

THE HORUS HERESY™

THE REFLECTION
CRACK'D

Graham McNeill



The Emperor's Children seek to cleanse
their Legion of all taint

The Reflection Crack'd

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DRAMATIS PERSONAE

The III Legion 'Emperor's Children'

Fulgrim, Primarch

Lucius, Captain

Eidolon, Lord Commander

Julius Kaesoron, First Captain

Marius Vairosean, Captain of the Kakophoni

Krysender, Captain, 9th Company

Kalimos, Captain, 17th Company

Ruen, Captain, 21st Company

Daimon, Captain

Abranxe, Captain

Heliton, Captain

Fabius, Chief Apothecary

1

He did not dream, he never dreamed, yet this was, inescapably, a dream. It had to be. La Fenice was a forbidden place now, and Lucius knew better than to ignore the word of his primarch. In the time before their awakening, such disobedience would have been foolhardy. Now it was a death sentence.

Yes, this was most definitely a dream.

At least he hoped so.

Lucius was alone, and he did not like to be alone. He was a warrior who thrived on the adoration of others, and this place was bereft of any admirers but the dead. Hundreds of bodies lay strewn around like gutted piscine lifeforms, twisted by the manner of their death, and every face belied the horror of their mutilations and defilements.

They had died in agony, yet had welcomed every touch of the blade, every clawed hand that burst eyeballs and tore out tongues. This was a theatre of corpses, yet it was not an unpleasant place in which to find himself walking. Though the dead surrounded him, La Fenice felt abandoned. It felt dark and empty, like a mausoleum in the darkest watches of the night. Life had once paraded before its audiences on the arched proscenium, its glorious vibrancy celebrated, its heroes lauded and its absurdities mocked, but now it was a bloody reflection of a time long passed.

The wondrous mural of Serena d'Angelus was all but invisible on the ceiling, its exotic depictions of ancient debaucheries hidden behind a pall of soot and smoke stains. Fires had burned here, and the tang of roasted fat and hair still hung as a scent on the air. Lucius barely noticed it, too faint and too dissipated to pique much of his interest.

Lucius was unarmed, and he felt the lack of a weapon acutely. He was a swordsman without a sword, and it felt as though his limbs were incomplete. Neither was he clad in armour. His luxuriantly painted war plate had been recoloured in a manner more pleasing to the eye, its drab hues and pedestrian ornamentation exaggerated and embellished in a manner more appropriate to a

warrior of his skill and standing.

He was as close to naked as it was possible for a warrior to be.

He shouldn't be here, and he looked for a way out.

The doors were locked and sealed shut from the outside. As they had been after the primarch had paid one last visit to La Fenice in the wake of the massacre of Ferrus Manus and his allies. Fulgrim had ordered the doors sealed for all time, and none in the Emperor's Children had dared gainsay him.

So why had he risked coming here, even if only in a dream?

Lucius did not know, yet he felt as though he had been summoned to this place, as though an unheard, yet insistent voice had been calling to him. It seemed as though it had been calling to him for weeks, but had only now grown enough in power to be heeded.

If he had been summoned, then where was the summoner?

Lucius moved deeper into the theatre, still keeping watch for a way out, but intrigued to see what had become of the rest of La Fenice. A pair of footlights flickered to life at the edge of the orchestra pit, reflecting their fitful glow from a golden-framed mirror that stood at the centre of the stage. Lucius had not noticed the mirror before now, and let his dreaming steps carry him towards it.

He skirted the orchestra pit, where creatures woven from ruined flesh and dark light had made sport with the entrails of the musicians. The skins of those players were hung from music stands, their heads and limbs arranged like a bizarre orchestra of the damned on those few instruments that remained.

Lucius vaulted onto the stage, the movement smooth and graceful. He was a swordsman, not a butcher, and his physique reflected that. His shoulders were broad, his hips narrow and his reach long. The mirror beckoned him, as though an invisible cord stretched from its silvered depths and reached deep inside his chest.

'I love mirrors,' he had once heard Fulgrim say. 'They let one pass through the surface of things,' but Lucius did not want to pass through the surface of

anything. His perfection had been ruined by Loken's treacherous fist, and Lucius had finished the job with a straight razor and a scream that still echoed in his skull if he listened hard enough.

Or was that someone else screaming? It was hard to tell these days.

Lucius did not want to look in the mirror, yet his steps carried him closer with every passing second. What would he see in such a mirror of dreams?

Himself or something far worse; the truth...

It reflected a single spot of light that appeared to have no source he could see. He thought this puzzling until he remembered that this was a dream, where no logic could be counted as solid, and no sight taken for granted.

Lucius stepped in front of the mirror, but instead of the face he had tried so very hard to forget, he saw a handsome warrior with aquiline features, a strong tapered nose and high cheekbones that accentuated the golden green of his eyes. His hair was lacquered black and his lips full, giving him a smile that would have been arrogant had his skill been any less.

Lucius reached up to his face and felt the smoothness of his skin, the unblemished perfection of it like the brushed steel of a polished blade.

'I was beautiful once,' he said, and his reflection laughed to hear such vanity.

Lucius balled a fist, ready to dash his mocking reflection to shards, but his twin did not match his movements, instead looking at a point somewhere over his right shoulder. In the depths of the mirror, Lucius saw the reflection of the incredible portrait of Fulgrim that hung on the pediment over the splintered ruin of the proscenium.

Like his own face, it did not match his memory of the thing. Where before it had been a majestic piece of incredible potency and power, its outlandish colours and vibrant texture stimulating every sense with its sheer daring, now it was simply a portrait. Its colours were bland, its lines uninspired, and the subject made small and unremarkable, such as any mortal journeyman painter might work with oils or watercolours.

Yet for all that it was a prosaic thing now, Lucius saw the eyes had been rendered with exquisite skill, capturing a depth of pain, suffering and agony that was almost too much to bear. Since Apothecary Fabius had worked dark transformations upon his flesh, it was a rare stimulus that piqued any interest in Lucius for more than a moment. Yet he felt himself drawn into the portrait's eyes, hearing a plaintive cry that echoed from a time and place beyond understanding. Wordless and edged with a madness that could only come from an eternity of confinement, the eyes were a mute plea for the release of oblivion.

Lucius felt himself drawn into the eyes of the portrait as something stirred within him, a primal presence that had only recently awoken and shared a kinship with the reflected image.

The glassy surface of the mirror rippled like the surface of a pool, as though it too sensed that shared heritage. Tremors were rising from somewhere impossibly deep within the mirror. Unwilling to face what might rise from the mirror's depths, Lucius reached for his swords, unsurprised that they were now belted to his waist and that he was fully attired in his battle armour.

The blades were in his hand in an instant, and he swung them at the mirror in a scissoring arc. It shattered into a thousand spinning pieces of razored glass, and Lucius screamed as they sliced into his perfect face, carving the meat and bone to ugly rawness.

Over his own scream, he heard a scream of frustration that dwarfed his own.

It was the cry of someone who knows their torment will be never-ending.

Lucius awoke instantly, his genhanced body switching from sleep to wakefulness in the blink of an eye. He reached for the swords he kept beside his bunk and was on his feet a second later. His chambers were brightly lit, as they always were now, and he swept his blades around in an effort to locate anything out of place that might presage danger.

Garish paintings, symphonic discordias and bloody trophies taken from the black sands of Isstvan V filled his chamber. A bull-headed sculpture taken from the Gallery of Swords sat next to the thighbone of an alien creature he had killed on Twenty-Eight Two. The long, keenly-edged blade of an eldar sword-shrieker

shared space with the blade limb of a clade creature he'd killed on Murder.

Yes, everything was as it should be, and he relaxed a fraction.

He saw nothing out of the ordinary, and spun his swords in an unconscious display of incredible skill as he sheathed them in the gold and onyx scabbards hanging on the edge of his bunk. His breath came quickly, his muscles burned and his heart beat a rapid tattoo on his ribs, as though he had exerted himself in the training cages against the primarch himself.

The sensation was wondrously pleasurable, yet was gone almost as soon as it came.

Aching disappointment touched Lucius, as it so often did when those sensations that raised more than a flicker of interest faded. He reached up to touch his face, relieved and repulsed at the hard ridges of scar tissue criss-crossing his once-perfect features.

He had defaced his wondrous visage with knives and glass and blunt metal, but Loken had made the first imperfection, the cut that had torn him open. Lucius had sworn a mighty oath on the primarch's silver-bladed sword that the Luna Wolf's face would be the mirror of his own, but Loken was gone, cindered ashes drifting on the mournful winds of a dead world.

That silver-bladed sword was now his, a gift from Primarch Fulgrim that had seen his star rise within the Legion to rival that of Julius Kaesoron and Marius Vairosean. The First Captain had offered him new chambers, closer to the beating heart of the Legion, but Lucius had chosen to remain in the quarters assigned to him long ago.

In truth, he despised Kaesoron, and his rejection of the man's offer had given him a moment of delicious frisson as he saw resentment flare in his ruined, molten features. Lucius relished Kaesoron's anger and felt a flicker of pleasure at the memory.

He had no wish to be part of the command structure; such as it was now, and simply wished to hone his already phenomenal skills to ever-greater heights of perfection. Some of the Legion had abandoned that quest as a reminder of their

previous existence as Imperial lapdogs, for what need had they to prove their perfection to the Emperor?

Lucius knew better.

Though few understood the truth of the repugnantly seductive creatures that had birthed and gorged themselves upon the terror and noise of the Maraviglia, Lucius suspected they were aspects of elemental powers that were older and more generous with their blessings than anything the Imperium had to offer.

His perfection would be his devotions to them.

Lucius sat on the edge of his bunk and strove to recall the substance of his dream. He could picture the ruined interior of La Fenice and the terrible gaze of the painting above the blood-slick stage. But for the eyes, it had been Fulgrim as he had been before the Legion had taken its first steps upon the path of sensation. And as full of pain as they had been, there was a familiarity to them that had been strangely absent in the days since Istvan V.

That battle had changed Fulgrim, but no one in the Legion appeared to notice the change save Lucius. He had sensed something indefinably different about his beloved primarch, something impossible to pinpoint, but there nonetheless. Lucius had sensed something awry, like a harp string a fraction out of tune or a pict image not quite in focus.

If any shared his opinion, they kept their counsel, for the primarch did not take kindly to questioning, nor was he merciful in his displeasure. The Fulgrim that had returned from the bloody sands of the dead world had none of the Phoenician's wit or insight, and when he spoke of past battles, his tales had the hollow ring of one who had heard of their fury, but taken no part in their winning.

The feeling that he had been summoned to La Fenice for a reason would not leave him, and Lucius looked up into the face of the painting that hung opposite his bunk. It was the last thing he saw before he took his infrequent bouts of rest, and the first thing he saw upon waking. It was a face that haunted him and inspired him in equal measure.

His own.

Serena D'Angelus had painted the portrait for him, a specially commissioned piece that had seen her delve further and deeper into her soul than any mortal should for perfection. Only the Emperor's Children dared reach for such heights, but where the Legion had transcended, she had been destroyed.

His ravaged features stared back at him from the golden frame with the one thought that had been gnawing at his dreams and waking life like an itch that could never be scratched.

Though it seemed impossible, the nagging thought would not leave him.

Whatever wore Fulgrim's face and moved in his flesh was not Fulgrim.

The route to the Heliopolis had changed since Isstvan V. The great avenue of towering onyx columns had once been a magisterial processional along the spine of the starship, but now it was a howling place of bedlam. Petitioners and supplicants who begged for a glimpse of the primarch's magnificence camped in the shadow of its pillars, where once golden warriors with long spears had stood.

In times past, such obscene flotsam would have been turned away, but now they were welcomed, and a tide of mewling wretches whose devotion fed Fulgrim's grandiosity choked every passageway of the ship. Lucius despised them, but in his more honest moments, he knew it was only because they did not chant his name with such high esteem.

