

DEATHWING

By William King

CHAPTER I

Cloud Runner gazed on the wreckage of his home and felt like weeping. He closed his eyes and took three breaths, but when he looked again nothing had changed. He turned back towards the dropship Deathwing. Weasel-Fierce had just descended from the ramp. He gazed round ferally at what once had been Cloud Runner's village and brought his storm Bolter into attack position. A grin split his skull-White face. "Dark Angels, be wary. Death has walked here," he said. The sun glistened off Weasel-Fierce's black Terminator armour. With his white hair and y-shaped scar-tattoos, he looked like the Eater of Bones come back to claim the world.



Cloud Runner shook his head in disbelief. For two hundred years he had held the memory of this place in his mind. Although the Chapter was his home and the Battle Brothers were his family, he had always felt his spirit would return here when the Emperor granted him rest. He glanced in the direction of the burial mounds. They had been broken open. He made his way to the entrance. He could see that the bones had been broken and mangled. It was a blasphemy that only the bitterest of foes would perform. It marked the ending of his clan. "The ghosts of my ancestors wander homeless," he said. "They will become drinkers of blood and eaters of excrement. My clan is dishonoured." He felt a heavy, gauntleted hand on his shoulder and turned to see Lame Bear gazing down on him. Two centuries ago Cloud Runner and he had belonged to enemy clans. Now the clansmen

who they had fought alongside were dead, and the old rivalry had long ago become fast friendship.

"The Dark Angels are your people now," said Lame Bear in his soft voice. "If necessary we will avenge this dishonour" Cloud Runner shook his head. "That is not the Way. The Warriors From The Sky are above the squabblings of the clans. We choose only the bravest of the mains People. We take no sides." "Your words do honour to the Chapter. Brother Captain," said Lame Bear, stooping to pick up something that lay in the grass. Cloud Runner saw that it was a metal axe-head. Sorrow warred with curiosity and won. "This was not the homecoming I had imagined." Cloud Runner said softly. "Where are children gathering flowers for the Autumn Feast? Where are the young bucks racing out to count coup on our armour? Where are the spirit-talkers who wish to commune with us? Dead. All dead." Lame Bear limped away leaving Cloud Runner alone with his grief.

Two Heads Talking studied the desiccated bodies within the lodge. One had been an old warrior. His shrivelled hand still clutched a stone axe inscribed with the thunderbird rune. The other had been a squaw. Between her skeletal fingers was the neck of an infant. "She strangled the child rather than let her fall into the hands of the enemy," said Bloody Moon. The Librarian noticed the undercurrent of horror in the Marine's voice. He took a deep breath, trying to ignore the musty stench that filled the long house.

"Something evil happened here, but it happened decades ago," Two Heads Talking replied seeking to relieve Bloody Moon's superstitious fear. He wanted time to consider, to probe the events of the past. The aura of old terror almost smothered him. Shadows lay over this lodge. Something was ominously familiar about the psychic aura of the area.

"Lord Shaman... " said Bloody Moon. The Librarian almost smiled, the habits of the; ancient former lives had returned in strength now that they once more walked the soil of their homeworld. "Brother Librarian is my title, Bloody Moon. You are no longer my honour guard. We are both

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Marines." "Lord - Brother Shaman," Bloody Moon continued. "No warriors of the Plains would have wrought such havoc. Do you think...?"

"We shall have to investigate, old friend. We must visit the other lodgetowns and speak with their chieftains. If someone has returned to the customs of the Reaving Time, we will put an end to it."

It was rumoured that some of the Hill Clans still kept to the old daemon-worshipping practices from the time before the Emperor's people came. If that were true, it was up to the Marines to take action.

Somehow Two Heads Talking did not think it would come to that. This did not have the feel of demon worshippers, although there was a taint in the air that was akin to it. An almost recognisable horror clawed at his mind. He fought it down and hoped that his suspicions were not true.

The city reared above the plain like a soot-grimed leviathan. Cloud Runner spotted it before the others and ordered Lane Bear to land the dropship in a valley, out of sight of its walls. From the brow of the hill, he studied it through magnoculars. It was an ugly place that reminded him of the hiveworlds he had visited. It covered many miles and was enclosed by monolithic walls. Great smokestacks loomed in the distance, belching acrid chemical clouds into the greyish sky.

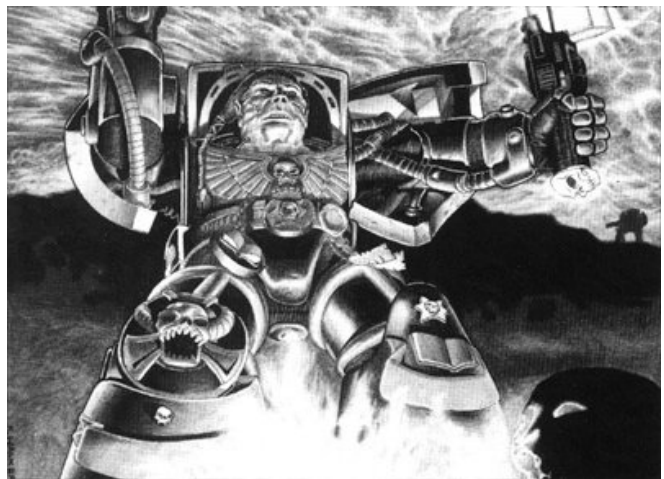
Outside the walls, the river ran black with poisons. As Cloud Runner watched, he saw herd elk being driven squealing from barges toward great abattoirs within the walls. From huge stone barracks, people swarmed through the streets towards enormous, brick factories. Smog drifted everywhere, occasionally obscuring the grimy city and its teeming inhabitants. "That is where Lane Bear's metal axe came from." Said Two Heads Talking, lowering himself to the ground beside Cloud Runner. "I wonder who built it?"

"It's a nightmare," murmured Cloud Runner. "We return home to find our lodges ravaged and this ... abomination in its place." "That city must hold all the clans of all the peoples of the Plains and ten times more besides. Could our folk have been enslaved and taken there, Brother Captain?" Cloud Runner remained silent, considering. "If they have been, then we will go down with flamer and storm bolter and free them." "We must know more before we act. We could be outnumbered and trapped," replied the Shaman. "I say we go in with weapons armed," said Weasel-Fierce from behind them. "If we find foes, we burn them." "Suppose they think the same? The soot and filth give the place an

Orkish look." said Lane Bear. He had been scouting further along the crest. "No Ork ever put stone on stone like that." countered Two Heads Talking. "That is human workmanship." "It is not the work of the People." said Cloud Runner. "Those barracks are a hundred times the size of a lodgehouse and built of brick." "There is only one way to find out anything." said Two Heads Talking. "One of us must visit the city."

The warriors nodded assent. Each tapped a scar-tattoo to indicate that he volunteered. Two Heads Talking shook his head. "I must go. The spirits will shield me." Cloud Runner saw the rest of the warriors look at him to see what his decision would be. As Captain, he could overrule the Librarian. He looked at the city, then at the Shaman standing quiet and proud before him. A sensation of emptiness, of futility came over him. His people, his village had gone.

"As you wish, Lord Shaman. Speak to the spirits and seek their aid." he said, giving the ancient ritual answer. "Bloody Moon's squad will remain here to watch over you. The rest of us will take Deathwing and seek out any surviving lodgetowns."



Night fell as Two Heads Talking completed his preparations. He laid the four rune etched skulls of his predecessors on the ground about him. Each faced one of the cardinal points of the compass and watched over an approach from the spirit realm.

He lit a small bonfire in the deep hollow, cast a handful of herbs on the fire and breathed in deeply. He touched the ceremonial winged skull on his chest-piece and then the death's head inlaid on his belt. Lastly, he prayed to the Emperor, tamer of thunderbirds and beacon of the soul path, to watch

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over him as he made magic. Then he began to chant.

The fumes from the herbs filled his lungs. He seemed to rise above his body and look down upon it. The other Terminators backed away from the spirit circle. A chill stole over him, and life leeched away until he was close to the edge of death. Great sobs wracked his body, but he mastered himself and continued with the ritual.

He stood in a cold shadowy place. He sensed chill white presences at the edge of his perception, clammy as mist and cold as the gravemound. Above him he could hear the beating of mighty pinions from where Deathwing, the Emperor's steed and bearer of the souls of the slain, hovered.

The Shaman talked with the presences, made pacts that bound them to his service and rewarded them with a portion of his strength. He sensed the hungry spirits surge around him, ready to shield him from sight, to cloud the eyes of any who might look upon him, causing them to see only a friendly being.

He walked from the circle, past the watching Marines. As he crested the brow of the hill, he saw the distant city. Even at night, its fires burned, lighting the sky and turning the metropolis into a giant shadow cast upon the land.

Above them, through the gloom, loomed the Mountains of Storm. Cloud Runner wondered how Lame Bear was taking it. The big man's face was a blank mask. He was not allowing himself to think about what might have happened to his people.

The Hunting Bear village was the last they had visited: the most remote, built in caves beneath Cloud-Girt Peak. Lame Bear limped up the narrow pathway in the cliff-face.

Cloud Runner tried not to think of the other lodgetowns they had seen. They had found nothing but desolation and desecrated graves. No living soul except the Marines walked among the fallen totems. They had buried the bodies they had found and offered prayers to the Emperor for the safety of their slain kin.

Cloud Runner could see Weasel-Fierce pause. The gaunt man's hand played with the feathered hilt of his ceremonial dagger. He studied the ledges above the paths and seemed to sniff the air.

"No sentries," he said. "As a buck, I raided these mountains. The Hunting Bear always had the

keenest watchers. If anyone was alive, we would have been challenged by now."

