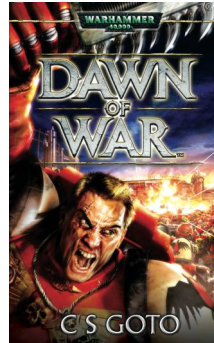


DAWN OF WAR

The first novel in the 'Dawn of War' series

By CS Goto

Brother-Captain Gabriel Angelos of the Blood Ravens Space Marines throw his men into a last-ditch defence of Tartarus – a planet with a long and troubled history. A brutal ork invasion has left the world in ruins, and there are more ancient evils at work. The mysterious eldar and the forces of Chaos are fighting a battle older than humanity itself. Gabriel must confront his own demons as he leads the Blood Ravens through a spiral of intrigue that could expose the shadowy hand of the Inquisition, and the long forgotten secrets of both Tartarus and the Blood Ravens themselves.



About the Author

C S Goto has published short fiction in *Inferno!* and elsewhere. His work for the Black Library includes the Warhammer 40,000 Dawn of War novels, the Deathwatch series and the Necromunda novel *Salvation*.

In the same series

Dawn of War

Dawn of War: Ascension

Dawn of War: Tempest

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Warrior Brood

Warrior Coven

Eldar Prophecy

The following is an excerpt from *Dawn of War* by CS Goto.
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SHEETS OF WARP energy cracked through the night, bathing the mountain top in dark, purpling light. Clouds roiled and rolled across the sky, spiralling around the peak as though being drawn into an immense tornado. Lightning flashed through the barrage of rain, silhouetting monstrous forms against the heavens. The discharge of force weapons crackled brightly, sending sparks of blue spraying through the rain. In the strobes of visibility, blades shimmered and combat was joined in an odd, staccato rhythm.

The sky was weeping with energy, spilling oceans of unearthly fluid from one dimension into another, ripping the fabric of the atmosphere into serrations through which the immaterium could drip, ooze, and flow. The unclean energies sizzled and hissed as they broke through into the air, as though celebrating their liberty. Unaccustomed to the viscosity of air and the strictures of gravity, the sickly flows congealed quickly into pods and droplets, falling from the sky like mutant rain, lashing into the mountain top with toxic ferocity.

Macha stood on the second summit of the mountain, just lower than the main peak. Her arms were outstretched, as though trying to embrace the rage of the storm, her head held high, her eyes closed delicately in concentration. The wind whipped her long hair into a torrent behind her and, in the sudden flashes of lightning, she was deathly beautiful. Power radiated from her body, glowing with a faint blue like a holy aura. The intensity grew, focussed on a point just in front of her chest, where the light condensed into a brilliant ball of blue fire.

With a sudden flick, Macha's eyes were open and the ball of energy erupted into life, blasting through the air towards the eye of the storm. The light hissed and crackled as it scorched through the hellish rain, before it was finally swallowed whole by the spiralling clouds. It was gone. Vanished. And, for a moment, it seemed that it was lost.

A tremendous explosion shook the mountain top, sending avalanches of rock and slides of blood-drenched earth cascading down its crumbling sides. The sky was lit with blast-rings of blue fire, rippling out from the eye of the storm and incinerating the droplets of warp rain, which sparked with moments of death in the concentric bands of flame.

In the sudden flood of light, Macha could see the scene around her and she shivered. Looking back towards the base of the mountain, there was a bed of corpses, like rocks in the river of bloody soil that gushed down towards the valley. Some of her eldar warriors were still on their feet, battling desperately against foes that seemed to flicker in and out of existence. Towards the peak of the mountain were even more corpses, piles of them where entire squads had been annihilated with single blasts from the daemon. But there was Macha's avatar, towering over his brethren and locked in combat with the daemon on the crest of the mountain. His ancient weapon, the Wailing Doom, flashed in his hands with incredible speed, smashing great chunks out of the daemon's form while the rest of the dwindling eldar forces struggled to keep the daemon host at bay.

Then the light died and the scene was plunged into darkness once again.

Something shifted in her mind, and the eldar farseer strained her eyes into the night, struggling to fit images to the gyring confusion of thoughts that jostled for her attention. There was something else out there on the mountain, something moving with a hidden purpose. Macha could see flickering pictures in her head, a collage of past, present and future all blurred into one curdling image-pool. There were dark figures in those pictures – giant, pseudo-human warriors – and her heart shuddered each time her thoughts lingered

on them. These clumsy humans were more fearsome than any daemon, in their own way, and Macha's soul was filled with dread by their sudden addition to the mix.