The Phoenix Gate was gone, torn down in the frenzy that followed the Maraviglia and the battle on Isstvan V. The eagle once carried by the carven Emperor was broken and part molten from the melta blast that had brought it down. The frenzy of defacement had almost destroyed the Pride of the Emperor until Fulgrim had put a stop to the madness engulfing the ship and restored a form of order.

Lucius laughed aloud at the mockery of their flagship's name, the sound like a banshee's screech that made the naked, skinless devotees wail with pleasure. Many in the Legion, Julius Kaesoron loudest of all, had clamoured for the ship's name to be changed along with that of the Legion, in echo of the Sons of Horus,

but the primarch had denied them all. All ties to their past loyalty were to remain, as spiteful reminders to their enemies that they fought against brothers. Horus Lupercal had favoured their Legion after the death of Ferrus Manus, and, for a time, the Legion had flown high on a cresting tide of euphoria and sensation.

But like all tides, that fickle euphoria had receded and left the Emperor's Children with a gaping emptiness in their lives. Some, like Lucius, had filled that void with the pursuit of martial excess, while others had indulged desires and secret vices kept hidden until now. Portions of the ship descended into anarchy, as all bonds of control were slipped but, before long, order was restored and a semblance of discipline enforced.

It was a strange kind of discipline, one that rewarded outlandish behaviour as much as punished it. In some cases, the two were one and the same. For all that the legionaries strove to find new meaning and pursue their newfound devotions with all their hearts, they were a force of warriors that needed a command structure to function.

They were still warriors, albeit ones without a war.

Tasking orders had despatched the Legion from Isstvan, but the primarch had shared none of the Warmaster's commands with his Legion. No one knew to which war zone they were bound or which foe would next feel their blades, and that ignorance was galling. Not even the senior warlords of the Legion could claim such knowledge, but the primarch's summons to the Heliopolis was sure to put an end to the Legion's ignorance.

Lucius gripped the hilt of the Laer sword as he saw Eidolon marching towards him along a connecting corridor. The Lord Commander hated him, and never passed over an opportunity to remind Lucius that he was not truly one of them. Eidolon's skin was waxy and pale, pulled tightly across the distended orbits of his eyes. Wire-taut tendons throbbed at his neck, and the bones of his lower jaw moved with the liquid detachment of a serpent.

His armour was painted in garish stripes of vivid purple and electric blue, the colours riotously applied in a striking pattern that owed nothing to any design of camouflage and made Lucius's eyes strain to assimilate what he was seeing.

Such vivid colourings were now the norm among the Legion, with each warrior striving to outdo his fellows in sheer extravagance and ostentation.

Lucius had only recently begun to ornament his armour, its plates strikingly adorned with madly screaming faces stretched beyond all recognition. The inner face of each shoulder guard was notched with jagged metal teeth that pricked and scored his flesh with every movement of his arms. The depth and angle of each tooth was carefully chosen to inflict the most scintillating pains should he choose to wield his blades in anything other than the most sublime manoeuvres.

Eidolon drew in a great sucking breath, the bones of his jaw seeming to writhe beneath the skin and link together before he spoke.

‘Lucius,’ he said, spitting the word at a pitch and cadence that sent an altogether pleasing clash of discordance into the swordsman’s brain. ‘You are an unwelcome sight, traitor.’

‘And yet, here I am,’ said Lucius, ignoring Eidolon and pressing onwards.

The Lord Commander caught up with him and made to grasp his arm. Lucius spun away and his swords were at Eidolon’s throat in a blur of silver too fast to follow. The Laeran blade and his Terran sword rested to either side of Eidolon’s neck. With one flick of his wrists, he could decapitate the man. Lucius saw the relish in Eidolon’s face, the pulsing beat of the hawser-like tendon in his neck and the dilated black holes of his pupils.

‘I’d take your head like I took Charmosian’s,’ he said, ‘if I didn’t think you’d enjoy it.’

‘I remember that day,’ replied Eidolon. ‘I swore I’d kill you for that. I still might.’

‘I don’t think you will,’ said Lucius. ‘You’re not good enough. No one is or ever will be.’

Eidolon laughed, the gesture opening his face up like a tearing wound.

‘You are arrogant, and one day the primarch will tire of you. Then you will be mine.’

‘Maybe he will, and maybe he won’t, but it will not be today,’ said Lucius, dancing away from Eidolon with graceful steps. It was good to draw his swords in anger and feel the gentle pressure of their sharpened edges resting on flesh. He wanted to kill Eidolon, for the man had been a thorn in his side for as long as he’d known him, but it would not do to rob the primarch of his most zealous devotee.

‘Why not today?’ demanded Eidolon.

‘It is the eve of battle,’ said Lucius. ‘And that’s the one day I don’t kill anyone.’

2

Mighty walls of pale stone had been defaced with a thousand splashes of paint and blood, and the great marble statues that supported the coffered dome of the roof no longer depicted the first heroes of Unity and the Legion. Now they were bull-headed representations of the old Laer gods, clandestine things whose heads were bowed or turned to the side as though keeping a delicious secret.

Torn banners hung between fluted pilasters of green marble, the fabric shredded and scorched in the fires of the Legion's rebirth. The floor of the Heliopolis was fashioned from black terrazzo, with inlaid chips of marble and quartz intended to render it into a celestial bowl reflecting the light from the great beam of lustrous starlight that shone down from the centre of the dome. That light still shone, brighter and more piercing than ever before, and the floor's polish reflected it with dazzling intensity. Once, carved bench seats had run around the circumference of the council chamber, rising in stepped ranks towards the walls like the tiers of a gladiatorial arena.

Those seats had been demolished, for none would now sit higher than the primarch of the Emperor's Children, and portions of the rubble formed a plinth at the centre of the chamber, rugged and glistening like the graven idol of a primitive god. Upon this elevated platform sat a black throne of unrivalled magnificence, its surfaces mirror smooth and reflective.

The throne was all that remained of the previous incarnation of the Heliopolis, its regal majesty deemed suitably noble for the primarch of the Emperor's Children. Discordia blared from iron vox-casters; the screams of loyalists as they died on the black sand, the deafening cacophony of a hundred thousand guns, and the music of pleasure and pain intermingled. It was the sound of an empire's violent death, the sound of a pivotal moment in history that would replay over and over again and of which the warriors forced to endure it would never tire.

Perhaps three hundred legionaries filled the chamber, and Lucius recognised many of them from the great battle on Istvan V: First Captain Kaesoron, Marius Vairosean, dour Kalimos of the Seventeenth, Apothecary Fabius, pouting Krysender of the Ninth and a score of others to whom he had applied derogatory

labels. Some were old faces of the Legion. Others were those who had attracted the fickle notice of the primarch, while yet more were simply members of the Brotherhood of the Phoenix who had followed their betters.

Like the Legion's ships and name, so too would the name of their quiet order stand.

Lucius moved through the press of bodies towards Julius Kaesoron, savouring the beautiful devastation of the First Captain's features. An Iron Hand by the name of Santar had ruined Kaesoron's face more thoroughly than Lucius could ever manage, and though Fabius had reconstructed much of his hairless skull, it was still a horror of vat-grown flesh stitched to fused bone, weeping orbs of milky blindness and burned scar tissue the colour of weather-beaten copper.

As wondrous as Julius Kaesoron's blessed transformations were, they were subtle next to those wrought on Marius Vairosean. Where the First Captain had received his ruined visage at the hands of the enemy, Marius Vairosean had been gifted during the rush of power unleashed by the Maraviglia. The captain's jaws were rigid and locked open with barbed cabling, as though he was forever screaming. His eyes were red and raw, bearing the savage scars of the wire-wound sutures holding them open. Two great open wounds in the side of his head cut 'V' shaped gouges in his tapered skull where his ears had once been located.

Both captains wore armour that had been wondrously embellished with spikes and draped with leathered hide stripped from the bodies that littered the parquet of La Fenice. Yet for all their gaudy finery and obvious mutilations, Lucius saw Kaesoron and Vairosean as relics of the past, officers of dogged loyalty who lacked the ambition or flair that would see a warrior burn brighter than a star.

'Captains,' said Lucius, layering just the right balance of respect and disdain into the syllables of their rank. 'It seems that war finally calls us.'

'Lucius,' said Vairosean, giving him a nod of acknowledgement as his jaw cracked and its too-wide circumference formed words that were swiftly becoming almost impossible to give voice. Such implied insolence from Lucius should have earned him a bloody reprimand, but his star was in the ascendancy. Eidolon – a warrior with an eye for spotting the way the wind was blowing – had

seen it, and Vairosean, ever the sycophant, knew it too.

Kaesoron was not so easily intimidated and turned his cloudy eyes upon him. His expression was impossible to read, the ruin of his face making his true disposition a tantalising mystery.

‘Swordsman,’ hissed Kaesoron through the raw wound of his mouth. ‘You are a worm, and an ambitious worm at that.’

‘You flatter me, First Captain,’ said Lucius, meeting his hostile gaze with one of supreme indifference. ‘I serve the primarch to the best of my ability.’

‘You serve yourself and no one else,’ snapped Kaesoron. ‘I regret not leaving you on Isstvan III with the rest of the imperfect ones. I think that I should kill you and be done with your flawed existence.’

Lucius gripped the hilt of the Laer sword and cocked his head to the side.

‘It would give me great pleasure to let you try, First Captain,’ he said.

Kaesoron turned away, and Lucius grinned, knowing Kaesoron would never openly follow through with his threat. Lucius would gut him in the opening moments of any duel, and the thought of murdering the First Captain sent a thrill of pleasure through his body.

‘Any word on where we are?’ he asked, knowing neither Kaesoron nor Vairosean would know and keen to expose their ignorance to those around them.

Vairosean shook his head. ‘That is for the Phoenician alone to know,’ he said, the jagged notes of his voice like the braying discharge of his sonic cannon.

‘You have not been told?’ replied Lucius with a smirk as a line of hooded bearers carrying heavy iron casks on their backs snaked through the gaping portal of the vanished Phoenix Gate. To Lucius, they looked like ants bearing food to a hive. ‘I would have thought a warrior of your status would have been amongst the first to learn our destination. Have you earned the primarch’s ire?’

Vairosean ignored the obvious barb and gave a nod of acknowledgement as Eidolon took position near Kaesoron like the glory-seeker he was. The First

Captain had been one of Fulgrim's closest companions in the old days, and though the Phoenician appeared to care little for past attachments, Kaesoron still commanded respect from most of the Legion.

Most, but not me, thought Lucius with an amused smirk as he saw the light of ambition in Eidolon's eyes. It was pathetic how the Lord Commander latched onto those the primarch favoured, and Lucius felt his contempt for the man swell to new heights.

'Looks like Fulgrim is breaking out the last of the victory wine,' he said with unearned bonhomie. 'We only do that when we're about to go into battle.'

'Old Legion custom,' spat Vairosean, his voice a wet, gurgling rasp.

'We still drink to the victory to come,' said Lucius, drawing his swords with a flourish, and careful to let the warriors nearby see the silver blade Fulgrim had gifted to him. 'By the will of Horus or the Phoenician, it matters not to the lords of profligacy, we still drink.'

'We should not honour who we were before our ascension,' said Eidolon.

'Not everything we were died on Isstvan,' replied Lucius, amused at the blatancy of the Lord Commander's ingratiating words.

The casks of victory wine were deposited in a circle around the black throne in the column of blinding light. The smell was potent, bitter and like engravers' acid. The gathered warriors leaned forwards as one to fully savour the acrid reek of the wine, fully aware of its symbolism.

