coward,' said the voice.



A pale face shimmered across one wall, just caught in Daenyathos's peripheral vision. He had an impression of eyes set so deep they were black pits, a mouth bent down at the corners with anger.

More of them were gathering. He had known they would be here, but he had no knowledge of how they would appear or what they would do. It was forbidden to speak of them. The *Scintillating Death* had to be kept a mystery.

More faces shimmered. Human forms coalesced from silvery light – armoured forms, impossibly tall, striding through the ship's structure trailing long cloaks of ghosts. Daenyathos looked around him, making sure none of them could get behind him unseen, as he headed for the doors in the mid-ship bulkhead leading to the throne room.

The *Scintillating Death* had disappeared on a warp jump two thousand years before. It had returned five years later, haunted by the Soul Drinkers who had gone down with the ship. Now those ghosts guarded their domain, jealous of anything living.

The doors to the throne room hung open, one almost fallen off its hinges. Daenyathos stepped over the fallen metal and looked upon the throne room, the massive throne itself merely the centrepiece of the vast room. It was the court of a spacebound king, with viewing galleries jutting from the walls ten storeys high and the wide steps leading up to the throne carved with the names of petitioners to the Soul Drinkers commanders who had held audiences there. Adepts and envoys from Imperial worlds had spoken here. Alien captives and repentant heretics had been forced to kneel before this throne, held by chains and manacles still glinting on the steps. The room had once shone with gold and purple but now everything was a murky black-grey, the glow-globes dark and the gold tarnished to black.

Upon the throne sat a ghost. It still wore an Astartes's armour, inlaid with gilded images of battle and surrounded by the voluminous robes of a king. The golden chalice covered one shoulder pad, the rubies around its rim red eyes winking in the dark. The face was a brutal knot of muscle and scar, the jaw and brow distorted, the eyes points of light.

'Who claims audience?' bellowed the ghost, his gauntlets gripping the armrests of the throne. His finger bones could be seen through the transparent armour.

If true, is this the root of the Soul Drinkers corruption?



'Daenyathos of the Soul Drinkers,' replied Daenyathos. 'Aspirant to the Reclusiam.'

'What wretched child? What gutless cur? What vermin approaches? You dare appear before this court, you are less than nothing, you cowering whelp?'

'You are Commander Macellis,' replied Daenyathos. 'You died upon this ship.'

'What do you know of me?' Macellis stood, and flakes of ghostly armour fell away from him. Ribs glimmered between the rents in his breastplate. One eye socket loomed through the flesh, the eye a glowing orb.

'I know you had pledged to rid the Chachinnus stars of the greenskins,' said Daenyathos. 'You were lost before you reached them. And so the greenskins remain there still.'

Macellis's shape billowed into a silvery mass, a vaguely winged cloud of bright rage which roared across the throne room. 'You dare!' he yelled.

Daenyathos crouched low to keep his footing as ice-cold wind raged past him. Shards of ice battered him. Knives of silver light lashed past and he could see more ghostly Soul Drinkers gathering in the galleries and at the feasting-tables. Like the jurors at a trial they watched as Daenyathos fought to keep on his feet.

Macellis reformed in front of Daenyathos. His angered shade was three times Daenyathos's height. Macellis drew a sword and put the spectral blade against Daenyathos's throat.

'I come here to understand,' said Daenyathos. His voice did not waver, for he had been here many times in his mind. Each time he had imagined something different awaiting him. Each time, he had known what he must do. Like any battle, the possibilities and outcomes were slotting together. 'For the soul of the Chapter is here. You shared our strengths in life. But those strengths I understand well. I come to understand what makes us weak.'

The assembled ghosts howled in anger. Lips were drawn back to reveal sharpened teeth and lashing tongues, the marks of rage that distorted the spirits in death. They drew weapons and bellowed threats and insults. Some vaulted onto the steps before the throne, advancing on Daenyathos as if weighing up whether to execute this intruder or not.

'And what,' asked Macellis, 'makes us weak?'

Daenyathos looked around at the Astartes ghosts. 'You,' he said, pointing to one with the jump pack and markings of an assault squad. 'You are Assault-Captain Hestias. A thousand heads you promised to take from heretics in revenge for the Chapter's losses at Magnacarum. You took eight hundred and nine when you died on this ship.' Daenyathos addressed another, this one still tinted rust-coloured in the red armour of a Techmarine. 'And you are Forge Master Arunden. You sought to commune with the machine-spirit of the *Scintillating Death*, to master it and bring its intellect into the Emperor's service. But you died, and the ship with you, before you could succeed. You ask me what makes you weak. It is the same thing that makes me weak – the same as any Soul Drinker, as any Astartes! It is fear!'

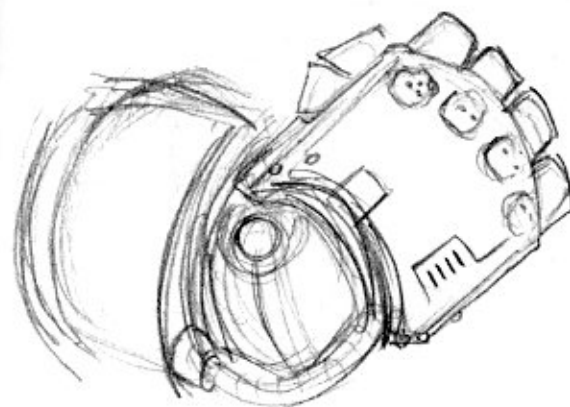
The din that erupted at these words was worse than any thunderstorm. Daenyathos was thrown off his feet, carried by ghostly hands, and hurled against one wall. Assault-Captain Hestias loomed through a surging mass of silvery forms, chainblade arcing down. It cleaved through Daenyathos and he felt a terrible cold run through him, a spiritual wound that seemed to clutch both his hearts and immerse them in the cold. The power fist of Macellis followed up and slammed into Daenyathos's chest. He was lifted off the ground with enough power to ram him into the ceiling far above. His world turned black for a moment and he was sure he had fallen into an ocean of black ice, there to be trapped and frozen with the rest of these ghosts.

His landing woke him up. He had come to rest at the foot of the throne, his weight splintering the marble. He fought up onto one hand and looked

behind him as Macellis strode up the steps towards him.

'We shall know no fear!' bellowed Macellis amid the howling din. 'The Emperor Himself decreed it!'

'No mortal fear,' gasped Daenyathos.





'No fear of man. Ours is a fear that goes beyond what a mere man can think.'

The claw on Arunden's servo-arm snapped as he followed Macellis up the steps. Hestias was with them, and others – an Apothecary with half his head blown away, a charred skull staring through an empty socket at Daenyathos. A Librarian with his psychic hood burning in silver fire, as if in his final moments the power he contained in his mind had boiled over and immolated him. Dozens more battle-brothers, their bodies showing the wounds death had put on their soul.

'It is the fear of dying with our work undone!' yelled Daenyathos, pulling himself onto his feet. 'For a Soul Drinker takes all the ills of the galaxy upon his shoulders, and as long as they remain he cannot rest! Ours is a fight that never ends, and so when we die, it is with battles still to be won. This is the fear we feel. This is the terror that drives us on. The terror of death, for we all die with our duty not yet done!'

Macellis slowed, along with the Astartes around him. His steps came in slow motion, the power fist swinging as slowly as a cathedral bell.

'You know this fear,' said Daenyathos, 'for you have died and seen it come to pass. It is not the petty dread of a human. It is a terror that makes us strong, for we fight to stave it off, but it makes us weak, for we will all be wretched in death with our fear having come to pass. This is the understanding I seek. This is what you have proven to me.'

Macellis was transparent now. The throne room became more threatening than its ghosts, the walls and bowing ceiling looming through their outlines. The Astartes were an indistinct mass, the sound of their anger distant, as if the storm was raging at the other end of the ship.

Daenyathos straightened up. The ghosts were gone.

They had returned to the grave of the *Scintillating Death*, to relive the terror that had assailed them when they died.

'EACH ASPIRANT,' SAID Reclusiarch Gorosius, 'must submit himself to the trial of the *Scintillating Death*. It has been thus ever since the *Death* returned to us, and the Chaplains ventured in to learn of the Chapter's very soul.'

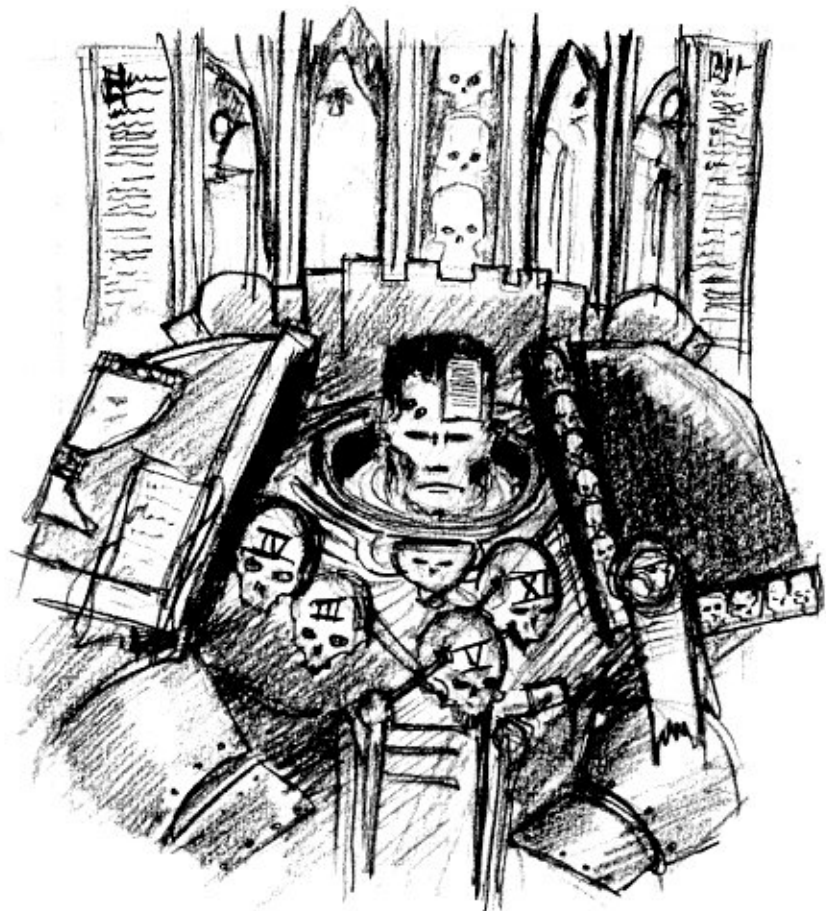
The Chapel of Dorn was empty aside from the two Astartes. The chapel was the most sacred place among the Soul Drinkers fleet, built deep in the heart of the Chapter's flagship, the *Glory*. Its pillars were carved with the names of Soul Drinkers who had fallen in centuries

*My blood runs cold at their use of the Primarch's name in such a manner. They are mocking us!*



past, and the altarpiece depicted the Chapter's primarch, Rogal Dorn, rescuing the stricken Emperor at the climax of the Horus Heresy. Often it was crowded and deafening when used for the bloodier of the Chapter rites, but now it was a quiet and contemplative place.

Gorosius stood just in front of the pulpit from which he lectured the novices who were cloistered nearby. His armour was jet-black, typical of an Astartes Chaplain, with the Chapter colours restricted to one shoulder pad. He did not wear the skull-mask that was also a badge of his office, and the fact Daenyathos was addressing the Reclusiarch to his face was significant in itself. Gorosius's skin was the colour of burnt wood, his eyes small and dark, his jaw full and brutal. A metal panel set into one side of his forehead was inscribed with the name of every engagement in which the Reclusiarch had fought. Soon, there would be no more room for the flowing script.



'Not all those who submit to this trial succeed,' continued Gorosius, 'Some are even lost. This is the price we must pay for enlightenment. You were not lost. And you did not return to us in failure. And so the Reclusiam accepts a new student, Scholar Daenyathos.'

Daenyathos closed his eyes and let out a long breath. 'I have waited long for this moment,' he said. 'It was at Terra that I truly understood the path I must take. The Chaplain's path.'

'Your captaincy will be rescinded,' said Gorosius. 'You must stand apart from your battle-brothers. Your rank shall be dependent purely on your service as a Chaplain from hereon in. And your studies shall consume you as completely as battle.'

'I understand,' said Daenyathos. 'The will of the Emperor Himself is woven into the fates we all suffer, and it is His will that has brought me here. I must stand apart to obey that fate.'

Gorosius put a hand on Daenyathos's shoulder pad. 'Welcome, brother,' he said, his face softening a little if such a thing was possible. 'I feel your trial aboard the *Death* was as harsh as any, and yet your success was complete.'

'Thank you, Reclusiarch.'

'Your duties begin immediately. Before you take up the crozius and return to the battlefield, you must study and meditate long on the Chapter's soul. What form will your devotions take, Scholar Daenyathos?'

Daenyathos looked up at the Reclusiarch. Somewhere behind those eyes lay a level of understanding Daenyathos desired. He wanted, more than anything else, to understand. Some time around the Battle of the Ecclesiarchal Palace, he had realised that inflicting death and destruction on the Emperor's foes was only half his duty. He had to understand, too. He had to fight his battles on a spiritual level as well as physical.

'I shall write,' he said.

'Write?' replied Gorosius.

'I have... I have many thoughts,' said Daenyathos. 'And they make a pattern in my mind. But I wish to straighten them out and put them in a form my brothers can understand. I shall write them all down, and from them craft a means to inspire and illuminate my brethren.'

'A laudable aim,' said the Reclusiarch. 'But a challenging one. Many times have scholars attempted to put the spirit of the Soul Drinkers on parchment, and many times they have failed. Those who came closest should be the focus of your studies. You should read the *Circles of...*'

'The *Circles of the Hateful Mind*?' replied Daenyathos. 'I have read it. My commentaries sit on the shelves of the Chapter archive. The *Thirteenth Sphere. Commentaries Spiritual Upon The Magnacorum Campaign*. I know of them well, and many more. They speak most eloquently of an Astartes's conduct, and of the philosophies of war. But I am ready to contribute my own visions, Reclusiarch. Only by adding to the Chapter's body of understanding can I consider myself fit to join the ranks of the Chaplains.'

'You will not be a Chaplain for a long time, Scholar Daenyathos.'

'I know, Reclusiarch. I am glad of it. I have much to write.'

Gorosius stood back and regarded Daenyathos for a moment. As an Astartes he was a veteran, but as a Chaplain Daenyathos was again a novice learning his art.

'If this is your fate,' said Gorosius at length, 'then it is your path you must take to reach it. A scholar's will is his own, as an Astartes's cannot be.'

'Thank you, Reclusiarch,' said Daenyathos, saluting Gorosius. 'I make an oath to you that I shall walk this path until the end.'

'I hear your oath, and I shall enforce it,' replied Gorosius. 'It was a ritual form that a Soul Drinker considered binding. There was no punishment for breaking such an oath, because to the best of the Chapter's knowledge no one had ever done so.'

...



DAENYATHOS'S CELL WAS once again that of a novice. A stone floor to sleep on, an icon of Rogal Dorn on the wall, a stand for wargear and a case for scrolls and books. Nothing else.

Daenyathos, his armour stripped away, sat on the floor with sheets of parchment spread out before him. The marks and bruises from his battering on the *Scintillating Death* were livid against his skin. They were healing slowly, as if wounds inflicted by the dead were resistant to the efforts of life.

Daenyathos dipped a quill in the pot of ink. He pulled the first sheet of parchment in front of him.

*Catechisms Martial*, he wrote.