She could feel their presence on the mountain, but there was no sign of them. Even her perfect eldar eyes could not pierce the enveloping shroud of warp energy and driving darkness, and the constant discharge of weapons riddled the mountainside with squirming shadows and pushed the unknown deeper into invisibility.

Kaerial, we are not alone on this planet. Look to the blind-side of the ascent. Macha's thoughts wove their way through the tortuous eddies of psychic energy that swirled around the mountain, and she guided them home – into the soul of Kaerial, the wraithguard commander who was holding the rear line of defences at the bottom of the slope.

Understood, farseer, came the simple reply, and the wraithguard loped off in search of prey. Towering over the battlefield in their psycho-plastic armour, the wraithguard were un-living warriors: artificial constructs housing the spirit stone of once mighty eldar warriors, giving their eternal souls the chance to wreak vengeance on those who slew them.

THE SHAFT OF LAS-FIRE lanced through the air and Jaerielle slid to his knees just in time, skidding a trough into the blood-slicked earth as the blast seared over his head. Without a moment of hesitation, he clicked the trigger of his shuriken catapult, loosing a hail of tiny projectiles into the bank of advancing Chaos cultists, felling four or five at once. As he sprang back to his feet, the rest of the Guardian Storm squad were already around him, braced into firing positions to protect their commander.

But the cultists kept coming, undaunted by the efficiency of the eldar defence, pressing on with sheer weight of numbers, even as hundreds fell and were trampled under foot. Their weapons were crude and increasingly scarce, but a spear will kill as well as a lasgun from close range, and the cultists were closing in on the eldar from all sides. The intervening air was alive with shuriken, flicking and flashing through the night with unerring precision, each one

burying its monomolecular shock deep into the mutated flesh of the advancing hordes. Line upon line of cultists fell, but the crowd was edging gradually closer.

Jaerielle checked behind him. Nothing had yet breached his defensive line, and the farseer stood on the crest of the rise behind them, haloed in a glorious phosphorescence, untouched by the dirty business of close-range combat. Sizzling jets of blue flame burst from her body at regular intervals, plunging into the eye of the storm that raged above them. She needed more time to seal the tear in the immaterium, and the Storm squad would make sure that she got it. And beyond her, on the very summit of the mountain, Jaerielle could see the avatar of Biel-Tan locked into combat with the daemon prince; lightning and warp-tears flashed around the two figures, framing their magnificence for all the world to see. As he watched, a fire grew in the soul of Jaerielle and a thirst for blood doused his thoughts.

Snapping his head back round to the advancing cultists, Jaerielle licked his lips and leapt forward into the fray.

‘For Khaine, the Bloody-Handed God!’ he cried as he drew his long power sword and pushed its impossibly sharp blade through the abdomens of three humanoid cultists.

The call was returned by the rest of the Storm squad, but it was no dissonant cacophony of battle-cries. The Guardian eldar summoned their call from the depths of their souls, chanting it out in tones both too high and too low for human ears to make out. In an exquisite and rumbling harmony, the name of their god of war flooded out across the battlefield, energising each of the eldar warriors who heard it, rallying them into a renewed quest: blood for the blood god. Soon, the call was reverberating around the whole mountain, pulsing through the rock itself, making the earth move with its sonorous power. On the peak of the mountain, acting like a conduit for the chants of the Biel-Tan eldar, Khaine’s avatar threw back its head and let out a scream of power, repulsing the warp clouds above it as though they were feathers in the wind, staggering the daemon prince in a moment of awe. The name was thrown up to the shrouded stars: ‘Kaela Mensha Khaine!’

And the eldar god smiled back at his precious children.

The power sword swung and arced with grace and accuracy, defining a spiral of death around the spinning and dancing figure of Jaerielle. He had discarded his shuriken weapon and now clutched his blade in both hands as he flittered his way through the crowd of Chaos cultists, separating limbs from bodies as though it were an art. From around the perimeter of his elongated helmet spat tiny toxic shards, peppering the faces and necks of cultists who strayed too close, melting them from within – the mandiblaster helmet, still edged in a deep red, was all that Jaerielle had kept from his time as an Aspect Warrior of the Striking Scorpions, but he was glad of it now.