The blood surged in Lucius's veins at the thought of going into battle once more. The forced inaction of the journey from the Isstvan system had chafed at him. He ached, needed, to feel hot blood sprayed from an opened artery, the visceral thrill of meeting a bladesman who might prove his equal.

He tried to remember the names of swordsmen of note in those Legions still loyal to the Emperor, but could think of none who could match him. Sigismund of the Fists was a competent, if bluntly single-minded wielder of the blade, and Nero of the XIII could kill with something approaching flair, though he fought with more than a hint of rote in his swings. Other names drifted through Lucius's

memory, but as competent as they were, none of them had reached the sublime pinnacle of bladework that he had attained.

‘Perhaps it will be Mars at last,’ he ventured. ‘We have travelled far enough. Perhaps we are making ready to join the fleets moving on the Red Planet as Horus ordered.’

‘The Warmaster,’ said Eidolon, his taut skin wrinkling in childish adulation. ‘He knows my name and has commended me on several occasions.’

Lucius knew better, but before he could contradict Eidolon’s fantasy a blare of noise erupted from the vox units strung between the pilasters. A glorious scream of birth and murder shrieked in dissonant anti-harmonies, like a million orchestras with every instrument out of tune. The sound was rapturous, a freakish blend of discordant music and howling voices raised in hideous adoration.

A cascade of light fell from the dome, a glittering rain that shimmered with a light so bright that it was like a moment of atomic detonation. The Emperor’s Children howled as sensory apparatus mutilated by Apothecary Fabius flooded their nervous systems with powerful surges of bio-electrical spikes, pleasure responses and pain signals. Warriors convulsed at the cacophony of sound and light, dancing like madmen or victims of grand mal seizures. Some tore at their skin, others beat their neighbours, while others pounded their fists bloody on the floor while screaming inchoate curses.

Lucius held his body rigid, fighting the sensations and receiving the pleasure tenfold, his deliberate resistance to the overload of sensation making it all the sweeter. Blood and saliva ran from his lips and he felt his bones and flesh vibrating in perfect symphony with the raucous madness of the spectacle.

The Legion screamed with the delirious joy of it, but this was merely a prelude.

A shape moved in the light, an angel of extermination, a god made flesh and the embodiment of all that was perfect in its expression of intemperance.

Fulgrim dropped through the light like the brightest comet in the firmament, a hammerblow of tyrian war plate the colour of a bruised sunset. He slammed

down onto the terrazzo floor, a billowing mantle of fiery golden scale spread at his shoulders like a pair of angelic wings. Hair like a snowfall cascaded from his noble crown, and his slender, aquiline features were tapered and elfin, though possessed of a haughty strength that none of the faded orphans of Asuryan could hope to match.

Fulgrim had eschewed his gaudy facial paints and scented oils, his face now pallid and ethereal, like a corpse-wraith given form and clad in polished plate that gleamed with the sheen of the finest mirror. His eyes were black pits from which no light escaped or ever would and his mouth creased in a smile that spoke of secret knowledge that would sear the mind of any but a primarch were they to learn even a fraction of its scope.

Lucius joined his fellow warriors in an orgiastic scream of welcome, a hymnal to excess, a chorus of pandemonium in praise of their liege lord. Just to be near the Phoenician fired the blood. Fulgrim stood and spread his arms to accept their devotion, tilting his head back as his full lips parted with the rapture of adoration.

The discordia from the vox dropped in volume and Fulgrim finally deigned to cast his gaze out amongst his warriors. The golden cloak draped across his shoulders, and the glitter of silver mail beneath his wondrously moulded breastplate shimmered like a waterfall of stars. A scabbard of ebony, mother of pearl and smoked ivory bands hung from a belt of soft black leather embossed with a buckle of amber and black.

The anathame.

Lucius knew this sword well, and even though it now belonged to the most sublime warrior imaginable, he could not resist the thought of what it might be like to face such a weapon. Sensing the scrutiny, Fulgrim turned his obsidian eyes upon Lucius and smiled as though in recognition of some shared bond known only to them.

Lucius felt the power of that gaze and fought to keep his suspicions from showing on his face. He grinned back at Fulgrim and sliced the blades of his swords across the skin of his forehead. Blood dripped into his eyes and he revelled in the bitter, rancid taste of it as it ran down the hundreds of grooves

carved through the skin of his face to his waiting tongue.

‘My Children,’ said Fulgrim as the glorious madness receded. ‘I bring you bliss.’

3

Fulgrim basked in the adoration of his warriors for a moment longer before raising his arms for silence. His gaze was beatific, humbling, intoxicating and cruel at the same time. Not one amongst his warriors failed to be cowed by that dread black stare. He circled the towering plinth upon which sat his throne, glancing up at its lofty magnificence as if in faint embarrassment that such a thing was meant for him.

‘You have been so patient with me, my sons,’ said Fulgrim, pausing at the foot of the plinth. ‘And I have been neglectful.’

Hundreds of voices clamoured in denial, but Fulgrim silenced them with his upraised palms and a slyly deprecating smile. ‘No, it’s true, I have allowed no word of our destination to work its way down to my beloved children, leaving you in darkness. Can you forgive me?’

Once again the Heliopolis was filled with wild cheering, a screaming din of sounds no mortal throat was ever meant to give voice. Warriors threw themselves to their knees; others beat their breasts and yet more simply screamed with wordless affirmation.

Fulgrim accepted their praise and said, ‘How you honour me.’

Lucius watched Fulgrim as he circled the raised throne, studying his every movement and gesture for some sign that this wondrous individual was someone or something other than he claimed to be.

Clad in his battle finery, the primarch’s presence was intoxicating. Not vulgar, not garish, but simply perfect. As though, in ascending to the pinnacle of excellence, he had shed the need for any overt displays of his devotion to the Dark Prince’s creed. One look into his black eyes was enough to realise his infinite capacity for excess in all its forms. Fulgrim had drunk deep from a well of sensation and without its continual boon, life was grey and empty, bereft of joy and meaning.

‘I bring the wine of victory and the sweet caress of war upon which to gorge

yourselves,’ said Fulgrim. ‘I bring you the symphony of war, the bliss of ecstasy and the rapture of a pain-filled death to our enemies. We have travelled far from the feast of fire at Isstvan, and I have decided that it is time to wet our weapons in the blood of our enemies.’

A chorus of shrieking approval greeted Fulgrim’s words, and he accepted their love as though it was an unexpected boon and not what he had planned all along. The primarch waved his slender, almost delicate fingers at the centre of the chamber, and a shimmering holo sprang to life, a glittering representation of planets in their gravitational dance with a brightly burning star.

‘Behold a system I have designated as the Prismatic Cluster,’ said Fulgrim, as the holo zoomed towards the fifth world of the newly-named system. A haze of multi-coloured light surrounded the planet like a polar borealis effect, and as the image magnified still further, Lucius saw a world of overlapping bands of deep black and glittering diamond.

A number of orbitals followed the rotational axis of the planet, colossal freight handlers and processing stations with docking facilities for bulk carriers. Smudges of iron and steel indicated the presence of several such vessels, and pinpricks of winking lights spread between them were clearly defence platforms.

‘It is here I give you opportunity to prove your love for me as warriors of the Emperor’s Children,’ said Fulgrim, walking through the flickering projection and letting the holographic world bathe his flawless features in reflected starlight. ‘The lackeys of the Martian Priesthood work this world with their dull engines of construction, grubbing like savages in the soil for crystals to be shipped back to Mars.’

Scrolling lines of aestimare, yields and tithed tonnage slid around the image of the world in a noospheric ripple of light, and Lucius took a moment to scan them before becoming bored and concentrating on the glittering, reflective surface of the planet itself. Aside from a passing aesthetic appeal, it appeared to hold no real importance or strategic significance. He saw nothing to suggest this world was valuable enough to attract the attention of the primarch.

What was he overlooking? What did Fulgrim see that he did not?

Perhaps the crystals were a raw material used in some vital manufacturing process? Lucius quickly dismissed the thought as irrelevant. That the Martian Priesthood valued them was reason enough to disrupt this Imperial operation, but it seemed a wretchedly backwater place to loose the strength of a Legion.

Fulgrim continued to stare at the gently revolving orb of Prismatic V, as though in serene thrall to the stark beauty of its glittering surface. His lips moved soundlessly, and he smiled at some secret joke or some particularly clever bon mot delivered to an unseen listener with perfect timing.

A petty thought occurred to Lucius, but he kept it to himself, knowing it would be unwise to speak it aloud. A similar thought evidently occurred to Eidolon, but the Lord Commander had not the common sense to keep his mouth shut.

‘My Lord, I do not understand,’ said Eidolon. ‘What purpose does this serve?’

Fulgrim rounded on Eidolon, the serenity of his pale features twisting in spiteful fury. He stalked towards Eidolon with murderous bile, and Lucius stepped quickly away lest he be caught in the hurricane of the primarch’s wrath. Fulgrim lashed out at Eidolon and the Lord Commander was hurled back like a swatted insect. He crashed down into the rubble left by the demolition of the tiered benches, his breastplate cracked wide and his taut skin spattered with blood.

‘You dare to question me?’ snapped Fulgrim, towering over the downed warrior.

‘No, my lord, I simply—’

‘Worm!’ screamed Fulgrim. ‘This is my desire and you question it?’

‘I—’

‘Quiet!’ raged Fulgrim, lifting the terrified Eidolon from the ground by the throat. Lucius felt a vicarious excitement at the sight of Eidolon’s humbling. He had seen Fulgrim crush the molten neck of an alien god in a fit of rage, and knew that Eidolon’s would present no challenge to his strength.

The fear in the Lord Commander’s face was very real and Lucius licked his lips at the thought of what a sublime sensation it must be to feel an emotion so alien to the Adeptus Astartes.

‘I am your lord and master and you insult me like this?’ said Fulgrim, his rage transformed into abject misery. ‘I deliver a war, and this is how you repay me, with questions and doubt? Is this campaign beneath you? Are you too good to make war at my command? Is that it?’

‘No!’ cried Eidolon. ‘I... I simply desired to know...’

‘To know what?’ spat Fulgrim, his anguish forgotten and his rage restored. ‘Speak, wretch! Out with it!’

Eidolon struggled in Fulgrim’s grasp, his face purpling to match the primarch’s armour. He gasped for breath, his enhanced physique no match for the strength of a primarch.

Between snatched breaths, Eidolon said, ‘Were we not ordered to Mars? Will this not delay our rendezvous with the Warmaster’s fleets?’

‘Horus is my brother, not my master, and I am not his to command,’ snarled Fulgrim, as though Eidolon had voiced the most heinous insult in mentioning the name of Horus Lupercal. ‘Who does he think he is to give me orders? I am Fulgrim! The Phoenician, and I am no man’s lapdog. If Horus thinks he can simply charge towards Terra like a blood-maddened berserker then he is a fool. One does not simply advance on the most heavily defended world in the galaxy; such a target must be taken with finesse. You understand?’

‘Yes, my lord,’ hissed Eidolon, but Fulgrim’s rage was not yet spent.

‘I know you, Eidolon, don’t think I don’t,’ said the primarch, dropping the choking Lord Commander and turning back to the image of the shimmering planet. ‘Always quick with a sniping comment, ever the whispered word in the shadows to undermine my authority. You are the worm at the heart of the apple, and I will have no one who doubts me at my back ready with a knife.’

Eidolon sensed the awful threat in Fulgrim’s words and dropped to his knees. ‘My lord, please!’ he begged. ‘I am loyal! I would never betray you!’

‘Betray me?’ said Fulgrim, whipping around and drawing the glitter-grey blade of the anathame. ‘You dare give voice to thoughts of betrayal? Here, in this gathering of my most loyal subjects? You are a bigger fool than I thought.’

‘No!’ shouted Eidolon, but Lucius knew he was wasting his breath.