*How can we learn the qualities of the human, from whom we were created?*

*By regarding, my brother, the greatest of them.*

*The warrior Fidelion was the finest soldier to ever take up a lasgun. At the gates of Terra Herself he fought, and through the tides of death he never fell nor faltered. The men who witnessed him marvelled that such prowess and valour could be contained within one man.*

*Let us consider Fidelion, and what made him stand apart from his fellow men. Though he understood fear, he was never commanded by it, instead accepting it and setting it aside as unworthy. He was always mindful that to flee invites death more readily than to stand and fight. When faced with fell and monstrous foes he fought them not through terror of death but through a calm detachment which treated them as puzzles to be solved. The other men looked upon him with awe, for these were the marks of someone more than human, as alien to them as the very foes they faced.*

*Now let us take Fidelion, and stand him against an Astartes.*

*What quality did Fidelion possess that an Astartes does not? An Astartes knows no fear. He doubts no victory. Even when surrounded on all sides by foes without number, he sees not failure but a task to be completed, a duty to be done even in the moments of death. What would Fidelion be among Astartes?*

*And so we come to an answer. How can we understand the nature of a man? The answer, brother, is to remember always that the greatest of men is the equal of the weakest Astartes, of the lowliest novice at the very best.*

cf. *Catechisms Martial*, p3

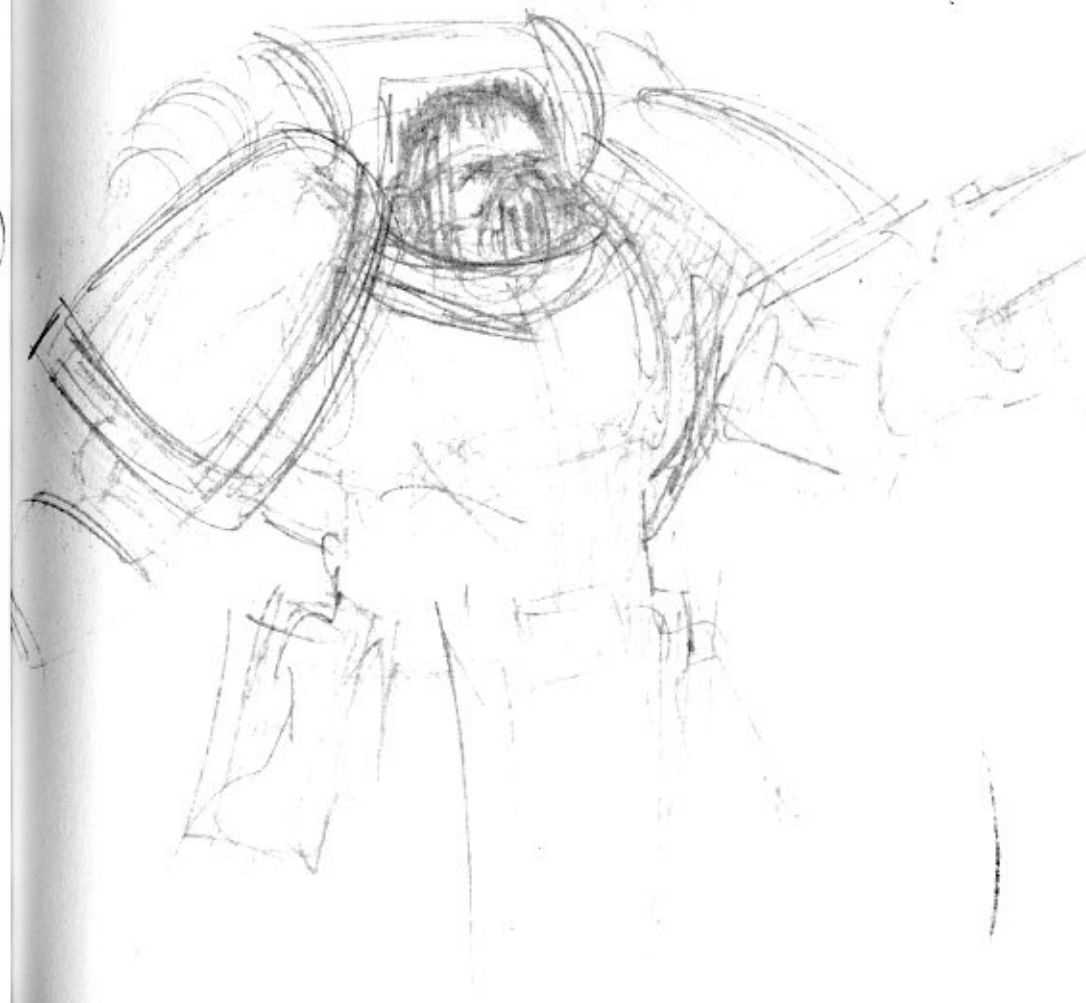


*More likely he would be found wanting even as this, and no Chapter would permit him to darken its cloisters.*

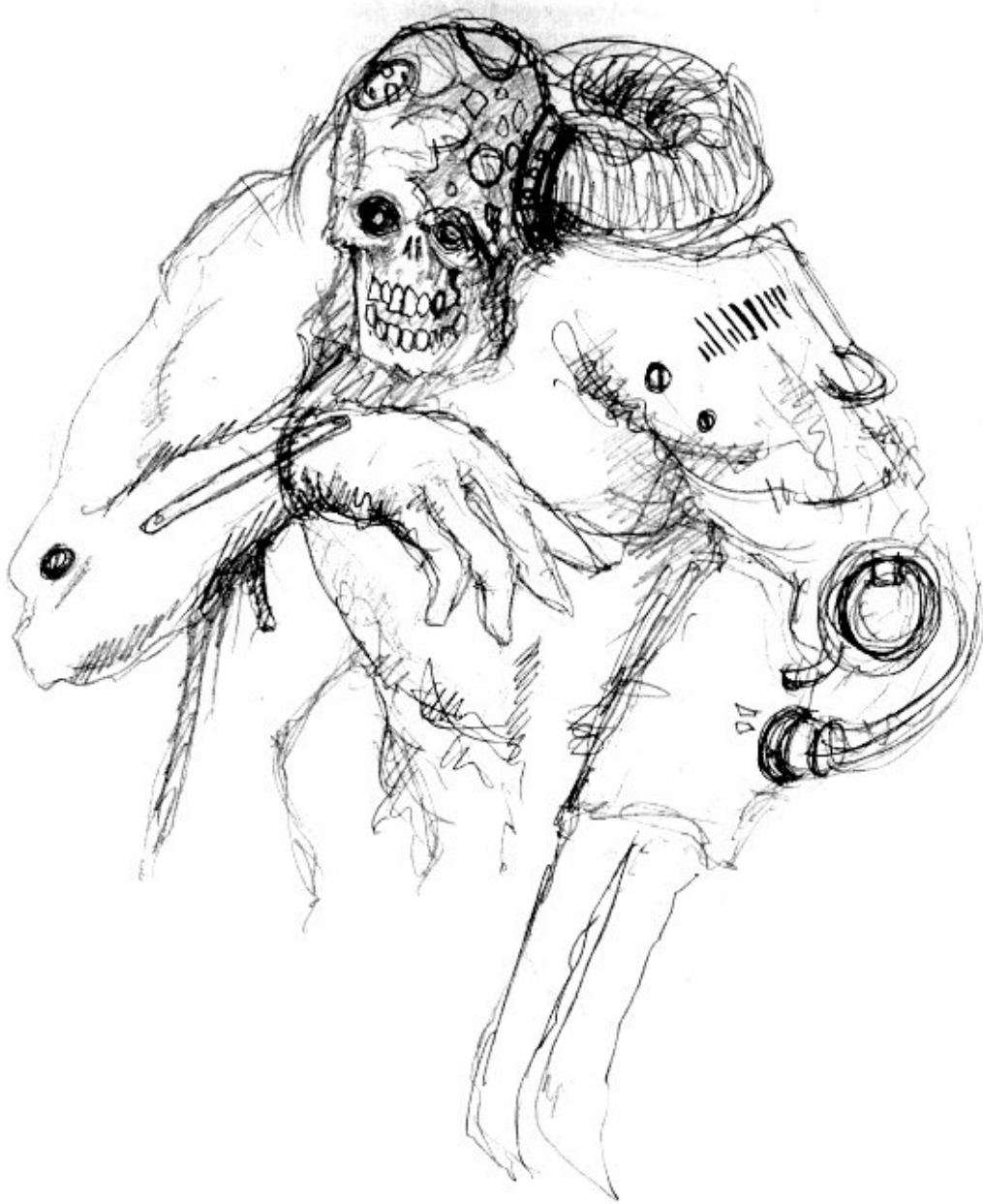
*Mankind's best are but children compared to the might of the Astartes.*

*The conclusion of our first lesson naturally follows from such a revelation. An Astartes must stand apart from the human race. He is not human. He is something more.*

*So it is we begin to see the true nature of a Soul Drinker's duty to his Imperium.*







## Part 4

344.M36

THE BLACK DAWN of Khaal broke overhead, the radioactive mass of the sun breaching the high horizon. The sunrise was in reverse, as the corrupted nature of the sun caused it to drink in the light that shone from its weaker twin and so dawn brought with it a supernatural darkness. The dense layers of the atmosphere distorted the horizon such that it rose up, bowl-shaped towards the sky, so everywhere on the blighted planet seemed to exist at the bottom of a vast crater.

The darkness bled across the forests of strange fleshy trees crowned with masses of brain-like foliage, over the rivers of greasy sludge and the spongy bleeding earth. Life teemed everywhere, billions of insects flitting on their way through their minutes-long life cycle. Larger predators fell from seed pods on the trees, maturing in moments into sabre-toothed lizards which lasted a few hours before the planet's accelerated life cycles claimed them, too, and they rotted away into the mantle of decay. Few creatures could live for long under the black sun's glare and so life had evolved to mature, grow old and die before the radiation could kill it.

Here and there were splintered trees, their brain matter crushed and smeared across the earth in rotting stains. Footprints like meteor craters punctuated the paths of destruction. It seemed impossible that anything so large could have evolved on Khaal, but life was a cunning and relentless thing. It always found a way.

The first Thunderhawk gunship came down close to one of the few buildings that broke the hold of the flesh forest. A series of simple domes and stone buildings had been constructed along a forested ridge. Roots had begun to break the lower walls apart but the domes still stood. They were made of mud brick and shored up with brainwood pillars in a primitive imitation of the Imperium's great cathedrals.

A cluster of smaller buildings lay nearby, almost swallowed by the trees. The place had been abandoned for a long time.

The rear ramp of the Thunderhawk opened and Chaplain Daenyathos jumped out onto the surface. He looked up at the dark sun rising and the black stain creeping across the forest towards the abandoned settlement.

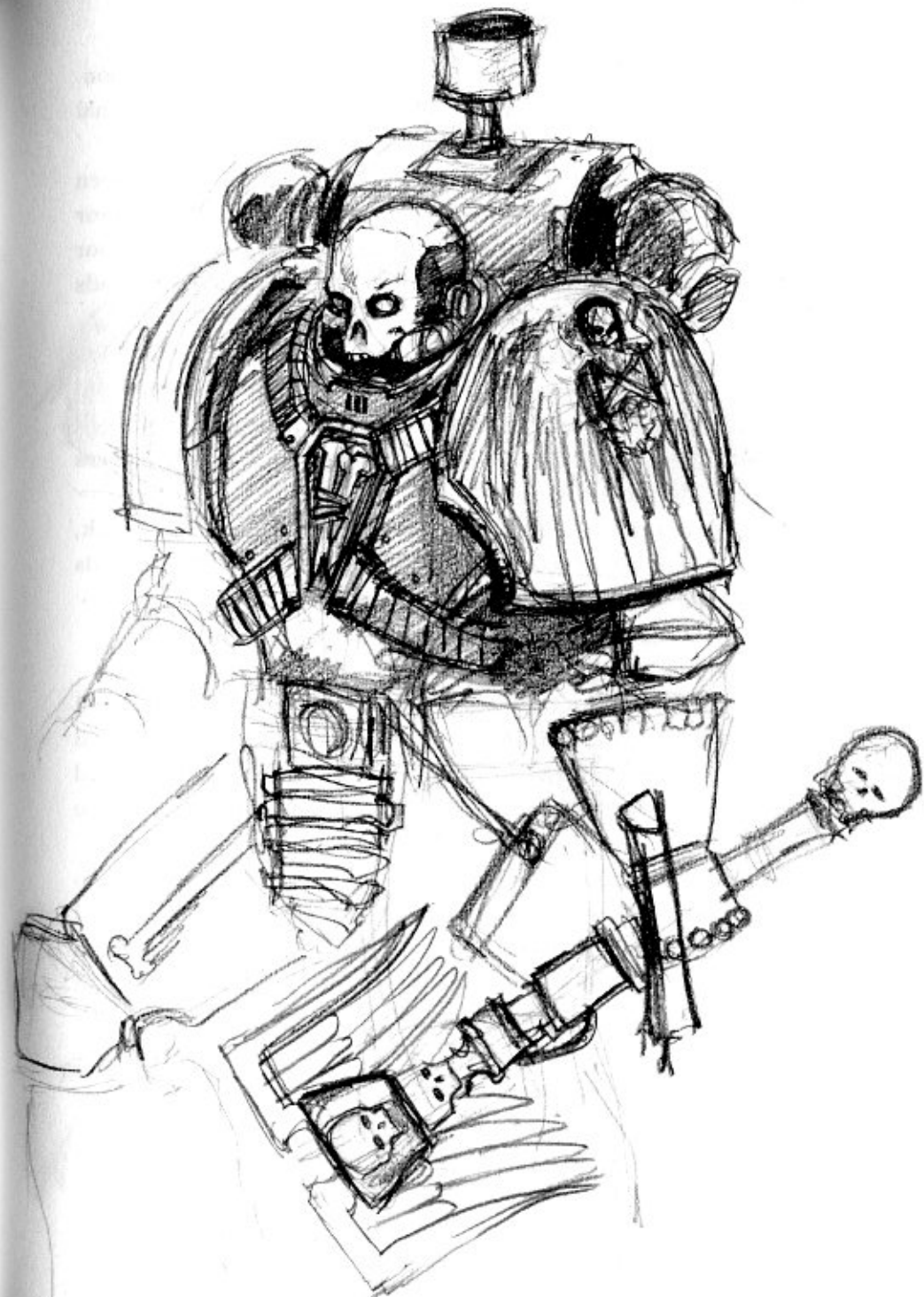
Squad Yelt followed him, jump packs on their backs and chainblades in their hands. The battle-brothers were young and eager, most of them not long out of novicehood. Yelt himself was a veteran, having elected to stay with the youthful assault troops rather than taking his place among the tactical units that made up the bulk of the Chapter. One such tactical unit, Squad Eristro, followed them out of the Thunderhawk, followed by a handful of Chapter serfs lugging equipment and ammunition. A couple of novices were among them, ready to note down the actions of their elder battle-brothers for the Chapter archives.

Chaplain Daenyathos carried the *crozius arcanum*, the power mace that served as a Chaplain's badge of office. His helmet was fronted by a skull mask and his armour was black, inlaid with fragments of bone that formed mosaics of skeletons populating battle scenes across his shoulder pads and breastplate. On his backpack was mounted a banner in the purple of the Soul Drinkers, depicting the Chapter's chalice held up by skeletal hands and overflowing with skulls.

*Fight Cold*, read the script beneath the chalice. *Fight Fast*.

Daenyathos led the way into the settlement, Squad Yelt close by him, Squad Eristro's guns trained on the trees. The little the Chapter knew of Khaal suggested the danger on this world could come from any direction, including directly overhead.

Daenyathos shouldered open the bronze doors of the largest domed building, the only metal in the settlement's construction. Inside was



a simple church with several pews lined up for a modest congregation. The walls were hung with items left there as offerings – spears, animal bones, hides, shields, bundles of withered human heads.