"No!" Lame Bear shouted and ran across the lodgetown's threshold and into the caverns. "Squad Paulo, overwatch!" Cloud Runner ordered. Five Terminators froze in position, guarding the entrance.

"The rest of you, follow me. Helmets on. Keep your eyes peeled. Weasel-Fierce, establish a fix on Lame Bear. Don't lose him."

Night-lights cut in as they entered the cave mouth. Dozens of tunnels led from the place. Chittering things flapped away from their lights. For a moment, Cloud Runner allowed himself to feel hopeful. If they were to find any survivors of the Plains People, it would be here. In this huge night-black maze Lame Bear's people could have hidden out for years, dodging any pursuit.

As they followed Lame Bear's locator signal through the warren of tunnels, despair filled Cloud Runner. They passed hallways where the dead lay. Sometimes the bodies were marred by the mark of spear and axe; sometimes they were crushed and mangled by inhuman force. Some had been ripped asunder. Cloud Runner had seen bodies butchered like that before but told himself that it was not possible here. Such a thing could not happen on his homeworld - in vast hulks that lay cold in space, perhaps, but not here.





They found Lame Bear standing in the largest cave of all. Bones littered the floor. Scuttlers fled from their lights. Lame Bear sobbed and pointed to the walls. Paintings dating from the earliest times covered the caveside, but it was the last and highest-situated representation that drew Cloud Runner's attention. There was no mistaking the four-armed, malevolent form. Hatred and fear chased each other through his mind.

"Genestealers," he spat. Behind him, Lame Bear moaned. Weasel Fierce gave his short, barking laugh. The sound chilled Cloud Runner to the bone.

Two Heads Talking stalked past the city's open gates. The stench assailed his nostrils. His concentration faltered, and he could feel the spirits struggling to escape. He exerted his iron will, and the spell of protection fell into place.

Studying his surroundings, he realised that he had no need to worry. There were no guards, only a toll-house where a pasty faced clerk sat, ticking off accounts. In its own way this was ominous: the city's builders obviously did not feel threatened enough to post sentries.

Two Heads Talking studied the scribe. He sat at a little window, poring over a ledger. In his hand was a quill pen. He was writing by the light of a small lantern. Momentarily, he seemed to sense the Librarian's presence and looked up. He had the high cheek-bones and ruddy skin of the Plains People, but there the resemblance ended.

His limbs seemed stunted and weak. His features had an unhealthy pallor. He gave a hacking cough and returned to his work. His face showed no sign of manhood scars. His clothes were made of some coarse-woven cloth, not elk leather. No weapon sat near at hand, and he showed no resentment at being cooped up in the tiny office rather than being under the open sky. Two Heads Talking found it hard to believe that this was a descendant of his warrior culture.

He pushed on into the city, picking his way fastidiously through the narrow, dirty streets that ran between the enormous buildings. The place was laid out with no rhyme or reason. Vast squares lay between the great factories, but there was no apparent pattern. The city had grown uncontrolled, like a cancer.

There were no sewers, and the roads were full of filth. The smell of human waste mingled with the odour of frying food and the sharp tang of cheap alcohol. Low shadowy doors of inns and food booths rimmed each square.

Unwashed children scuttled everywhere. Now and again, huge, well-fed men in long, blue coats pushed their way through the throng. They had facial scar-tattoos and they walked with an air of swaggering pride. If anyone got in their way, they lashed out at them with wooden batons. To Two Heads Talking's surprise, no-one hit back. They seemed too weak-spirited to fight.

As he wandered, the Librarian noticed something even more horrible. All the members of the crowd, except the urchins and the bluecoats, were maimed. Men and women both had mangled limbs or scorched faces. Some hobbled on wooden crutches, swinging the stumps of legs before them. Others were blind and were led about by children. A dwarf with no legs waddled past, using his arms for motion, walking on the palms of his hands. They all seemed to be the accidental victims of some huge, industrial process.

In the darkness, by the light dancing from the hellish chimneys, they moved like shadows, scrabbling about crying for alms, for succour, for deliverance. They called on the Heavenly Father, the four-armed Emperor, to save them. They cursed and raved and pleaded under a polluted sky. Two Heads Talking watched the poor steal from the poor and wondered how his people had come to be laid so low.

He remembered the tall, strong warriors who had dwelled in the lodgetowns and asked nothing of any man. What malign magic could have transformed the People of the Plains into these pathetic creatures?

He felt the shock as a child tugged at his arm. "Tokens, Elder. Tokens for food."

Two Heads Talking sighed with relief. His spell still held. The child saw only a safe, unobtrusive figure. He could feel the strain of binding the spirits gnawing away at him subconsciously, but they had not yet slipped his grasp.

"I have nothing for you, boy," he said. The urchin ran off mouthing obscenities.

Depressed and angry, the Marines left the cave village. Cloud Runner noticed that Lame Bear's face was white. He gestured for the big man and Weasel-Fierce to follow him. The two squad leaders fell in beside him. They marched up to a great spur of rock and looked down into a long valley.

"Stealers," he said. "We must inform the Imperium."



Weasel-fierce spat over the edge of the cliff.

"The dark city is theirs," said Lame Bear. There was a depth of hatred in his quiet voice that Cloud Runner understood. "They must have conquered the People and herded them within."

"Some clans resisted," Cloud Runner said. He was proud of that. The fact that his clan had chosen to continue a hopeless struggle rather than surrender gave him some comfort.

"Our world is ended; our time is done," said Weasel-Fierce. His words tolled like great, sad bells within Cloud Runner's skull. Weasel-Fierce was right. Their entire culture had been exterminated.

The only ones who could remember the world of the Plains People were the Marines of the Dark Angels. When they died the clans would live only in the Chapter Fleet's records. Unless the Dark Angels broke with tradition and recruited from other worlds, the Chapter would end with the death of the present generation of Marines.

Cloud Runner felt hollow. He had returned home with such high hopes. He was going to walk once more among his people, see again his village before old age took him. Now he found his world was dead, had been for a long time.

"And we never knew," he said softly. "Our clans have been dead for years, and we never knew. It was a cursed day when we rode the Deathwing back to our homeworld."

The squad leaders stood silent. The moon broke through the clouds. Below them, in the valley, they saw the faded outline of a giant winged skull cut into the earth.

"What is that?" asked Weasel-Fierce. "It was not here when last I stalked in the valley."

Lame Bear gave him an odd look. Cloud Runner knew that his old friend had never pictured the brave of an enemy clan walking in his people's sacred valley. Even after a century, the taciturn, skeletal man could still surprise them.

"It was where our spirit talkers made magic," answered Lame Bear.

"They must have tried to summon Deathwing, the bearer of the Warriors from the Sky. They must have been desperate to attempt such a summons. They trusted us to protect them. We never came."

Cloud Runner heard Weasel-Fierce growl. "We will avenge them," he said.

Lame Bear nodded agreement. "We will go in and scour the city."

"We number only thirty, against possibly an entire city of Stealers. The Codex is quite clear on situations like this. We should virus bomb the planet from orbit," Cloud Runner said, listening to the silence settle. Lame Bear and Weasel-Fierce looked at him, appalled.

"But what of our people? They may still survive," Lame Bear said, like a man without much hope. "We must at least consider that possibility before we cleanse our homeworld of life."

Weasel-Fierce had gone pale. Cloud Runner had never seen him look so dismayed.

"I cannot do it," he said softly. "Can you, Brother Captain? Can you give the order that will destroy our world - and our people - forever?"

Cloud Runner felt the weight of terrible responsibility settle on him. His duty was clear. Here on this world was a great threat to the Imperium. His word would condemn his entire people to oblivion. He tried not to consider that Lame Bear might be right, that the People might not yet be totally enslaved by the Genestealers. But the thought nagged at him most of all because he hoped it was true. He stood frozen for a moment, paralysed by the enormity of the decision.

"The choice is not yours alone, Cloud Runner," said Weasel-Fierce. "It is a matter for all the warriors of the People."

Cloud Runner looked into his burning eyes. Weasel-Fierce had invoked the ancient ritual; by rights, it should be answered. The Terminator Captain looked at Lame Bear. The giant's face was grim.

Cloud Runner nodded. "There must be a Gathering," he said.



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CHAPTER II

Two Heads Talking saw a commotion break out across the square. A squad of bluecoats forced the maimed beggars to one side. People were crushed underfoot as they pushed through the throng like a blade through flesh.

The Librarian dropped back toward the entrance of a tavern. A surly bravo with fresh-scarred cheeks came too close. He raised his truncheon to strike Two Heads Talking, obviously perceiving him as one of the throng. It bounced off the carapace of his Terminator armour. The bluecoat squinted in astonishment at him, and then backed away.

A palanquin borne by two squat, shaven-headed men in brown uniforms moved through the path cleared by the bully-boys. Two Heads Talking looked at the sign of a four-armed man on its side and a thrill of fear passed through him. His worst suspicions were justified.

"Alms; Elder, give us alms." the crowd pleaded, voices merging into one mighty roar. Many had abased themselves and kneeled, stumps and grasping hands outstretched in supplication towards the palanquin.

A curtain in its side was pulled back, and a short, fat man stepped out. His pale skin had a bluish tint, and he was wearing a rich suit of black cloth, a white waistcoat and high, black leather boots. A four-armed pendant dangled from a chain hanging around his neck. His head was totally hairless, and he had piercing black eyes. He gazed out at the crowd and smiled gloatingly, great jowls rippling backward to give him a dozen small chins.