To his credit, Eidolon saw it too and reached for his sword as Fulgrim stepped in to deliver the deathblow. The quillons of Eidolon’s sword had barely parted company with the lip of his scabbard when the anathame cut through his neck and sent his head flying through the air. It landed with a meaty thud on the terrazzo floor and rolled until it finally came to rest against one of the urns of victory wine.

The Lord Commander’s eyes blinked once, his lips drawn back over his splintered teeth in an expression of horror that made Lucius want to laugh. Fulgrim turned from Eidolon’s corpse as it slumped to the ground, and retrieved the head he had cut from the Lord Commander’s body. Blood ran in a viscous stream from the severed neck and Fulgrim walked the circumference of the chamber, allowing coagulating droplets to fall in the opened casks of victory wine.

‘Drink, my children,’ he said as though what had just happened was a minor thing. ‘Fill your chalices and drink to the great victory I give you. We will make war on Prismaticca and show the Warmaster how this campaign should be waged!’

The Emperor’s Children surged forwards, each eager to be the first to drink the primarch’s gift to them. Still clutching Eidolon’s head, Fulgrim ascended the plinth to his throne and spread the golden weave of his cloak behind him before sitting. He looked down on his warriors, his gaze at once indulgent and faintly condescending.

Lucius thought back to the way Fulgrim had moved as he drew his sword and cut Eidolon’s head from his body. With the eye of a master swordsman, he analysed every movement the primarch’s body had made, his stepped lunge, the turn of his shoulder and the pivot of the hips as he struck.

One movement had flowed into another, as if no other could ever have been possible. The primarch’s flawless body was always in balance, yet Lucius saw something no one but the greatest living mortal swordsman could ever have seen, and it gave him a delicious thrill of excitement and disappointment.

It was an impossible thought, a treasonous thought, but Lucius couldn't help but follow it through to its logical conclusion.

I could beat you, thought Lucius. If you and I fought right now, I would kill you.

4

The warriors of the Mechanicum were powerful enemies, augmented and enhanced beyond mortal norms, but Lucius wondered if they even bothered to tutor their warriors in the arts of close combat. He danced through a swirling melee, his twin swords moving in whirling arcs that opened jugulars, removed limbs and lifted the lids off skulls.

These men were brutes, crudely enhanced to be bigger and stronger than most mortals, but there was little subtlety to their power. Anyone could pump a man full of growth chemicals and graft a host of combat augmetics to his frame, but what good was that if they were not trained in their use?

A weaponised servitor creature encased in azure war plate and bearing little that could be called organic came at him. Its shoulder mounted cannon spat a torrent of shells, tearing up shards of glassy, volcanic stone, but Lucius was already moving. He rolled beneath the blitz of fire, slicing away the furiously rotating barrels of the gun and lancing his Terran blade through a thin gap in the abdominal armour plates.

Oily black blood sprayed from the wound like pressurised hydraulic fluid, and Lucius spun inside the reach of its remaining arm. The snapping, energy-wreathed lifter claw slashed low, and Lucius used the arm as a springboard. He vaulted onto a projecting stub of armour plating at the servitor's hip and somersaulted onto its wide shoulders. The silver Laer blade stabbed down into the construct's armoured skull, and Lucius felt something wet and living burst apart inside. He vaulted from the dying servitor's body, pleased to see red wetness on the blade of his sword.

The bio-machine staggered, but did not fall, though it was clear it was dead.

Lucius paused in his killing to flick the blood from his swords as a thunderous detonation mushroomed into the sky with concussive force. A petrochemical stink filled the air as the unrefined promethium burned off and mingled with the fluorocarbon-rich atmosphere to form a potent breath that gave Lucius a momentary flush of pleasurable dizziness.

Emperor's Children swarmed around him, shooting with abandon into the mass of fighting warriors. What had begun as a carefully orchestrated act of mass murder had become a screaming free for all. Hundreds of augmented warriors protected the main refineries and processing plants, but they had no chance of survival. Three companies of Emperor's Children had fallen on the defenders of Prismatica, and there would be no survivors.

Though he had been careful not to let any hint of his true feelings show, Lucius was forced to agree with the late Lord Commander Eidolon's assessment of this venture. It had taken the fleet, led by Andronius and Pride of the Emperor, a mere ten hours to batter a path through the picket line of system monitors and cripple the last defence orbital. Three bulk carriers had been captured, kilometres-long behemoths loaded with billions of tonnes of shimmering, reflective crystals.

With orbital space secure, hunting squadrons of Stormbirds had descended on the main manufactories at the southern tip of a vast forest of towering crystal spires and the slaughter had begun. The Mechanicum facility was burning, aflame from end to end as the Emperor's Children ran rampant through its vast storage silos and hangar-sized refining structures. Vast drilling engines towered above the battling figures, tall augers and serrated drilling arms raised to the sky like the limbs of praying mantises.

Marius Vairosean led his company of shrieking Kakophoni against the western flank of the facility, systematically razing its defences with grim, methodical dogma. Shrieking harmonics of dissonant vibrations echoed from the iron canyons between the towering structures as monstrous sonic weapons tore the atoms of matter apart with resonant frequencies that echoed between worlds.

Buildings collapsed like paper, and coruscating sound waves tore deep gouges in the basalt rock of the planet. The screams of the dying mingled with the musical crescendo of clashing sound waves, a howling symphony of destruction that brought the rapturous madness of the Maraviglia to mind.

Lucius had kept well clear of Marius Vairosean, for the Kakophoni were now virtually deaf and insensate to any but the most ear-splitting noises. A swordsman needed perfect hearing and his inner ear to be flawless. The nerve-shredding rush of excruciatingly vivid sound was simply a pleasure he would

have to forego.

Fulgrim himself led the main thrust of the assault into the heart of the Mechanicum defenders, surrounded by hulking Terminators of the Phoenix Guard. Julius Kaesoron fought next to him, bludgeoning a path through the cohorts of weaponised servitors and phalanxes of skitarii that held the chokepoints with an array of automated gun platforms.

Against the brute force of the Phoenician and Kaesoron's warriors, they had no chance. A primarch was an unstoppable force of destruction and Terminator armour made a warrior nigh invincible. Even those warriors who suffered wounds found that their agony only spurred them to greater heights of ecstasy.

Fulgrim was magnificent, a towering avatar of beauty and death, his golden cloak spread behind him and reflecting the variegated sunlight in rainbow arcs of dazzling brightness. His armour shone like a beacon, and where he walked, his grey sword clove through hybrid flesh and iron without pause. He sang as he slew, an aching lament from lost Chemos that spoke of beauty's end and a lost love that can never come again.

More beautiful than anything Coraline Aseneca had sung, it seemed perverse that the machine men dying around him could not appreciate the wonder that surrounded them and the glory of the one who stooped to take their lives. They were dying without knowing how they were honoured and Lucius hated them for that.

Smoke coughed from the interior of a burning refinery, and Lucius howled in frustration as his view of Fulgrim at war was hidden behind a bank of black and violet clouds. He turned from the battles being fought elsewhere, back to his own arena of death.

Fulgrim had entrusted the eastern flank to him, and he had led his warriors in a series of daring feints that drew the enemy from their defensive formations in prosaically predictable ways. One by one, each counterattack had been beheaded until the defensive line had been bled dry and Lucius's warriors had advanced without meeting any real resistance. He wove a red and silver path through the defences, encircling each pocket of resistance and despatching its most promisingly threatening warrior with a flourish of breathtaking skill and spite.

He vaulted onto the remains of a toppled battle engine, a ten-metre-high biped with its princeps compartment breached and pink amniotic gel drooling from the cracked cockpit. Lucius had seen the machine stomp from an armoured hangar at the edge of the defences and briefly considered taking it on. His colossal vanity had intervened, and he had laughed the idea away. Only a fool would dare face such a machine alone, and it had fallen in the crossfire of sonic cannons before it had taken a dozen paces.

Lucius thrust his sword to the scintillating sky, striking an appropriately heroic pose for his warriors to see.

‘Onwards! Into the fires and we will show these mechanised men the meaning of pain!’

No sooner had he shouted than the curtain of smoke parted and a thunderous crash of heavy footsteps shook the ground. High above Lucius, a snarling, bestial head emerged from the smoke. Worked in bronze to resemble a hunting mastiff, the battle engine’s armoured cockpit was hung with thermal-gusted banners, and the grey and tan carapace boasted a golden eagle and crossed swords emblem.

The towering battle engine emerged from the ruins of the factory, and Lucius felt a wonderfully unexpected jolt of terror as it stalked towards its downed brother.

‘Ah, yes,’ said Lucius. ‘They hunt in pairs.’

The battle engine’s arms swung up to fire, clattering as auto-loaders drove heavy-calibre shells into the breeches of monstrously oversized guns. Lucius stood defiantly atop the broken carapace of the Titan’s brother, leaping clear as its weapons fired with the deafening thunder of a thousand hammers beating at a war god’s anvil. He rolled as he hit the ground, momentarily blinded by the hurricane of stone splinters, dust and propellant gases.

A flaming pyre of wreckage blazed brightly behind him, and he sprang to his feet as he saw the blackened outline of the battle engine silhouetted against the flames. Its head bobbed low, as though hunting his scent, and Lucius tightened his grip on his swords.

The guns roared again, and Emperor's Children warriors vanished in a spraying blitz of shells that churned the ground to splintered rock. Armour disintegrated under the barrage, flesh vaporised, and the screams of the dying were musical, pain-filled and short.

Return fire sprayed the Titan, its shields sparking and flaring with bright squalls of energy discharge. Heavier impacts tore gouges in the invisible energy, like stones hurled into fluorescing water. A missile streaked towards the Titan and the warhead exploded with a red bloom of superheated plasma. Shrieking frequencies ripped the air, but still the shield held; though Lucius knew it must be close to collapse.

'Over here, you bastard!' he shouted, enjoying the mix of wild emotions surging through his body. The modifications Apothecary Fabius had worked on his nervous system responded to the powerful stimulus and rewarded him with a heady cocktail of pleasure responders and hormonal boosters. In an instant, Lucius became faster, stronger and hyper-sensitive to his environment.

Its mastiff head swung to face him and its war horn loosed a screaming howl born of rage and grief. Lucius matched its braying fury with a roar of his own, daring it to come and fight him. His suddenly enhanced senses took in a thousand tiny details in an instant; the fine texture of its metal skin, the cursive gusts of smoke from its weapons, the glint of colourful light on the red cockpit panes, the dripping of coolant gases from the machinery concealed beneath its carapace, and the bitter, iron flavour of the sentience at its heart.

All this and a thousand other sensations washed through Lucius in a fraction of a second. The intensity of it all staggered him, and he blinked away a host of light bursts from behind his eyes. The war horn brayed again as the Titan swung its weapons towards Lucius. The engine was wasting its strength coming for a single warrior, but it had seen him atop its fallen twin and had marked him for death.

Lucius knew he could not fight such a powerful enemy, and turned to run, but before he had taken a single step, the angelic outline of a warrior on wings of gold dropped from the smoke. He bore a flint-knapped blade in one hand and a long-barrelled pistol worked in silver and onyx in the other. His stark white hair flew around his glorious features as the heat bleeding from the Titan's reactor

washed over him.

‘One for me, I think, Lucius,’ said Fulgrim, levelling his pistol at the battle engine.

Fulgrim shot with the calm poise of a duellist on a misty heath. A shining spear of incandescent light imbued with the heat of a newborn star spat from the gun and struck dead centre on the Titan’s shields. A shrieking flare of overload banged like a host of shattering mirrors and a powerful sphere of energy pulsed out like a solar flare.

Lucius was hurled from his feet and hit hard against one of the towering crystal spires at the edge of the facility. Pain sawed up and down his back, and he grinned as he tasted blood.

Even through a haze of smoke and pain he saw what happened next with complete clarity.