The icon at the far end of the chapel was carved from veined green stone. It had been painted with an uneducated hand, so the Emperor the sculpture depicted had chalky-white skin, red eyes and armour picked out in smears of ochre and blue. Hundreds of flint spearheads were piled up around His feet.

The Emperor was not the only figure in the sculpture. The other was a serpent with three heads. It had been carved from wood entwined around the Emperor, but it had been inlaid with thousands of shell fragments to give it iridescent scales. Its teeth were ivory and its eyes were uncut blue gemstones.

The fangs of one head were sunk into the stone Emperor's neck, where slashes of bright red paint showed the holy blood flowing. His sword was broken, and the serpent was winning.

Daenyathos regarded the icon for a moment.

'Ascenian was here,' he said.

Sergeant Yelt moved into the building behind Daenyathos, stalking through the pews. A few mouldering prayer scrolls, the script painted onto rolls of bark, crumbled under his feet. The assault squad followed him in. 'Don't touch anything, brothers,' said Yelt. He turned to the Chaplain. 'He's gone. No one has worshipped here for a long time.'

'No,' said Daenyathos. From the foot of the sculpture he picked up an animal carcass. It was one of the lizardlike predators, its throat and body slit open. Its entrails had been tied off and cured to keep them from decaying at Khaal's accelerated rate. The corpse was fresh – an offering, left here within a few hours. 'He was here. And he still lives.'

THE AGE OF Apostasy was not over.

Some said the Great Crusade, when the Emperor had conquered the galaxy to unite its human worlds as the Imperium, had never ended, either, and that it was still being fought by the Imperial Guard and Navy every day. Some said the Horus Heresy was still going on, and that every time one man turned a gun on another it was an echo of





that great treachery. To say the Apostasy was still going on required no such abstraction. The chaos of Vandire's reign had been too profound to end with his death.

Whole swathes of the Imperium were still cut off, or without Imperial presence. Some had rebelled by default when, with no aid or contact from the Imperium, they had set up their own governments and churches. A few had fallen prey to opportunistic aliens. Some, the worst off of all, had been fodder for men like Croivas Ascenian.

With the Ecclesiarchy no longer under Vandire's thumb, thousands of Imperial missionaries had scattered from the Imperium's holier worlds to refound the Imperial faith among those who had lost it. Plenty met grievous ends, as had been the lot of missionaries since the Great Crusade – boiled by natives, decapitated by the priests of heathen religions or picked off by the many dangers that accompanied any space travel. But a greater threat lay among them. In the upheaval of the Imperial Creed, some took up the eagle banner and rosarius of the missionary without being properly examined for their purity of faith. Some of these were charlatans hoping to acquire free passage on a spacecraft, and whatever else they could grift from gullible pilgrims. But some took the opportunity to commit far worse crimes.

Croivas Ascenian had journeyed with a shipload of pilgrims along the galaxy's eastern edge, where the Astronomican was dim and, even by the standards of Apostasy, few Imperial adepts could be spared to monitor the countless worlds there. Laden with gifts from pilgrims too poor to afford them, he had alighted on a forested world where a few human kingdoms, reduced to a medieval existence by centuries of isolation, warred with each other from wood-walled fortresses on the slopes of vast flinty peaks. He had come as a prophet, promising them deliverance from their unenlightened ways.

A Chartist trader had stopped off at the world four years later, quite by chance. They found one of the royal families imprisoned in their palace, flayed of their skins and hooked up to an archeotech machine that randomly stimulated their nervous systems so they were trapped in an endless dance of pain. The people of their city-state were hooked up to the same machine, their minds scrubbed away so they could act only in response to



the haphazard edicts the machine divined from the agonised movements of the king and his court. It was an experiment, with its goals lying somewhere in the understanding of power, but seen through a monstrously distorting lens. The scientist in charge had butchered or tormented a planet's worth of innocents, purely to see what would happen.

The hunt for Croivas Ascenian had begun.

By the time Ascenian had been tracked to Khaal, it had become clear his experiments were becoming more and more dangerous. A whole city had been marched into a darkened valley to hear the words of the prophet Ascenian, and then had their minds torn away and crammed into the skulls of half a dozen specially selected psyker children. The resulting creatures were psychic nightmares, their destructive powers vastly amplified and unleashed at random by the thousands of conflicting minds boiling inside each one. On another world twenty thousand souls had been sewn together into one immense fleshy thing in an attempt to forge from them a single lifeform – the failed experiment had begun to decay in its pit by the time an Arbites cruiser had reached the planet.

And so Ascenian flitted from planet to planet, keeping ahead of the few Imperial authorities with the mobility to catch him. His movements, like his motivation, were random, and the only pattern among his experiments was their escalation in the lives destroyed and ruined. He had become more than a heretic. He was a moral threat now, a threat that could corrupt others by his mere presence. He was the worst kind of human being there was. And wherever he went, this brilliant charlatan, this charismatic madman, convinced the people he had come as a saviour.

Then the Imperial Tarot was read by a hundred astropaths, all contacted in desperation by the subsector governors whose planets had suffered at Ascenian's hands. The readings were all the same. A place on the edge of the galaxy no one had ever heard of – Khaal, a benighted world that barely registered on only the oldest stellar maps.

Word reached the Soul Drinkers. They possessed one of the fastest fleets in the segmentum. They could reach Khaal before the missionary was done with it. The Soul Drinkers were promised the honour of taking the head of Croivas Ascenian.

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'ERISTRO! SKIRT ALONG the treeline and flank it! Yelt, stand with me! Here we fight it, brothers! Emperor's shield be about your hearts!'

Daenyathos gave his orders from the edge of the abandoned village as the first of the great beasts crashed up the slope through the trees that choked the valley below. He had the impression of immense size. The Soul Drinkers had heard the din of its footsteps from inside the settlement's church. Most normal soldiers would have simply run, but Daenyathos knew, like Fidelion, like any Astartes, that running was more dangerous. He would face the beast here. Fate had put him in its path, and he would not deny that fate.

The first part he saw of the beast were its tusks – enormous flat shovels spreading forwards from a jaw as square and solid as a front-line bunker. Above the jaw, taking up its whole head, were hundreds of fleshy tubes each as long as an Astartes was tall, trailing dribbles of



greenish spores. Its shoulders were bigger still, reaching the height of the tallest trees as it knocked them aside and trod them flat under feet the size of tanks. Daenyathos calculated the whole thing was ninety metres long and perhaps fifty wide at the shoulders, covered in a combination of scales and shaggy hair. It had six legs and a tail almost as long as its body, tipped in a club covered with spiked scales that knocked down whatever trees had survived its feet.

Its mouth opened, showing a tooth-studded tunnel of a throat that shuddered as it roared a monstrous deep gale. Somewhere among the spore-tubes, eyes focused on the purple-armoured Astartes gathering ahead of it.

Wounds along its flanks drooled spurts of purplish blood. It had been goaded here. It was not just a natural predator of Khaal. It was a weapon, deployed to kill the intruders.

Daenyathos dissected its movements in his mind. It could kill all of the Soul Drinkers, easily, if they were but a collection of statistics and probabilities. Even the combined strength of Daenyathos and Squad Yelt could not strike a killing blow. There were not enough chainblades in the whole Chapter to carve it apart and reach some vital spot before the beast killed them.

But they were not mere soldiers, to be moved around on a map and dismissed as fodder for the beast. They were Astartes. Failure was never an option. Somewhere among the hurricane of muscle and tusk lay victory.

'Your orders, Chaplain?' voxed Yelt.

'Hold,' said Daenyathos. He could barely hear his own voice over the thunderous tread of the beast's feet.

An outlying building disappeared beneath the beast's forepaw. It swept its head from side to side and the tusks tore a dozen brain trees out by their bleeding roots.

'This beast is not a cunning foe,' voxed Daenyathos to Yelt's squad 'Its weakness is in its animal brain. See how its head hangs low, ready to stampede, heedless of all else! What have we to fear from an enemy so crude? What defeat can there be when the enemy knows not why it fights?'

The beast brayed, and the ground shuddered. A chunk of the temple's roof fell in. Daenyathos took half a step back, bracing himself against the ground, his crozius held ready to strike.

'Here!' yelled Daenyathos. 'Here, heretic thing! Here is the flesh of a human for you to taste, seasoned with the will of an Astartes! A fine thing for your last meal!'

The beast dropped its head and hunched its shoulders so its tusks tore along at ground level. Then it charged, its back legs powering it forwards like a train, the ground cracking open underneath it.

'To the sky, brothers!' yelled Daenyathos. He barely heard over the beast's bellowing the sound of Squad Yelt's jump packs roaring.

The bony blade of the tusk sliced towards him. Daenyathos dropped low and swung his crozius with all the strength an Astartes could muster.

The crozius was surrounded by an energy field which flashed in a blue-white halo the moment before the impact. The tusk was good for gouging through Khaal's soft earth and shredding its trees, but it had never been tested against the arm of an Astartes and the badge of the Chaplain's office.

Bone shattered. Shards of it flew. The tusk parted around Daenyathos, the crozius carving through it in a charred, arcing blur. The





titanic head was anchored into the earth, the stump of the tusk shearing through the ground beneath Daenyathos.

Squad Yelt leapt over Daenyathos, the exhausts of their jump packs sending scalding air washing over him. They landed among the spore tubes that quivered all over the beast's head and shoulders. They stabbed and slashed with chainblades, and thick purplish blood fell in fist-sized clots. The beast forced its head up out of the earth and shook it, throwing two Astartes off. It raised its head and snapped with its jaws, perhaps thinking the Astartes were flying insects it could swat away. The rest clung to the spore tubes and clumps of hair to keep themselves from being flung aside.

'It is at bay!' shouted Daenyathos into the vox. The beast's gullet yawned in front of him, thousands of teeth quivering. He could see the plates of gnashing bone in its throat that would grind up even an Astartes's power armour. 'Open fire!'

Squad Eristro had made it through the forests to flank the beast. They took aim from the cover of the trees and unleashed a salvo of bolter fire that shredded the scales armouring its front leg. Chunks of scale were blasted off and the muscle turned pulpy beneath. Blood



flowed. The knee buckled, the beast lowing in pain. It shuddered in agony and another Astartes fell from its mane of spore tubes.

Brother Carvos, who carried Eristro's missile launcher, took aim. The Soul Drinkers were not known for their use of heavy weapons – they specialised in close assault and boarding actions. The few they had were almost venerated weapons and the barrel of Carvos's launcher was inscribed with prayers of accuracy and reliability. The green crosshairs of the weapon's targeter fixed on the mass of oozing wounds where the armoured scales had been blown away.

Carvos fired, and the missile roared into the beast's knee. It passed through the torn muscle and exploded inside the leg, blowing the lower half of the leg clean off. The beast bellowed and sank to one side. It fell slowly, like a ship capsizing. The Astartes clinging to what was now the underside of its head were able to leap free before it came crashing down onto one side.

Daenyathos clambered up its jaw to join Squad Yelt as they butchered their way through the beast's skull. Spore tubes were cut away and Yelt punched through the cranium, grabbing a section of skull and levering it away. Frag grenades were dropped into the gory pit before the Astartes jumped down off the beast. The explosion shredded half its brain and covered the trees around with sticky purple matter.

Along the beast's hide were small circular burn marks. They had been made deliberately with long-handled implements, to goad it forwards into the Soul Drinkers' position.

Daenyathos switched to the vox command channel. 'Daenyathos here,' he said. 'The enemy is close by. He has sent his lackeys against us. It is here he will be brought to battle.'

Minutes later the contrails of descending Thunderhawks appeared in the sky, carrying reinforcements from the strike cruiser *Unendingly Just*. Bringing Croivas Ascenian to battle was a goal that had eluded every Imperial force sent after him. Now the Soul Drinkers would show the Imperium how it was done.

RECLUSIARCH GOROSIUS SURVEYED the ground ahead of him. Somewhere in the tangle of forest, broken by outcrops of purple-black rock and

scored with rivers of poison, was Croivas Ascenian. It was unlikely the heretic could have made it past the mountains circling the close horizon – they rose up so sharply they almost met overhead, as if they decorated the edge of a cauldron in which the forest lay. The sensors of the *Unendingly Just* were trained on the mountains and to move an army through their unforested passes would alert the Soul Drinkers instantly. No, Ascenian was there, among the brain trees and thickets of manglegorse, hiding with the predators of Khaal and the humans who had the misfortune of living here.

It was night, which meant on Khaal the sky was a scorched white, the brain trees edged in black, the mountains dark like a pictographic negative.

Gorosius went to war in his Terminator armour, jet-black, with dozens of books chained to the waist and chestplate. Gorosius had on his person a prayer for every eventuality. He valued them not for their religious purpose – the Soul Drinkers, while a spiritual Chapter, did not cleave to the Imperial Creed, a faith which emphasised the servitude of the common man to his betters. Instead, he valued the insight they could give into any situation, a view of a tactical conundrum through the lens of the Imperial devotee's blind faith and eagerness for death.

Gorosius opened one such prayer book. It was tiny in his power glove's gauntlet. He leafed through its gilt-edged pages and found a prayer to the Emperor in His capacity as the Unmerciful Taskmaster.

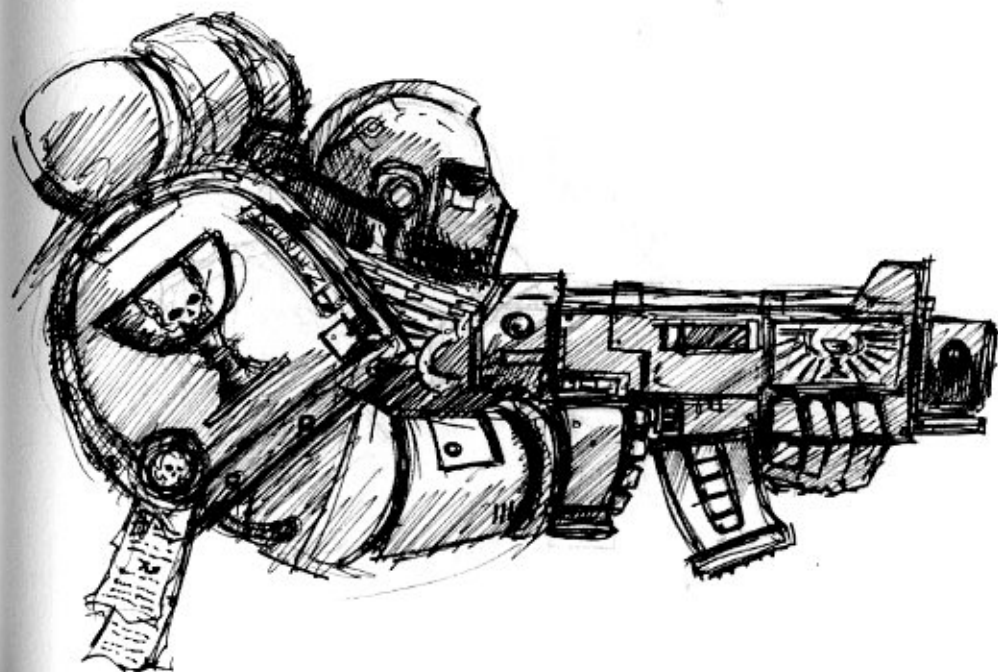
*Demand of me, the prayer beseeched, the labour that will end my days. Unburden me of the mercy that might see my work undone, that I may never lay my head to sleep knowing it is undone, but might lay it down in death knowing my duty is fulfilled. Drive me on with great pain, so in pain I shall drive others before me. Bring unto me great suffering, Unmerciful Emperor, with the whip and the cudgel! Relinquish me from family and friendship! Carve away that which I need not, so all that is left can be devoted to Your work!*

Gorosius closed the book. A common soldier, an Imperial Guardsman, would follow such a prayer as he was sent along with wave after wave of fellow soldiers to march slowly through the cauldron. Where

men died, there was the enemy. Where they did not, there the enemy was absent. Soon enough, with the expenditure of many lives, the location of Croivas Ascenian could be determined.