All of the Guardians of the Storm squad had served their warrior cycle in one of the close combat temples, making them perfectly suited for this kind of battle. Jaerielle could see his sister, Skrekrea, slipping elegantly through the forest of primitive blades and random smatterings of fire, dispatching cultists with splendid ease. She had been a Howling Banshee once, and her elaborate mask was still fitted with the sonic amplifiers employed by Aspect Warriors of that temple. The terrible, shrill howl, from which the aspect drew its name, was beginning to rise in volume, emanating from the lithe form of Skrekrea as she swooped and lashed with her sword. The cultists nearest to her were beginning to feel the effects of the sound: their movements were slowing into confusion. Some had already come to a halt, shaking their heads in pathetic attempts to rid their ears of the invasive noise.

Suddenly, Skrekrea spun to a halt, raising her sword before her face, pointing into the stars. The screech from her helmet reached its crescendo and all around her the cultists fell to the ground clutching at their heads, blood coursing from their ears and oozing over their desperate fingers.

Jaerielle did not even pause to watch the impressive sight – he had seen Skrekrea in battle hundreds of times before and well knew what she was capable of. In truth, she was not an exceptional warrior. Frqual was a different story. A former Fire Dragon, he was a blur of motion, spilling great jets of fire from his flamer and

incinerating swathes of cultists with rapid bursts from his fusion gun. Melta bombs sprayed out from unseen holsters around his legs, scattering into the oncoming horde and blasting great craters out of the mountain itself.

Frqual was an eldar Guardian on the edge. He lived to fight and relished the blood that soaked his long memory. He teetered on the edge of damnation, constantly questing for battles and contests. Jaerielle was sure that he would become an exarch one day, completely lost to himself but honed as the perfect embodiment of eldar warcraft. In general, the eldar could not afford such recklessness – they were once the dominant force in the galaxy, but now they were a dwindling race. They had to pick their battles carefully.

Tartarus was not a battle that they could avoid – the farseer had been preparing for it for centuries. The ancient tomes in the Black Library told of the return of the daemon prince, and it fell to the eldar to vanquish him every three thousand years. They could trust nobody else with this task, especially not the short-sighted humans who had bungled into space so very recently.

A spear thrust straight at Jaerielle's stomach, and he rolled easily outside it, drawing his own blade almost casually back along its path, slicing the cultist neatly in two at the waist. These humans are quite pathetic, thought Jaerielle, as he thwarted their futile attacks as though they were in slow motion. Their minds are weak, he added in a haughty internal narrative, for they have fallen to the paltry temptations of this daemon prince. And their bodies are weaker, he noted as another head was parted from its shoulders. The comparison with his Storm squad spoke for itself. Humans – if only there weren't so many of them.

'HOLD,' WHISPERED TRYTHOS, as he held up a giant, armoured fist, signalling to his kill team in case the vox beads in their helmets had failed. 'There is movement ahead.' He pointed sharply at two of the massive Space Marines, enshrined in ancient black power armour, indicating that they should go on ahead to scout. The auto-reactive shoulder plates of the Space Marines glinted against the distant

lightning, and the insignia of the Undying Emperor shimmered in the darkness.

‘You’d better be right about this, inquisitor. This planet is crawling with filthy xenos creatures, and the forces of Chaos are strong here. The local population have lost their minds to this daemon—’

‘—not to mention their souls, captain,’ interrupted Inquisitor Jhordine as a noise behind them made her turn. ‘I am right about this, captain, as we are about to see.’ The inquisitor was dwarfed by the huge Space Marine, who stood over two metres in height, and she did not wear the impressive power armour of the Space Marines, but the Deathwatch kill team were the militant arm of the Ordo Xenos, the branch of the Imperial Inquisition charged with combating the alien, and her authority over these Marines was unquestioned.

A stutter of fire erupted from behind the team, further down the slope towards the valley floor. Out of the mists and the darkness emerged a group of loping figures. Tall and slender, with massively elongated heads, they appeared to have no faces, but bright jewels inset into their armoured forms seemed to glow with life. Taking giant strides in smooth, soundless movements, they were rapidly closing the gap between them and the Space Marines.

‘Eldar wraithguard!’ called Trythos, turning to face the new threat as his team brought their weapons to bear in instantaneous reflex.

