

The Gallant Stand

A Warhammer 40,000 short story by Adam Fasoldt

It was a pleasure to crush the scarlet warp spawn beneath her Imperial Knight's massive weight. Seneschal Michelle Vaughn and her Knight Gallant, Tiamat, smashed a half dozen of them to paste with every stride. The crunch of bones, the squeals of rage, and the stink of their bursting bodies filled her senses even from the throne buried deep within Tiamat's twilight-black edifice. She waded in a sea of red until she could no longer tell the difference between the writhing bodies of the living and their malformed remains.

A lance of hell-wrought cavalry broke through the enemy ranks, trampling a score of their own number in a huge plume of dust in an effort to penetrate the Imperial line. They were devils mounted upon mechanical steeds, eyes blazing with hellfire. The disciplined Cadian command structure did not allow their lasgunners to take the bait. Instead, they maintained their fusillade against the tide of infantry. It was Vaughn and Tiamat's job to intercept such threats. She urged her mount forward.

Vaughn and her Knight met the enemy cavalry in three long strides. If they'd reacted a moment slower, the Bloodcrushers would have smashed into the horde of men and women defending the army's formation of artillery. The artillery was a crucial asset, but they had been forced to consolidate it into a single position due to their dwindling numbers. Vaughn planted Tiamat's feet into the earth to arrest her momentum, tearing great furrows as deep as a man. She allowed the Knight's knees to bend as Tiamat's broad Reaper Chainsword cut a wide arc into the oncoming cavalry. Several black-horned warp spawn and their mechanical mounts were cloven with equal ease. Vaughn rotated again. This time, her Knight's massive Thunderstrike Gauntlet swatted another, crumpling the iron mount and shattering its rider's bones. The last Bloodcrusher reared up to avoid the final killing blow, but it was too late. Tiamat's right leg wrenched itself from the earth and she crushed the abomination beneath her full weight.

She poured herself back into the enemy's front ranks. The exhilaration was intoxicating. Rarely had Seneschal Vaughn felt such joy. Rarely did her life have such meaning, such purpose. Of course, she was experienced enough to realize that these feelings were a direct result of her connection with Tiamat. The machine itself desired the contest and the resulting victory. Tiamat was hungry for killing and Vaughn fed that need with violent purpose, though she knew her ceramite-clad companion would never be sated.

A tarnished metal streak passed across her vision, then another. Six Astartes waded into the throng of blood-skinned maniacs, putting them down with bone-shattering bolter rounds followed by a deluge of gore from their nimble chainswords. Her vox crackled, "Do you realize how far you've removed yourself from our lines, Rafiki Vaughn?"

The nickname should have annoyed her. Instead, she welcomed the voice. Indeed, she had lost herself in the slaughter and was far too removed from the Cadian lines. She had nearly allowed herself to be overwhelmed by the enemy, "I will fall back. Don't get yourself killed on my account."

"I am invincible, Seneschal Rafiki."

She poured Tiamat's heavy stubber into the enemy as she took several long strides back into her own cloud of dust. The caliber and rate of fire of the weapon was not impressive by any means, but added to the Space Marine's bolter fire, they were able to keep the pressing horde at bay long enough to regroup with the rest of the army. "Thank you, Chapter Master Chu-i. My thanks to Kivuli Squad Somaru as well. I would apologize, but I would just as soon apologize for breathing."

The Chapter Master laughed, a deep baritone, "Slaying warp spawn is hungry work. Our blades have quite the appetite."

She smiled at how close he was to the truth. She'd always felt a great kinship with the Star Eagles and Chapter Master Chu-i in particular. House Draco's history with that chapter was long. The House's heraldry was scattered from Segmentum Solar to the northern reaches of the Eye of Terror and the Star Eagles could be found represented, to one degree or another, throughout. Although their camaraderie hadn't always resulted in victory, their kinship had never been tarnished, even in the face of catastrophe.

Inquisitor Faldere's cracking voice broke through the vox, "Enough chatter. Keep this channel clear. Chapter Master Chu-i, fall back! Keep your Star Eagles in position. You have no business in the Vanguard. Allow the Cadians to take the brunt of the casualties. They must be liquidated after this battle anyways."

"We will discuss..." Chu-i began, but was interrupted by the Inquisitor.

"We will discuss nothing. Hold your position. Keep the channel clear. The same goes for you, Seneshcal Vaughn. Do not allow yourself to be overwhelmed. Fall back! Let the lasgunners do their job!"

There was nothing more to be said. For more than two decades Vaughn had been battling warpspawn. She had tangled with them from the inky shores of Sigma Draconis in Segmentum Solar to the rim of the Eye of Terror itself. The story was the same every time: the threat must be contained; the corruption must be stopped. The minds of humanity were fragile things and the only humane answer was to grant the majority of them the Emperor's Mercy and, in rare cases, cleanse the minds of those who were deemed too invaluable to liquidate.