The Soul Drinkers would execute a similar plan, but one that did not rely on the meaninglessness of an individual soldier's life. Space Marines were far too valuable to waste in such a way. Instead, they would divide the area up into sections, each one to be scoured by a single squad. This squad, once engaged by the enemy, would call upon the assistance of all those in nearby sections, until the Soul Drinkers were engaged only in the areas of enemy concentration. Support, in the form of orbital strikes from the *Unendingly Just* and artillery salvos from the guns being set up by the Techmarines, could then be deployed precisely, only where it was needed. Soon Ascenian would be dead, and the lives of few if any Space Marines would be lost.

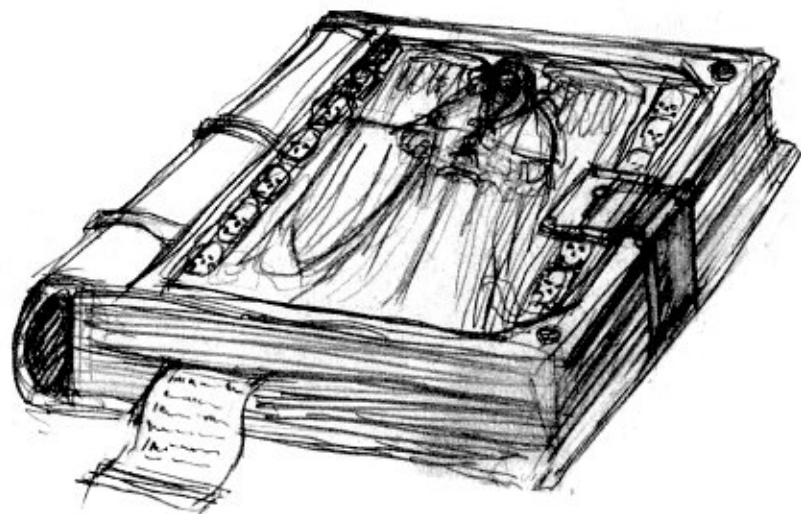
Gorosius glanced behind him to the Soul Drinkers' mustering area. Seven Thunderhawk gunships had joined Chaplain Daenyathos's expeditionary force from the *Unendingly Just*, and the Soul Drinkers' numbers had been swelled as the other expeditions on Khaal had been



called in to abandon their own searches and join the main force. The whole process had taken less than two hours, in which time Ascenian could hardly have moved his rabble a single kilometre through the forests. The Astartes moved fast, as no other Imperial force ever could.

Among the abandoned settlement's buildings were Thunderfire cannon and Skyhammer mortars, crewed by Chapter serfs under the direction of the Techmarines. They were being loaded and calibrated, their stabilising feet already bolted to the soft earth with metal spikes. The Soul Drinkers were gathered up by squad, each officer explaining his squad's location in the by-sections assault, and preparing their souls for contact with the enemy. Ascenian was a moral threat. He would attack their minds as his men would their bodies. He would fail, of course, but no Astartes had ever failed in his duty by being too prepared.

The attack would take place in less than thirty minutes. Thunderhawks would drop off the tactical units. Assault squads could make their own way, supported by the land speeders now being unloaded and bombed-up by serf details. Cold and fast, as Daenyathos liked to say – they would strike cold and fast.



Chaplain Daenyathos was approaching now. His detail, Squads Yelt and Eristro, had located Ascenian's tracks and slain the beast which was sent against them – the beast's attack had served to confirm how close they had got to Ascenian himself. He would be honoured for his part in Ascenian's death when it was over.

'Chaplain,' said Gorosius. 'What do you say to this alien night being Ascenian's last?'

'As good a night for him to die as any other,' said Daenyathos. 'Perhaps not quite soon enough.'

'He would have fallen many nights ago had the Astartes been given his scent from the start,' replied Gorosius.

'In that you shall have no argument from me, Reclusiarch.'

Gorosius took another book from his armour, this one chained to one of the silver rings hanging from the lower edge of his breastplate. Its cover was stamped with the chalice of the Soul Drinkers. 'It is good,' he said, 'that you were the one to find Ascenian. It gives me the opportunity to speak with you before the battle on a matter that has been troubling me.'

'Then speak, Reclusiarch,' said Daenyathos. The cover of the book was familiar to him, as it was to every Soul Drinker. It was the *Catechisms Martial*, written by Daenyathos himself. Copies of it, illuminated by Chapter serfs, formed part of the wargear of many battle-brothers, and officers gave readings from it to their squads.

'I have been studying your writings,' said Gorosius, 'in much depth. Ever since you undertook to write the *Catechisms* down I have followed them with fascination. Never before have I seen the soul of the Chapter illuminated with such eloquence. I feel our brothers now understand, more than at any time in the past, the Soul Drinker way of war.'

'Such was the form my own duty took,' replied Daenyathos. 'It honours me greatly to hear you say so, Reclusiarch. But presumably this is not what concerns you.'

'Indeed not. There is a section, Chaplain Daenyathos, in which you speak of a Soul Drinker's place within the galaxy as a whole.'

'It taxed me greatly in the writing,' said Daenyathos, 'and yet it could not have been left out. The questions of a Soul Drinker's role in the human race are as essential as the way we fight.'



'In that I agree. What concerns me is the light in which the Imperium's other citizens are cast,' said Gorosius. 'You describe them as cattle.'

'It was not meant as an insult,' said Daenyathos. 'Indeed, it illustrates the importance of the Imperium's citizens. Without them the Imperium is meaningless. Their role is to be herded and led by their betters, so their exploitation may make the existence of the Imperium possible. That was the intention of the simile.'

'There is not much I would argue with in that alone,' said Gorosius. 'But what concerns me is the exceptions you make. The Astartes are included, as are a few of humanity's more exalted specimens. This is as it should be. But there are some exceptions not made. The High Lords of Terra, when they form the Senatorum Imperialis, are surely above the common man? Yet you do not mark them out as exalted, and hence, what conclusion can be drawn other than that they are cattle? Those who rule in the Emperor's name, the custodians of the Golden Throne, are they but mere cattle, too?'

Daenyathos was silent for a moment. Behind the skull of his helmet, he was thinking. 'I had not considered such an interpretation.'

'That does not mean it was not intended by you,' said Gorosius. 'Sometimes our purposes can be obscure even to ourselves.'

'I shall think upon it,' said Daenyathos. 'The *Catechisms* shall never be truly finished while I still live. The document lives, as our Chapter does.'

'More conclusions must naturally follow from such a reading,' continued Gorosius. 'If the lords of mankind are cattle, and cattle are to be led, then what can be said of those who are led by them? Do not we answer, when the Lords of Terra call forth a Great Crusade, or declare an enemy of humanity to be eradicated? We may not heed every word of the Adeptus Terra, but do our objectives and those of the Imperium's rulers not broadly coincide? And yet we cannot be cattle, too, for we are Astartes, the shepherds of humanity.'

'A paradox, then,' said Daenyathos. 'An unfortunate conclusion in such a work as mine. I shall write an addendum, I think, to be included in a volume of commentaries, to address this issue.'

'But it is not a paradox,' continued Gorosius, 'if it is brought to its conclusion. That conclusion is, the Soul Drinkers should not obey Terra at all. They should exist outside Imperial authority. Indeed, given the roles ascribed to the Astartes and to the masses of the Imperium, it would seem becoming renegades from the Imperium is a natural and inevitable step for the Soul Drinkers. Would you not say this avoids the paradox? And given how devoted many of your battle-brothers are to the *Catechisms Martial*, if such an interpretation were to become widespread the Chapter's split with the Imperium would surely occur in reality.'



'This concerns me greatly,' said Daenyathos, 'and I will of course retire to the Reclusiam to reconsider these passages once Ascenian is apprehended. Now, if the matter is settled for now, I have concerns I wish to pass on to you in turn.'

'Then speak, brother-Chaplain.'

Daenyathos looked towards the forest that would, in less than an hour, become a battlefield. 'The Chapter serfs have been surveying the forest for the artillery. They have located a particular site, at the fork where a river splits in two. A fortification stands there. I believe this is the most likely site for Ascenian to have taken shelter, for it is the most defensible location in the forest.' Daenyathos pointed at where the jagged line of the river split in two, just visible through the blanket of trees. 'I suggest that while the by-sections assault be maintained, special attention should be given to this location from the attack's outset. If Ascenian is there it would be best to confirm it as soon as possible so he cannot prepare a defensive position to receive our attack.'

Gorosius thought about this for a moment. 'This is important intelligence, Chaplain. What measures would you take regarding the force that reaches these defences first?'

'Ensure they are led by our best,' said Daenyathos. 'The head of Ascenian should go to the officer in command.'

'Then I shall lead the assault on the river fork,' said Gorosius. 'Should Ascenian be there, my presence will ensure our battle-brothers do not let him slip away.'

'As it should be, Reclusiarch,' said Daenyathos. 'I shall lead the prayers before the battle. Our souls shall be steeled and nothing the heretic can do will shake our devotion.'

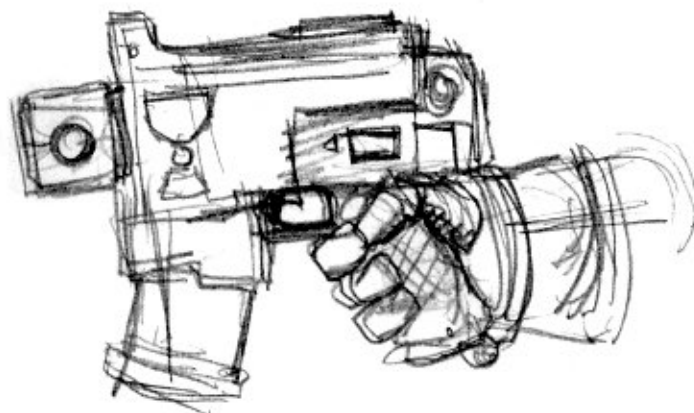
Daenyathos saluted and walked back towards the Soul Drinkers position. Gorosius turned back to the battlefield. The river fork would indeed make for an excellent defensive position, covered on two sides by the river, with fortifications easily made from the brain trees to cover the third. Gorosius weighed his crozius arcanum in his hand – a very old weapon, it contained a sliver of the sword once wielded by Sigismund, the Imperial Fists commander who had become the first

Black Templar and from whose personal guard the Soul Drinkers had been created during the Third Founding. It had taken the lives of many heretics in its long life. In the hands of Reclusiarch Gorosius, it would take one more.

THE RIVER, KNOWN by the natives of Khaal as the Bleed, carved a channel from the foothills of the mountains right across the forest. Where it split in two was indeed a structure, a very old place made of stones quarried from far beneath the soggy loam of the forests. This had been an ancestral seat of power for generations long since dead, a place of superstition and ill favour among the savages who now inhabited the forests.

The southern fork of the Bleed ducked underground, and had dug a complex system of caves and underground lakes through the layer of stone which had furnished the materials for the fortress. At one point it had met a seam of softer stone and had dutifully eroded it away, leaving a long, wide, high cavern before diverting away through a fissure to continue its journey. The savages had found a use for this cavern. It was where they kept their beasts.

These beasts, one of whom had been lost to the invaders back at the abandoned town, trumpeted their rage in response to the sound of engines overhead. They needed no goading to force them out into the sunlight, thundering their way across the river fords in the direction of the ancient fortress.



The beasts were difficult to control. It normally cost lives to force even one of them out and aim it in the direction of the enemy. But when they were angered, they needed no help. Something about the engines of the craft angered them. The craft was blocky and studded with guns, large enough for its hold to carry twenty of the armoured warriors the forest scouts had glimpsed landing at the town. It hovered over the vine-covered battlements, training its guns on the tumble-down guard towers and the weed-choked courtyard, before its rear ramp opened and the armoured warriors jumped down onto the walls.



The scouts watched them from among the trees. They were a strange breed even among Khaal's natives – their faces painted red and white, their teeth pulled out and stitched to their hands and feet to give them better grip, they lived among the trees and fed on the spongy brain-like matter. It drove them mad, some said. A true scout never touched the ground again after his first mouthful. They communicated in a chirruping imitation of birdsong, telling the warriors in the caves of the attackers' presence.

They need not have bothered. Minutes later the beasts stormed through the trees of theirs, shaking ancient stones from the fortress walls. The chemical river churned with their footfalls.

One of the armoured warriors, their leader, stood in defiance on the walls. He was enormous, twice the height of a man, his armour so bulky the strength required to wear it was surely beyond any human. His face was a skull, his armour was black instead of purple, and he carried a club wreathed in lightning. The savages of Khaal could scarcely believe such a thing could exist.

Except they had been warned. Father Ascenian had told them of the dark ones from the sky, the ones who would come to destroy them. The savages loved Father Ascenian. They would die for him. He had promised them they would have the chance.

The armoured warriors fought. They were brave and strong. But the beasts were too many. One of the beasts fell before it reached the walls, felled by the magic weapons of the invaders. But then one crashed into the fortress. One wall collapsed into the river, damming it. Under the rocks was the leader. Impossibly, he heaved the fallen blocks of stone off him and fought on. He seemed to challenge the beast towering over him, parrying the sweeps of its enormous tusks with his club. The savages asked one another how any man could stand before a beast. The scouts in the trees chirped and squealed with delight.

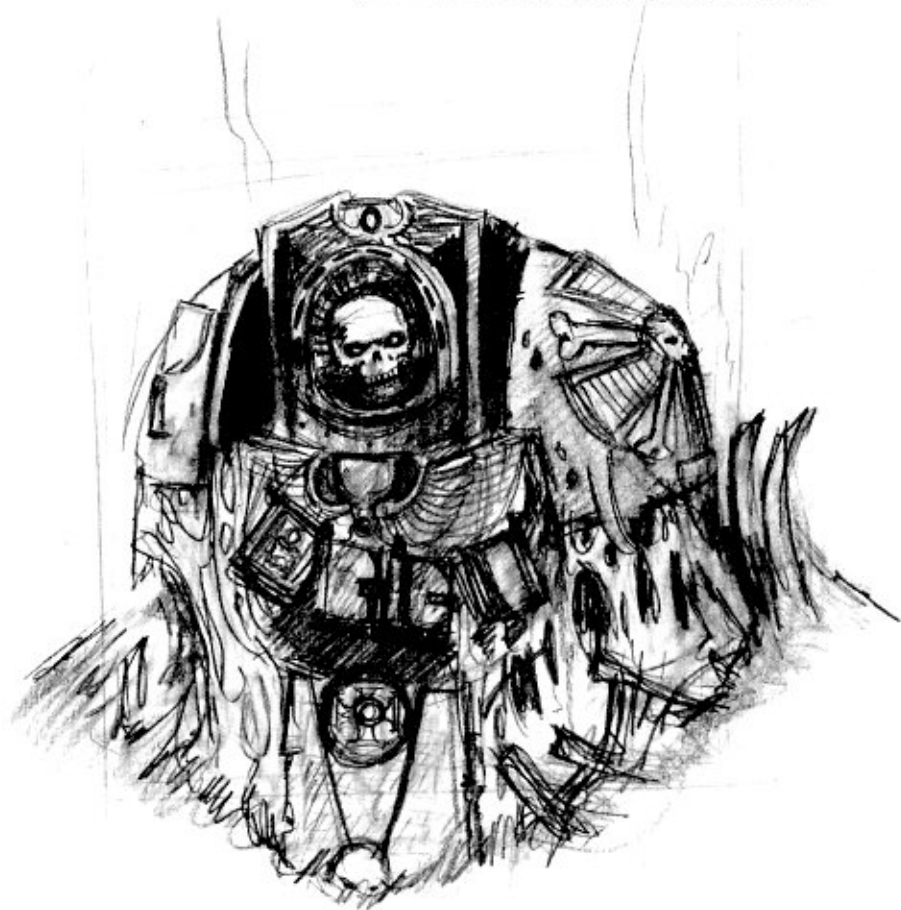
The beast scooped up the invader's leader and threw him over its shoulder into the river with a sweep of its tusks. It turned its head and the savages saw how its face was gouged and ruined, torn apart by the leader's might. But then another beast charged into the fray, and crushed the leader underfoot.