He reached down and found a purse. The crowd held its breath expectantly. For a second, his gaze fell on the Librarian, and he looked puzzled. A frown crossed his face. Two Heads Talking felt a tug on his leg and fell to one knee, although it went against the grain to kneel to anything except the image of the Emperor. He felt that malign glance linger upon him and wondered whether the fat man had somehow penetrated his bound spirits' disguise

All the squads gathered around the fire. The great logs smouldered in the dark, underlighting the faces of the Marines, making them look daemonic. Behind them, Deathwing sat on its landing claws, a bulwark against the darkness. He knew that beyond

it lay the city of their enemy, where dwelled abomination.



Nearest the fires squatted the squad leaders, faces impassive. Behind them were their men, in full battle regalia, storm bolters and flamers near at hand. Firelight glittered on the winged swords painted on their shoulder pieces. Their garb was Imperial, but the scarred faces that showed in the firelight belonged to the Plains People.

He had known these men for so long that not even Two Heads Talking could have done a better job of reading their mood. In each stern visage, he saw a thirst for vengeance and a desire for death. The warriors wished to join their clansmen in the spirit realm. Cloud Runner, too, felt the tug of his ancestral spirits, their clamour to be avenged. He tried to ignore their voices. He was a soldier of the Emperor. He had other duties than to his people.

"We must fight," said Weasel-Fierce. "The dead demand it. Our clans need to be avenged. If any of our people survive, they must be liberated. Our honour must be reclaimed."

"There are many kinds of honour," responded Bloody Moon. "We honour the Emperor. Our Terminator suits are the badge of that honour. They are signs of the honour our Chapter does us. Can we risk losing all traces of our Chapter's ancient heritage to the Stealers?"

"For a hundred centuries, the armour we wear has borne Marines safely through battle. The suits will not fail us now," replied Weasel-Fierce hotly. "We can only add to their honour by slaughtering our foe."

"Brother Marius. Brother Paulo, pray, silence." Cloud Runner said, invoking formality by the use of Chapter ritual and calling Weasel-Fierce and

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Bloody Moon by the names they had taken on when they had become Marines. The two Terminators bowed their heads, acknowledging the gravity of the moment.

"Forgive us. Brother Captain, and name penance. We are at your service. Semper fideles." they replied.

"No penance is necessary." Cloud Runner looked around the fire. All eyes were upon him. He weighed his words carefully before he spoke again.

"We are gathered tonight, not as soldiers of the Emperor, but by ancient custom, as warriors of the People. To this, I give my blessing as Captain and War chief. We are here as speakers for our clans, joined in brotherhood so that we might speak with one voice, think as one mind and discern the correct path for all our peoples."

Cloud Runner knew his words rang false. Those present were not speakers for their clans. They were their clans - all that was left. Still, the ritual had been invoked and must be kept to.

"Within this circle there will be no violence. Till the ending of this gathering, we will be as one clan."

It was strange to speak those words to warriors who had fought together in a thousand battles under a hundred suns. Yet it was the ancient rite of meeting, meant to ensure peaceful discourse among the warriors of rival tribes. He saw some Marines nod.

Suddenly, it felt right. The ways of their people had been born on this world, and while they were here, they would keep to them. In this time and space, they were bound by the ties of their common heritage. Each needed the reassurance after the trials of the day.

"We must speak concerning the fate of our world and our honour as warriors. This is a matter of life and death. Let us speak honestly, according to the manner of our people."

The Elder fondled his chain of office and continued to stare at Two Heads Talking. A frown creased his high, bulbous forehead. Abruptly, he looked away and fumbled in his purse.

A ragged cheer went up from the crowd as he threw handfuls of gleaming iron tokens out to them, then withdrew into his palanquin to witness the scramble. The Marine watched people grovel in the dust, scrambling for coins. He shook his head in

disgust as he entered the tavern. Even the most debased hive world dweller would have shown more dignity than the rabble outside.

The place was nearly empty. Two Heads Talking looked around at the packed earth floor and the crudely made tables over which slouched a few ragged, unwashed drunks. The walls were covered in rough hangings which repeated a stylised four-armed pattern made to look like a crude star. Outside, in the distance, he heard the long, lonely wail of a steam whistle.



The innkeeper leaned forward against the counter, gut straining against the bar-top. Two Heads Talking walked over to him. As he reached the counter, he realised that he had no tokens. 'The innkeeper stared at him coldly, rubbing one stubbled, broken-veined cheek with a meaty paw.

"Well," he demanded peremptorily. 'What do you want?"

Two Heads Talking was surprised by the man's rudeness. The People had always been a polite folk. It paid to show courtesy when an offended party might hit you with a stone axe. He met the man's gaze levelly and exerted a portion of his will. He met no resistance from the man's weak spirit, but even so, the effort was fatiguing.

The innkeeper turned away, eyes downcast, and poured a drink from a clay bottle, without being asked. Outside the doorway came the sound of



footsteps. The doors burst open and a crowd of workers flooded in, bellowing orders for drink.

Both men and women had gaunt, tired faces. Their hands and bare feet were as grimy as their clothing. Two Heads Talking guessed that a shift had just ended. He took his drink and sat down in a corner, watching the workers slump down in the chairs, listening to them listlessly curse their overseers and their lack of tokens. A group set up a dice game in the corner and gambled indifferently.

After a while, Two Heads Talking noticed that people were drifting through a doorway in the back of the tavern. He rose and followed them. No-one seemed to object.

The room he entered was dark and smelled of animal fat. In its centre was a pit surrounded by cheering, cursing workers. Two Heads Talking made his way forward, and the crowd melted away about him. He stood at the edge of the pit and saw the object of everyone's attention.

Down below, two great Plains weasels were fighting, ripping long strips of flesh from each other while the audience roared and betted. Each was the size of a grown man and wore a spiked metal collar. One had lost an eye. Both were bleeding from dozens of cuts.

Two Heads Talking was disgusted. As a youth, he had hunted weasels, matching stone axe against ferocious cunning. It had been a challenge in which the warrior gambled his life against a fierce and deadly adversary. There was no challenge to this cruel sport. It was simply a safe outlet for the bloodlust of these weary, hungry workers.

The Librarian departed from the pit, leaving the workers to their sport. As he left he noticed that a bluecoat had entered the bar and was talking to the bartender. As he stepped outside, he saw that they were looking in his direction. He hurried into the smoggy night, thinking that he felt inhuman eyes watching him.

Cloud Runner looked at the faces round the fire. They were waiting for him to begin. He took three deep breaths. By long tradition, he must be the first to speak.

A Gathering of Warriors was not an argument in the formal sense, where words were used as weapons to count coup on the enemy. It was a pooling of experience, a telling of stories. Words must have no sharp edges on which to snag anger. He chose his carefully.

"When I was twelve summers old," he began. "I dwelled in the Yellow Lodge among the young bucks. It was my last summer there, for I was pledged to marry Running Deer, who was the fairest maiden of my clan.

"Often, the bucks would talk of the Warriors from the Sky. A hundred years had passed since their last visit, and the red star was visible in the sky. The time was near for their return.

"Hawk Talon, my grandfather's grandfather, had been chosen and taken to the spirit realm to serve the Great Chief Beyond The Sky. My bloodline had acquired much honour because of it, although he had left his son fatherless and needing to found a new lodge.

Silver Elk was a buck with whom I had vied for Running Deer's hand. Because she had chosen me, he hated me. He boasted of how he would be chosen. His words were a taunt, aimed at belittling my kinsman's honour. Silver Elk's own line had no spirits who had ridden Deathwing and ventured beyond the sky.

"I was stung and responded to his taunt. I said that, if that were so, he wouldn't mind climbing Ghost Mountain and visiting the Abode of the Ancestors."

Cloud Runner paused to let his words sink in, to let the warriors imagine the scene. The memory seemed fresh and clear in his own mind. He could almost smell the acrid wood smoke filling the young men's lodge and see the fun hanging from its ceiling.

"That was what Silver Elk had wanted me to say. He sneered and replied that he would go to the mountain if someone would accompany him as a witness. He looked straight at me.

"So I was trapped. I could not back out without dishonour. I had to go, or he would have counted coup on me.

"When she heard, Running Deer begged me not to go, fearing that the spirits would take me. She was a Shaman's daughter and had the Witching Sight. But I was young, with a young man's pride and folly, so I refused her. Seeing that I could not be swayed, she cut a braid from her hair and wove it about with spells, making it a charm to return me safely home.

"It was a three-day trip at hunter's walk to Ghost Mountain. Fear was our constant companion. What had seemed possible in the warmth of the lodge seemed dreadful in the cold autumn nights when



the moon was full and spirits flitted from tree to tree. I believe that if either of us had been alone, we would have turned back, for it is a terrible thing to approach the places of the restless dead at night as winter approaches.

"But we could show no fear, for the other was witness, and our rivalry drove us forward. Neither wanted to be the first to turn back.

"On the evening of the third day, we met the first warning totems, covered by the skulls of those the sky warriors had judged and found wanting. I felt like running then, but pride kept me moving on.

"We began to climb. The night was still and cold. Things rustled in the undergrowth, and the moon leered down like a Witching Spirit. Stunted trees hunched over the pathway like malign ghosts. We climbed till we came to the vast empty plateau marked by the sign of the winged skull.

"We were filled with a sense of achievement and our enmity was, for the moment, buried. We stood in a place few men had ever seen. We had defied the spirits and lived. Still, we were on edge.

"I don't know what I thought when Silver Elk pointed upward. There came a howling as of a thousand roused ghosts, and fire lit the sky. Perhaps I thought the spirits had chosen to strike me down for my presumption. Perhaps I was so filled with terror that I thought of nothing. I know that I was frozen in place, while Silver Elk turned and ran.

"If I had been afraid before, imagine how I felt when I saw that great, winged shape in the distance and heard the roar of the approaching thunderbird. Picture my horror when I saw it was Deathwing itself, steed of the Emperor, chooser of the slain, Winged Hunting Skeleton.