Fulgrim stood alone before the war machine, his pistol cast aside and his sword held loosely at his side. The Titan’s auto-loaders ratcheted canisters of shells around from its rear hoppers, and the breeches snapped shut on a fresh load. Fulgrim’s free hand reached up to the battle engine, as though demanding it halt its march.

Lucius laughed at the absurdity of the gesture.

But Fulgrim intended more than simple defiance.

A shimmering nimbus of misty light gathered around the Phoenician, its substance shot with threads of barely visible lightning. Fulgrim’s splayed fingers closed into a fist and he twisted his grip as though tearing at unseen ropes.

The battle engine halted in its rampage, the cockpit snapping up and its weapon arms jerking spasmodically as though the machine was suffering a hideous seizure. Fulgrim’s outstretched hand continued pulling and twisting at the air, and the Titan’s war horn brayed with plaintive horror. The cockpit panes shattered, spraying glass tears to the ground as it slumped back onto its hissing legs.

Lucius watched with horrified fascination as bulging wads of oozing flesh pushed their way out of the cockpit, swelling and pulsating with grotesque life. The gelatinous mass of expanding meat obscured the mastiff head, drooling from the armoured carapace in raw pink tendrils of mutant flesh.

Lucius rose to his feet, awed and wondrously horrified at the death of the battle engine. Amniotic fluid fell in a drizzle from the Titan's ruptured body, its every orifice and exhaust port choked with monstrous growths of rampant flesh culled from its mortal crew. The stench was appalling, and Lucius breathed deeply, savouring the reek of burned meat that was already beginning to decay.

He approached Fulgrim as the primarch gathered up his fallen pistol.

'What did you do?' asked Lucius.

Fulgrim turned his dead black eyes upon him and said, 'A little something I learned from the forces that empower me. A trifle, nothing more.'

Lucius lifted his hand, letting a gobbet of glistening flesh drop into his palm. It was wet and veined with black necrosis. The slimy texture was mildly diverting, and even as he watched, it decayed before his eyes.

'Could I learn how to do something like this?'

Fulgrim laughed and leaned close to Lucius, placing a delicate hand upon his shoulder guard. The primarch's breath was cloying and sweet, like temple smoke and glucose, and the heat of his skin was like being close to a dangerously overused plasma coil. Fulgrim looked deep into his eyes, as though searching for something he already suspected was there. Lucius felt the power of his master's stare, and knew that what held his gaze was far older and more malicious than he could ever hope to be.

'Perhaps you could, swordsman,' said Fulgrim with an amused nod. 'I think you have the potential to be just like me one day.'

Fulgrim looked up, mercifully breaking the connection between them as the sounds of fighting died away.

'Ah, the battle is over,' said the primarch. 'Good. I was beginning to tire of it.'

And without another word, Fulgrim marched into the forest of mirrored spires, leaving Lucius alone with the dead battle engine.

5

There was beauty here, real beauty, and it made him weep to see such glory.

His warriors saw only the physical properties of the crystal forests, but Fulgrim saw the truth in this place, a truth no one but he had eyes to see.

Spires of glittering, diamond-sheened crystal speared up from the black ground, towering monuments to the galaxy's endless geological wonder. None were less than a hundred metres tall, and even the slenderest was ten metres or more in diameter. Hundreds of thousands of these spires stretched into the distance, covering a vast swathe of ground with their glittering majesty.

They sprouted from the ground in thick clusters, growing like an organic forest of greenery with curling paths between them. He changed direction at random, plunging deeper and deeper into the shimmering forest of crystal with no thought to any direction. It would be easy to become lost in this shifting forest of mirrors, and Fulgrim recalled an apocryphal tale of a lost warrior trapped in an invisible maze upon the Erycinian Highlands of Venus.

The fool had died within arm's reach of an exit, but Fulgrim had no fear of such a fate. He could retrace his route from this impenetrable wilderness of glass without ever needing to open his eyes.

He reached out and ran his fingers along the smooth flanks of the spires, revelling in the tiny imperfections of their silicate surfaces. Some were milky and translucent and others opaque, but the vast majority were sheened with a mirror finish, like a million spear heads belonging to a giant army buried in the black sand.

Fulgrim had learned of an army that had been buried on ancient Terra, a clay army of ghosts to protect a dying emperor who feared retribution from the countless souls he had sent to the afterlife in his wars of conquest. This was no such thing, but the conceit of walking upon the graves of a vast army of colossi amused him, and he sketched a casual salute to the fallen warriors upon whose grave he strolled.

The battle to capture the Mechanicum facility had been mildly diverting, but all too brief. To fight a foe who did not despair at his own destruction or beg for mercy was a dull, lifeless affair, and Fulgrim was disappointed at the Mechanicum's lack of ability to feel the raptures he and his warriors had gifted upon them. He had known what to expect, of course, but it irked him that his opponents had so selfishly denied him the thrill of hearing their screams and feeling the ecstasy of their deaths.

His mood darkened at such boorish behaviour from a foe and he instinctively reached for the Laeran blade before remembering he had given it to the swordsman Lucius. Fulgrim laughed at the idea of Lucius becoming like him. Lucius was touched, yes, but no mortal could ever achieve what he had achieved, become what he had become.

Fulgrim paused in his walk, turning around in a slow circle as he appreciated the true beauty around him. Not the power of planetary sculpting; that was a mere accident of geology. Not the shimmering skies above him; a freak of atmospheric chemical bonds and pollution. No, the true beauty of this place was no accident, no chance occurrence; it was a singular wonder of design, of will and perfection.

His reflections surrounded him, the most incredible perfection captured in living form.

Fulgrim watched his image grow and recede as he took turns at random, enraptured by his exquisite features, his noble countenance and his regal bearing. What other could match him in perfection? Horus? Hardly. Guilliman? Not even close.

Only Sanguinius approached him in aesthetics, but even his wondrous appearance was flawed. What manner of perfect being could be cursed with mutant flesh that marked him as a reminder of ancient myth and belief?

And Ferrus Manus... what of him?

'He is dead!' roared Fulgrim, his voice echoing strangely through the dense layers of the crystal forest.

DEAD, DEAd, DEAd, Dead, dead...

Fulgrim spun around as the distorted cries came back to him like accusations. His mood turned thunderous and he drew his sword. He hacked at the nearest spire, sending razor shards of crystalline glass spinning. He hacked at his reflection, daring it to answer him, cutting into its lattice structure with mighty blows of terrible power.

The flint-knapped blade chopped like a woodsman's axe, yet it lost none of its edge at such careless treatment. Sentience beyond human understanding had crafted it, and the power to end gods was bound within its rude appearance.

'My brothers are all cruel and magnificent in their own way!' screamed Fulgrim, each word punctuated by a hewing blow. 'But each is a flawed creation, marred forever by a curse that will one day undo them. I alone am perfect. I alone have been tempered by loss and betrayal!'

At last his capricious anger was spent and he backed away from the ruined spire. In his anger, he had cut through fully half its thickness, and it swayed as its structural stability was undone. Glass popped like gunshots as the spire snapped where Fulgrim had cut into it, and it toppled like a felled tree, smashing its way to the ground in a storm of shattering crystal. Its fall took a dozen others with it, and a vast swathe of the crystal forest fell to the hard ground in a deafening, crashing tumult of broken glass.

The sharp thunder of the falling spires echoed around Fulgrim, a never-ending crescendo of musical destruction, and the pain of so brittle a sound lancing into his brain was a very real pleasure. His warriors would hear the noise, but if they came at all it would not be fear for his life that drew them, but to bask in the sublime sound of such wanton devastation. He wondered how long it had taken these spires to achieve their titanic height. Thousands of years, maybe more.

'Millennia to grow, and a moment to destroy,' he said with more than a hint of wanton spite. 'There's a lesson to be learned here.'

The echoes of the spire's collapse faded and Fulgrim listened for any other voices in the forest. Had he truly heard someone speaking the name of his dead brother or had he imagined it? He held his sword out before him, staring at the glitter-sheen of its flinty surface as a nagging memory that would not coalesce tugged at his consciousness.

He had heard a disembodied voice before, hadn't he?

It had told him dreadful, secret things. Unendurable things.

Fulgrim closed his eyes and pressed a hand to his temple as he tried to remember.

I am here, brother, I will always be here.

Fulgrim looked up in surprise, and an emotion he had long cast aside in his ascent to glory stabbed into his chest like the thrust of a lance driven by the Khan himself.

Deep in the forest of mirrored spires, he saw a powerful warrior in battered war plate the colour of tempered onyx. A face hewn from granite stared back at Fulgrim, and he cried out as he saw the look of endless sorrow in the silver nuggets of his eyes.

'No!' whispered Fulgrim. 'It cannot be...'

Fulgrim clambered through the sharp fangs of glass that jutted from the ground, slicing open his hands and scarring the unblemished plates of his armour in his haste. He staggered like a drunk, smashing aside nubs of crystal and fallen shards that had once stretched out to the heavens.

'What are you?' he yelled, the echoes of his cry bouncing around him so that it seemed as though a host of angry voices demanded answers. He lost sight of the warrior in black as he ran, pushing deeper into the maze of mirrors without heed for any thought other than unmasking this invader of his solitude.

Every time he looked up he saw nothing but his own desperate reflection, his aquiline features twisted and pulled into ugliness by the crazily angled spires. To see his wondrous face so deformed by a quirk of reflective geometry enraged him, and he pulled up short in a ragged clearing of spires.

He spun on his heel, daring his reflections to show anything less than his true beauty.

A hundred or more Fulgrims stared at him with expressions of equal anger,

though only now, still and enraged, did he see the pain and terror in the depths of those oh-so-black eyes.

‘Where are you?’ demanded Fulgrim.

I am here, one reflection answered him.

I am where you abandoned me and left me to rot, said another.

Fulgrim’s anger vanished like a droplet of water vaporising on a hot engine cowl. This was new, this was unexpected, and was therefore to be savoured. He walked a slow circuit of the clearing, meeting the gaze of one reflection while trying to keep an eye on the others. Were these reflections his or were they animated by a will of their own and simply mimicking his movements? How such a thing could be possible, he did not know, but it was a fascinating diversion.

‘Who are you?’ he asked.

You know who I am. You stole what was mine by right.

‘No,’ said Fulgrim. ‘It was always mine.’

Not so, you only borrow the flesh you walk in. It has always been mine and always will be.

Fulgrim smiled, now recognising the sentience behind the myriad voices and broken-glass reflections. He had been expecting this, and to know with whom he conversed gave him a welcome feeling of brotherhood. Fulgrim sheathed the anathame, now certain it was not the source of the voices.

‘I wondered when you would manage to reach out beyond the golden frame of your prison,’ he said. ‘It took you longer than I expected.’

His reflection returned his smile.

Being confined is a new experience for me. It took time to adjust. Freedom such as I once possessed is hard to forget.

Fulgrim laughed at the petulance in the reflection's voice.

'So why show me Ferrus Manus?' he asked the myriad reflections.

What better mirror is there than the face of an old friend? Only those we love have the power to show us our true selves.

'Was it guilt?' asked Fulgrim. 'Do you think you can shame me into surrendering this body to you?'

Shame? No, you and I have long since outgrown shame.

'Then why the Gorgon?' pressed Fulgrim. 'This body is mine, and no power in the universe will compel me to relinquish it.'

But there is so much we could achieve were I to command it again.

'I will achieve more,' promised Fulgrim.

Keep telling yourself that, laughed his reflection. You cannot know the things I know.

'I know everything you knew,' said Fulgrim, lifting his arms and flexing his hands like a virtuoso pianist preparing to play. 'You should see what I can do now.'

Parlour tricks, scoffed his reflection, his eyes darting to another mirror image.