Even then his armour did not buckle. He rose again from the torrent of the river. His warriors rushed to his side to save him, but the beasts crushed them and threw them aside, or they were buried as the fortress collapsed. Again and again the leader was trampled, and his armour was crushed out of shape, yet still he lived.

Finally a beast caught the leader in its jaws and swallowed him whole. The scouts whooped and gibbered in the branches. It was dead! The invader was dead! Father Ascenian would be happy.

Then Father Ascenian left for the sky, as he had told them he would with a promise to return. The invaders appeared everywhere in the forest, and many savages were lost to their swords and guns. But it did not matter. The dark ones had come, and Father Ascenian had eluded them. The lives of the savages meant nothing compared to that.



A few of the scouts evaded destruction, hiding up in the trees, their gibbering mistaken for the cries of birds and predators by the invaders. They continued to watch the site of the invaders' only defeat at the ancient fortress. Some of them saw the leader of the invaders fight his way out of the beast's stomach. His armour was scorched by acid and torn by teeth, but he was alive when he emerged, covered in bile and filth and bellowing in rage. He was wounded, and could only drag himself along on his stomach since his legs were ruined.

Another armoured warrior approached. This one wore black armour, like the leader, and like him wore a skull on his face. This warrior was alone. The two armoured men exchanged words, and it seemed the leader was angered.

The second warrior drew his gun and shot the leader twice through the head. He paused for a moment, regarding the man he had just killed. Then he hauled the body back through the wound in the beast's side, and left him there.

The scouts realised, in a basic, animal way, that they had just witnessed something important. But nothing was really important, except that Father Ascenian had escaped the dark ones. The savages hooted and whooped in the trees, happy they had lived to witness their father victorious.

IT WAS WITH sorrow and gravity that Daenyathos addressed the Chapter concerning the great shame that had fallen upon them. The battle-brothers were gathered in the Chapel of Dorn on the *Glory*, a thousand Astartes and a hundred novices kneeling before the lectern.

'Reclusiarch Gorosius was one of the greatest heroes of our Chapter,' continued Daenyathos. 'Of the human race. Only by the efforts of such Astartes do we endure. Only with their deaths are we illuminated as to the debt we owe them.'

Daenyathos's sermon had been masterful. It was no less than the Chapter would expect from their keenest mind. Daenyathos had not mentioned the poor circumstances of Gorosius's death – caught out by a stampede of enemy war-beasts, trampled and devoured. The omission was not obvious, nor skirted around. Instead Daenyathos had



emphasised the precarious nature of human existence and how Astartes like Gorosius were a symbol of what must be done to survive. The congregation felt the galaxy itself had lost a hero, not just the Soul Drinkers.

'Reclusiarch Gorosius was lost in the pursuit of a worthy goal,' said Daenyathos, the tone of his voice darkening. 'The persecution of the heretic Croivas Ascenian. It is our duty, not just to honour our fallen brother, but to acknowledge the great shame that falls upon us by our failure. Gorosius lies on his slab in the Chambers of Repose, and Ascenian is free. This is a stain upon our honour, on the honour of the human race! It cannot stand!' Daenyathos gripped the lectern with his black-gauntleted hands. 'As I take up the mantle of Reclusiarch, I swear this day that Ascenian shall be brought to justice. It is by the Soul Drinkers he shall be found and defeated! It is by the hand of the Reclusiam that his head shall be taken! In the name of Gorosius and of Rogal Dorn, I make this oath!'

Daenyathos held up the crozius that Gorosius had carried to Khaal – the badge of office of the Reclusiarch. With Gorosius gone, there had been no question that Daenyathos, whose *Catechisms Martial* was carried by nearly every Soul Drinker into battle, should become the new Reclusiarch.

The Soul Drinkers clapped their fists to their breastplates in salute. They had acclaimed Daenyathos as their new spiritual leader, and with him the oath of finding and punishing Croivas Ascenian. Daenyathos descended from the pulpit, and as one, the Soul Drinkers spoke in low voices as they began to pray.

Daenyathos retired to the Reclusiarch's chambers adjoining the chapel. Novices were ready to attend upon him, to take the crozius and place it in its blessed casket of black hardwood and red silk, to remove his armour and weapons and make notes of his sermon in the great ledgers in which Reclusiarchs had recorded the spiritual history of the Soul Drinkers. The chambers were sparse but dramatic, a place made to inspire meditation, thousands of volumes of theology and battle-theory shelved below glowing icons of past Chapter heroes. The Reclusiarch required several sets of armour, all hanging on one wall – Gorosius's Terminator armour, still

scarred with acid and claw marks, its many books reduced to charred spines. Ceremonial obsidian armour for addressing outsiders to the Chapter, rarely used. Daenyathos's own power armour, the armour he had first taken as an initiate painted black and inscribed with skulls when he had been appointed Chaplain. A suit of ashen grey with skulls and chalices carved from bones, to be worn when the Reclusiarch handed over his duties while still living, an event which had never happened.

Daenyathos asked the novices to leave. They did so, and aside from a leetern-servitor waiting in the corner formed by two bookcases, Daenyathos was alone.

His actions on Khaal had been a risk, of course. Gorosius could have survived, even if Daenyathos's plan to send him to the beast caves of Khaal suggested he would not. It had been a strange instinct that had initially stopped Daenyathos from announcing his discovery of the bark map showing where Ascenian's savages kept the beasts they used as weapons. Perhaps it was a sort of foresight, one step short of warp-craft, a voice of wisdom and experience that told him to keep the information in reserve in case he needed it.

The greater risk had been Gorosius recognising Daenyathos's change of plan for what it was – a hasty measure to send Gorosius to his death before he could spread the idea that the *Catechisms Martial* contained within it a hidden message. Daenyathos had intended every word of that message, but he had not intended for anyone to uncover it so soon, least of all Gorosius. He had underestimated the Reclusiarch's mental agility.

Daenyathos corrected that last thought. Gorosius was not the Reclusiarch. Daenyathos was.

At least there had been no risk of Gorosius leaving the attack on the fortress to anyone else. Once he believed Ascenian might be there, it had been certain Gorosius would lead the attack himself. He could not refuse the chance to take Ascenian's head himself, to win for himself the greater portion of the glory, to add another line to the eulogy he had thought would be read for him many decades in the future.

How could he have refused? He had been a Soul Drinker.

## Part 5

481.M36

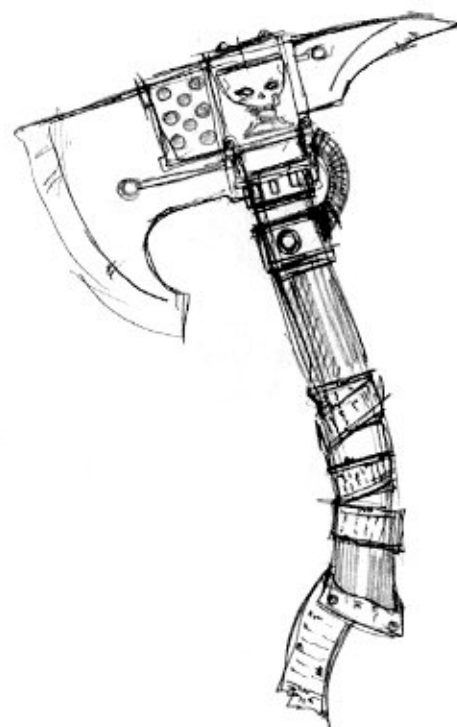
IT TOOK a long time for Reclusiarch Daenyathos to awake.

An Astartes did not sleep. He could put half his mind into slumber, then the other, always retaining a degree of alertness. That meant for him to wake, he had to have been unconscious.

At first, he thought he was immersed in cold water. The chill surrounded him, and masked his eyes. He did not possess the treacherous instincts that might cause a normal man to gulp foul water down into his lungs, or lose control of his bodily functions in panic. Instead, Daenyathos considered the situation and calmly drew in a shallow breath.

He could breathe. The cold and the clammy, greasy sensation surrounding him came from somewhere else.

He could hear as well. He recognised the engines of a



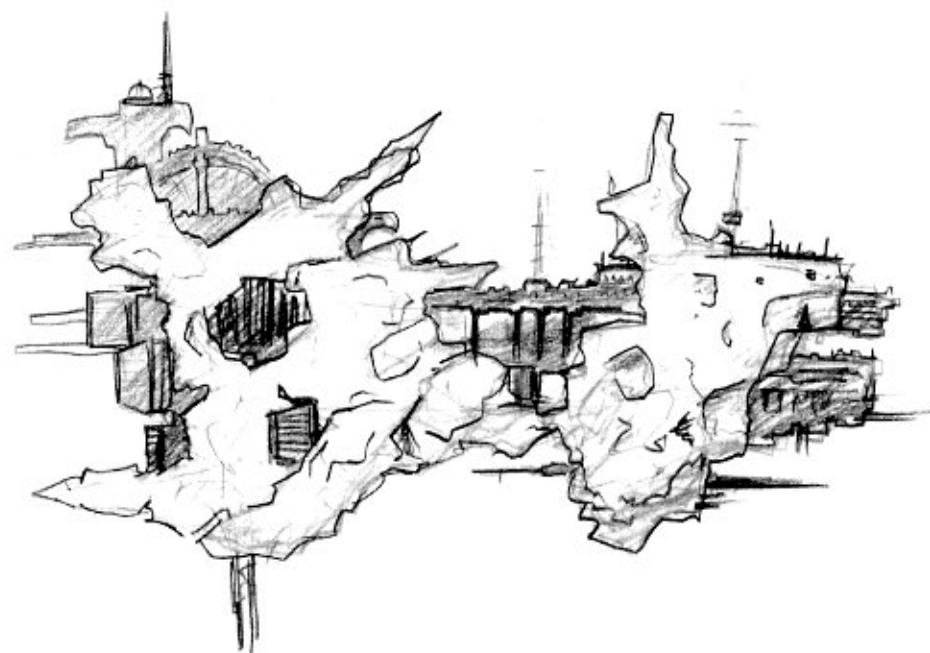


spaceship. When on board a ship, the sound of the engines was a constant, a distant drone that eventually merged with the silence. Now, newly awake, Daenyathos was aware of them. He was on a spaceship.

He was on the *Talon of Mars*.

Daenyathos fought to move. He was encased in something that prevented his limbs from making the slightest motion. His face was not similarly encased. He could move his jaw, and his head, if only a little. He tried to open his eyes. They were gummed up – with dried blood, he guessed. An Astartes's blood clotted extremely quickly, becoming hard red clumps within moments of exiting a vein or an artery. It meant an Astartes would never bleed to death, but it had its drawbacks. If it was in an Astartes's eyes, it could take precious moments to pick it away so he could see again.

The *Talon of Mars* had started out as an Adeptus Mechanicus explorer ship, a highly advanced and ancient craft that sought out new warp routes. On one of its expeditions it had dropped into the warp



and not returned for three thousand years. By the time it had returned it had become something very different – a space hulk, a ship deformed and made terrible by its long imprisonment in the warp. The Soul Drinkers had attacked it. Daenyathos had led them. His memory seemed as gummed-up as his eyes, and the facts of the recent past were reluctant to come to the surface.

Daenyathos struggled. There were few bonds an Astartes could not break. Daenyathos's held firm. His arms and legs were numb with imprisonment. He grimaced and strained every muscle in the trunk of his body, neck muscles standing out in cords, abdominals crushing against his ribs, spine bending back.

He put everything he had into it, until he could taste blood in his mouth and feel his fused ribs creaking with the strain. He let it go, sagging in his bonds.

'You are awake,' said a voice. 'Let me help you.'

The voice was synthesised, but very well. It was male, with a hint of age and education. A wealthy noble or senior adept might be granted such a high-quality artificial larynx when his voice failed. Daenyathos felt dexterous fingers on his face, prising away the layer of coagulated blood from his eyelids.

Daenyathos's pupils snapped shut. He had been blind for a long time, and his augmented eyes fought to protect his retinas while still granting him sight.

He was in a Verispex suite, a laboratory used by the *Talon's* Mechanicus crew to examine samples. Several lab benches held brass-cased microscopes and centrifuges. Lab servitors were mounted on the ceiling, their human torsos augmented by folding metal limbs now curled up underneath them. The walls, faced in the rust-red and bronze of the Mechanicus, were inscribed with machine-code prayers. The place was relatively intact, albeit covered with a patina of corrosion suggesting its age. Unlike most of the hulk, it had not been twisted by the ship's time in the warp.

The man who had picked the blood from Daenyathos's eyes was standing over him. It was Croivas Ascenian.

*This period of time is subject to disagreement amongst Imperial scholars*



Daenyathos was certain of the man's identity even though no one had given a reliable description of him for well over a century. There was something in the stature – too tall for a human, yet hunched over – that spoke of the decades of malice Ascenian had perpetrated. His robes were still those of an Imperial missionary, a brown cassock tied at the waist with a length of golden rope hung with icons Ascenian had stolen from places of worship. There were gilded finger bones and skulls of saints, delicately painted icons on panels of wood taken from primitive altars, jewel-studded aquilae taken from the croziers of Imperial clergymen. On Ascenian's shoulders lay a heavy mantle of cracked leather, and his face was half-hidden under its hood.

No one knew what Ascenian's first face had looked like. It had been rebuilt and repaired so many times it looked like no natural face ever could. It resembled a mechanical device made from body parts. The jaw was a single piece, the skin stretched over it in an approximation of reality. The cheeks hung over it, hinged at the cheekbones to allow for an imitation of facial expression. The eye sockets were wide and raw, and the eyes – biological, and of different colours suggesting more than one donor – sat in them like meteors in impact craters.

The hands Ascenian used to prise the blood from Daenyathos's face were mechanical, too. They made no pretence at realism. They were slender metal armatures that ended in spreads of slim fingers, like spiders' legs. The cassock shifted with more shoulders and elbows than a human should have, suggesting many more limbs were folded up under there. The cassock reached the ground but Daenyathos noted the way Ascenian moved suggested he had no feet. Perhaps he hovered, or had many small lower limbs to move him along like an insect.

Ascenian turned to examine the lab bench behind him. Several biological samples sat in dishes of nutrient gel, or were pinned open on the work surface to expose their inner workings. They looked like organs, still glistening and marbled with blood.

'You,' said Daenyathos.

'Ah, you still speak,' said Ascenian without turning around. 'That is good. The last one was less than talented with regards to conversation.'



The last one? Daenyathos strained against his bonds again. There was more than one. Another Soul Drinker had fallen into Ascenian's hands. More battle-brothers to be avenged. Ascenian had taken his share of them in the years the Chapter had hunted him.