"I bitterly regretted my folly. I could not move to save myself, and waited for Deathwing to strike me with its claws and release my spirit

"I was surprised when the thunderbird stooped to earth in front of me and ceased its angry roaring. Still, I could not run. Its beak gaped, disgorging the massive, black-armoured forms of the chosen dead. On each shoulder, they bore the sign of the winged blade.

"I knew then that I was in the realm of spirits, for Hawk Talon, my grandfather's grandfather, stood among them. I had seen his face carved on the roof pole of our family lodge. He looked old and grey and tired, but there was still a family resemblance.

"To see a face so familiar and so strange in that dreadful place was somehow reassuring. It enabled me to overcome my fear. Filled with wonder, I walked forward till I stood before him: that terrible, grizzled old man whose face was so like my own.

"For a long time, he simply stared at me. Then he smiled and started to laugh. He clasped me to his armoured breast and shouted that it was a fortunate homecoming. He seemed just as pleased to see me as I was to see him."

Cloud Runner paused, comparing his ancestor's return to his own. There was no laughter here as there had been among those Marines long ago. He understood now how glad the old man had been to see a familiar face. He was glad that Hawk Talon wasn't here now to see the destruction of their people.

"Of course, I was overwhelmed, standing among these legendary warriors, speaking with my ancient blood-relative. I knew they had returned to choose their successors in the Emperor's service, and forgetting everything else, I begged to be allowed to join them.

"The old man looked at me and asked me whether I had any reason to stay or any reason to regret going. I thought of Running Deer, and I hesitated, but I was a callow youth. Visions of glory and the wonders beyond the sky filled me. What did I truly know of life? I was being called on to make a choice that I would have to live with for centuries, although I did not know it.

"My ancestor did. He saw my hesitation and told me better to stay in that case. I would have nothing of it, and insisted that they put me to the test.

"They strapped me to a steel table and opened my flesh with metal knives. I had endured the Weasel Claw ritual to prove my bravery, but the pain was as nothing to what I then endured. When they opened my flesh, they implanted things which they said would bond with my flesh and grant me spirit power.

"For weeks, I lay in feverish agony while my body changed. The walls danced, and my spirit fled to the edge of the cold place. While I wandered lost and alone, one of the Brothers stood beside me reciting The Imperial litanies.

"In a vision, the Emperor came to me, riding Deathwing, mightiest of thunderbirds. It was different from that which had borne the Sky Warriors home. It was a beast of spirit; the other had been a bird of metal, a totem cast in its image.



"The Emperor spoke to me, telling me of the great struggle being waged on a thousand thousand worlds. He showed me the races other than man and the secret heart of the universe, which is Chaos. He showed me the powers that lurked in the warp and exposed me to their temptations. He watched as I resisted. I knew that, if I had given in, he would have struck me down.

"Eventually, I awoke, and I knew then that my spirit belonged to the Emperor. I had chosen to abandon my people, my world and my bride for his service. I knew I had made the correct choice."

Cloud Runner glanced around at the other Terminators. He hoped he had told the story well enough to catch his listeners' minds and remind them of their duty to the Emperor. He hoped he had reminded them that they had all made the same decision as he had and that they would once more make the correct choice.

He shook his head and touched the charm of braided hair that he still wore round his throat. He wondered if he had made the correct choice all those years ago, if he would have been happier staying with Running Deer. The bright, bold vision he had possessed in his youth had faded and lost its glamour over the years of endless warfare. I never even said goodbye to her, he thought, and that somehow was the saddest thought of all.

He judged that he had swayed many of the Marines, but when Lame Bear leaned forward to speak, he knew the struggle had only begun.

"I would speak of Genestealers," the big man said quietly. "I would speak of Genestealers, their terror and their cruelty..."



CHAPTER III

Two Heads Talking wandered the nighted streets. They seemed empty now that the workers had returned to their barracks. A slight breeze had sprung up, blowing flecks of ash through the streets, clearing the smog slightly. A bitter ash-taste filled his mouth.

He passed by the factories where giant steam engines stood, still working. Their din filled the air. Their pistons went up and down like the nodding heads of maddened dinosaurs. He knew they never rested.

He strode down a street of rich mansions, driven by morbid curiosity. He felt as though he had been shown the pieces of a vast puzzle, and if he could only locate the last piece, it would all fall into place.

Each mansion he passed had wrought-iron gates which bore the signs of the Night-owl, the Puma and the Rat. These were the totem animals of the Hill Clans. Two Heads Talking wondered whether the chieftains of these people dwelled within. He could well believe that they might make pacts with whoever had done this. Those people had dark reputations.

He felt anger grow within him, driving out the sense of bewilderment. His life had been rendered meaningless. His people had been betrayed. His world had been stolen. Even the Dark Angels had been destroyed. Ten thousand years of tradition ended here. There were no more bold huntsmen of the plains for the Sky-Warriors to recruit.

The Chapter might continue, but its heritage had been destroyed - it would never be the same again. Two Heads Talking was of the last generation of Marines recruited from the Plains People. There would be no more.

As he moved beyond the mansions, toward the polluted river, his spirit senses warned him he was being followed. Part of him did not care, he would welcome confrontation with whatever watchers shadowed him. From up ahead, he heard a groan of pain.

"We do not know where they come from." said Lame Bear. "Not even the Curators of the Administratum know that. They appear without

warning, carried in the mighty space hulks which drift on the tides of warp space."

A shiver passed through even these hardened Terminators. Cloud Runner saw the gaze of those who had faced the Genestealer turn inward. Their faces reflected the grim memories of the encounters.

Unconsciously, they sat up straighter and looked around nervously. For the first time, it was brought home to the Captain that they really did face the Genestealers once more. They faced a threat that could kill them.

"They are dreadful foes: ferocious, relentless, knowing neither pity nor fear. They do not use weapons, perhaps because they do not need them. Their claws are capable of tearing adamantium like paper.

"They do not use armour; their hides are so tough that they can survive, for a time, unsuited in vacuum. They have the aspect of a beast, yet they are intelligent and organised. They are the most terrible enemies any Marine has faced since the time of the Horus Heresy.

"How do I know this? I have faced them, as have others here."

Cloud Runner shivered, recalling the times he had faced the Stealers. He remembered their chitinous visage, their gaping jaws and four rending claws. He tried not to recall their blinding, insect-like speed.

"It is not their fearsome battle prowess that makes the Stealers such dreadful opponents. It is something else. I will tell you of it.

"One hundred and twenty years ago, before ever I donned Terminator armour. I was sent with the fleet that investigated the strange silence of the hive world 'Thranx.

"The Imperial Governor had not paid tribute for twenty years, and the Adeptus Terra had decided that perhaps a gentle reminder of his sworn duties was in order.

"The fleet arrived bearing sections from the Dark Angels, the Space Wolves, the Ultramarines and an Imperial Guard regiment from Necromunda. As the fleet moved into drop position we expected resistance, rebellion. But the orbital monitors did not fire at us, and the Governor spoke fairly to us on the comm-link."

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"He claimed that the world had been cut off by warp storms and Orkish raids. He apologised for the non-payment of tribute and offered immediate reparations. He suggested that Inquisitor Van Dam, who was in charge of the punitive expedition, descend and accept his obeisance.

"We were naturally suspicious, but Van Dam suggested that any chance to take a world back into the Imperial fold without the expense of military action should at least be investigated. He requested that the Dark Angels provide an honour guard. We set our location and teleported down into the Governor's reception hall.

"Thranx was a world encased in steel. Its natives never saw the sky. The Governor's hall was so vast, though, that clouds formed under its ceiling and rain fell on the trees that surrounded the Ruler's Pavilion.

'It was a sight to stir the blood. Long ranks of guardsmen flanked the curving metal road that led to the pavilion. The pavilion itself floated on suspensors above an artificial lake. The governor sat on a throne carved from a single industrially cultured pearl, flanked by two beautiful blind maidens who were his court telepaths. He bade us welcome and showed us the tribute.

"It was brought from vaults by specially bred slaves, grey-skinned eunuchs with muscles like an Ogryn's. Even so, they could barely carry the chests. They paraded past us in a seemingly endless procession, carrying industrial diamonds, gold-inlaid bolters, suits of armoured ceramite and jade.

"All the time the governor, Huac, kept up an endless, amiable chatter. We watched, dazzled and beguiled by his smooth voice and affable manner. As the long day wore on, we began to accept that there was no need to fight, that we should simply take the tribute and go home.

"Our minds were pleasantly befuddled, and we were prepared to agree to anything our gracious host suggested when the great cryogenic coffins were brought forth. Huac claimed they carried his greatest treasures. It is a measure of how under his sway we were that we almost took them, without thinking.

"It was Two Heads Talking who said no. He stood there, for a moment, like a man bemused, and then he began to chant. It was as if cobwebs had been lifted from our eyes and we saw the snare that had been so subtly set for us.

"The spell of the Magus, for such was Huac, was lifted, and we saw to our horror that we had almost taken two Genestealer coffins back to our fleet. All that afternoon, as our minds had been lulled by the long, slow march, Huac had been inserting subtle, mystical tendrils into our minds.

"Still, so near to being enthralled were we that we almost protested when Two Heads Talking riddled Huac and his two apprentices with bolter fire. Only the Living Dreadnought Hawk Talon joined in the firing. We reacted slowly when he warned us to defend ourselves. Huac's guardsmen almost had us.



"But we were Marines. No sooner had they opened up with their lasrifles than we returned fire with our bolters, cutting them down. Van Dam tried to contact the fleet but our comm-links were being jammed, and we could not teleport out. There was nothing for it. We had to fight our way to the planet's surface and hope that a dropship could reach us.