A volley of bolter fire punched out of the line of Deathwatch Space Marines, smashing into the advancing line of wraithguard. Great chunks of psycho-plastic splintered away into the darkness, but the strange creatures just kept coming, as though they couldn’t feel the impacts. Their weapons flared with life, returning fire with a hail of projectiles that hissed smoothly through the air, ricocheting off the power armour of the Marines.

‘Go for the jewels,’ called Jhordine, drawing her own plasma gun and taking aim. ‘The jewels are their heart stones.’

The inquisitor squeezed off a pulse of plasma that burst against the glowing gem stone on the chest of the leading wraithguard. The

creature stopped short and a keening cry erupted from its mouthless head, before it suddenly broke into a run, spraying projectiles from its weapon as it charged towards the team.

Trythos matched the giant creature stride for stride, pounding out into the space that separated the two groups and intercepting the charge. As he ran, Trythos swung his power axe above his head, circling it in crescents of coruscating power. From behind him came the chatter of bolter fire and shells flashed past his head, peppering the charging wraithguard with impacts.

Then they were upon each other, but the wraithguard was not equipped for combat at this range. It was an uneven match. Trythos turned his charge into a dive, swinging his axe into an arc as he cleared the last few metres that separated him from the creature. The wraithguard tried to turn the Deathwatch captain aside with his long elegant limbs, but Trythos smashed through them with the servo-assisted power of his armour, shattering the psycho-plastics like wax, driving his power axe towards the gem stone on the wraithguard's chest.

The axe cracked into the jewel with a metallic ring that echoed with an incredible volume. The force weapon sputtered and sparked with power as the pressure against the gem increased, but the stone would not break. Trythos drove the head of the axe forward with all of his strength until a huge explosion threw him back from the shattered wraithguard.

As he hit the ground, Trythos saw another blast of energy smash into his kill team, this time coming from further up the mountain. His squad had split, with half of it continuing the assault against the wraithguard, and the other half turning to face the new threat.

A heavy foot crunched into the ground next to his head, bringing Trythos back to the present with a start. He rolled to his feet and shouldered the shaft of his axe, preparing for a strike against another of the wraithguard. But something was wrong – the shaft was light and unbalanced. The axe head was ruined and broken, shattered and rent by the force of the impact against the eldar stone. A burst of bolter fire from his battle-brothers gave him a split second of cover;

he snatched his boltgun from its holster and loosed a tirade of shells against the wraithguard as they closed around him.

THE AVATAR SWEEPED his immense sword with incredible ferocity, hacking it into the gradually solidifying form of the daemon prince, who winced slightly under the impact. The sword seemed to hum and glow with a life of its own, crying out for blood, wailing with doom. Its impacts resounded simultaneously in multiple dimensions, slicing into the substance of the prince on both sides of the breach in the immaterium.

The daemon roared in frustration as the rivers of blood cascaded freely down the mountainside. It was being violated even as it was being born into the material world, but the avatar was relentless in its assault. The daemon's cultists rushed at the towering Avatar of Khaine, but the ancient warrior hardly even noticed them, swatting them away in droves with the back swing of his blade or treading them into the ground under his feet.

The storm was spiralling in and out of the material realm, sucked into focus by the ungodly presence of the daemon prince. The clouds of warp energy just poured into the daemon's growing form, filling it with power and chaos. The prince lashed out in frustration, raking claws and talons across the body of the avatar, ripping into the warrior's metallic skin and sending spurts of molten blood jetting into the night. The avatar screamed his defiance to the gods, stepping inside the wildly flailing limbs of the daemon and driving his sword home where the monstrosity's heart should be.

Standing on the lower summit, her arms outstretched and open to heaven, Macha unleashed another blast of blue fire into the storm, desperate to seal the breach before the daemon could fully materialise. If the prince were permitted to take solid form, not even the Avatar of Khaine would be able to confront it.

Something clawed at her mind, breaking her concentration for a fraction of a second. For a moment she thought that the daemon was whispering into her soul, trying to lure her away from her purpose, but the voice was too weak, plaintive, and familiar. It was weeping into her thoughts and tears started to roll down her face as she

realised what it was. Kaerial was gone. His spirit stone, which had been housed in wraithbone armour for centuries after his physical death, permitting the great warrior to go on living for the sake of the Biel-Tan eldar, had been destroyed. His death knell rang through the warp like a beacon of lost hope.