As a member of the Inquisitor's own private, little army, Vaughn had never suffered a mind wipe. At least, she didn't think she had. If it were not for House Draco's long history of dealing with warp spawn and its ancient oaths to the Ordo Hereticus, she knew she would have long ago been either mind-wiped or granted the peace of oblivion. In any case, her experience fighting against the ruinous powers continued to serve the Imperium and also the goals of Inquisitor Faldere. Whatever those goals might be, she had no choice but to trust that they were for the greater interest of humanity. He was, after all, an extension of the will of the Emperor Himself and that meant she was as well. There was something noble about that. It was comforting.

Vaughn saw that the Inquisitor stood among the throng of soldiers in the second rank. A guardsman with a vox-caster strapped to his back stood nearby, little more than a prop to the inquisitor who was screaming into the handset. She soon realized she no longer had enemies to fight. The daemons were falling back into the dust-clouded hills in the East. They did not rout, of course. Daemons do not rout.

"Hold your advance," Inquisitor Faldere's voice crackled over the command channel, "Give the line troops a moment to take a breath and gather their morale. This must seem a great victory to them. Meet me just forward of my current position."

Another voice jumped into her earbuds on her Lance channel, this one a far sight younger, "Ma'am?" She could hear his eagerness to press the attack. She could relate. The urge was strong in her as well. The compulsion made her feel like a callow youth again.

She glanced down either side of their battle lines. Another Knight Gallant stood as a proud silhouette against the stark, white sky on each flank. Knight Apparent Leng mounted within Shadow Drake stood along the right flank and Knight Baerm within Flame Heart on the left. "Hold your position, Knight Apparent Leng. I will communicate our orders momentarily."

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When she had finally managed to clamber from her mount, the other commanders had gathered around Inquisitor Faldere. They stood out of earshot of the front line troops, yet near enough they didn't have to muck about in the terrain sodden with the enemy's remains. Corporal Hussum of the Astra Militarum had nary a drop of blood upon

his fine uniform. An Astropath stood at his side, eyes never leaving the Inquisitor. Faldere either never noticed or put on a good show of not noticing.

Chapter Master Chu-i dwarfed them all, of course. His massive Astartes bulk was clad in dented and stained silver power armour. He held a helmet reminiscent of a bird of prey in the crook of his arm. He had a noble face with sharp yet full features. His black, crinkly hair was cut very short and his full, purple lips were tucked into a permanent grimace. His dark, fathomless eyes, however, belied a gentle wisdom far beyond his years. Rumor within House Draco was that this feature held more truth than hyperbole. The Star Eagles were all calm and calculating, never hasty. Some used outmoded phrases or had strange accents, though they all hailed from the same Chapter Homeworld. All of them had a deep knowledge of history and cultures. They were an odd chapter, to be sure, but never really did anything to sully their reputation. Indeed, they were beloved by common folk and reviled by despots from Segmentum Obscurus to Segmentum Pacificus. While this was laudable and rare in these dark times, Vaughn often wondered if it was worth the trouble. Such things tended to attract the wrong kind of attention.

“My men will lead the Vanguard,” Chu-i insisted.

Faldere spat, “The Chapter Master’s altruism is endearing, but misguided. I am not sure why the enemy has fallen back. This is *not* a behavior I have witnessed from these particular Xenos in the past.”

Chu-i broke the pretense immediately, “These are the spawn of the Blood God. They are not Orks. Their commanders could possess the battle wisdom of a thousand wars. They have as much a right to claim the status of lords of the battlefield as any of us. They draw back for a reason. It is for us to determine why.”

Corporal Hussum suggested, “Are they bringing forth reserves?”

Faldere’s eyes never left Chu-i’s face. Something the Chapter Master had said didn’t sit well with the Inquisitor. “Possibly,” he said.

“Not yet,” the Chapter Master growled. “The toll has not been paid in full to please their god. Only at that time will he bequeath them with reinforcements from the Empyrian.”

The Astropath spared Chu-i a glance at that.

Inquisitor Faldere stalked towards the giant Space Marine. His own stature was a joke by comparison. “Yes. I believe you’re right, Astartes. Too soon. Your wisdom in this matter is very interesting.”

Slowly, Vaughn hooked her thumb against her sidearm’s holster.

“So,” Chu-i said, his eyes narrowing. Those dark pools grew until only the faintest ring of white remained, “What is the plan of action?”

The two were less than a meter apart. The tension was thick.

“We follow the plan. Full infantry advance. All-out assault.”

“Tell me again. This time, give me the right answer.”

She hoped no one noticed her popping the snap of her holster with her thumb. Vaughn had no idea who she would shoot if there was violence. The political waters were muddy at best when the will of an Inquisitor and the wisdom of a Chapter Master were at odds. It did not help that House Draco had a storied history with both of their organizations. She hoped her instincts would guide her in the heat of the moment.

Faldere chose to explain rather than continue his hard line. He was breaking. "We cannot afford to lose our special forces. We can reduce their numbers with our own first, then erase anything left alive." Vaughn knew that the Inquisitor meant that quite literally.

Chu-i's segmented gauntlets curled into massive fists. His dark brow furrowed. Vaughn knew he wasn't balking at being relegated to a defensive role. Rather, he was a consummate Star Eagle and therefore loathe to throw away human life, no matter how insignificant. Indeed, it had been her experience that the Star Eagles did not hold much stock in measuring the value of a human life.