"It seemed as if the whole planet had turned against us, and that was more or less what had happened. Two hundred of us fought our way out of the audience room. We were met by armed men, unarmed children and their mothers. All threw themselves against us with insane ferocity. As we cut them down, they showed no fear - only a strange, unholy joy. The whole world had been infected.

"Our trip to the surface was a nightmare. We battled along dark corridors, crawled up access



ladders and through narrow hatches never meant for Marines. I saw Steel Fist tumble back headless from one hatchway. Van Dam lobbed a handful of crack grenades through and we were spattered with the remains of a full-grown Stealer"

"My brother Red Sky was pulled down by a wave of feral children with explosives in their hands. They detonated them as they crawled over his body. He did not live.

"Twice in the endless corridors, we were almost overrun. It came to hand-to-hand combat with purestrain Stealers. Twenty of our brothers were cut down before Two Heads Talking's force axe and Cloud Runner's power sword carried us clear.

"It was while guarding the final hatchway that I lost the use of my leg. A Stealer cut right through the floor and grabbed me, trying to pull me down. I blasted frantically at it. The last thing I remember was its horrid, leering face as it pulled me down toward it. Around it was a group of Thranxians who stroked and pushed against it fondly.

"The others told me what had happened when I woke up in the medical bay of the ship with a new bionic leg. Two Heads Talking and Cloud Runner had pulled me clear and carried me to the roof of the world. where the dropship waited.

"There was only one thing to do: order the Exterminatus. The whole place was sterilised from orbit with virus bombs. Later, inquisitorial investigators ascertained that the whole business had begun only sixty years before, when an unrecorded space hulk had swung through the system.

"It had taken only three generations for the Stealers to infect a whole world. For that is how they reproduce - by turning people into hosts for their offspring. Their victims endure this willingly, due to the Stealers' hypnotic powers.

"Many nights I have lain awake wondering whether we could have saved the world if only we had arrived sooner. Perhaps if we had been able to eliminate the Stealers before the cancer had spread, we would not have had to order the Exterminatus.

Cloud Runner could see that the warriors had been swayed and angered by Lame Bear's tale. He could tell that they were considering the assimilation of their People as breeding stock and the possibility that, by swift action, they might prevent it.

"Let us go." said Weasel-Fierce, leaping to his feet. "Let us enter the city and kill the Stealers' spawn."

Several other warriors made to accompany him.

Wait," said Bloody Moon. "The gathering is not over and I would speak..."

Anger and impatience drove Two Heads Talking toward the sound of pain. By the brink of the river, in the shadow of a monstrous factory, he saw that a group of bluecoats had pinned an old man against the wall and were slowly and surely beating him to death with their truncheons. One of their number held a lantern, occasionally giving a calm, precise order.

"Talk seditious nonsense, would you?" said one bravo. His stroke ended with the cracking of breaking ribs. The old man groaned and fell to his knees. The other bluecoats laughed.

"Preach heresy against the Imperial cult and the warriors from the sky, eh? What makes you old fools do it? By the Emperor. I thought we had got the last of you."

Their victim looked up at them. "You are deluded. The Warriors from the Sky would not have built this place and herded us here the way elks are herded to the slaughter. Nor would they have broken the burial mounds of our people. Your masters are evil spirits summoned by the Hill Clans, not true Sky Warriors. Deathwing will return and rend them asunder."

"Silence, blaspheming no-name." said the leader of the bluecoats.

"You wish to prove your courage, do you? Perhaps we should return to the old ways, drunkard, and practise the Weasel Claw ritual on you."

The old man coughed blood. "Do what you will, I am Morning Star of the line of Running Deer and Silver Elk. I have the Witching Sight. I tell you that the spirits walk. Ancient powers stalk the land. The red star burns bright in the sky. A time of trouble is coming."

"Is that why you chose to start ranting this night? I had thought the only spirits that talked to you came from a bottle," said another bluecoat, kicking Morning Star in the ribs. The old man groaned. Two Heads Talking made his way forward through the mist, till he emerged into the lantern light.

"The bluecoat leader spoke to him. "Go away, buck. This is Warrior Lodge business. If you don't want to join this drunkard in the river, you'll leave now."



"You dishonour the idea of the Warrior Lodge," said Two Heads Talking quietly. "Depart now, and I will spare you. Remain a heartbeat longer, and I will surely grant you death."

The old man looked up at him, awe-struck. Two Heads Talking could see the winged skull tattoo of a Shaman on his forehead. A few bravos laughed. Some, the wiser ones, heard the soft menace in the Marine's voice and backed away.

The leader gestured for the bluecoats to attack. "Take him!"

Two Heads Talking parried the swipe of a truncheon with his forearm. There was a metallic ring as the bludgeon snapped. He broke the bravo's nose against the butt of his force axe then lashed out with his foot, driving it into another bluecoat's stomach with inhuman force. As the man bent double the Librarian chopped down on his neck, breaking it.

The bluecoats swarmed over him now. Their truncheons were as ineffective as twigs against a bear. A few tried to grab his arms and immobilise him. He shrugged them off easily, swinging killing blows with weapon and elbow. Where he struck, men died.

As the battle lust swept over him, he felt the bound spirits slip away. He knew that he stood revealed in his true form. The last of the bluecoats turned to ran. Two Heads Talking hooked an arm around his neck and twisted. There was a crunch of shattering vertebrae.

The old man gazed on him with religious intensity. "The spirits spoke truthfully," he said, as if he did not quite believe it. He reached out and touched him, making sure he was real.

"You have come at last to free the People from their bondage to the false Emperor and lead them back to the plains. What is your name, Sky Warrior?"

"In my youth, it was Two Heads Talking, apprentice to Spirit Hawk. When I entered the service of the true Emperor, I took the name Lucian." He could see tears running down the old man's scarred cheeks.

"Tell me, old man, what has happened to our folk? How did they come to fall so low?"

"It began when I was a buck," said Morning Star, wiping his face. "One summer night, the sky burned, and there was a great roaring. A trail of fire raced across the sky, and there was an explosion. Where we are now was a vast crater, and in the

centre, where the Temple of the Four-armed Emperor stands, was a great, red-hot pile of metal.

"Some people thought the Sky Warriors had returned, that the roaring was the voice of their thunderbird. The Shamans knew that this could not be so, for Deathwing returns only once every hundred years, in autumn, and it had been only fifty years since the red star was last visible."

"We were pleased because we thought that we might ride Deathwing. Most of us had reckoned on being old men when the Sky Warriors came again.

"Those who met our chiefs were not the armoured warriors of legend. They were feeble, pale-skinned men who claimed that they had come from the Emperor to show us the way to build an earthly paradise. They preached the virtues of tolerance and brotherly love and an end to warfare. The chiefs sent them packing, which was a mistake, for when honeyed words did not succeed, they tried force of arms. They allied with the Hill Clans and gave them metal blades which our weapons could not withstand.

"Eventually, clans were forced to trade for the new weapons in order to withstand their enemies. Tales were told of how witching spirits with four arms and terrible claws destroyed our warriors. Soon, the pretenders ruled the Plains, taking slaves and destroying utterly those who opposed them.

"Then came the building of this great city, using slave labour and paying the freemen in trade tokens."

Suddenly, the old man's eyes went wide with horror. He was looking past Two Heads Talking and into the night. The Librarian turned, and from the mist, shapes emerged.

One was the fat man who earlier had been riding in the palanquin. Flanking him were two huge four-armed figures. Their carapaces glistened like oil. They raised large claws which glittered in the moonlight.

"We would have told you all this if only you had asked," said the fat man, gazing at Two Heads Talking with his dark, magnetic eyes.

The Librarian flexed his fingers, and his force axe hummed a song of death in his hand.

"It was in the time of Commander Aradiel, a hundred summers gone," said Bloody Moon. "We were aboard the battlebarge Angelus Morte on

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sector edge patrol when the alarms went off. Sensor probes indicated that a space hulk had dropped from warp space near us. Deep scanning revealed nothing. We were ordered to investigate.

"We crouched within the boarding torpedoes and were fired at the hulk. It was unpowered and dark when we disembarked, so helmet lights on, we moved to secure the perimeter. We met no resistance, but as per standard operational procedures, we proceeded with extreme caution.

"We identified the hulk as Prison of Lost Souls, an appropriate name as it turned out. We moved nervously through the shadowy corridors, for the taint of the warp still hung about the craft. It made us uneasy."

"At first, there was no sign of danger. Then we came across the bodies of some Space Wolves. They had been riddled with bolter fire. We could not guess how long they had lain there - perhaps since the hulk had last entered normal space. It might have been ten years or ten thousand - we did not know. The tides of warp space are unpredictable, and time flows strangely there.

"Brother Sergeant Conrad ordered us to be wary. Then a terrible thing occurred. A Space Wolf's corpse sat upright, its eyes glowing crimson. 'You are doomed,' it told us. 'Every one of you will die as I have.' We riddled it with fire from our weapons, but still its horrible whispers echoed in our minds.

"We began to fall back. All around us, Blips suddenly appeared on our sensors. They were running parallel to us, trying to cut us off from the boarding torpedo.



"At corridor intersections, we caught sight of armoured figures. We exchanged a few shots with them. I hit one and heard its scream over the comm-link. They were using the same frequencies as we were. When we realised that, our blood ran cold. We asked ourselves: could these be Marines?

"We did not have long to wait for an answer. They swarmed down the corridor toward us in a vast wave. They were garbed in the armour of Marines, but they were horribly mutated. Some clutched rusty bolters in tentacles instead of hands. Some had faces that were moist and green and slimy like toads. Some had claws and extra limbs. Some dragged themselves along, leaving a trail of mucus behind them.