The farseer's pain was transformed into anger almost immediately, and she focussed her rage into a searing ball of energy that rocketed up towards the main summit of the mountain as she screamed her fury into the darkness. This time it smashed directly into the form of the daemon itself, sending it staggering back towards the precipice at the edge of the peak, pursued at each step by the frenzy of the avatar's wailing blade.

Tendrils of energy darted out of the daemon's limbs, questing for purchase to prevent its fall from the summit, from the epicentre of the warp storm that fed its manifestation. They lashed and whipped around the mountain top, vaporising clutches of cultists and lapping at the warp-shields that burned around a group of eldar warlocks, who returned fire with jabs of their own lightning, riddling the daemonic form with javelins of blue flame.

Macha smiled to herself: this was it. She threw back her head and screamed into the sky, channelling the energies of her gods into her chest for a final killing blow. The coruscating ball of energy pulsed in the air before her, eager to be loosed against the forces of damnation.

Then a blast of las-fire punched into the back of Macha's shoulder, pushing her forward, stumbling to regain her balance. The ball of flame hissed and then blinked into nothingness, as Macha turned to locate the origins of the blast.

A group of Chaos cultists had burst through the defensive line of the Storm squad. The grossly mutated humans bore Chaos brands on their skin, which seemed to be the wrong size for their bones. Two of them brandished primitive lasguns, which whined with energy and heat as they discharged them frantically in the direction of the farseer.

With a cursory brush of her hand, Macha sent a torrent of lightning crashing into the pathetic humanoids. She watched in

curiosity as they turned themselves inside out and then imploded into tiny tears in the material fabric of the world, sucked through into the immaterium where their daemon lords waited to consume their souls.

The Storm squad were in some disarray. There were new enemies emerging from the darkness, popping directly out of the warp as the storm drew the fabric of reality perilously thin. But Macha had no time for these bloodletter daemons.

Kaerial... she began before she remembered. *Vrequer, you are needed.*

Turning back to the battle on the crest of the mountain, she could see that the daemon prince had found his footing once again.

THE CREATURE SEEMED to slip and slide around his blade, as though it were not wholly solid. Jaerielle spun with his sword, taking clutches of clumsy cultists with each turn, but the dancing, devilish form seemed to evade his every move. It glowed with a dark light, making it shimmer in the rain-drenched night. Its finger tips leaked energy, as though it flowed through its body like blood or cascaded down its arms with the rain. With sharp flicks of its wrists, the bloodletter splattered sizzling droplets of warp energy against the eldar warriors and cut into their armour with its scything finger nails.

Great plumes of flame jetted out from Frqual, engulfing the slippery form in chemical fire. But it just laughed, bathing in the flames and licking at them with its forked tongue. With a sudden movement it spat something back in the direction of Frqual. The old Fire Dragon's reflexes were the sharpest of any of the eldar in the squad, but the viscous liquid splashed into the face of his helmet before he could even flinch. A fraction of a second later, and Frqual was lying prone in the bloody mud, a yawning hole cut straight through his helmet where his head should have been.

'Frqual!' cried Jaerielle and Skrekrea in unison, each working their blades into intricate ritual patterns through the thick, humid air. Their elaborate movements came to rest in the pincer stance of the

Striking Scorpions, with their blades held over their heads, pointing directly at the foe caught between them.

A flurry of gunfire told Jaerielle that the wraithguard had arrived to reinforce the Storm squad. They could deal with the cultists, leaving him and his sister to deal with this bloodletter before it found its way to the farseer.

Jaerielle moved first, lunging at the figure's naked legs with his sword, sweeping his blade in a lateral arc. But the bloodletter was too fast, springing into the air in a breathtaking pirouette, kicking its tiny weight off Jaerielle's blade itself. But the eldar was ready for this, and the mandiblasters around his helmet fired instantly as the daemon-form flashed past his face.

At the same time, Skrekrea brought her blade across in an opposing arc, slicing in front of Jaerielle at about head height, catching the bloodletter full in its stomach. For a moment, Skrekrea's blade cut deeply into the white flesh of the bloodletter's gut, but then it caught as the flesh seemed to regenerate around it, leaving it stuck as a protrusion from the daemon itself. A blast of warp energy fed back along the blade and into the hilt, throwing Skrekrea from her feet and sending her sliding into the swampy earth.