"My Lord, Inquisitor," Vaughn chimed in, hoping her voice didn't sound sheepish, "Do the arithmetic. So far, a slow battle of attrition has depleted their forces steadily. We have seen few new arrivals from beyond the veil. But we've still lost half a regiment this week. Any significant spilling of mortal blood would be catastrophic in the heat of battle."

She knew she came very close to speaking too plainly, but she didn't want to be misunderstood. The ruinous powers sipped upon the sacrifice of mortal folk and rewarded dearly those who served the meal. Twenty thousand Cadian guardsmen would make for quite a meal.

Faldere snorted, "It is a calculated risk, Seneschal. It would be far worse to lose our strongest counter-assault, not just in this battle, but in battles to come."

Corporal Hussum nodded, "A good commander does not only think of the moment, but of the future as well."

"M'Lord," she said, shaking her head, "you were at the Heybes Pass. You saw the great culling and what it meant for that world. I am willing to risk myself and my lance-mates to save this world from the purge. I do not share my old friend's soft heart, but his logic is flawless. My Gallant Lance and the Star Eagles must meet their inevitable assault, break its momentum, and allow our forces to crush them at range."

Faldere sighed and frowned, his features softening, "The enemy vessel which bore the cult responsible for this madness has been obliterated in orbit. The incursion does seem localized here in these hills." The Inquisitor fiddled with one of his many badges of honour and sighed, "Very well, Seneschal. It is possible we could save this world."

He almost made her believe that mattered to him. He had never been a stupid man, nor a man who would allow hubris or arrogance to jeopardize a mission or his own life. However, Faldere had never given her reason to believe he was actually capable of mercy or even basic empathy.

"It would be nice, m'Lord," she said, "to make a difference in the here and now for once, rather than for the greater good."

The Inquisitor's dark expression was contrasted by the smile beaming on the face of the Corporal, "You will have a full vehicle escort," Corporal Hussum offered, "We have over forty Chimera fueled up and crewed. That should keep some pressure off the Knights and the Astartes at least for a time."

The Inquisitor nodded, "Agreed. Chimera need only carry two skulls aboard, after all. They will not drastically affect the tally."

Chu-i's hands opened and his posture loosened. Most of all, his pupils contracted. The calm washed over him in a single breath. "Thank you, m'Lord. For the Emperor," he said and pulled the beak-faced helmet over his head. In his full battle plate, it was hard to believe he was anything but a vicious predator of war, that the hearts of a savior beat in his chest. He stalked away towards the rest of his men.

"I suppose my meeting is over," snarled the Inquisitor, "Go on. Make preparations. Seneschal, you stay."

“M’Lord?”

When the others had gone, he drew close and said, “I hope you understand, Seneschal, that there is a very important priority to your loyalties. They begin and end with me.”

“They begin, m’Lord, with House Draco and my High King. They end with the Emperor of Mankind. This has always been the case and it shall always be.” He tried to interrupt and she continued, “Like as not, you, the Inquisition, and my brothers in war, the Star Eagles, lie somewhere between.” She smiled and began the long climb to the Knight’s top hatch. She paused, turned back, and said, “For now.”

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Vaughn settled into the Throne Mechanicum. She felt worry for the first time since the start of the campaign and not really for the success of the mission.

Faldere and Chu-i had an enmity that she didn’t understand. The Chapter Master’s brazen attitude towards the Inquisitor was unsettling and dangerous. What’s more, Faldere was too familiar with the Star Eagles. Did he have an inkling of their history or their strange nature? Why should he? The Star Eagles were as loyal and fearless as any Lord of the Imperium would hope from their Angels of Death.

Mechadendrites hissed around her, jacking into her jumpsuit and directly into the augmetics in her skull. She plugged two synth-hormone tubes into her neck and secured herself to the command throne. Vaughn emptied her mind of sensation and doubt. She and the Knight became two parts of a whole, each experiencing a shared perception of the world around them.

From her vantage point, she could see the disposition of the enemy over the hills and was not surprised. They were gathering for an assault. “Lord Inquisitor,” she voxed over the Command channel.

“Report.”

“The enemy are gathering for a thrust maneuver. A column is being assembled at the center of our lines. They plan to kill as many of us as possible in a single go and damn the casualties.”

“Understood. It is as the Corporal predicted. Take your position at the center. We are leaving the artillery, vehicles, and heavy weapons teams there and sending the rest of the infantry in a flanking maneuver. You will halt their advance and the infantry will collapse on either side, crushing them in a crossfire of lasguns and bayonets.”

“Victory shall be ours, m’Lord.”

“For the Emperor, Seneschal,” he said.

“For the Emperor,” growled Chapter master Chu-i.

“For the Emperor,” Vaughn replied.

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They allowed the enemy to redeploy in a massive wedge and begin their assault before tipping their strategic hand. The Cadian artillery smashed the enemy’s flanks, obliterating the enemy cavalry and beast packs until naught but the massive column of infantry and twisted war machines remained. When the enemy was sufficiently

close, Vaughn's Gallants and the Star Eagles charged across the empty battlefield, leaving the entrenched Astra Militarum behind. At least two score Chimaera broke ranks and followed close.