"The mark of Chaos was upon them. They called on Horus and those powers that are better not named. And we knew then - they were renegades, survivors from the Age of Heresy who had pacted with Chaos in exchange for eternal life. The fighting became close and heavy. They had the weight of numbers, but we had our Terminator armour and the strength of righteousness.

"For a moment, it looked as though they might overwhelm us, but then our thunder hammers and lightning claws came into play, and we cut through them inexorably. They fought like daemons, and they had the strength of the damned, but eventually we won.

"I stood looking down at the body of my last foe, and a thought occurred to me: this man had once been a Marine like myself. He had undergone the same training and indoctrination as I had. He had sworn to serve the Emperor. And yet he had betrayed humanity. How could this be?

"How could a true Marine become forsworn? It seemed unlikely that he would suddenly turn his back on the pattern of a lifetime and pact with the Darkness. What had Chaos to offer him?

"Wealth? We have no use for the baubles that other men covet; we already have the finest of everything that a man could wish for. Sensual gratification? We are taught its transitory nature. Power? We know true power, which is the will of the Emperor. Who among us could equal his sacrifice?"

"No - as I stood over his body I came to understand. He had deviated not in one leap but in small steps, by increments.

"First he had come to place trust in the Warmaster. An easy step, for was not Horus the chief champion of the Emperor?

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"Then he had come to follow the Warmaster. Who would not? A soldier follows his commander.

"Then he had come to believe Horus divine. An easy mistake. Was not the great Heretic one of the Primarchs of the First Founding, gifted with god-like powers second only to the Emperor himself.

"Thus did he sway from the path of truth, till eventually he lost both his life and soul. It is a way that is open to anyone, one small mistake leading to another until at last the Great Error is reached. This I came to realise as I studied the body of the renegade on the Prison of Lost Souls. I resolved then and there to submit myself to the Emperor's will. I knew that all our regulations and our codes have a purpose, and it is not for us to question them, for they keep us from the path of the deviant.

Around the fire, there was silence. Cloud Runner could tell that Bloody Moon's words had touched a chord within the Marines. He found himself examining his own conscience for signs of heresy. The implication of Bloody Moon's tale was quite clear: if they lapsed from the service of the Emperor, they were taking the first step down the road to damnation. He had also reminded them that they were Marines, the chosen of the Emperor. If they did not keep the faith, who would?

For a long time, all was quiet. Then Weasel-Fierce indicated his wish to talk. "I will speak of death," he said. "the death of men and worlds...."

Two Heads Talking felt the impact of the fat Magus' will like a physical blow. The great, dark eyes seemed to swell, to become bottomless pits into which the Librarian fell. At his feet, Morning Star whimpered.

With a wrench, the Marine broke the psychic contact, thankful that his Librarian's armour was equipped with a psychic hood. The Magus was strong, and Two Heads Talking was already tired.

The Stealers raced toward him. The Librarian raised his storm bolter and sent a hail of shells blazing out. Tracer fire ripped the night apart. The leading Genestealer was shredded by the heavy bullets. The other dodged with inhuman speed.

Morning Star leapt between the Librarian and his assailant. A claw flickered, and the old man's body was torn in half. Two Heads Talking lashed out with his axe, willing it to strike hard, and its blade burned coldly as it passed through the Stealer's neck. He leapt back to avoid its reflexive death-strike.

The Magus laughed. "You cannot escape. Why struggle?"

The fat man concentrated, and a halo of power played around his head. The Librarian hosed him down with fire, but some force intercepted the shells, causing them to explode harmlessly a few feet from their target.



Two Heads Talking strode forward, swinging the axe. He felt his own power build within him as the blade arced toward his target. Something stopped it a foot away from the Magus's head. Great muscles bulged under his armour as he forced it forward. Servo-motors whined as they added their strength to his.

Slowly, inexorably, the Marine forced the blade toward his enemy. Sweat ran down the fat man's brow as he concentrated. A look of fear passed across his face. He could not save himself, and he knew it.

He gave a single shriek as his concentration lapsed. The force axe sheared through him from head to groin. Two Heads Talking felt the Magus' psychic death scream echo through the night. He sensed hundreds of minds answer it in the distance, through the deadening curtain of mist, he heard the sound of scuttling, coming ever closer.

Knowing his only chance of survival lay in swift flight, Two Heads Talking turned and ran.



CHAPTER IV

"Our world is dead," said Weasel-Fierce. Some Marines muttered about the fact that he was addressing them directly, rather than keeping to the ritual. He silenced them with a short, chopping gesture of his right hand. When he spoke again, his tone was scathing and savage.

"This ritual is a sham. It comes from a time that is ended. Why pretend otherwise? You may wish to delude yourselves by keeping with the old ways, but I do not.

"You can speak in parables about our oaths to the Emperor, the horror of the Stealers or the nature of damnation. I choose to speak the truth.

"Our people are dead or enslaved, and we sit here like old women, asking ourselves what to do. Have we been put under a spell? When were we ever so indecisive? A true warrior has no choice in this matter. We must avenge our people. Our weapons must taste enemy blood. It would be the coward's way not to face them."

"But if we fail . . ." began Bloody Moon.

"If we fail, so be it. What have we to live for? How many summers have we left before we die of old age or are encased in the cold, metal body of a Living Dreadnought?"

He fell silent and glared around the fire. To Cloud Runner's surprise, he looked down, and the fury seeped out of him.

"I am old," he said softly. "Old and tired. I have seen more than two hundred summers. In a few more, I will be dead anyway. I had hoped to gaze again on my kin before then, but it is not to be. This is my only regret."

Cloud Runner could see the weariness in him, felt its echo in his own mind. Every man about the fire had served the Emperor for centuries, their lifespans increased by the process that turned them into Marines.

"If I had remained among the people," Weasel-Fierce said. "I would be dead by now. I chose another path and I have lived long – longer perhaps than any mortal should.

"It is time for an ending. Where better than here, on our homeworld, among the bones of our kin? The day of the Plains People is done. We can avenge

them, and we can join them. If we fall in combat, we shall have had warriors' deaths. I wish to die as I have lived: weapons in hand, foes before me.

"I believe that this is what we all want. Let us do it."

All was quiet except the crackling of the fire. Cloud Runner looked from face to face and saw death was written in each of them. Weasel Fierce had voiced what they had all felt since first seeing the shattered lodges. They had become wraiths, walking in the ruins of elder days.

There was nothing left here for them, except memories. If they departed now, all that loomed before them was old age and inevitable death. This way, at least, their ending would have a meaning.

"I say we go in. If the contamination has not spread too far, we can free any survivors," said Lame Bear. Cloud Runner looked at Bloody Moon.

"Providing we command Deathwing to virus-bomb the planet if we fail," he said. The rest of the warriors put their right fists forward, signifying assent. They all looked at him, waiting to see what he had to say. He felt once more the pressure of command fall on him. He considered the destroyed lodges and his own loss and weighed them against his Imperial duty. Nothing could bring back the Plains People, but perhaps he could save their descendants.

But that was not all there was to it, he realised. He wanted the satisfaction of meeting his foes, face to face. He was angry. He wanted to make the Stealers suffer for what they had done, and he wanted to be there when they did. He wanted vengeance for himself and for his people. It was as simple as that. Such a decision was not the correct one for an Imperial officer, but it was the way of his clan. In the end, to his surprise, he found out where his true loyalty lay.

"I say we fight," he said at last. "But we fight as Warriors of the People. This battle is not for the Emperor. It is for our murdered clans. Our last battle shall be fought in accordance with our ancient ways. Let us perform the rite of Deathwing."

Two Heads Talking ran for his life. Through the darkened streets, Genestealers pursued, loping along, swift and deadly. He sensed their presence all around.

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He leapt over a pile of rubbish which lay in his path and swept round a corner into a main road. Two workers poked their heads through a doorway to see what was going on. They swiftly withdrew.

Two Heads Talking ran wearily. His heart was pounding, and his breathing was ragged. The strain of maintaining the spell of concealment for so long had sapped his strength. He wondered how long he could keep up this pace.

He risked a swift glance over his shoulder. A Genestealer had just rounded the corner. He fired his storm bolter at it, but his shot was inaccurate, and the Stealer lurched back into cover.

Sensing danger in front of him, he turned. From out of a shadowy doorway, a Stealer uncoiled. He had just enough time to raise his force axe before it sprang. He thrust the blade out before him, chopping into the monster's chest. The momentum of the thing's charge knocked him over. A claw cut into his arm, searing it with pain. If his blow had not landed cleanly, he realised, he would have been dead.

Ignoring the pain, he rolled onto his belly, catching a clear glimpse of his pursuers as they charged. He squeezed the trigger of his bolter and stitched a line of fire across their chests. The strength of the armour allowed him to hurl off the ambusher's carcass with ease. He continued on his way.

Not much further, he thought, forcing himself to reel onward. He could see the huge walls jutting upward above nearby buildings. He recited a spell to free his mind of pain and made for the gates.

His heart sank when he saw what awaited him - a mass of hunched, evil-faced men with dark, piercing eyes. Some held ancient-looking energy weapons. Some gripped blades in their three hands. Towering over them were purestrain Genestealers, flexing their claws menacingly. Two Heads Talking came to a halt, facing his foes.

For a moment, they eyed each other in respectful silence. The Librarian commended his spirit to the Emperor. Soon Deathwing would be carrying him off. His bolter was almost empty. With only his force axe, he knew he could not withstand so many. As if at an unspoken signal, the Genestealer and their brood surged forward. A bolt from an energy weapon burned into his armour, melting one of the skulls on his chest plate. He gritted his teeth and returned fire, cutting a great swathe of death. There was a loud click as his bolter jammed. He did not have the time to clear it, so he charged to meet his foes, chanting his death-chant.