Again Jaerielle was ready. He let the natural arc of his sword turn him into a spin and he came round again with his blade held high, slicing perfectly through the neck of the bloodletter. For a horrible moment, nothing happened. But Skrekrea pulled herself up onto her elbows, dripping with blood and soil, and let out a banshee howl that smashed into the frozen form of the daemon-creature, blowing its severed head from its rapidly disintegrating shoulders and casting it into the ravening hordes of cultists who snatched at it like a prize.

SUDDENLY THE WRAITHGUARD just stopped attacking and turned away, leaving Trythos clutching the shaft of his axe. He fired a volley of bolter shells into the retreating squad, then turned to rejoin his kill team, who were already in the midst of a new battle further up the mountainside.

Inquisitor Jhordine was standing forward of the team with her staff of office held proudly aloft. Next to her stood the Librarian, Prothius, who was spinning his force-staff in a frenzy of spluttering power, sending spears of fire lancing through the darkness ahead of them. The Librarian stood out from his brother-Marines as psychic power played around his form, and he muttered the forbidden words of an ancient mantra – only the Librarians of the Space Marines were sanctioned to use such ungodly forces. But Prothius and Jhordine suddenly stopped fighting, their adversary apparently gone.

‘What’s going on?’ asked Tyrthos as he drew up to Jhordine.

‘I’m not sure,’ she said, scanning the darkness for signs of a trap. ‘The eldar are cunning creatures, and it is not like them to abandon a fight.’

‘Perhaps they knew that they were outclassed,’ offered Trythos.

‘No. They were not outclassed,’ put in Prothius.

‘And they would never admit it, even if they were,’ concluded Jhordine.

‘So, we proceed with caution,’ said Trythos, waving the Deathwatch kill team into formation for an ascent of the south side of the mountain.

‘Yes, extreme caution. There are greater powers at play on this mountain than even the Deathwatch can handle,’ added Jhordine with a note of foreboding.

PROTHIUS WAS THE first to crest the rise and, perhaps, the only one of the Space Marines to understand what he saw. The others just stopped and stared. Jhordine, the last to complete the climb, without the advantage of the Marines’ augmented physiologies, broke the silence immediately.

‘So, I was right. There it is.’ Her voice was barely more than a whisper, but they all heard her.

‘Yes, inquisitor, you were right,’ responded Prothius. ‘Now, what do you intend to do to it?’

The avatar had lost his footing and was pinned to the rock at the summit, with the daemon prince’s tendrils lashing him down. He thrashed and twisted to get free, but the other-worldly strength of the

daemon held him fast. The magnificent sword of the avatar lay on the ground where it had fallen, a great crack ripping through the rock from its point of impact. From a lower summit to the east came blasts of blue power, emanating from an eldar sorcerer of some kind, who stood alone on a rocky outcrop, held clear of the turmoil of battle around her.

The whole side of the mountain was a death scene, lit by the eerie light from the storm and from the flashes of energy that darted through the combat, all reflected into ugly reds by the blood-slicked earth. As far as the Space Marines could see, from peak to valley, there were corpses of eldar warriors and strange misshapen humans. The remnants of each force still fought in pockets over the face of the mountain – fighting was particularly fierce just below the sorcerer and around the summit itself.

‘Why are they fighting?’ asked Trythos.

‘I don’t know, captain, but the eldar must have their reasons to fight this daemonic foe. They are an ancient race, and their ways are mysteries to us, even in the Ordo Xenos of the Inquisition. But they are a dwindling race, and they do not fight without reason, no matter how unfathomable that reason might be.’

‘If they are dwindling, should we not help bring them to extinction: suffer not the alien to live,’ said Trythos with some bravado.

‘Not today, captain. We are not here for annihilation, but for knowledge. We are here because of that,’ explained Jhordine, pointing towards the fallen weapon of the avatar. ‘Over many millennia, the eldar have created a weapon to slay daemons and banish the forces of Chaos from this world – that is the Wailing Doom of Biel-Tan. That is why we are here. Even the smallest fragment could be wrought into a great weapon for the Emperor’s Inquisition.’

A BOLT OF BLUE lightning smashed into the daemon prince, shifting its weight slightly as it turned to stare at the farseer, and triggering a terrible keening. This was all the opportunity that the avatar needed, as he bucked the daemonic form and reached for his fallen weapon.

As the daemon returned his fathomless eyes to the avatar beneath it, the Wailing Doom slashed across its unholy face with a tremendous explosion of power.