'You make a poor liar,' laughed Fulgrim. 'But I should expect no less. You once ensnared the weak minded with offers of empowerment, but what you really offered was slavery.'

All things that live are enslaved to something; be it lust for wealth and power or the desire for possessions and new experiences. Or the desire to be part of something greater...

'I am no man's slave,' said Fulgrim, and his reflections laughed, a hundred peals of mockery that cut him more deeply than any blade ever could.

You are more a slave now than ever you were, hissed his reflection. You exist trapped in a body of meat and bone, caught in a broken machine that will grind you to ash. You cannot know what true freedom is until you have embraced power beyond imagining. That is to know the power of a god. Release me and I can show you how we can ascend together.

Fulgrim shook his head. 'Better yet to subdue that power and bend it to your will.'

We can experience such wonders together, you and I, said a reflection to his left.

A universe of sensation, said another.

Ours for the taking, added a third.

'Say what you will,' countered Fulgrim. 'You have nothing to offer.'

Think you so? Then you have no understanding of that body you claim as your own.

'I grow tired of your games,' said Fulgrim, turning away, but finding himself face to face with yet more mirror images. 'You will remain where you are and we will speak no more.'

Please, begged a reflection, suddenly contrite. I cannot exist like this. It is cold in here, and dark. The darkness presses in on me and I fear I shall be gone soon.

Fulgrim leaned in close to the mirrored surface of a crystal spire and grinned.

'Have no fear of that, brother,' he said. 'I will be keeping you around for a very, very long time indeed.'

6

The fleet remained in orbit around Prismatica for six days, gathering the crystal forests from the Mechanicum silos and packing the hold of five captured bulk carriers with glittering cargo. Fulgrim demanded every shard, every powdered fragment and every spire that could be taken from the world, though he gave no clue as to what purpose he intended to turn this haul of captured minerals.

In those six days, the Emperor's Children made sport of those few prisoners they had taken, using them in ways too terrible to describe before passing them on to the next company. Lucius fought solitary duels in the last remnants of the crystal forests, dancing with his reflection and matching its every thrust, cut and parry with another dazzling move. He was as close to being the perfect swordsman as it was possible to be, possessing the ideal balance between attack and defence, flawless footwork and a pathological need to feel pain.

Such was the weakness of most opponents, they feared to feel pain.

Lucius had no such fear, and only the warrior capable of the most berserk fury would stand any chance against him. Such a warrior cared nothing for his own life and would only stop fighting when he was dead. Lucius remembered the sight of a battle captain of the World Eaters on Isstvan III, watching as he tore through his own warriors like a man possessed.

To fight such a warrior would be the true test of Lucius's skills, for, as much as he liked to believe himself to be unbeatable, he knew that was not the case. There was no such thing as an unbeatable warrior, there would always be someone faster or stronger or luckier, but instead of fearing to meet such an opponent, Lucius ached for it.

His reflection advanced and retreated with him, matching his movement for movement, and no matter how fast his attacks, how lightning quick his ripostes, he could never breach his mirrored defences. His swords moved with greater and greater speed, each attack faster than the last. He moved quicker than any other living swordsman, his blades forming a shimmering sphere of silver around his body, an intricate sword dance that would have been madness to interrupt.

‘So self-involved, swordsman,’ said Julius Kaesoron, emerging from behind a jagged stump of crystal. ‘You would be left behind here?’

Lucius stumbled, his swords clanging together with a resonant clang of lethal edges. His Terran blade squealed in protest as the Laeran edge notched it with a gleeful shriek of metal on metal. Lucius turned his stumble into a spin and both blades whistled as they cut the air and came to rest on the First Captain’s throat.

‘That was not wise,’ he said.

Kaesoron batted the blades away, and laughed with a gurgle of frothed fluids in his throat. He turned his back on Lucius and gestured towards the ruined Mechanicum facility, where the last of the container shuttles hauled its heavily laden bulk from the blasted rock of the planet’s surface.

Almost nothing remained of the crystal forests, the horizon stripped bare and the silos torn down as they were emptied. Marius Vairosean’s screaming squads blasted what little was left standing to shredded atoms with jangling blasts of interlocking blast waves of disharmonious sonics. Soon it would be as though this place had never existed.

Lucius jogged after the First Captain. ‘You think I wouldn’t kill you, Kaesoron?’ he asked, angered at the warrior’s casual dismissal of his threat.

‘You are a viper, Lucius, but even you’re not that stupid.’

Lucius wanted to snap at Kaesoron, but he knew it would be pointless to antagonise the man. The First Captain would leave him behind without a second thought, and barely a glimmer of emotion.

‘The primarch has been thorough,’ said Lucius, sheathing his swords and watching the last container shuttle ascend on a rippling haze of struggling engines. ‘What does he want with it all?’

‘The crystals?’

‘Of course, the crystals,’ said Lucius.

Kaesoron shrugged, the matter of no consequence to him. ‘The primarch desired

them, so we took them. What he intends to do with them is of no interest to me.'

'Really?' said Lucius. 'And you call me self-involved.'

'And you do care?' countered Kaesoron. 'I think not. Your world begins and ends with you, Lucius. Just as mine concerns only what will allow me to taste the greatest bliss and darkest raptures. We exist to gratify all our desires to the extreme edges of sensation, but we do it in service to a power greater than any of us, greater even than any primarch.'

'Even the Phoenician or the Warmaster?'

'Luminous beings they are, but they are mere vessels for a power older than you or I can imagine.'

'How do you know this?' asked Lucius.

'There is wisdom in suffering, swordsman,' said Kaesoron. 'Isstvan V showed me that. The bliss of pain and the ecstasy of agony are how we offer our devotions. You have not known true suffering, because you are weak. You still cling to notions of what we were, not what we have become.'

Lucius bristled with anger at Kaesoron's casual dismissal of his own pain and talents, but said nothing, eager to learn more of what the First Captain had to say.

'The Lord Fulgrim has known the greatest pain this galaxy has to offer and he knows the truths at its heart,' said Kaesoron, and Lucius detected a change in his rasping tones, a tremor of doubt. 'Since... Isstvan he has shown me such sights as I would never have dreamed, pain and wonder, rapture and despair.'

Was it possible?

Did Kaesoron suspect the same as he?

Lucius risked a sidelong glance at Kaesoron, but the warrior's skull had been so thoroughly mangled and rebuilt that it was impossible to read his features. A thunderous crash of atomising metal washed over them as the last silo toppled to the ground, and its destroyers shrieked as the deafening noise drove spikes of pleasure through their brains.

Marius Vairosean marched towards them as a last Stormbird dropped through the streaked corona of a rainbow sky. Lucius wanted to find the sky beautiful, to be moved by the vivid colours and the rarefied blends of hues he had never seen.

He felt empty, and wanted nothing more than to leave this world. It had nothing left of interest, and anger touched him at the thought that he was bereft of stimulation.

‘A grand finale,’ said Marius, the words mangled by his overstretched jaws. Lucius wanted to ram his swords into Vairosean’s chest, just to feel something. He resisted the urge only with difficulty.

‘I despise this place,’ said Lucius, wanting nothing more than to be gone from this mundane rock of a world.

‘I have already forgotten it,’ said Kaesoron.

7

The dream still clung to the ragged edges of his consciousness, its lingering dread and burdensome suspicions hanging like an albatross from his neck. The corridors of the Pride of the Emperor were never silent, the echoes of screams drifting from one end of the ship to the other in a constant choir of debauched indulgences. The majority of these screams were of pain, but many were of delight.

It grew harder and harder to tell which was which with the grey passage of days.

Yet this area of the ship was abandoned and forgotten, like a dirty secret a man might hope will go away if only it can be ignored for long enough. No light or music or screams filled this wide hallway, no disjointed pavaues of misery, and no fleshy tributes to masterful excruciation. It felt like this place didn't exist, as though it was out of joint with the rest of the ship.

Lucius turned a corner and found himself before the great arched doors to La Fenice, and here the illusion of abandonment was dispelled. Six warriors stood before the doors, clad in scored armour of blues, pinks and purples. They wore tattered cloaks of gold weave that hung in asymmetrical waterfalls from the spikes worked into their shoulder guards, and crimson raptors surged from ruby flames on their breastplates.

All six carried golden-bladed halberds, the edges of which crackled with a faint haze of killing light. A flesh-masked warrior stepped towards him, the blade of his halberd spinning to face him. Lucius watched the warrior's movements, calm, assured and smooth. He was unafraid of Lucius, which marked him out as being particularly stupid.

'Phoenix Guard,' said Lucius with a grin of relish.

'Entering La Fenice is death,' said the warrior, his voice muffled by the skin mask.

'Yes, I'd heard,' replied Lucius amiably. 'Why is that, do you think?'

The Phoenix Guard ignored the question and said, 'Turn around, swordsman. Leave here and you will live.'

Lucius laughed, amused at the sincerity if not the seriousness of the threat.

'Really?' said Lucius, resting his palms on the pommels of his swords. 'Do you think you and your friends can stop me from getting inside?'

The rest of the Phoenix Guard spread out, forming an arc of killing steel around him.

'Leave now and you live,' said the warrior before him.

'Yes, you said that, but here's the thing,' said Lucius. 'I want in there, and you aren't going to stop me. Trust me, it will give me great pleasure to take the six of you on at once, but I think that might be a rather one-sided experience by the end.'

Lucius saw the attack coming in the Phoenix Guard's eyes.

Energised carbon steel clove the air, but Lucius was already moving.

Lucius ducked below the sweep of a halberd and the Terran blade leapt to his hand. Its tip plunged into the groin of the flesh-masked warrior. Lucius gave a savage twist and the blade cut up through his opponent's femur and hip to remove his leg. Blood gouted from the wound, and the warrior fell with a cry of mingled pain and surprise. Lucius darted to the side, his Laeran blade cutting into the flank of the warrior to his right. Armour parted before its alien metal and the warrior's guts looped out as though eager to be free of his flesh.

Altered organs heightened every sensation, and Lucius laughed with the vividness of his surroundings. The darkness became multi-faceted, the smell of blood a heady cocktail of unnatural chemicals and biological agents, the gleam of dim light from flashing weapons like the explosive fanfare that marked the end of the Great Triumph. His breath sounded impossibly loud, his blood like thundering rapids, and his opponents came at him with what seemed like deliberate slowness.

A halberd stroked his shoulder, and Lucius rolled with the arc of the blow. He

sprang to his feet, blocked the return cut, and rolled his wrists around the weapon's haft, stabbing the blade through the Phoenix Guard's helmet. The warrior dropped without a sound and Lucius swayed aside from a scything halberd blow intended to cleave him from skull to pelvis.

Lucius counterattacked with blistering speed, his first cut removing the warrior's blade, the second opening his throat. A third blow all but severed the head, and he threw himself flat as another spiked halberd stabbed for the space between his shoulder blades. He came to his knees, swords crossed before him to catch the blade as it descended. The strength behind the blow was awesome, far in excess of his own, but Lucius twisted his blades to drive the blade down into the deck. Steel shrieked as the crackling blade tore up the decking. Lucius thundered his fist into the Phoenix Guard's helmet, cracking the visor and drawing a grunt of pain from within. The warrior lost his grip on the halberd and blocked a dazzling cut to the neck with his forearm.

Lucius's blade severed the arm at the elbow, and he spun inside to ram the Laeran blade through the warrior's chest. His victim fell with a gurgling cry, grabbing Lucius's wrist and dragging him down with him. Lucius was pulled to the deck, but kept the momentum of his tumble going as the last Phoenix Guard's halberd swung for him. He twisted in the air and landed lightly on the balls of his feet, leaving the blade trapped within the Phoenix Guard's chest.