He rushed into a sea of bodies that pressed against him, hitting him with blades and rending claws. He summoned the last dregs of his strength to power his force axe and swung it in a great double arc. He lopped off heads and limbs with a will, but for every foe who fell, another stepped into place. He could not guard himself against all their blows, and soon he bled from scores of great wounds.

Life fled from him, and overhead he thought he heard the beating of mighty pinions. Deathwing has come, he thought, just before a blow smashed into his head and all consciousness fled.



Cloud Runner paused briefly before he painted out his personal cloud-and-thunderbolt insignia on his armour's right shoulder; He felt changed. By blanking out his Imperial insignia, he had blanked out part of himself, cut himself off from part of his history. Slowly he began to etch in new totem signs on the armour, the marks of vengeance and death. As he did so, he felt the powers of the totem spirits begin to enter him.

He looked at Weasel-Fierce. The gaunt man had finished painting out all the icons on his armour. It was now white, the colour of death, except on its left shoulder, where the skull had been left unchanged. It seemed somehow appropriate.

They performed a rite that dated back to ancient times, before the Emperor had come to tame the thunderbirds. Only once before had Cloud Runner seen it performed. As a boy, he had watched a party of old warriors, sworn to vengeance, paint their bodies white and go after a horde of Hill Clan raiders that had killed a small child. They had painted their bodies the funeral colour because they did not expect to return from facing so overwhelming a foe.

DEATHWING

Bloody Moon looked over from beside the fire and gave him a weak grin. Cloud Runner walked over to him.

"Ready, old friend?" he asked. Bloody Moon nodded. Cloud Runner bent over the fire and put his hands into the ash. He pressed his palms, fingers together, flat against his face, making the sign of Deathwing on each cheek.

"I wish Two Heads Talking would return." said Bloody Moon, repeating Cloud Runner's gesture.

"He may yet surprise you."

Bloody Moon looked doubtful. Cloud Runner gestured for the warriors to assemble. They formed into a circle around the dead fire. One by one, they began to chant their death-songs.

Even as they carried him through the long steel corridors, Two Heads Talking knew he was dying. Life leaked from his wounds. With every drop of blood that dribbled over his bearers, he became weaker.

It felt like some evil dream, being borne down dimly lit tunnels by the hunched, daemonic figures of the Genestealer brood. The Librarian watched these events through a fog of pain, wondering why he was still alive. Part of his mind realised that he was within whatever vessel had carried the brood to his homeworld.



Agony lanced through him as one of his bearers jolted him slightly. It took all his will power not to scream. They entered a long hall in which a hunched, dreadful figure waited. He was placed on the floor in front of it. It cocked its head to one side, studying him.

Tears ran down the Librarian's face from the pain as he forced himself to his feet. Genestealer guards raced towards him, but the huge creature glanced at them, and they froze in position.

Two Heads Talking stood unsteadily, knowing he faced a Genestealer Patriarch. He had heard dim legends of such things, the progenitors of entire broods, the most ancient of their lines.

He looked into his enemies' eyes. He felt an almost electric shock pass through his body as their minds made contact. The Librarian found himself confronted by a foe that was ancient, implacable, deadly. His mind reeled under the assault of its ferocious will. He felt an urge to kneel, to do homage to this ardent being. He knew that it was worthy of his respect.

With an effort, he managed to restrain himself. He reminded himself that this was the being that had destroyed his people. He made to throw himself at it, to aim a killing blow with his good arm. He sprang, but his legs gave way underneath him, and the Patriarch caught him easily, almost gently, and held him at bay with its claws. The long ovipositor on its tongue flickered out, but did not touch him.



Suddenly, he found himself engaged in a bitter, psychic struggle. Tendrils of alien thought insinuated themselves into his mind. He blocked them, chopping them off with the blades of his hatred. He countered with a psychic bolt of his own, but it was stopped by an ancient will that seemed impervious to outside influence.

The Patriarch exerted his full power, and Two Heads Talking felt his defences begin to buckle under the terrible pressure. The cold, focused power of the Genestealer was enormous. Even fresh, Two Heads Talking doubted he could have matched it. Now, strength fading because of his wounds, exhausted because of his earlier struggles, he could offer no contest at all.

His outer screen fell, and the Patriarch was within his mind, sorting through his memories, absorbing them into itself. For a second, while it was disoriented, he tried a psychic thrust. The Stealer countered easily, but for a moment, they met mind to mind.

Strange alien memories and emotions washed over the Librarian, threatening to drown him. He saw the Patriarch's past spread out before him. He saw the long trail that led through despoiled worlds and past many children. He saw the hive world it had fled from in a fast ship, just before the virus bombs fell.

With a shock, he realised that he had been there himself - on 'Thranx and that the creature had recognised his aura from then. He saw the ship crippled by an Imperial battlebarge and barely able to make the jump into warp space.

He experienced the long struggle to return to normal space and the frozen eternities it took to escape and crash-land the crippled ship on a new, virgin world. He saw the pitifully few survivors emerge; only a few purestrains and three hybrid techs. He saw them make axes from the wreckage of the ship for trade with the tribesmen, and he watched them start the long struggle to establish themselves in a hostile world.

He was gratified as the web of psychic contact expanded with each new brood member. He felt cold satisfaction at the destruction of the tribes and the knowledge that soon a new industrial base would be built. The ship would be repaired. New worlds to conquer would be within reach.

For a bleak moment, despair filled Two Heads Talking. He saw the Stealer planning to spread to and infect new worlds. And he could do nothing to stop this old, invincible entity. He almost gave in.

He could see no way out. Death loomed, and that thought gave him pause. He knew what he must do. Part of him gave way before the Patriarch's assault; another part willed his spirit towards oblivion.

He stood once more in the cold place, sensed far-off the spirit of the Emperor, bright and shining as a star. Near at hand were the angry ghosts. The Patriarch was a hungry, ominous presence, determined to enslave him. Somewhere in the distance, he could hear the thunderous pinions of Deathwing coming to claim him.

Too late, the Patriarch realised what he was doing and tried to break the link. Two Heads Talking focused all his hatred, anger and fear and held the link open, a task made easier by their earlier intimate contact. The Patriarch struggled frantically, but could not free himself.

The wingbeats came closer, drowning the Librarian in a roar that might have been a hurricane or his own last breath. From the middle of a vortex of agony, he was borne up into darkness. The maelstrom sucked in the Patriarch. It died, slain by the Librarian's death agony.

Briefly, Two Heads Talking felt his foe vanish, felt the sense of loss from its brood. As the Librarian's spirit rose higher, he reached out and touched the minds of his comrades, bidding them farewell, telling them what they must do. Then Two Heads Talking knew no more.

Cloud Runner felt the presence as he stared into the fire. He looked up and saw Two Heads Talking standing before him. The Librarian looked pale. His face was distorted by agony, his body gashed by dreadful wounds. He knew that this was a spirit vision, that the old Shaman was dead.

For a moment, he thought he heard the sound of titanic wingbeats and saw the mightiest of thunderbirds soaring toward the moon. The presence vanished, leaving Cloud Runner feeling cold and alone. He shivered in the sudden chill. He knew he had been touched by Deathwing's passing.

He looked toward the others and knew that they had seen the same thing. He raised a hand in a gesture of farewell and then swept it down as a signal for the Marines to advance.

Filled with determination, the white-armoured Terminators marched toward the distant city.



DEATHWING

CHAPTER V

Cloud Runner sat enthroned and looked down upon his visitors. His people were drawn up in long ranks, forming a corridor along which the Marines advanced warily. They were led by a Captain and a Librarian. From the doorway, the huge armoured form of a dreadnought performed overwatch. Cloud Runner found the sight of that old, familiar form comforting.

He saw the uneasy, worshipful faces of his people look to him for reassurance. He kept his face grim and calm. He sensed the Battle Brothers' unease at the strangeness of the folk within the great lodgehouse. They held their bolters ready, as if expecting violence to erupt at any moment.

Cloud Runner was glad to see them. Since Lame Bear's death, he had felt very alone. He spotted several familiar faces among the oncoming Imperial warriors. Memories of the old days in the Chapter House flooded back. He took three deep breaths, touched the ancient, white-painted suit beside him, for luck, and then spoke.

"Greetings, Brother Sky Warriors," he said.

'Greetings, Brother Ezekiel,' said the Marine Leader suspiciously.

Cloud Runner rubbed his facial scar-tattoos with one gnarled hand, then grinned. 'So they made you a Captain. eh Broken Knife?'

"Yes, Brother Ezekiel. They made me a Captain when you failed to return." He paused, obviously waiting for an explanation.

"It took you ten years to come looking for the Dark Angels' honour suits?" the old man asked with a hint of mockery.

"There has been war: a great migration of Orks through the Segmentum Obscura. The Chapter was called to serve. During that time the absence of our Terminators was felt grievously. You have an explanation for this, of course."

The Marines stared at Cloud Runner coldly. It was as if he was a stranger to these grim youths, or worse, a traitor. He remembered the first time he had stood among Marines and, for the first time in long years, became aware of their uncanny quality. He felt isolated and uneasy.

"These are not our people. Cloud Runner. What happened here?" asked a deep rolling voice. He recognised it as the dreadnought's. Suddenly, he did not feel so alone, Hawk Talon was there, hooked into the life-support systems of the dreadnought. There was at least one person present who was on his side, who was old enough to understand. It was like their first meeting under the shadow of Deathwing, when he had sighted that one familiar face among strangers.

"No, honoured forefather. they are not. They are the untainted survivors of the Genestealer conquest."

He heard the shocked murmur of the Marines, saw the way that they instinctively brought their weapons to bear on the lodge people.

"You had better explain, Brother Ezekiel,' said Broken Knife.