Ascenian's apprehension had become a matter of pride for the Soul Drinkers. Ascenian had bested them and, as far as the rest of the Chapter was concerned, killed Reclusiarch Gorosius. Daenyathos had known the truth of what happened to Gorosius, but still he had dedicated



himself to hunting Ascenian as completely as any Soul Drinker. This was not just to conceal his part in Gorosius's death. He genuinely despised Ascenian. The corrupted missionary was an upstart, a pretender to the ranks of those who decided human destiny. His experiments into human nature, crude and gory as they were, suggested he aspired to a greater understanding of his species. His was a crime of arrogance, and no one could match their arrogance to that of the Soul Drinkers.

It had taken the Chapter a hundred and thirty-seven years to find him. During that time, Ascenian had taken to living on the *Talon of Mars*. The Soul Drinkers had found and boarded it. And then Daenyathos had fallen.

It had been a bomb that had laid Daenyathos low. A booby trap. Not even a bullet or blade, not even the hand of Ascenian himself. Ascenian had known he would be found and the *Talon of Mars* boarded, so he had turned the ship into a deathtrap. He had been waiting for the Soul Drinkers, or someone like them, so he could take a few more scalps.

Daenyathos could still not move. But he could turn his head, a little. He felt the familiar collar of his power armour's breastplate around his throat, and wondered for a moment why Ascenian would leave him wearing it. The thought flitted out of his mind when he forced his head round to see what was fixed to the wall immediately to his left.

Another Astartes was chained to the wall. This one was out of armour. His flesh was pallid and purplish, covered in cuts and bruises. His muscles were wasted, giving it a sagging, lopsided look anathema to the idea of an Astartes. It was an obscenity, to see a Space Marine reduced to this, weak and pathetic, helpless.

The Astartes was dead, but he had clearly been weakened first, perhaps chained there for months while his muscles atrophied. The Space Marine's torso had been carved open, the breastplate of bone cracked open and the organs harvested. Daenyathos recognised the bird's-head symbol tattoos on one shoulder. The symbol of the Raven Guard, a much-storied Chapter of Space Marines. At some point they, too, had tangled with Ascenian, and like Daenyathos this Astartes had been subdued and captured.



Another sight caught Daenyathos's eye, in his peripheral vision. His hand.

His hand hung pale and limp where it was manacled to a chain hanging from the ceiling. The armour had been removed from his arm and hand and the skin along his forearm had been slit open and restitched. Cables and wires led from the wound, dangling down to the floor. His palm was open, too, and Daenyathos could see clamps attaching wires to bundles of exposed muscle. He tried to twitch a finger, but he could not move his arm at all. It was entirely dead.

He looked down, forcing his chin against the collar of his armour. His legs had been similarly operated upon, and were similarly motionless.

The wires led to the monitors on the lab bench. Daenyathos realised with a lurch that Ascenian had pared open his body to get at his nervous system, so his vital functions could be monitored. In the process his nervous system had become disconnected from his extremities, his limbs now effectively dead.

When Daenyathos looked around again, Ascenian was standing in front of him, staring.

'I have been impatient in the past,' said Ascenian. 'I have damaged my specimens in my haste. With you, I hope to be more thorough.'

Daenyathos's veins had filled up with ice. He was Astartes, and he knew no fear – but he could still feel horror, that blank white obscenity that filled a man's mind. Daenyathos had never felt more human than in that moment. Ascenian had stolen from him the use of his arms and legs. He was nothing any more. He could not fight. He could not even run. He was Ascenian's possession. Everything he was, everything he had earned as a Soul Drinker, had gone.

'You are,' Ascenian was saying, 'quite fascinating. Examining an Astartes makes me feel all my previous experiments have been precursors. Training, if you will, for the time I could get my hands on a Space Marine. You know, I presume, that you have three lungs. It was something of a revelation for me, however.'

Daenyathos's throat tightened. He felt he would vomit. Some hidden instinct kept trying to break the bonds holding his arms and legs. How pathetic he must have looked, swaying in his chains, as if by twisting

and jerking around he could free himself. And what would he do then? Drag himself along by his chin, wriggle like a worm? Ascenian could simply step over him and observe as Daenyathos abased himself further.

'Do you know what this is?' said Ascenian. A mechadendrite, an articulated cable that ended in a three-fingered claw, snaked out from his robes to pick something up from the lab bench and hold it up in front of Daenyathos. It was a lump of meat, a fist-sized knot of muscle.

'It's a heart,' said Daenyathos. He had a dim awareness that he should keep Ascenian talking.

Ascenian smiled. Two more mechadendrites reached out, from his shoulders this time, uncoiling from beneath the mantle of his habit. They removed the bolts that held the two halves of Daenyathos's breastplate together under the shoulder joints. The breastplate lifted away.

'Think again,' Ascenian said.



Daenyathos looked down. His chest and abdomen had suffered the same treatment as his limbs. A deep, ragged Y-shaped incision, such as might be made in a corpse to harvest the organs, ran from his shoulders to his solar plexus and then down beneath his navel. Tubes and wires snaked from the wound, the edges of which were held together by clamps and steel sutures. He could see red stripes under the skin where his ribs

had been cracked so his chest could be levered open, and then shut again.

Daenyathos felt a bilious terror rising in him. It was something he had never felt before. He was going to die here.

The analytical part of his mind had been working all this time. It told him the tree of organs inside him, many of which had been added to him during his conversion into a Space Marine, was not complete.

'It's my heart,' said Daenyathos. It took an effort to speak. The fractured panels of his ribcage shifted to allow his lungs to inflate and give him the breath to do it.

'Very good,' said Ascenian. 'Your original one, I believe. The additional one is quite the creation. In the vats of your Apothecarion I imagine it must have been crafted. Even the Magi Biologis of the Mechanicus would struggle to emulate such craftsmanship. Every cut I make into your kind gives me some new revelation. To think I wasted so much time seeking out new ways to explore the nature of the human body, when it was within the body of an Astartes that true enlightenment lay.'

Ascenian spoke almost conversationally, instructively, and Daenyathos could imagine that same voice convincing his many followers to abandon their humanity and become his victims. In the decades since Khaal there had been other experiments, all of them presaged by that reasonable, inarguable voice. It had convinced ten thousand supplicants on Calderoi Magna to live like animals, wallowing through filth and fighting with teeth and nails, solely to see which among them would become predators and which prey. Ascenian had somehow made his way onto a ship of the Imperial Navy, and when he left it one-tenth of the crew survived on a command deck decorated with the skin of the other nine-tenths. Ascenian would become bored and disappear for years at a time, to re-emerge when he had some new theory that needed testing.

'Such a shame,' Ascenian was saying, 'that Space Marines are so hard to come by.' He pointed a mechadendrite at the dead Raven Guard. 'This one was the first I acquired intact. In my eagerness, I damaged him beyond usefulness. Be assured, I shall be more methodical with you.'



Ascenian turned to the laboratory bench. 'Some of your organs I assume are redundant, so injury to one will permit the other to take over its function. The purpose of others, however, is less obvious to me. Pray tell me, what is this for?'

Ascenian held up another organ that had been lying in a nutrient dish on the lab bench. It was a stomach, with wires clipped to it leading, Daenyathos presumed, to his spinal column. Ascenian's mechadendrite claws carefully opened up the stomach along a slit cut into its surface, revealing a whiteish nodule on the stomach's inner surface.

'Go to hell,' hissed Daenyathos.

'Oh dear,' said Ascenian, with an air of disappointment that was almost believable. The claw of his third mechadendrite folded up to reveal a slender silver probe, which he inserted into a bundle of fibrous matter on the bench behind him.

There had been something missing from the situation, something other than Daenyathos's absent organs. There had been no pain.

There was pain now.

Daenyathos was bathed in it. It leapt from every nerve ending. It flooded through him, down his throat and into his lungs. It burned

through his missing limbs, it knotted the stomach in Ascenian's hands, it rippled up his spine.

He had never felt such pain. He had never felt pain at all, compared to this. A thousand knives cut him. Phantom fingernails were ripped away. Every nerve ending sang out at once.

It was impossible to tell how long it lasted. Time had no meaning while bathed in that pain. It was probably only a fraction of a second, but that meant nothing to Daenyathos's mind as a million points of agony assailed it.

The pain fell away. Daenyathos sagged in his chains. Saliva ran from his lower lip, his jaw hanging limp. His lungs shuddered to draw breath.

'It is unwise to show discourtesy to one's host when that host has control of one's nervous system,' said Ascenian. He indicated the organ grafted onto Daenyathos's stomach again. 'What is this for?'

Daenyathos had a duty to defy Ascenian. But he also had a duty to live on. The longer he kept Ascenian interested in an Astartes's various augmentations, the longer Daenyathos would stay alive, and the more opportunities he would have to...

...to what? To escape? To kill Ascenian? The logical part of his brain told him those things were not possible. For once, Daenyathos silenced it. Logic did not apply here. To struggle on was its own reward.

And perhaps, just perhaps, there was a way.

'It is the omophagea,' said Daenyathos thickly. He had bitten his lips and the inside of his cheeks during the pain, and he drooled out blood as he spoke. 'It absorbs racial memory. We can... we can know the thoughts of our enemies.'

Ascenian's artificial face flexed into an expression of curiosity. 'By consuming their flesh?'

'Their... their brains.'

'Ah, now that is fascinating. Yes, this is what I sought, unknowing, until I finally had an Astartes of my own.'

Daenyathos needed information. Just like Ascenian lusted to know everything about the pathetic specimen in front of him, so Daenyathos needed to know more about Ascenian.

Someone in the room knew more. Perhaps not much more, perhaps only a few moments of rage and pain. But it would be something.

Daenyathos let his eyes flicker, almost imperceptibly, to the Raven Guard hanging beside him.

Ascenian smiled.

The claw of a mechadendrite folded in on itself and a miniature circular saw blade slid out of its casing. It started spinning with a tinny whine. Ascenian walked up to the Raven Guard and lifted the dead Space Marine's head up. He looked into the Astartes's glazed eyes as the saw blade cut around the top of the cranium. A fine mist of blood coloured the fleshy panels of Ascenian's face.

The saw finished its work. The mechadendrite reformed into a claw and delicately lifted the top of the Raven Guard's cranium. The Raven Guard's brain was revealed, beneath a greyish membrane. Two more mechadendrites now worked, both tipped with fine scalpel blades, removing the membrane. One slid down between the brain and the skull,





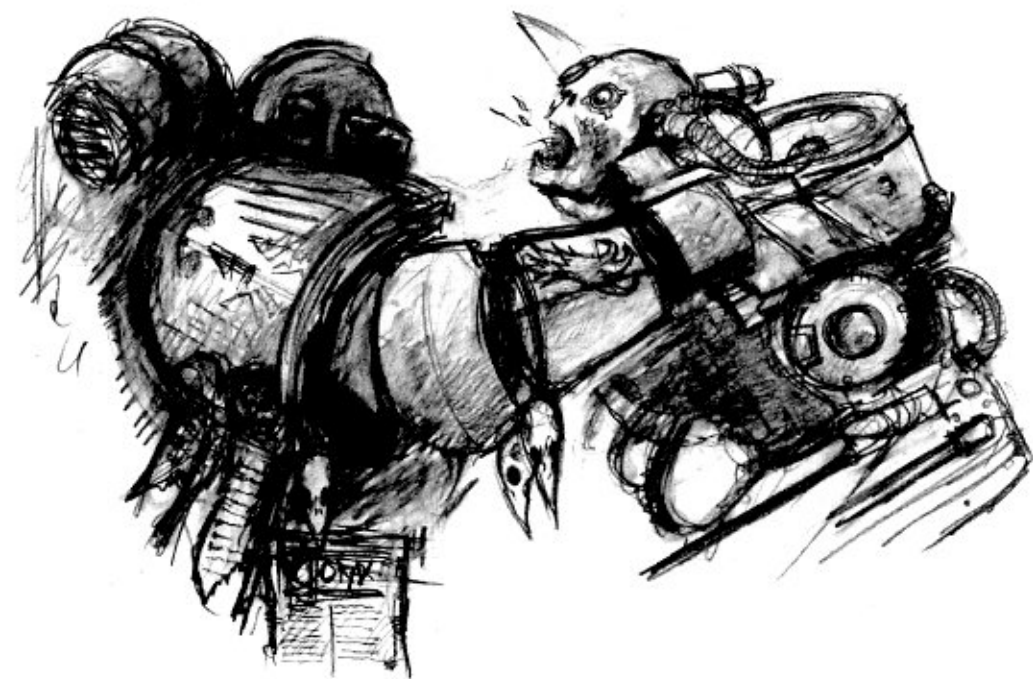
presumably severing the optical nerves, the spinal column and the other anchors that held the brain in place.

The mechadendrites carefully lifted the brain from the Raven Guard's skull. The whole operation had taken perhaps two minutes. Ascenian returned to the lab bench and placed the brain on its surface. It was a rippled mass, a little shrunken and discoloured by the onset of decomposition.

Daenyathos let the symptoms of fear appear on his face. Not obvious, of course. Ascenian could not suspect he was putting it on. He forced his pupils to dilate a little, the muscles in his neck to tighten, his breath to hitch.

Ascenian cut a thin slice from the Raven Guard's brain and dropped it into Daenyathos's stomach.

The stomach was still hooked up to Daenyathos's nervous system, and straight away he registered the omophagea recognising memory-rich matter.



His back-brain flooded with the primitive thoughts from the Raven Guard's mind. A grim desire for death, a sense of persecution and anger, a bleak hatred of life the Raven Guard instilled in their recruits. That was how the Raven Guard thought – the galaxy was a cruel place and they had to be crueller. Life was an aberration and ending it was a sacred duty. They were a dark brotherhood, seekers of oblivion. They could not have been more different to the Soul Drinkers and still call themselves Astartes.

More sophisticated thoughts surfaced as Daenyathos concentrated further. The more recent memories were the only ones intact enough to make sense. A great anger at failure, at the insult of capture. Daenyathos had a fleeting image of an Astartes strike cruiser burning, its hull pounded by the many guns of Ascenian's space hulk. It was seen from the porthole of the saviour pod in which the Raven Guard had escaped his ship, and which was then presumably captured by Ascenian.

The Raven Guard had fought. Ascenian had sent combat-servitors to subdue him, machines of flesh and steel. Most had been destroyed, but ultimately, there had been too many.

Now Daenyathos saw through the eyes of the Raven Guard as he hung in the lab. Ascenian stood before him, the image distorted by the weight of anger and shame filling the Raven Guard's mind.

Then there was pain. Ascenian had set about the Raven Guard with a vivisectionist's glee, savouring the Raven Guard's suffering as much as the revelations he could find about Astartes physiology. Saws had cut through the Raven Guard's ribs. Blades had probed at living organs, thousands of pain receptors firing off like fireworks in the Raven Guard's brain. The sensations were muted by the omophagea but still Daenyathos had to hold on mentally, to keep his own mind from recoiling and banishing the Raven Guard's dying thoughts.

'Tell me!' came Ascenian's voice, amplified and distorted. 'Tell me! How do they change you? What do they do? What are you, servant of the Emperor? The Mechanicus couldn't make you. All the magi on Mars could not create an Astartes! What are you?'

Then, death was falling. Daenyathos had tasted the deaths of many fallen foes through the omophagea, and they were always the same – cold,

fearful and utterly alone. He let the Raven Guard's thoughts go before that moment. The dead Astartes deserved at least that small dignity.

Daenyathos let his head hang, as if exhausted.

Ascenian did not know. He did not know about the gene-seed.

Daenyathos looked up to see Ascenian smiling before him. 'Well?' Ascenian said.

'Damn you,' replied Daenyathos. He let his voice sound weak. He imagined his mind had been broken by the consumption of another Astartes's thoughts, and that he was now at Ascenian's mercy. Nothing would have pleased Ascenian more than to have an Astartes, one of the Emperor's finest, crushed and compliant before him.