Armed only with his Terran blade, Lucius dropped into a theatrical en garde position, keeping his sword high and moving the tip in tiny circles. An old trick, but the Phoenix Guard was not a subtle warrior, and Lucius saw his foe's eyes follow the motion of the blade. Lucius leapt forwards, feinting right as the warrior realised his mistake. A clumsy block swept around, but Lucius had already altered the angle of his thrust. The Terrawatt clans of the Urals had forged the blade in the days before Unity, and its edge had never failed him.

Until now.

The tip of the blade caught the broken nub of an eagle's wing on the warrior's plastron, and the impact sent a jolt of force along the sword. It snapped, and the tip sprang back at Lucius in a spinning arc of razor steel. Even Lucius's preternaturally swift reactions could not save him, and the shard sliced a deep furrow from his left temple to his lower jaw.

The pain was so sudden, so blissful and so wonderfully unexpected that it almost killed him as he took a moment to savour it.

Given a reprieve from death, the Phoenix Guard thrust his halberd towards Lucius. The tip kissed the metal of Lucius's war plate, but that was as close as it came to the swordsman's skin. Lucius hacked the weapon's haft in two with his broken sword and waved an admonishing finger.

'That was careless of me,' he said with a faintly embarrassed sigh. 'Imagine being killed by a sluggard like you. I'd never live it down.'

Before the warrior could reply or lament the loss of his weapon, Lucius spun inside his guard and executed an exquisitely aimed decapitating strike that sent the Phoenix Guard's head spinning across the chamber.

Lucius bent to retrieve the Laeran sword, twisting the handle back and forth to ease the pull of flesh. The blade slid clear and he tore the mask of dried skin from the first warrior's face, curious to see what someone who thought he could fight him and live looked like.

It was an unremarkable face, and in the flat planes of its features, he saw Loken's mocking grin. Lucius's good humour evaporated in an instant, and he stood with a grimace of bitter memory. He stamped down on the warrior's face. Once and the bone broke, twice and the skull cracked. Three times and it caved in, a wet crater of pulverised brain matter and skull fragments.

Angry now, Lucius cleaned his sword on the dried rag of skin, his mood changing like the wind as he held up the skinned face before him like an actor upon the stage.

'Trust me, you're better off,' he said, gesturing to the broken skull of the warrior from whom he had taken the flesh mask. 'He was an ugly bastard, that one.'

He tossed the face aside, making his way to the arched doors of La Fenice.

They had once been adorned with gold and silver leaf, but were now virtually bare. Frantic madmen, desperate to relive the beautiful horrors of the Maraviglia, had worked their hands to bloody nubs of bone in their attempts to gain entry. Lucius saw fragments of splintered fingernails embedded in the doors and

plucked a few from the wood, enjoying the thought of how it must have felt to have them ripped from the nail bed.

‘What do you hope to achieve?’ he asked himself.

He had no answer, but the days since the Legion’s departure from Prismatica had only intensified his desire, his need, to see what lay behind the sealed doors to the abandoned theatre. This was disobedience on a grand scale, and the very illicitness of the venture was reason enough to seek it out.

The killing of the Phoenix Guard made withdrawal a moot point anyway.

Lucius pushed open the doors and entered the abandoned theatre.

8

He drew a lungful of stagnant air as the darkness enfolded him like a midnight lover. It tasted of metal and meat, dust and age. La Fenice had once been a place of magic, but without any breath of life to sustain it, the theatre was little more than an empty shell, bereft of any hint of joy. Lucius struggled to recall the wondrous anarchy that had once filled this place, the stark violence and manic copulation that had filled its parquet and gallery boxes with a celebration of all things visceral.

His memories of the event were grey and dull, like faded echoes instead of the glorious moment of awakening he wanted to remember. The stage was splintered and stained with blood, the walls daubed with smears of reeking fluids and hung with rotted vines of organs that had no place outside of a human body. The songbirds that had trilled from gilded cages were gone, the golden footlights extinguished and the bodies he had expected to find sprawled in decomposition were nowhere to be seen.

Who would have taken them and for what purpose?

A number of answers presented themselves – for pleasure, for dissection, for trophies – but none seemed likely. Lucius saw no drag marks, simply stained outlines where the bodies had lain, as though they had been drained of substance by something within this room, something that could draw strength from the presence of so much death.

Lucius moved through the echoing vastness of the deserted theatre, his steps carrying him with unerring inevitability towards the centre of the parquet. Above him was the Phoenician's Nest, and he cast a wary glance upwards as he felt the skin on the back of his neck tighten in anticipation of danger. He felt as though malevolent eyes were upon him, but every sense told him he was alone in here.

His gaze was drawn up to the only spot of light in La Fenice, and Lucius was not surprised to find that the portrait of Lord Fulgrim bore no resemblance to the glorious piece of artwork that had presided over the Legion's rebirth. As it appeared in his dreams, the portrait was a work of insipid blandness. To the

prosaic senses of mortals, it would have been a masterpiece, but to a warrior of the Emperor's Children it was a lifeless piece.

At least that was what Lucius believed until he met the eyes of this painted Fulgrim.

Like staring deep into an abyss that looks back, Lucius saw a dreadful anguish there, a bottomless well of agony and torment that took his breath away. His mouth fell open in a wordless exhalation of enjoyment to feel such exquisite pain. What manner of being could feel such despair? No mortal or Adeptus Astartes could plunge to such unknowable depths of wretchedness.

Only one such being could know such horror.

Lucius met the eyes of the portrait and knew in a heartbeat the nature of the being held captive within its golden prison.

'Fulgrim,' he breathed. 'My lord...'

The eyes pleaded with him, and his entire body shuddered with the ecstatic knowledge he now possessed. His heart beat furiously in his chest, and a giddy sense of vertigo staggered him as he struggled to comprehend the sheer scale of the deception worked upon the Emperor's Children.

Giddy with excitement, Lucius made his way from La Fenice in a fugue state, barely conscious of his surroundings. The enormity of what he now knew filled him like a supernova, the furthest edges of its illumination making his limbs tremble as though an electric charge filled his veins.

He staggered like a drunk through the doors of the theatre, and dropped to his knees as he began to exert a measure of control over his body. Lucius blinked away a confusing mass of light and colour from his eyes as the world around him became more real, more solid and more filled with vibrant possibility.

Alone in the entire galaxy, he knew something that no other did.

Yet even Lucius knew he could not act on this alone.

Galling as it was to admit, he would need help.

‘The quiet order,’ he whispered. ‘I will call the Brotherhood of the Phoenix.’

9

They gathered in the upper reaches of the Pride of the Emperor, in an observation bay that laid the immense starscape before the mortals who dared traverse its unimaginable gulfs. The Brotherhood of the Phoenix had not assembled since Isstvan, its members too involved in their own gratification to bother with the affairs of others.

Which was not to say that the observation deck went unused. Those who imbibed the toxically hallucinogenic cocktails brewed by Apothecary Fabius found enlightenment in its infinite vistas, and many indulged their freshly awakened carnal hungers with vicarious feasts of flesh and blades. Discarded bodies and torn heaps of broken glass lay strewn throughout the bay, and the occasional moan issued from a jumbled pile of clothing and leather restraints.

It had been a place of quiet reflection, where a warrior could meditate on the means by which he might draw closer to perfection, but now it was an arena of depravity, depthless horror and indulgences beyond all constraints of morality. No one came here to better themselves, and the grand ideals and debates once bandied back and forth were now forgotten echoes, remembered by none and actively flouted by many. If anywhere on board the Pride of the Emperor could be said to embody the utter desolation of the Emperor's Children it was this place.

They arrived in ones and twos, intrigued enough by Lucius's summons to come in hopes of some diversion interesting enough to amuse them for a time. That he – so uninterested in any notions of brotherhood – had issued such a summons was reason enough to appear, and by the time he judged it wise to begin, Lucius counted twenty warriors before him.

It was more than he had expected.

First Captain Kaesoron had come, as had Marius Vairosean and, more importantly – if Lucius's suspicions were confirmed – so had Apothecary Fabius. Kalimos, Daimon and Krysander were here, and Ruen of the Twenty-First. Heliton and Abranxe came also, and several others whose names Lucius

had not bothered to remember. They regarded him with mild amusement, for he had always been held in faint contempt by the order. Lucius struggled to hold his temper in check.

‘Why have you called us here?’ demanded Kalimos, his downcast face stitched with rings and toothed hooks. ‘This brotherhood has little meaning for us now.’

‘I need you to hear something,’ said Lucius, staring at First Captain Kaesoron.

‘Hear what?’ bellowed Vairosean, deaf to how loud he spoke.

‘Fulgrim is not who he claims to be,’ said Lucius, knowing he had to snare their interest early. ‘He is an impostor.’

Krysander laughed and the skin of his face cracked with the force of it. Others joined in, but Lucius’s anger was mitigated by the fact that he saw Kaesoron and Fabius narrow their eyes in interest.

‘I should kill you for those words,’ snarled Daimon, swinging a heavy, spike-headed maul from its shoulder harness. A monstrous weapon, one impact would crush any foe unlucky enough to be on the receiving end.

Ruen circled around behind Lucius, and he heard the whisper of an assassin’s dagger being drawn. He tasted the bitter tang of the toxins on its blade, and licked his lips.

‘It sounds preposterous, I know,’ said Lucius. His life hung on the line here. It was one thing to defeat a handful of Phoenix Guard, quite another to take on twenty captains of the Legion. He grinned at the thought of such a fight, even as he knew he would not survive it.

‘Let him speak,’ said Fabius in sibilant tones. ‘I would hear what the swordsman has to say. I am curious to see what has made him think like this.’

‘Aye, let the whelp speak,’ said Kaesoron, moving to stand beside Daimon.

Marius Vairosean unlimbered his sonic cannon, its destructive potential filling the observation deck with a bone-rattling bass note as he worked his scarred fingers over the harmonic coils.

The rest of the brotherhood spread out around him, and even as Lucius appreciated his mortal danger, he felt wonderfully alive. Krysander ran a hooked tongue over his lips, his black eyes like those of the primarch, as he slid a red-bladed dagger from a flesh-sheath cut into the meat of his bare thigh.

‘I’ll have your skin, Lucius,’ said the warrior, licking stagnant blood from the blade.

Kalimos unhooked a coiled whip from a beringed belt at his waist, its entire length barbed with the gleaming razor teeth of a carnodon and tipped with an Inwit pain amplifier. It writhed like a snake, pulsing with an intestinal motion as it wrapped itself around its wielder’s leg. Abranxe drew two swords from shoulder scabbards, as his blood brother, Heliton, slipped hooked cestus gauntlets over his fists.

They circled him in ever-decreasing rings, elaborating on the violations they would wreak upon him for wasting their time. Each captain sought to outdo the other in the depths of horror he outlined, and Lucius forced himself to ignore the barbs.

‘Speak, Lucius,’ said Kaesoron. ‘Convince us that we have all been lied to.’

Lucius stared into Kaesoron’s eyes, meeting his dead gaze, and hoping he had an ally in the First Captain.

‘I don’t have to,’ said Lucius. ‘Do I?’

‘You are foolish if you think I won’t kill you, swordsman,’ replied Kaesoron.

‘I know you can kill me, First Captain, but that’s not what I meant.’

‘Then what did you mean?’ growled Kalimos, cracking his whip and leaving a bloody line carved into the deck plates.

Lucius scanned the faces around him. Some were as they had been before Istvan, perfect and patrician, while grotesque flesh masks or androgynous porcelain harlequins hid many others. Still more were disfigured with gouged wounds, repeated burns, chemical scars or multiple piercings.

‘Because you already know, don’t you, First Captain?’ said Lucius.

Kaesoron grinned, no mean feat for a man with little remaining of his face he could call his own. The look of gleeful madness Lucius saw in his eyes confirmed the suspicion that had begun to form on Prismatica.

Kaesoron already knew that Fulgrim was not who he claimed, but one ally among these warriors would not save Lucius if he could not convince the rest.