Cloud Runner found himself telling his tale to the astonished Marines. He told them of the Terminator company's landing and of their discovery of the devastation that had been wrought by the Genestealers. He told them of the Gathering and of the choice the warriors had made - of Two Heads Talking's spirit walk and the Terminators' final march on the city. He spoke to them in the intricate



syntax of the Imperial tongue, not the language of the Plains People.

DEATHWING

"We marched through the black gates and were assaulted by Stealers. At first they seemed confused, as if they had suffered a great shock. They attacked in small groups with no pattern and no guiding intelligence, and we cut them down.

"We pushed through crowds of screaming people as we followed our Librarian's locator beacon toward the city centre. Huge purestrain Stealers erupted from buildings as we advanced. They attacked with insane fury, but without thought, and so we bested them easily.

"In the centre of the city we found a temple - a building that obscenely parodied the Imperial cult, dominated by a huge four-armed statue of what was intended to be the Emperor. We toppled it into the street and beneath it found an entrance into the underworld.

"Down we went into the cold, metal corridors. We passed through airlocks and bulkheads. It was like a buried spacecraft. We still followed the locator fix, determined to reclaim Two Heads Talking's armour and avenge his death.

"At first we made easy progress against isolated Stealer attacks, but then a change occurred. For a while, there was peace.

"We exchanged wary looks. Bloody Moon asked if we could possibly have killed them all. I can even now picture the puzzled look on his face. It was still there when a Stealer dropped through an air vent and took his head off. I blasted the thing with bolter fire, reducing it to bloody mush.

"Now the Stealers began to attack again. But this time their attacks were co-ordinated, guided by some malign intelligence. It was as if they had been leaderless for a time, but a new fiend had now taken charge.

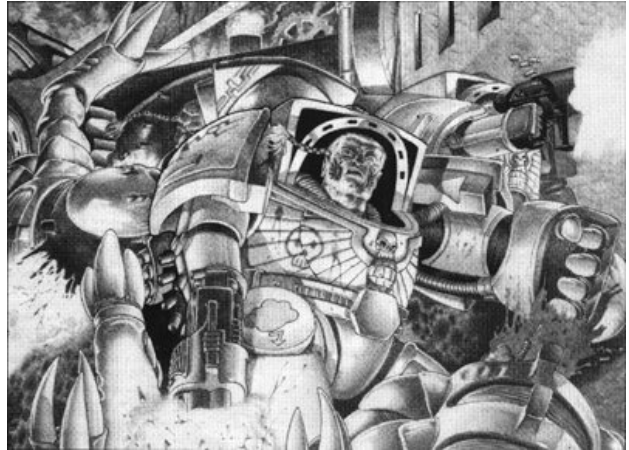
"They flanked us through parallel corridors, dropped through vents in the ceiling. Hordes of Stealers and their human brood attacked from all sides. Waves of them scuttled forward with blinding speed, threatening to overwhelm us with sheer numbers. It was a horrible sight, watching those great armoured beasts race closer, ignoring their kin as they were cut down.

"Still they came. Our point men and rearguard were ambushed and killed. The threats came so fast, we almost didn't have time to respond.

"I saw a score of them slain by flamer fire, and the stench that filled the air was indescribable. They

spent their lives recklessly in their blind lust to kill us. There was a sense of terrible, oppressive anger in the air. It was as if they had a personal score with us and were all prepared to die to settle it

"Any other squad, even other Terminator, would have been beaten back by the sheer fury of their attack, but we wore the mark of Deathwing. Our funeral dirges had been sung - fear was not in us, and we had our own scores to settle. We pushed forward, inch by tortuous inch.



"Blood washed the corridors as we fought our way into a great central chamber. There we found the body of Two Heads Talking. He was dead, his body rent by great wounds. Nearby lay the body of the Patriarch, not a mark upon him.

"The hall was full of foes, purestrain and brood. A handful of us had fought our way into the throne-room. We faced many times our number. For a moment, we stood exchanging glares. I think both sides sensed that they faced their ultimate enemy - that the outcome of that fight would decide the fate of this world.

"There was quiet in the hall, silence except for the cycling of our breathers. I could hear my heart beating. My mouth felt dry. But I was strangely calm, sure that soon I would be greeting the spirits of my ancestors. The Stealers formed up, and we raised our bolters to the firing position.

"At an unspoken signal, they charged, mouths open but making no sound. A few of the brood fired ancient energy weapons. Beside me, a Battle Brother fell. We laid down a barrage of fire that tore the first wave to pieces. Nothing could have lived through it. Everything we fired at died. But there were just too many of them. They swarmed over us, and the final conflict began in earnest

"I saw Weasel-Fierce go down beneath a pile of Stealers. His bolter had jammed, but he fought on,



screaming taunts and insults at his foes, the last I saw of him, he was tearing the head from a Stealer, even as it punched a claw through his chest. Thus passed the greatest warrior of our generation.

"Lame Bear and I fought back to back, circled about by our enemies. Power glove and power sword smote the Stealers as we cut them down. If there had been only a few more purestrains, things would have gone differently that day, but most of them seemed to have died in the initial futile attacks.

"As it was, things were close, Lame Bear fell, wounded, and I found myself breast to breast with a huge, armoured horror. The leader knocked my sword from my hand with a sweep of a mighty claw. I thanked the Emperor for the digital weapons in my power glove and sprayed the monstrosity's eyes with poisoned needles, blinding it. In the brief respite, I found time to bring my storm bolter to bear and slay it

"I looked around: only Terminators stood in the hall. We whooped with joy to find ourselves still alive, but then the number of our fallen struck us, and we stood in appalled silence. Only six of us survived. We did not count the number of the Stealers fallen.

"In the world above, the children of the Plains People waited. A huge crowd had gathered outside the temple to see the outcome of our battle. They looked at us, awe-struck. We had destroyed their temple and killed their gods. They did not know whether we were daemons or redeemers.

"We looked on the weary creatures who were the only remnants of our former clans. We had won, and we had reclaimed our world. Still, our victory seemed hollow. We had saved our descendants from the Stealers, but our way of life was gone.

"As we stood before the assembled throng, it struck me what we must do. The Emperor himself provided inspiration in that moment. I explained my plan to the others.

"We drove the crowds from the city and assembled them on the plain outside. We searched for traces of the brood among them, but there were none. The Stealer taint seemed to have been destroyed in our vengeance war.

"I walked through the factories and past the toppled chimneys. Then we took our flamers and burned the city to the ground. We divided the people up into six new tribes and said our good-byes to each other, for we knew we would likely never meet again.

Then we led our descendants away from the still-blazing city.

"Lame Bear took his folk to the mountains. I brought my people to my old village, and we rebuilt it. I do not know what became of the others.

"I have told these people that I was sent by the Emperor to lead them back to the old ways. I have taught them how to hunt and fish and shoot in the old manner. We do battle with the other tribes. One day they will again be worthy of becoming Sky Warriors."

Cloud Runner fell silent. He could see the Battle Brothers had been moved by his tale. Broken Knife turned to the Librarian. Cloud Runner felt the pressure of mind-to-mind contact.

"Brother Ezekiel speaks the truth, Brother Captain Gabriel," said the Librarian. Broken Knife looked up at the old Marine.

"Forgive me, brother. I have misjudged you. It seems the Chapter and the Plain's People owe you and your warriors a great debt."

"Semper Fideles," said Cloud Runner. "You must take back the suits. They belong to the Chapter." Broken Knife nodded.

"Perhaps a favour. In honour of our dead, leave the suits the colour of Deathwing. The deeds of our brothers should be remembered."

"It will be so," replied Broken Knife. "Deathwing will be remembered."

The Marines turned and filed out past the dreadnought. The mighty being stood there, watching Cloud Runner with inhuman eyes.

The Terminator's departure left Cloud Runner suddenly tired. He felt the weight of his years heavily.

He sensed the dreadnought gazing at him and looked up.

"Yes, honoured ancestor?" he asked in the tongue of the Plains People.

"You could go back with us. You are worthy of becoming a Living Dreadnought," it said.

He wished he could return and spend his last years with his Chapter, but he knew that he could not. His duty was to his people now. He must return them to the Emperor's way. He shook his head.

DEATHWING

"I thought not. You are a worthy chieftain of the People. Cloud Runner."



Matthias (Red Fox)
 Raphael (Grey Mane)
 Nathaniel (Wind Runner)
 Pluvius (Blood Blade)
 Octavius (Swift Wing)
 Antonius (Flying Eagle)
 Caliban (Iron Fist)
 Claudius (Red Crow)
 Adonai (Stone Hand)
 Uriel (Great Bear)
 Sammael (Doom Walker)
 Vicconius (Laughing Sun)
 Saphon (Pale Crow)
 Malloc (Rain Bringer)
 Amael (Spirit Runner)
 Bethor (Snarling Bear)

"Any Sky Warrior would be, Ancestor. Few are given the chance. Before you depart, there is something I must know. When first we met, you told me I should not become a Sky Warrior if there was anyone I would regret leaving behind. Did you have any regrets about becoming a Marine?"

The dreadnought stared at him. "Sometimes I still do. It is a sad thing to leave people you care about behind, knowing they will be lost to you forever.

"Goodbye, Cloud Runner. We will not meet again."

The dreadnought turned and departed, leaving Cloud Runner among his people, his hands toying with a braid of ancient hair.

Names of the Deathwing and their translations:

Akkad (Stone Heart)
 Ezekiel (Razor Wing)
 Azrael (Weasel Fierce)
 Sergio (Lame Bear)
 Aradiel (Two Tongues)
 Conrad (Bloody Moon)
 Lionus (Long Spear)
 Gabriel (Fire Walker)
 Gdeon (Hawk Talon)
 Marcus (Lonely Hunter)
 Lucius (Stalking Death)