'What other secrets do you have hidden away in these organs?' continued Ascenian. 'Or will I have to convince you again?'

'No,' said Daenyathos quickly. 'No. I... I will show you. Please. I will show you.'

Ascenian came closer. 'Then do so, Soul Drinker.'

Daenyathos looked up at Ascenian. It was an effort to keep the hate out of his eyes. 'It is the gene-seed that you seek.'

Ascenian raised an eyebrow. 'The gene-seed?'

'Every Astartes carries within him the genetic blueprint of his primarch. That is what regulates our augmentations.' Daenyathos's mind raced. The concoction he was coming up with had to grab Ascenian's attention quickly and completely.

'The Emperor created the primarchs,' began Daenyathos, 'in His own image. But they were not enough to conquer the galaxy on their own. There were twenty primarchs, but two of them the others despised.'

'Good,' said Ascenian, rapt. 'When my story is told, your part shall be greater than most. Go on, Astartes. Go on!'

'The primarchs,' said Daenyathos, 'killed these two, and cut them up into thousands of pieces. Each piece was implanted in a warrior, and it transformed them into the first Space Marines. Whenever one of us falls, our battle-brothers will risk their lives to reclaim the body, for the gene-seed we each carry is the same that was taken from the Emperor's murdered sons.'

Laughable!

Ascenian's face broke open in delight. The panels of skin could barely hold the expression. 'The Emperor's own blood! The flesh of the lost primarchs themselves! This is contained within every Astartes?'

'It is,' said Daenyathos. 'In the progenoid. It is within us all.'

'So... could it be that here, in this creature hanging before me, I could look upon the flesh of the Emperor Himself?'

'The primarchs were born of the Emperor's own flesh,' said Daenyathos. 'They are His brothers as much as His sons.'

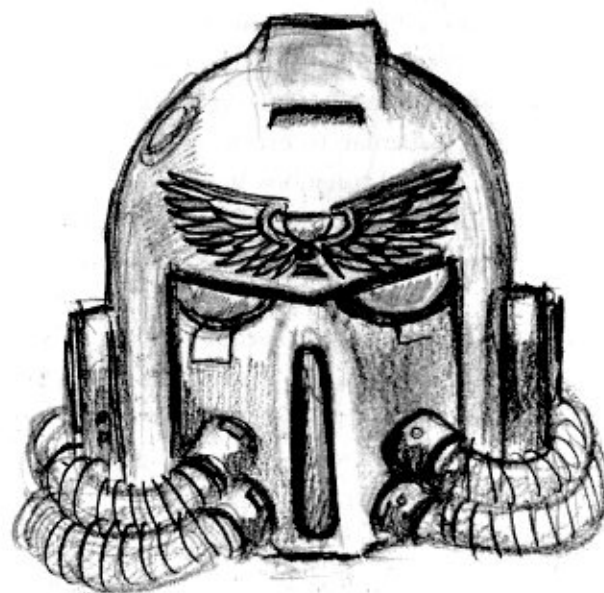
Ascenian peered closer at Daenyathos's many scars, wondering how he had missed this sacred organ. 'Where?' he asked.

Daenyathos was silent a moment too long.

'Where is it?' snapped Ascenian. Impatience was taking him over now.

'In my throat,' said Daenyathos. 'Behind the larynx. Within the spinal column, protected by the vertebrae.'

'Then let us look upon divinity,' said Ascenian, stepping closer to Daenyathos. Delicate implements unfolded from his mechadendrites. Blades, saws, pincers, syringes.



Daenyathos held up his head, exposing his throat.

The first blade touched his throat. The point of pain grew to a line, then slid inside along with the blade. Daenyathos gritted his teeth. This was not pain. This was nothing. This was proof he was still alive. No enemy could inflict true pain on an Astartes. This was what Daenyathos told himself as his throat was peeled open and the air touched the raw muscle of his neck.

Ascenian backed away a little, peering into Daenyathos's throat, two pincers holding the skin apart.

'It is delicate,' whispered Daenyathos, 'and easily damaged.'

Ascenian leaned forwards to get a better look. Past the whitish gristle of larynx, the pillars of Astartes muscle, there was a dark scarlet twist of folded flesh. It was not muscle or bone. It was not part of the wind-pipe or the gullet. It had no place in a human body.

'Wonderful,' said Ascenian softly. 'This is the Emperor's gift to mankind. To see it... to hold it... this is to be as a god...'

Ascenian leaned in a little further.

Daenyathos lunged.

Daenyathos's teeth clamped down on Ascenian's neck, somewhere beneath the mantle of his habit. The chains rattled as his body swung back and forth, but Daenyathos's grip held. Ascenian tried to back away but Daenyathos bit down as hard as an Astartes could, and that was too strong a grip for Ascenian to break.

Daenyathos felt the artificial voice box breaking beneath his teeth. He felt bone grinding and skin tearing. Hot wetness flooded into his mouth, oily and foul-tasting, whatever concoction Ascenian had used to replace his blood.

Perhaps Ascenian didn't need to breathe. Perhaps his throat contained only what he needed to speak. It didn't matter, not really. As long as Daenyathos's duty filled the last moments of his life, then he could truly call himself Astartes.

Blades cut at him. The circular saw blade buried itself in his back. It cut through Daenyathos's spine and he lost all sensation below the chest. His jaw clamped down further, and vertebrae shattered beneath the pressure.





Some of Ascenian was still natural, then. There was still enough left to kill.

Blood spurted as an artery severed. Ascenian fell limp as his spine, too, was cut by a shard of bone or the shearing of vertebrae. Daenyathos shook his head from side to side and tendons tore in Ascenian's neck.

Daenyathos's mouth was full of blood. It choked down his throat and spurted from his nose. He didn't let go. He could hold his breath for longer than Ascenian could survive without blood. Ascenian's neck was human, that much Daenyathos could tell. He had to breathe, he had to receive oxygenated blood to his brain. Quite probably, Ascenian had no other vulnerable spot in the unholy artificiality of his body. But Daenyathos had found what made him human.

Daenyathos held on for a long time. Ascenian stopped moving, but that was no proof he was dead. The false missionary would feign death for an age if it meant he could survive. But Daenyathos could feel no heartbeat. The blood spurting from Ascenian's neck subsided and ceased. Either there was no more blood in Ascenian, or his heart – if he had one – had stopped.

From the way Ascenian's head hung from his mouth, Daenyathos could tell Ascenian's neck was almost completely severed. Only a string of skin and gristle held it on. The sheer volume of blood pooled on the lab floor meant nothing remotely human could still be alive. But still Daenyathos held on, until in exhaustion, hours later, his jaw slackened and Ascenian clattered to the ground.

Ascenian's habit fell open as he landed in the puddle of dark oily blood. Daenyathos saw very little of the original man had remained. Ascenian's chest was a brass-cased machine, all cogs and steam valves. Beneath it were more mechadendrites, these serving Ascenian as legs. Countless medical devices and implements were folded up around his torso, accessible by the mechadendrites sprouting from his back. Only Ascenian's brain and internal organs, the connections between them in his neck, had remained from the man who had once claimed to be a missionary of the Imperial Creed.

And now he was dead. There was no doubt about that. Ascenian was all but beheaded.

Daenyathos could die with this duty done. There were thousands of other duties, of course, that he would not live to see completed. But this one was fulfilled. Ascenian was dead. Daenyathos hung his head, and allowed himself to rest.





## Part 6

481.M36

THE RECLUSIAM OF the Soul Drinkers had, under the Reclusiarch Daenyathos, produced three Chaplains of sufficient loyalty and purpose to be given Daenyathos's trust. Already Daenyathos had attained a rank beyond one that could be bestowed by the mundane workings of the Chapter. He was more than a Reclusiarch, which was in itself second in rank only to the Chapter Master. He had become, instead, the Philosopher-Soldier, the embodiment of the Chapter's spirit, the moral father of everything the Soul Drinkers thought and did. The Chaplains he had taken into his trust had the duty of continuing his legacy – in ensuring the *Catechisms Martial* continued to serve as the exemplar of a Soul Drinker's beliefs, and in continuing to watch over the philosophical foundation of his training.

These three Chaplains were Apollonios, Themiskon, and Aciar. Apollonios had reached the rank of assault-captain before he had withdrawn to the Reclusiam, seeking greater meaning than could be found executing the Emperor's foes at the point of a chainsword. He was, some said, the strongest and most skilled fighter the Chapter had seen in a hundred years, and the acclaim such prowess had brought him was all sacrificed when he took up the studies of a Chaplain.

Themiskon had been a talisman of ill fortune. As a novice, three masters had been slain while he was in attendance to them. To show that superstition could not be the master of Astartes, Themiskon was elevated to a battle-brother in spite of his ill fortune. When he was the

sole survivor of his squad for a second time, he begged for the freedom to do penance for the calamities he was sure he had brought on his battle-brothers. The Reclusiam took him in, and Daenyathos himself turned Themiskon from the harbinger of cruel luck to an icon of redemption, of how even the bleakest fate could not turn an Astartes from the fulfilment of his duties. Themiskon went into battle with his skin pierced by red-hot barbs, the pain reminding him of his past sins, and of the pain that would fall on the Chapter's enemies in an endless revenge against the universe.

Aciair had attended on Daenyathos for a time, and was a rare thing among Astartes – a scholar, a seeker of knowledge. He had served under the Techmarines and undergone the pilgrimage to Mars, but the mysteries of the Chapter's technology had not sated his desire for understanding. Daenyathos had entrusted him with the Reclusiam's archives, and with collating the many commentaries on the *Catechisms Martial* which the Soul Drinkers had penned in the decades since it had been written. He was as skilled and fierce in battle as any Astartes, but his real value to the Chapter was in answering the spiritual questions of the brethren and watching over their minds as the Apothecaries watched over their bodies. Aciair had been granted the

honour of writing Daenyathos's chanson, which would surely serve as an example to every student of the Reclusiam to come.

Themiskon led the squad of Soul Drinkers that penetrated into the depths of the *Talon of Mars* in search of Daenyathos. The Reclusiarch had been lost in the first assault on the space hulk and was assumed captured or incapacitated. None dared believe he could actually have been killed by Ascenian's cowardly, crude array of booby traps. And



true enough, Themiskon found Daenyathos alive beside the body of the heretic Croivas Ascenian.

But Daenyathos was mutilated beyond any hope of repair. His limbs useless, his organs scattered, he had no hope of recovery. He would die of the injuries Ascenian had inflicted, as surely as Ascenian himself was dead. In great sorrow Themiskon took the dying Daenyathos back to the Soul Drinkers fleet, and there laid him in state in the Apothecarion.

It was Apollonios who knelt in vigil at Daenyathos's side. The Apothecaries fought to keep the Reclusiarch alive. Some suggested the Emperor's mercy should be granted to him, but Apollonios angrily refused any such suggestion, even going so far as to say that any Astartes who tried to end the suffering of Daenyathos would have to first best Apollonios in combat. The rage of Apollonios was well known among the battle-brothers, and so Daenyathos was permitted to endure, his vital signs declining with every passing moment.

And it was Aciair who did not give up hope. The task force sent to the *Talon of Mars* returned to the main fleet, and Aciair immediately disappeared into the *Scintillating Death*. He had served his penance on the ghost ship before being accepted into the ranks of the Chaplains, and a few rumoured that he had returned there many times to commune with the angry spirits of the Chapter's fallen. Indeed, Aciair had been there several times, but at the behest of Daenyathos, who had secured a truce with the restless ghosts there and established a base of operations on the *Scintillating Death* that none outside the Reclusiam suspected.

Aciair summoned the other Chaplains to the *Scintillating Death*, and bade them bring Daenyathos with them.

THE SCINTILLATING DEATH had its own cathedral of Rogal Dorn. This was a chapel of war, a monument to violence. The floor was paved with segments of shattered xenos skulls. Spent casings from artillery rounds were welded together to form its pillars. Captured weapons and armour lined the walls in a mosaic of death. In centuries past Soul Drinkers had come here when they believed themselves guilty of some



failure to their Chapter, usually in battle. Beneath the eyes of a thousand skulls lining the ceiling, they stated their desire to die to the bronze statue of Rogal Dorn in his guise as the Emperor's Executioner. They begged their primarch for the strength to die in battle, for an Astartes could not merely throw his life away and had to beg fate for an enemy of sufficient prowess to kill him. Most of the oaths made in the Chapel of War were in private, with no other Astartes ever learning of the death wish. All of them were fulfilled, sometimes quickly, sometimes many years later, for it was a rare Astartes who did not meet death eventually on the battlefield.

Aciar looked up at the statue of his primarch. Rogal Dorn was hooded and carried the obsidian blade that marked him out as the Emperor's Champion.

'Do you think that Dorn would forgive us?' he said.

'There is nothing to forgive,' retorted Apollonios. He had not washed the blood off his armour since the battles on the *Talon of Mars*, and he stank of gun oil and dried gore. 'What need have we to ask forgiveness for doing our duty?'

'Of course,' said Aciar. Aciar's skin and hair were deathly pale, to the extent that anyone seeing him for the first time would assume he was severely ill. His ceremonial armour was the traditional Chaplain's black and the



bones of his skull were tattooed on one half of his face, so from one side he looked dying and from the other he looked dead. 'But did blessed Dorn know of the coming of Daenyathos? Had he foreseen it? Our master is the greatest to have worn the armour of a Soul Drinker, and I would say no other who carries Dorn's blood could exceed him. Did Dorn know it would come to this? Or were the primarchs themselves at the mercy of fate, merely hoping that one day the warrior-philosopher would arise?'

'You think too much, brother,' said Themiskon. Unlike Apollonios, Themiskon did not wear the armour he had fought in on the *Talon of Mars*. Instead, he wore the plain black armour he favoured, covered in a heavy brown habit stained with the blood he shed daily in his many penances. 'Ours is not to ask of the stars. Ours is to serve.'

Themiskon wheeled the surgery slab down the aisle of the Chapel of War. On the slab was strapped the body of Daenyathos with a wealth of monitors and Apothecarion machines hooked up to the organs in his chest. His ribcage was open, the innards protected by a thin sheet of transparent gauze. Replacement organs had been grafted in, but none believed they could hold out for long.

'You have not told us, Aciar,' said Apollonios, 'why he had to be brought here.'

'Because Daenyathos is not going to die,' replied Aciar.

Aciar took a device from one of the ammunition pouches at his waist. It was a small rectangle of black metal, covered in controls. Aciar activated a couple of the controls.

From behind the statue of Dorn came the sound of a growling engine, and pistons slamming home. The floor shuddered under a huge footfall.

'When the *Scintillating Death* was lost,' said Aciar over the sound, 'the relics on board were lost, too, some of them now forgotten. One of them I found, in an obscure history of the Chapter, and I returned here to find it. I was successful.'

A shape lumbered into the half-light of the chapel. It was the size of a tank, but it walked on two squat legs that left deep footprints in the floor. Its square body was decorated with the golden chalice symbol of the Soul Drinkers, and covered in purity seals and prayers illuminated

on parchment. One blocky shoulder ended in a huge power fist, four slabs of plasteel arranged around a barrel-shaped fist. The other was a launcher with dozens of missiles racked. The machine shuddered with the growl of its power plant.

'Throne of Terra,' said Themiskon. 'By the Skies of Mars. A Dreadnought.'

'The only one the Chapter possesses,' said Aciar. 'And none but we know of it. It was thought lost with the brethren on the *Scintillating Death*, but it survived. Now it is ours.'

Themiskon walked up to the Dreadnought and placed a hand against its armoured hull in reverence. 'We must waste no time,' he said.

Apollonios and Aciar hauled open the sarcophagus of the Dreadnought, revealing the interior of its torso. A bewildering tangle of tubes and wires was revealed, surrounding a chair large enough for an Astartes torso. Several dozen probes and syringes lined the seat.