Within the Daemons' vanguard, several mounted commanders seemed to realize what was happening. They pulled back into the horde and began barking orders in a crackling, foul tongue. It was, however, too late for them to reform. The trap was closing.

"Gallants, close ranks!" she ordered, "Chimaera, pull up to either side of us and make a wall of steel in an enveloping phalanx formation."

Chapter Master Chu-i added, "Star Eagles, stay behind the Knights and shoot anything to death that trickles through. Not a single Cadian shall fall before they are ordered to engage."

Although several of the enemy war machines belched flaming skulls into the Knights' charge, the impromptu shells exploded harmlessly off their Ion Shields. Energy crackled across Tiamat's carapace with every blast. When their assault hit the vanguard of the enemy advance, the disciplined Chimaera drivers formed a steep, backward wedge on either side of the Knights, funneling the hellspawn into the enraged, twilight-hulled Knights at the center.

Vaughn didn't even bother with Tiamat's Reaper Chainsword or Thunderstrike Gauntlet at first. She mucked into the enemy with her Knight's bulk, stomping, kicking, and crushing anything that dared come near. The Chimaera were rocked with the momentum of the Daemonic throng, but their turrets sliced the enemy with deadly coherent light or blew them apart with thudding Heavy Bolter rounds. Tiamat's autosenses translated the odor of burned, rancid meat and Vaughn delighted in it.

When the enemy began pouring around the wall of Chimaera, the Astra Militarum infantry broke into two organized lines and advanced at a steady march on the enemy flanks. Other Daemons clambered or leapt over the tanks, though the majority of these were easily gunned down by the patient and accurate Astartes bolters. The Chimaera's guns went silent one by one. Some pilots popped their canopies and defiantly emptied their laspistols into the horde before being hacked to smoking pieces by swords as hot as the day they were pulled from the hellforge.

The inner ranks of the Cadian advance began to open fire as they closed on the enemy flanks. A Lasgun is fairly quiet on its own, but the sheer volume of heads exploding and chests bursting swelled to a roar as the enemy's flesh violently evaporated under the intense hail of las beams. The Cadian artillery continued to thunder away, their ammunition stores depleting rapidly. The Daemons rushed away from the explosions at their rear flank and were more than happy to meet the Cadian advance.

"Gallants! It's time to push!" she barked and urged Tiamat forward, beyond the wall of Chimaera. Faldere was keeping the Star Eagles on a short leash. They held their position, engaging any Daemons which dared to have a go at the artillery in the back field. More than once, a lone pack of Flesh Hounds or Bloodcrushers managed to swing around the main press only to find themselves riddled with mass-reactive shells.

The carnage within the press was thick. The Knights of House Draco kept a tight formation to avoid being overwhelmed piecemeal. Were it not for her great strength, Tiamat would surely have bogged down in the roiling muck stewed from blood and ferrous dust. She and her lance-mates hacked and stomped their way forward, causing incalculable casualties in the center of the enemy's ranks.

A horn blared from within the cloud of dust beyond the fighting. It was answered by seven others. The sonorous clarion rippled over the enemy. Oddly, they gave way for the advance of the Knights and Astartes, throwing themselves into the jaws of the Astra Militarum's wall of lasgun fire on either side instead. It felt oddly like a rout.

It seemed the sudden redoubling of the enemy's efforts had stoked the flames of the Cadians' ire. Hundreds of Daemons were torn to hot, steaming chunks with a heavy, but undisciplined series of lasgun volleys. Some Bloodletters and also Bloodcrushers mounted on their mechanical steeds broke through the short reprieve from constant lasfire and tore into the Cadian ranks. Half of their Space Marine bodyguards broke formation to attend to the situation.

Then, from dusty clearing, a phalanx of lumbering shapes lurched from the center of the enemy column. Eight Quadrupedal Daemon Engines roared, belching steaming blood and hate as they advanced. Black smoke, cinders, and gout of hellfire poured from several thickets of smokestacks. Elaborate, yet haphazard bronze webs of reinforced armour crisscrossed over their crimson hulls. Each boasted a set of slavering jaws flanked by a pair of articulated mechanical tentacles.

"Four steps back, mates. Take four steps," she said to her lance, her own desire to meet their charge head-on strong in her heart. She could feel Tiamat's machine spirit and the will of all those who had mounted her saddle in countless centuries past urging her to jump into the fight. She withstood the will of the machine for the time being, as did Leng.

To her left Baern and his Knight, Flameheart, broke ranks. A short cry of regret burst through the vox, "Draco in Perpetuum!" followed by a bloodthirsty scream as the twilight-black Knight leapt for the enemy. The suns glinted off Flame Heart's dull silver edging as he swung back his massive Reaper Chainsword and tore into the first machine, reducing it to glowing slag with a single stroke, then another. A third beast wrapped its tentacles around Flame Heart's leg. Baern managed to grasp the offending thing in his Knight's massive fist and lift it off its feet. There was an intense, blue-violet flash as cutting beams on the tips of the creature's tentacles tore into the Flame Heart's knee joint. He buckled, his leg snapped, and he toppled. Almost three hundred tonnes of machines crashed into the enemy's left flank, crushing dozens of Daemons in the process.