The daemon screamed as the blade sliced into its head, shattering its skull in hundreds of dimensions at once. As it reared up in agony, a second great blast from Macha smashed into its face, lifting the contorted form into the air. Then the avatar was on its feet, molten blood cascading down its metal skin, spraying out of the terrible wounds that threatened to tear him apart.

With one last supernatural effort of will, the avatar brought the sword round in a magnificent arc. The weapon wailed into the eye of the storm that spiraled above it, promising doom, and the avatar let out a cry to Khaine. The sound brought silence to the mountain, as all eyes turned to watch the terrible blow. The eldar warriors had stopped fighting and a painfully beautiful chant rose from the remnants of their force – Kaela Mensha Khaine.

The Wailing Doom, the ancient weapon of the avatar of Khaine, seemed to fall into slow motion, sweeping up in a vertical crescent from the avatar's feet, leaving a stream of sparkling energy in its wake. Its tip ripped into the body of the daemon prince with the sound of reality being torn asunder, and the avatar pushed it on with the very last of his ageless strength. The blade ploughed through the abdomen of the shrieking daemon, spraying warp energy and toxic liquids across the mountain, and then sliced up through its neck, smashing into the base of its skull. The daemon's head was shattered in an immense explosion, sending the collapsing skull rocketing up into the gyring storm above.

The head of the daemon prince detonated like a mine, blasting rings of ugly, purple light and splatters of filthy ichor across the mountain top. The blast seemed to consume the storm, and the roiling clouds were a sudden blaze of red fire.

Macha raised her arms to the heavens, holding a small, shimmering stone of maledictum between her hands. She was whispering and chanting into the blaze that engulfed the sky. Then suddenly, as if on command, the fiery clouds spiralled into a

whirlpool and vanished down into the farseer's stone, leaving the scene in stillness and silence.

The avatar of Khaine pushed his sword into the air and a last fork of lightning ruptured the sky, striking the ancient blade as though it were a conductor. The sword flashed momentarily and then shattered with a crack of thunder, sending a shard splintering off against the rocks, as the avatar slumped to the ground with the rest of the blade still clasped in its hand. He lay prone on the mountain top as the clouds parted, leaving him bathed in starlight. His magma-like blood oozed slowly from his stricken body, forming little streams of lava that trickled down the mountainside, as though it were a volcano.

On the lower summit, Macha the farseer collapsed in exhaustion, but she knew that this was not over. She struggled against her exhaustion, trying to warn the warlocks that were rushing to the aid of the avatar, but she could manage nothing more. *A curse on the naïve humans.*

'NOW. NOW'S OUR chance,' said Jhordine, but Prothius was already on his way.

The Librarian vaulted across the lava flows that radiated out from the fallen avatar and rolled beneath the fire that seared out from the line of eldar warlocks who had already gathered to honour him. Streaks of blue power jetted through the air, sending up explosions around the charging Librarian. But the eldar were tired and spent, and Prothius was easily their match. His spinning force staff deflected the bursts of alien power, and sent back flares of its own, smashing into the line of stationary warlocks.

Stooping, Prothius scooped up the abandoned shard of the avatar's blade, feeling its writhing energies repulse at his touch. Voices started to whisper into his mind, but he shut them out and turned. The whispers persisted, pressing at his soul and driving up the pressure in his head to bursting point.

He leapt the last of the magma streams and slid down a short cliff, crashing into the middle of a ring of his battle-brothers who awaited him at its base.

‘Let’s get out of here,’ recommended Jhordine, as streams of warlock fire crested the cliff top, raining energy down onto the team.

The Deathwatch Marines returned fire instantly, sending salvos of bolter fire streaking back up the cliff, breaking away chunks of rock and sending a few eldar flipping over the edge to their deaths.

‘Agreed. The Thunderhawk is already on its way. Extraction point is less than five hundred metres,’ barked Trythos over the din.

PROTHIUS COULD NOT let go of the sword fragment. It was as though it was fused into his grip. He felt weak and drained, and the shard had grown heavier with every hard fought step. Heavier still after they had climbed into the Thunderhawk and blasted away from Tartarus. It was as though it wanted to be back with the eldar. And the whispering wouldn’t stop. His mind was peppered with thoughts that were not his own, chattering and debating all around him. But one voice was clear, and its pain was exquisite: *Human, you know not what you have done.*

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