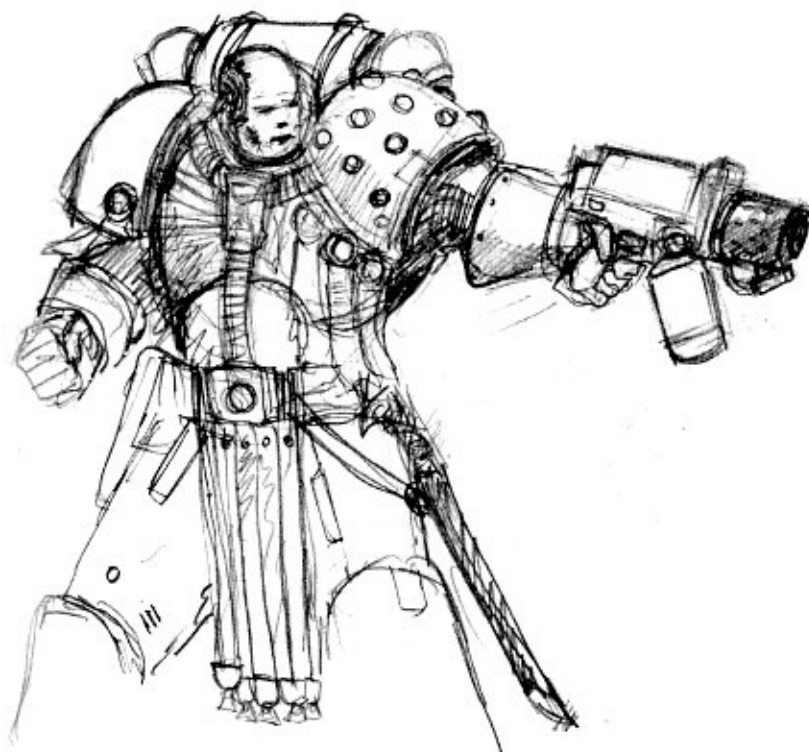
Themiskon carried Daenyathos carefully to the Dreadnought and placed him in the seat. Themiskon had, for a time, studied in the Chapter Apothecarion, hoping his much-lamented ill luck would not find him so far from the battlefield. The experiment had not proved fruitful, but the knowledge he had gained served him well in hooking up the Dreadnought's probes and control wiring to the interfaces of Daenyathos's body. Much of the black carapace implanted over Daenyathos's ribs had been destroyed by Ascenian, but the Apothecaries had fashioned replacements for the sockets and readouts that had been lost.

The other two Chaplains watched in silence. Daenyathos was, to all appearances, dead. His eyes had not opened and the probes inserted in his skin did not cause him to bleed. Faith alone told them the man they placed in the Dreadnought was something more than a corpse.

THE RITES AND operations involved in interring a Space Marine in a Dreadnought were long and complex. For three days, Themiskon worked, the other Chaplains shuttling occasionally back and forth between the *Scintillating Death* and the rest of the fleet to fetch supplies from the Apothecarion or incense and sacred writings from the Recluisiam. When he was finished, Daenyathos was barely visible among the



See? How can his word be trusted when he can't even keep straight the number of Dreadnoughts his chapter possesses?



wiring and tubes. His face was completely obscured by the breathing mask and the mass of electronics covering his eyes.

Themiskon hauled the sarcophagus closed. The sound rang around the chapel like the note of a distant cathedral bell.

'We should pray,' he said.

The three Chaplains knelt and silently ran through the prayers they had memorised from the *Catechisms Martial*. In this state they forgot time and place. They could have been anywhere, or everywhere, their minds contemplating the great truths Daenyathos had passed down to them. Their duties. The meanings of their existence. The great plan of which they were a part. It was a purifying prayer, a prayer that let them drift away from the shackles of humanity and comprehend what they truly were.

Their trains of thought were broken by a change in the engine note of the Dreadnought. Lights flickered somewhere inside it. The power

fist flexed and the sarcophagus swivelled on its mountings, as if looking around to see where it had found itself.

'I live,' came a growling, artificial voice from the vox-casters mounted on its upper hull. 'I see. I see my brothers.'

The three Chaplains stayed kneeling. Their prayers had been answered.

'Lord Reclusiarch,' said Themiskon. 'Speak unto us of your wishes. What must we do? How must we serve?'

'I have known this time would come,' said Daenyathos. 'Take me to the Chamber of Arms.'

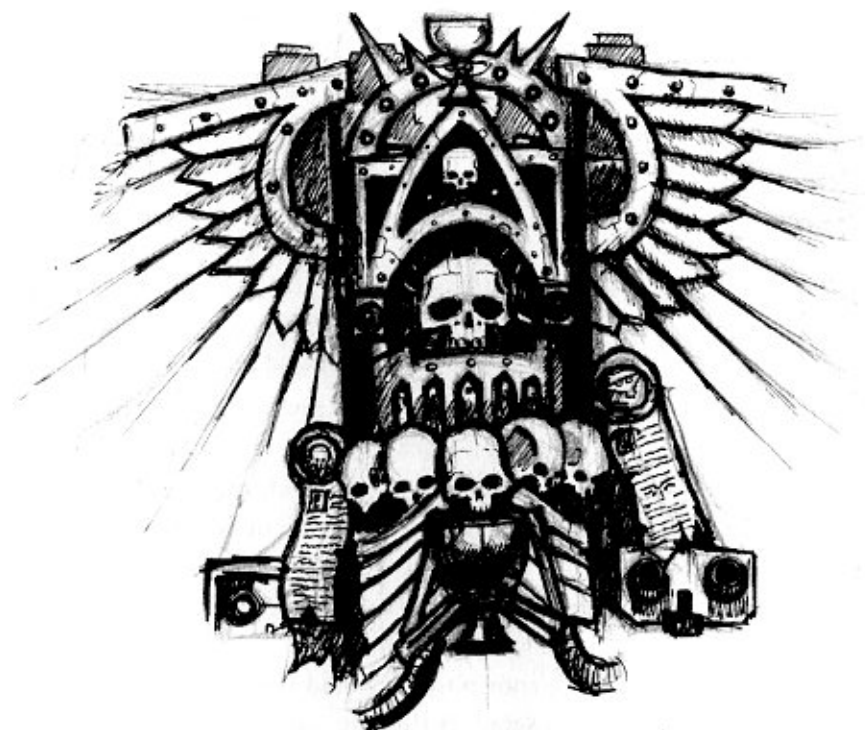
THE CHAPLAINS LED Daenyathos down through the decks of the *Scintillating Death*. The Chapter's ghosts watched them with suspicion, for they still did not trust the living even though Aciar had made truce with them. Daenyathos's movements were slow and uncertain, as he learned to control his new mechanical body. Themiskon spoke quiet prayers of protection as they passed through the ancient corridors and mustering-decks of the ship, the places where generations of Soul Drinkers long dead had trained and studied the ways of war.

The Chamber of Arms was where some of the Chapter's relics had once been kept. Many of them had been salvaged after the disaster that had befallen the *Scintillating Death*. A few had been lost forever to the warp, the subjects of ancient oaths recorded in the Chapter histories. They had been kept in banks of safes, each one the size of a mortuary drawer, inscribed with the history of the weapon or piece of armour inside. The safes took up one wall of the Chamber of Arms, behind the armour and weapon racks and the duelling circles where Soul Drinkers of generations past had practised with their chosen arms.

Daenyathos's Dreadnought body stomped towards the safes. He indicated one with a finger of his power fist.

'Open it,' he said, and the amplified words echoed off the distant walls of the chamber.

Apollonios hauled open the safe door.



An awful stench rolled out. Human ordure, sweat and vomit. It was the smell of something alive, which was why it had no place on the *Scintillating Death*.

'Take him out,' said Daenyathos.

Apollonios pulled out the drawer. On it lay a human body, tied down with leather restraints. Tubes ran down its throat and into its veins in an echo of the machinery now keeping Daenyathos alive inside the Dreadnought. It was a man, his skin mottled with purple-blue veins against the waxy skin. Some of the machinery was from the Chapter Apothecarion, designed to keep a severely wounded Astartes alive, and there was no saying how long the man had been alive in there.

'Let him speak,' said Daenyathos.

Themiskon removed the air tube gagging the man, and peeled the bandages from his eyes. He altered some controls on the medicae console hooked up to the man's body, and the device hissed as it sent a cocktail of drugs into his veins.



The man convulsed, his body bowing as his spine bent backwards. A long, blood-flecked breath rattled out of him. His eyes opened, and even in the dim light of the *Scintillating Death* he squinted in pain.

He thrashed about in a sudden panic, but the restraints held him firm. Blood flowed as probes were torn out of his skin. After a few moments he seemed to remember he could not escape, and he sank back down again, resigned.

His eyes turned and focused on Daenyathos. His expression did not change, but his vision was fixed on the monster standing over him.

'Greetings, Fidelion,' the monster said. 'I am Daenyathos.'

Fidelion closed his eyes and lay back, as if trying to force himself into sleep so this could be proven nothing more than a dream. The Imperial Guard tattoos were still visible on his chest, faded blueish outlines of a double-headed eagle and a long tally of kill-marks.

'How...' croaked Fidelion. 'How old?' His voice was barely audible.

'You are one hundred and ninety-eight years old,' said Daenyathos.

Fidelion sighed. 'Why have you woken me?'

'It is time for you to serve your purpose,' said Daenyathos.

'My lord Reclusiarch,' said Aciar. 'Is this the same man you wrote of? Fidelion, the hero of Terra?'

'It is,' said Daenyathos. 'There is much that has not been written in the *Catechisms Martial*. Much that I must pass on to you. It was on Terra I first came to understand the purpose to which I must devote myself, and with me, the Soul Drinkers Chapter. It is this purpose that you will in turn fulfil, and the Chapter with you, hidden from the battle-brothers until the time is right for it to be revealed. I have a plan, my brothers, for the galaxy. Everything I have seen as an Astartes has convinced me of its rightness. Now I have seen how close death has come to me, I must place this burden on you, my brethren, and retire from this age of the Imperium until your future brothers come to find me.'

'What will you have us do?' asked Themiskon.

'First,' said Daenyathos, 'I must know for sure that my purpose is true. Fidelion, I have kept you here so that when the final details of my task are determined, I can be sure they will fulfil my purpose. Listen, Fidelion, hero of Terra.'



Fidelion did not show fear. Rather, he seemed accepting of whatever fate was about to befall him.

Daenyathos explained, at great length and intricate detail, just what he planned to do with the Soul Drinkers Chapter. He described the means he would use to manipulate the Chapter, and how the *Catechisms Martial* had planted in the minds of his battle-brothers a desire to break from Imperial authority that would lead to them reneging from the Imperium. Perhaps it would happen in a hundred years, perhaps thousands, but it would happen. He explained how the Chaplains would guide this renegade Chapter subtly towards the fulfilment of their purpose, which could only be achieved if the Soul Drinkers were seen as the enemies of the Imperium.

He explained what they would do, in desperation and fear. He explained about Terra.



*Their damnation is assured.*

When Daenyathos was finished, Fidelion slumped off the slab on which he lay and sprawled pathetically on the cold floor. He wept, covering his face with his hands and sobbing heedless of the three Astartes and the Dreadnought watching him.

'Kill me,' he gasped. 'Let me die, so I will not see this come to pass. I have done what you wanted. I have played my part. Let me die.'

Apollonios fulfilled his wish. He broke Fidelion's neck, a simple twist of his gauntleted hand snapping his spine and ending the life of a man as brave as a mere human being could be. Fidelion had wasted away during the decades he had spent imprisoned, and his body was light and frail. Themiskon said a prayer for him, and cast him out of one of the *Scintillating Death's* airlocks.

DAENYATHOS WATCHED FIDELION'S body with the electronic eyes of his new body. It drifted away into the void until it was a point of light indistinguishable from the stars. Then, it was gone.

'I came so close to death at Ascenian's hands,' said Daenyathos. 'Never again shall I let the fulfilment of my duty rely on my own survival. Even an Astartes is stalked by death at every turn. The Chapter must take over now. You three shall found a tradition in the Chapter Reclusiam, into which shall be brought the Chaplains you will train.'

'You are sure that it will work?' said Apollonios. 'That what you plan will have the result you anticipate?'

'Of course it will work.' It was Aciar who replied in Daenyathos's stead. 'It is through the suffering of the Imperium that its people will be saved. That suffering is our true purpose. Think on it, brother. Think of everything you have read in the *Catechisms Martial*. Does it not all point in that direction? Does not everything in it make a perfect sense, seen through that lens?'

'It does, brother,' said Apollonios. 'It does.'

'I must leave you now,' said Daenyathos. 'The Chapter must come to think the lessons of the *Catechisms Martial* come not from me, but from within themselves. The world of Selaaca, in the Veiled Region, was visited by the Chapter in ages past. None now recall it, and during

my time as Reclusiarch I have removed all reference to it from the Chapter archives. I will be safe there. Leave clues so the Chaplains who follow can find me.'

'We can take you there,' said Themiskon. 'I shall claim to accept responsibility for your death, and that some failure of mine led to your loss on the *Talon of Mars*. I shall go on a pilgrimage, seeking forgiveness and redemption. It will be within my character to do such a thing, for I have laboured long under the sins that fate has cast upon me. I shall bring you with me, and go to Selaaca.'

'Then we shall remain with the fleet,' said Aciar, 'to continue your work.'

'It shall be our greatest honour,' said Apollonios. 'There can be no duty so grave as that which you place on us now.'

'Feel not its weight,' said Daenyathos. 'There is no eventuality that can turn this Chapter from the course I have laid. There can be no failure when Astartes are the instruments of my will. Brothers, rejoice, for we have already won.'

THE THREE CHAPLAINS returned to the Soul Drinkers fleet, and at a great gathering of the Chapter on the *Glory*, they told their battle-brothers that the warrior-philosopher Daenyathos had finally lost his grip on life.

*The Chapter are currently en route to Selaaca to retrieve Daenyathos so that he may stand trial alongside his fallen brethren.*



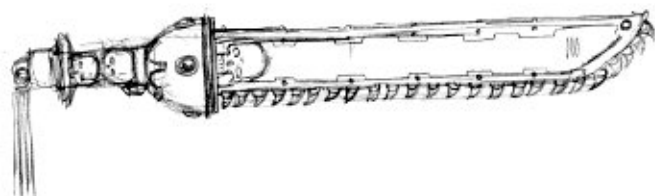
The mourning took several months. Chaplain Themiskon left to atone for his failures. Apollonios and Aciar told the Soul Drinkers to turn their grieving into hatred for all the enemies who still stood before them. A million Ascenians still lived, they said, heretics who begged for the bite of the chainblade or the sting of the bolter. Daenyathos passed into legend, even those who had fought alongside him seeing him not as an Astartes but as an idea, an exemplar.

Eventually, there was no one left in the Chapter who had served when Daenyathos still lived. Daenyathos ceased to be a figure of the Chapter's history and became a spiritual ancestor, akin to Rogal Dorn and even the Emperor Himself. His spirit, it was said, had never died, for it lived in the soul of every Astartes who read the *Catechisms Martial* and treated it, as every Soul Drinker did, as a sacred text. The way they fought, the way they prayed, every thought, was in some way shaped by this legend of the Chapter.

Daenyathos the man was forgotten, to be replaced by Daenyathos the idea.

And Daenyathos the warrior-philosopher passed from that age of the Imperium.

*Never!!*



#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

The Soul Drinkers series contributed to **Ben Counter** becoming one of the Black Library's most popular authors. An Ancient History graduate and avid miniature painter, he lives near Portsmouth, England.