Vaughn didn't have time to witness Flameheart and Baern torn to pieces by the warp-spawn. The five remaining enemy constructs were upon them. The first two immediately mired themselves in the blood-permeated dust. Their front legs screamed in protest as their own momentum twisted their joints, flipping the creatures onto their sides. The others used their fallen comrades as stepping-stones to leap at Tiamat and Shadow Drake. A single ball of molten energy streaked past her vision and connected with one of the leaping constructs. It exploded, a cloud of flaming debris pelting Tiamat's hull.

"Thank you, Kivuli Squad Somaru," she managed to say as one of the surviving Daemon-Engines squared off against her. It was surprisingly nimble. She missed her first swing at the creature, though her fist banged against its hull, knocking loose several armour plates and crushing its left exhaust. Smoke billowed from every crack in its armour. Its tentacles snaked out in search of Tiamat's weak points.

"We have no weak points, Warp-spawn," she muttered and drove Tiamat's chainsword deep into the creature's bronzed hide. Molten metal, sparks, and fragments of cursed machinery belched from the wound and it died at her feet.

She saw that Leng and his Knight had similarly destroyed their attacker, though the beast had exploded and charred Shadow Drake's livery.

"Well done, Leng," she said to the young Noble, "By my reckoning, if you survive this day, you will have earned the title of Knight."

He did not respond. More horns blared from within the enemy column. The sound was not as disturbing as she would have expected. Instead, the horns spoke to her, called her to battle. She did not question him when Leng stomped back into the melee. She considered following him, but took stock of the situation first.

On either side of them, the meat grinder of war was taking its toll, but the score was not in the enemy's favor. Several pockets of Daemons had broken through the Cadian advance, but they were quickly cut down either by the Cadians themselves or the Space Marines. For the most part, their counter-advance held, and the enemy was enveloped. The artillery had stopped. Vaughn surmised that this was either because the Inquisitor had felt the enemy was now too close to risk continuing the barrage so near the guardsmen or they were out of ammunition. Vaughn assumed the latter.

"Seneschal," Chapter Master Chu-i voxed.

"I'm here, Chapter Master," she responded, surprised at how rattled her own voice sounded.

"There is something wrong. Do you feel it?" he said.

"I... no. Only that the battle is going according to plan and we may yet save this world. That is a somewhat new concept of late."

"The fighting has become... feral, Seneschal. Look."

She turned her knight and tried to make out what was going on beyond the billowing dust. She saw that many platoons had closed on the enemy. The infantry were employing sidearms and bayonets with vicious intent. Some seemed to be snarling and screaming at their foe.

"I see," she replied.

"I felt it, too," Chu-i said.

"As did I," she admitted, "I need to re..."

A booming voice suddenly echoed from the enemy's column. "Rejoice, fathers, mothers, daughters, and sons of the Imperium! Rejoice, for your battle is over! Your great war is finished! For Cadia has fallen!"

She should have ignored it. She should have chalked it up as propaganda. Instead, she somehow felt the weight of truth behind the words. The heart of her knew the words were as honest, pure, and true as any oath she had ever taken. She should have despaired. Instead, her heart was only rage.

"Kill them!" Knight-Apparent Leng's young voice bellowed from Shadow Drake's vox. "To me, Cadians! To me! Kill them! Kill them all!"

The roar of the Cadians was unlike anything she had ever experienced. The rage of ten thousand soldiers tore into the Daemonic horde. Many of them forsook their weapons altogether and ripped into the warp spawn with tooth and nail.

Part of Vaughn was compelled by Leng's words. Cadia was not her home, but it was the territory of the Imperium and of key importance to all of humanity, possibly second only to Terra herself. The need for vengeance and the promise of glory for the taking filled her heart. And yet, Seneschal Vaughn's decades of experience washed over the fires of rage and hatred, quenching it to a smoldering nothing.

"No," she said to no one in particular, "I am not your puppet, god of gore and skulls. I am not in your service."

"I'm glad to hear that, Seneschal," Chapter Master Chu-i said.

She wasn't aware that she had broadcast her last statement over the vox, "And I am glad you are still with me, Brother Chu-i," she replied, "I think we've lost Leng."

He sighed, "And a number of my men, I'm afraid."

The roar of the guardsmen rose to a crescendo when the Cadian rearguard joined the fight. Their artillery and heavy weapons lay inert and forgotten in the dusty trenches. Every soldier, every officer, and every serf charged into battle, funneling through the gap in the wall of wrecked Chimera.

Another voice of reason broke through the vox, "Stop them," said the Inquisitor, "Stop them before this incursion becomes untenable."

Simultaneously, Tiamat and Chu-i turned to face the charging mass of Cadians. "Stop!" they boomed from their external vox amps, "In the name of the Emperor, stand down!"

They didn't. Or they couldn't. Either way, the flood of humanity streamed past the Astartes and the Knight without thought for self-preservation in the face of such legendary gods of Imperial lore. They charged into the breach, slogged through the mire of dust and blood, then engaged the enemy, armed with naught but their own hate.

"We need to stop them," Chu-i growled, "We need to stop them from dying."

The carnage was already ghastly to behold. The Bloodletters' blades, which seemed possessed with spirits of flame, carved into the press of humanity as a thresher to wheat. With each strike, flesh caught aflame and Cadians fell, bleeding and burning to death.

Vaughn said, "Then the enemy must die faster than the Cadians. Grab hold," and coaxed Tiamat into a kneeling position. She heard the Chapter Master chuckle over the vox as the nine surviving Space Marines climbed aboard the Knight's hull. "Hold tight, now," she warned, then leapt from her crouching position and pumped the Knight's legs into a run. It took the skill of all her years as a Knight Scion to navigate the ferrous slurry of dust, corpses, and wreckage.

She aimed for a grassy hillock just before the melee with her last great stride, then pushed off in a powerful jump. Warning klaxons screamed around her. A technical readout superimposed over Tiamat's autosense pict feed immediately outlined her right knee in yellow. Tiamat sailed over the Cadian line and landed in the midst of the incursion favoring her left leg. The Klaxons blared once again. This time the readout traced her left foot in bright crimson.

The Space Marines didn't waste time. They charged over the broken remains of several hellspawn and engaged the enemy with blade and pistol. Seneschal Vaughn noted that one Astartes was bathed in viscous fluid. With a thought, she cut the hydraulic feeds to Tiamat's left foot. She'd have to do without two operational feet, it seemed.

They crushed and chopped their way into the enemy. Not far off, Shadow Drake was still mulching through the press. It was hard to tell whether the voice screaming from the Knight's vox amplifier was Leng's or that of Shadow Drake's machine spirit. Vaughn surmised that the distinction was likely tenuous at best.

Fleshy, red bodies gave way with ease, but they mainly ignored the Astartes and the Knights in favor of the mortal sacrifice surrounding them. Both warp spawn and human alike were cut to ribbons, screaming manic laughter, delighting in their own slaughter. The Space Marines were trying to engage the enemy, emptying the last of their bolt ammunition and releasing the last of their grenades into the Daemons. Still, the enemy never relented in their butchery.

"Fight me, damn you!" Vaughn bellowed through her own external vox-amplifier. "FIGHT ME!"

At that, a voice boomed out of the West, "Very well! Here I am!"

She turned Tiamat to see the Cadian Artillery crews and carriage teams were all dead. There was nothing left of them but a mountain of flesh standing in a lake of blood. Ripples pulsed out from the golgotha. The ripples became a tide. The tide coalesced into a wave. The wave of gore gathered at the edges of the battlefield and rolled inward. The Space Marines and Tiamat all weathered the surge, but many Cadians were not so lucky. Many were swept away towards the center of the carnage, still bellowing with rage. The blood tide broke over Shadow Drake's hull and gathered up into a fountain of boiling remains.

The surge hung like that for much longer than momentum ought to have allowed. The blood and gore continued to pull into the space where the young Knight Apparent's armour once stood, sucking itself out of the permeated earth and leaving dry, ferrous dust behind. A mechanical howl of pain, rage and regret pealed across the battlefield as the fountain exploded, a storm of gore raining over the remaining survivors.

A hulking, black-armoured daemon had manifested in the place where Shadow Drake once stood. Its lolling tongue caressed the whirring edge of its all-too-familiar chain blade. Its fist boasted massive claws at the end of each finger. The armour bulged with red flesh and black horns. A pair of enormous, dark, red wings stretched out behind the apex Daemon as it surveyed the carnage.

"Throne save us," choked Inquisitor Faldere over the vox, "Bloodthirster. Vaughn. You're the only one who can face it."

Vaughn was genuinely surprised the Inquisitor was still alive let alone cognizant enough to bark orders, "It will be dead," she said, "or I will."

Vaughn targeted her former lance-mate's corrupted bulk with Tiamat's heavy stubber and cut loose a useless stream of rounds to get his attention. He turned towards her, glowing pinpricks of hot malice in his eyes. "Fight me, beast," she said through the vox-amplifier, "End this."

"Yes," he replied, "Your end," and stormed towards her with a single beat of his enormous wings.

The Bloodthirster hacked at her with the great chain blade he still bore as his right arm. She parried with her own left-handed blade, tilting on Tiamat's right leg for leverage. Her Knight's own sword tore into the other, pulling her opponent's chain blade from its tracks. Dozens of individual chain teeth ripped themselves apart, showering both combatants with sparks. The Bloodthirster did not care. He hammered at her with the neutered weapon as if it were a club. Vaughn coaxed Tiamat's sword arm up in defense, pushing into the Bloodthirster's assault to reduce the momentum of each strike. Just the same, his final stroke severed the his own arm and crushed the mechanism of Tiamat's Reaper Chainsword.

Her instincts told her that, if there was anything left of Leng within the mountain of hateful flesh before her, he would follow through with a strike from his fist. Vaughn uttered a prayer to the machine-god and leaned Tiamat back onto her left leg. Three claws scored the Knight's torso with angry, molten scrapes, but the damage was superficial. However, when Tiamat came down on her dead left foot, several loud bangs reverberated through her edifice and she went down with a crash, sending a plume of dust in all directions.

Vaughn blacked out.

~ * ~

When she came to, her ears were ringing. A huge, dark red blur dominated her vision, blotting out one of the suns. As her senses returned to her, she heard lasguns again. Someone was ordering a fall-back. A louder voice ordered fire on their target. A hot bolt of energy passed over her vision and impacted with the red blur followed by a roar of rage and pain.

Her sluggish arm keyed a control on her throne. A cocktail of adrenalin along with a multitude of drugs and toxins suddenly coursed through her body. Her vision cleared and she leaned Tiamat to the right, pushing up with her Thunderstrike Gauntlet. "Come on, honey," she urged her Knight, "One more time. You can do this."

The Bloodthirster had one of the Star Eagles in its fist. The Marine mashed the trigger of his Meltagun, pouring molten hate into the thing's face and torso over and over until the Daemon hefted the hero into his snaggle-toothed mouth, bit down, and pulled. He threw the bottom half of his victim to the dust and locked eyes with Vaughn and Tiamat over whom he stood. She was nearly up. She struggled to find purchase with her hobbled leg.

Her opponent grinned and reached up with his mangled right arm. Another stream of blood and bone streaked from nowhere and swirled about his ragged stump. In an instant, a proper arm and hand was formed from the remains of the fallen. A stroke of crimson lightning exploded and the hand's grip was suddenly filled with a massive axe crafted from some dark, alien metal. The axe's skull-faced head glowered, red as a blade in the forge.

"No..." she growled and pushed off from the ground with Tiamat's fist, swinging up in a wild haymaker. She connected with the monstrosity's jaw just as the great axe bit deep into her torso. Teeth and blood exploded from the Bloodthirster's face, raining upon Cadians dozens of meters away. Simultaneously, the axe clove into Tiamat's Heavy Stubber ammunition case. The explosion was titanic, shooting hot flame from the Knight's emergency explosion vents in her back, jerking her to the right. This was serendipitous as the Bloodthirster blindly followed through, hammering little more than dirt with his own fist.

Tiamat rolled away. Vaughn saw ground, then sky, ground, sky, ground, sky, ground. The knight came to a halt. Dizzy, but desperate, Vaughn shoved Tiamat to a crouch, then stood, wobbling dangerously. She turned gingerly towards her opponent. A disheartening trail of slag and wreckage littered the ground from Tiamat to where the Bloodthirster stood reeling. Much of its face was a mangled waste of flesh and bone. Its eyes, however, bore a determined fury.

"Time to die." it managed to say.

"I couldn't agree more." she retorted.

The lumbering giants clashed through the roiling dust, both unmindful of their grave injuries and impairments. Tiamat's heavy bulk smashed her own left foot to scrap in the first stride, but still she came on. Vaughn could see the Daemon's breath sputtering blood through its ragged nose and mouth. Smoke oozed from the thing's makeshift armour plates which still bore the heraldry of House Draco and poor Leng's ancient family. Axe hacked. Fist smashed. Blood fanned. Coolant sizzled, evaporating in pools of molten metal.

The Bloodthirster grabbed at her right pauldron with its claw and tried to pull her into a closer grapple. She resisted as much as she dared, the pauldron's riveted mounts screaming for mercy. She then allowed the monster's grip to add to her own strength and leaned in. She swung the gauntlet up and punched through the creature's torso. Her opponent vomited his own internal organs from his mangled face. She lifted him up, turned on Tiamat's bad leg and tossed him over her shoulder. She fell, trailing a line of hot innards from her fist, and crashed to the earth one last time.

She knew no more.

~ * ~

Despair. It was mixed with relief and joy, but the despair was a lodestone, dragging everything else down with it. She sat in the dust, in the shadow of her constant companion, and held her open palm to the cold hull. Her eyes

were wet, an inevitable result of the pain. She hoped the failing light of day would hide her mourning from the others.

“She may yet fight again, one day,” Chu-i’s voice rumbled behind her. She hadn’t heard him coming. Her ears still rang from the concussion.

Vaughn stood, swayed, and leaned against Tiamat’s cold, black pauldron. She turned to face the Space Marine. His eyes were also wet.

“I’m sorry about your brothers, Chapter Master.”

He nodded, “Many of them were old souls. Their passing is a tragedy for my chapter and my people. Though it is the risk they take by following this path.”

Another shadow shuffled into the battlefield.

“Old souls, Chapter master?” the inquisitor croaked.

“A figure of speech, m’Lord,” Chu-i explained.

“Of course it is. Your chapter’s loyalty is on shaky ground with the High Lords, Space Marine. Secrets are hard to keep as it is, and doubly so if you have to protect them with lies.”

“Do you question my loyalty, Lord Inquisitor? When our chapter has lost so much for this world?”

“This system is an important depot for the Cadian front. You brought me barely a company to help hold it.”

“I brought you my first company, m’Lord. Also, there is activity on the northern verge of the eye of terror. Do not question me. The Star Eagles currently hold the line against the Ork Warlord Gathrog. Would you like to add an unchecked Ork WAAGH! To your troubles, Inquisitor?”

“Never mind. You and what remains of your 1st company will be accompanying House Draco and me to Segmentum Solar as soon as possible. We are to rendezvous with...”

Chu-i cut him off, “We will do no such thing. We have our own responsibilities. Do not treat me like one of your retinue. I am a Chapter Master and I have the authority...”

It was Faldere’s turn to cut him off, “You will come. You belong the Ordo Hereticus now, like this Seneschal and the rest of her House.”

“I serve the Emperor,” Chu-i replied, “not you.”

“You serve yourselves,” the Inquisitor spat.

The accusation hung in the air for several beats.

“You were never conditioned in the same way other Astartes are, were you? None of you were. I sense an age to your psyches. Thousands of years, yet here you are, few of you having yet reached your first century yet, if that. Oh I know. There have been whispers. How old is your soul, space marine?”

For that, he had no answer.

“And you, Seneschal. How much do you know?”

She shrugged.

“Very well. Both of you are alive now thanks to the mercy of the Inquisition. And you are lucky, because mercy is a business I am in. Your chapter has been loyal, Space Marine. Aloof. Headstrong. But loyal. For that, I will simply report your deaths to your fortress monastery on Yanchi and you will serve the Emperor by my side until those reports become a reality. Your strange, little customs can continue on that world until the day I die for all I care. And when that death comes, you had best hope it is on my terms or else your secrets will be made bare to all who would care to know of them.”

Chu-i looked into Michelle’s eyes and asked, “What say you, Rafiki?”

“Say yes,” she replied without hesitation.

“You side with this snake?” he was incredulous, as if he had expected her response to be skinning her laspistol and evaporating the Inquisitor’s skull.

“My friend, your compassion is your greatest asset and your most obstructing flaw,” the truth made her voice waver.

“I did not think that our debt to one another’s organizations could be forgotten by the pull of an Inquisitor’s leash.”

“Chapter Master Chu-i,” she said, angry, “House Draco count hundreds of star systems from here to the core of Segmentum Solar as our domain. Our house rides to war every time Terra is threatened. Time and again we have emerged from that crucible on waves of victory and honor. Every system we purge of Empyric threats is another debt of honour owed to us. However, the truth is that our debt to the Star Eagles is greater still. It is for this reason that I ask you. Take. The. Deal. Fight by our side until the end comes. What more could you possibly desire.”

Chu-i seemed stunned. They locked eyes long enough to sense one another’s sincerity. He frowned, nodded, and extended his hand. She put hers in his and they shook once. He said, with no small portion of regret “It would be an honor, Seneschal.”

After a long moment, he stalked off.

Faldere turned to her, “Well done, Vaughn. You should consider taking up the mantle of the Ordo Hereticus yourself. You are often masterful in dealing with others.”

“I’m a warrior, Inquisitor, not a bureaucrat.”

“Oh, the Inquisition is much more than a bumbling bureaucracy, my friend. We could use you.”

She changed the subject. “I have to get a thought off my chest, Inquisitor. Otherwise, I’m afraid it will eat me alive.”

“Go on.”

“For a few moments, I was sure you would intentionally sacrifice the Cadians. Perhaps in the name of the dark gods themselves.”

His expression was cold and unreadable, yet she could feel that she was in more danger now than she had ever been, during the battle or perhaps in her entire life, “You would question my motives? After our years of partnerships?”

She did not back down, "How else can I resolve your original plan in my mind? Such a great sacrifice at the hands of the enemy would have certainly been catastrophic for this world."

He seemed to struggle with this, "The risk of full incursion was great no matter which plan we went with. At least with a full infantry charge, we had the option of extraction followed by Exterminatus."

"But why? Why, if this world is so important? If there was a chance of success, why not risk it if the result is the same otherwise?"

His expression broke into a deep frown. His old, wrinkled brow sagged, "Damn you."

"For what?"

"For forcing my hand, damn you. For exposing my dereliction of duty. I knew the danger. The signs were all there. The rise of the Greater Daemon was almost certain with all the bloodshed we had experienced in this theatre of war."

"So it's true?" her hand wavered over her sidearm again. She had no idea how many of his agents stalked the darkness, but she had always been very fast on the draw.

"No. Never. The truth is, I didn't want to be responsible for your death, or worse, your corruption."

Vaughn gaped, "Pardon?"

"How old were you when you originally joined me in this long fight against the ruinous powers, Michelle? Nineteen?" his voice cracked, "Why did I not want to send you to a bloody grave? Dereliction of duty, thy name is Sentiment. I will thank you to forgive it and forget it, if you can. Forgive that I did not wish to sign the death warrant of the only person I have ever known who I could call family."

Her response was necessary, but it revolted her even as it fell from her mouth, "Never fail to send me to do my sworn duty in the future, old man. You are nothing to me. There is only war."