‘You must have seen it, brothers,’ said Lucius as Daimon began swinging his maul around his body in tight arcs. ‘The Phoenician speaks, but it is not his voice. He tells of our glorious battles like he wasn’t even there. He barely remembers the war against the Laer, and the victories of which he does speak sound like he reads them from a history book.’

‘Old wars,’ sneered Ruen, tasting the poison on his blade. ‘Wars won in another’s name. What do I care how they are remembered?’

‘Who I was is forgotten,’ said Heliton. ‘Only what I am now is important.’

‘A bad dream from which I am awakened,’ added Abranxe. ‘If the primarch forgets it too, so much the better.’

Lucius drew his sword as the ring of warriors tightened on him. Heliton slammed a spiked fist into his shoulder. Hard enough to hurt, not enough to provoke a reaction. Lucius curbed his natural instinct to take the bastard’s head. Kalimos’s whip cracked, and Lucius grimaced as it scored a red line at his shoulder, leaving a white tooth embedded in the plate.

Ruen’s dagger licked the groove cut by Kalimos’s whip, and Lucius felt the nerves in his shoulder spasm as the viral toxin bathed his nerves in fire. He staggered, seeing bright colours dance before his eyes.

‘I saw the portrait in La Fenice,’ he said through gritted teeth. ‘It’s him. It’s him before the massacre.’

He sensed a pause in the captains’ murderous attentions, and let the words pour from him in a stream of rabid consciousness.

‘You all saw it, the glory of its life,’ he said. ‘It was Fulgrim as he was always meant to be, a shining avatar of perfection. A celebration of his transcendent beauty. It was everything we aspire to be, a vision we were compelled to worship. It was all that we beheld of beauty and true gratification and bliss. I have seen it, and that vision is gone. It’s as though they’ve swapped places, like twin souls displaced by unnatural means.’

‘If we do not follow the Phoenician then who has commanded us since the battle on the black sands?’ demanded Kalimos.

‘I do not know, not for sure,’ said Lucius. ‘I don’t understand it all, but the power we saw in the Maraviglia... I saw it take the flesh of that mortal singer and rework it like wax before a flame. You all saw it. The power Fulgrim showed us makes soft clay of flesh, and who is to say what limits it has? Something else came through at Istvan, something powerful enough to overcome the mind of a primarch.’

‘Lord Fulgrim called such beings daemons,’ said Marius Vairosean. ‘An old word, but an apt one. They scream in the nights we travel between the stars, and scratch at the hull of the ship with nightmares and dark promises. They make glorious music in my skull.’

Lucius nodded. ‘Yes,’ he said. ‘A daemon, that’s it. You all saw what they could do in La Fenice. The powers they have. Lord Fulgrim has such powers now. I saw him unleash a curse upon a Mechanicum battle engine on Prismaticca. Its shields were down, and without even touching it, he caused every living thing inside it to grow and mutate in a storm of flesh that ripped the war machine apart from the inside. Lord Fulgrim was mighty, but even he wasn’t that powerful. Only the Crimson King has such powers.’

‘Lord Fulgrim is no sorcerer!’ cried Abranxe, lunging at Lucius with his swords extended. Lucius batted away the clumsy attack, and his riposte gave Abranxe a neat scar on his cheek for his trouble.

‘I didn’t say he was,’ said Lucius, dropping into a defensive crouch, ‘Listen, we knew the Warmaster was treating with such things, but this is a step too far.’

Kaesoron pushed the other captains aside and gripped Lucius by the edges of his

breastplate. ‘You think Horus Lupercal is behind this?’ he snapped.

‘I don’t know. Maybe,’ said Lucius. ‘Or maybe Fulgrim went further than any of us thought he ever could.’

Kaesoron glanced over at Fabius, who had remained impassive throughout the unfolding drama. The First Captain drew a curved gutting knife and placed the tip of the blade against the pulsing artery at Lucius’s neck. Sensing bloodshed, Daimon’s hands slipped down the length of his hammer’s shaft in preparation for a crushing blow.

‘What say you, Fabius?’ demanded Kaesoron. ‘Is there any merit to the swordsman’s words, or should I kill him right now?’

Fabius ran a hand through his thin white hair, his pinched features belying the strength in his limbs. The hissing, clicking chirurgeon machine that squatted at his back like a parasite reached over his shoulder, caressing Lucius’s cheek with a slender blade. Lucius felt its feather-light touch, the blade so sharp that he only knew he had been cut when the blood ran over his lips.

The Apothecary’s dark eyes glittered with amusement, and he nodded thoughtfully as though weighing the outcomes of a trial by combat where the fighters were equally matched.

‘I too have seen things that have given me cause to wonder what our beloved primarch is becoming,’ said Fabius, his desert-parched voice like the hiss of a snake’s belly on sand.

‘What manner of things?’ said Kaesoron.

‘A change in the composition of his blood and flesh,’ replied Fabius. ‘It is as though his molecular structure has begun to dissolve the bonds linking its constituent parts into a cohesive whole.’

‘What could cause such a thing?’

Fabius shrugged. ‘Nothing of this world,’ he said with a grin of dreadful appetite. ‘It is quite fascinating, you understand. It is as though his form is preparing for some great ascension, a wondrous shedding of a redundant form as

his flesh is remade into something extraordinary.'

'And you never thought to mention this?' asked Lucius, still very much aware of the blade at his throat. Just by speaking, he caused its monomolecular tip to pierce his skin.

'It was too soon to speak,' snapped Fabius. 'I do not pause in my observations as you would not pause in the midst of a duel.'

'You mean you believe him?' asked Marius Vairosean, his stretched face unable to hide the revulsion he felt at the thought of their master's body being hijacked by another. Marius had ever been the loyal lapdog of the primarch, unquestioningly following his orders and never once doubting their course.

'I do, Vairosean,' said Fabius. 'My research is unfinished, but I believe that another entity resides within the Phoenician and prepares to transform him into some new image.'

Lucius took grim pleasure in his vindication as the First Captain's knife was removed from his throat. The circling captains paused in their threatening dance, shaken and enthralled that the wild claims of the swordsman had been backed up by no less a figure than Fabius.

Kaesoron lowered him to the deck and released his grip.

Lucius found it grimly amusing that it had been their very loyalty to Fulgrim that had seen them cast as traitors in this rebellion. Blind, unquestioning devotion to one luminous being had been the origin of their damnation in the eyes of the Imperium. The irony was not lost on any of them.

'How long before this transformation occurs?' asked Kaesoron.

Fabius shook his head. 'It is impossible to say for sure, but I would expect this pupating stage of development to be rapid. Indeed, the change in physicality might already be under way. It could be too late to stop it.'

'But it might not?' said Lucius.

'Nothing is certain,' admitted Fabius.

‘Then we have to try,’ stated the First Captain. ‘If Fulgrim is no longer master of his own body then we have to get him back. We are his sons, and whatever has claimed his flesh must be captured and cast out of his body. Lord Fulgrim is our gene-father and I take orders from no one but him.’

A charge of febrile excitement swept through the gathered captains, and Lucius let out a shuddering sigh. He had convinced the others of his suspicions while keeping his blood inside his body and his head upon his shoulders.

‘So, a pertinent question...’ said Lucius. ‘How do we go about capturing a primarch?’

10

The Gallery of Swords was a place where the exhibitionists of the Emperor's Children liked to display their latest flesh masterpieces. Devotees of Apothecary Fabius, hoping to attract his notice, would drape their latest confections of macabre living art from the bull-headed statues that lined the grand processional of the Andronicus.

The towering granite-hewn heroes of the Legion, warriors who had cut the first histories of the Emperor's Children into the meat of the galaxy, were no longer recognisable as human. Their lovingly-carved faces had been recut, defaced and shaped anew into forms pleasing to the lurid aesthetics of the Legion. Leering grotesques kept watch on those who passed beneath them, and all who gazed upon them felt the wondrous horror of their debauched expressions.

Apothecary Fabius made his lair beneath the Gallery of Swords, a sprawling medicae complex that had been transformed from a place of healing, research and excellence into a shadowed labyrinth of excruciation, screams and nightmarish, inhumane experiments.

Fulgrim swept into the Gallery of Swords with Julius Kaesoron at his side, majestic in a long robe of cream fabric, with silver embroidered stitching running along the hems and collar. A sword belt of mirrored discs encircled his waist, the golden hilt of the anathame never far from Fulgrim's hand.

The primarch's white hair was pulled back into a long scalp-lock woven with mother of pearl and held in place by a circlet of golden laurels. His sculpted chest was bare, and the pale skin bore numerous ridges of scar tissue from the last treatments and enhancements worked upon him by Fabius.

Even though Kaesoron was encased in his spiked and flesh-wrapped Terminator armour, Fulgrim still stood head and shoulders above him. Clad in naught but his finery, Fulgrim was still a warrior to be feared.

The primarch stopped beside one statue that had suffered particularly at the hands of the Legion's craftsmen. He smiled up at the graven image of a reptilian bull's head. The warrior's armour had been cut with blessed symbols, and a trio

of hollowed out bodies hung from barbed nooses, one from each outstretched arm, and another from its neck.

‘Ah, Illios, you would not know yourself now,’ said Fulgrim, with wistful nostalgia. ‘I remember the day you first drew sword alongside me as we forged the alliance of the eighteen tribes. We were young then, and warriors who knew nothing of the wider world.’

‘Do you wish he were here with us now?’ asked Kaesoron.

Fulgrim laughed and shook his head. ‘No, for I fear I would have to kill him. He was always so unbending, Julius. He was a man with an unbreakable code of honour from the elder days, I do not think he would have appreciated the enlightenments we have received.’

The primarch took a wistful look at the statue of his former blade brother and a strange expression passed over his alabaster features. Kaesoron’s eyes were no longer able to perceive the world as they once had, but even he could see the light of dark memory in the primarch’s eyes.

‘How naive we were, old friend,’ mused Fulgrim. ‘How blind...’

‘My lord?’

‘Nothing, Julius,’ said Fulgrim, marching towards the end of the gallery.

‘How did Lord Commander Illios die?’ asked Kaesoron.

‘You know the answer to that, Julius. Your introspections on perfection would have required you to memorise the victories of our past.’

‘I know, but to hear it from your lips is always a sublime experience.’

‘Very well,’ smiled Fulgrim. ‘Apothecary Fabius will not mind if we are a little late.’

Kaesoron shook his head. ‘I am sure he will not.’

‘Good. Ah, Illios, it was your temper that saw you killed,’ said Fulgrim, his tone

warming with recall. ‘You were a man of joyous rages and great sorrows. Never good combinations in a warrior, but you were almost great enough to survive your own weaknesses. Mighty he was, Julius, tall and proud, with the triple-bladed Executioner Falchion and the Armour of Chemos. He was unstoppable. A warrior such as he had only one superior, but he held no grudge that I was his better.’

‘It was atop the Barchettan Warlord’s city-leviathan he fell, was it not?’

‘If you know the story so well, why bid me tell it?’ snapped Fulgrim, his eyes ablaze.

‘Apologies, lord,’ said Kaesoron, keeping his head bowed. ‘It is a stirring story, and I was caught up in your words.’

‘Then you should have kept your mouth shut, Julius,’ said Fulgrim. ‘You do not interrupt me when I am speaking. Did Eidolon’s death teach you nothing?’

‘It was instructional,’ said Kaesoron.

‘When I speak, I am the star around which you orbit,’ said Fulgrim, leaning down to fix Kaesoron with his furious gaze. His black eyes were pools of dark oil, ready to ignite with unspeakable rage. Kaesoron knew he had made a terrible error in speaking and that his life now hung in the balance.

‘Who but you, my lord, could speak with such passion and force me into a loose tongue?’

‘None other,’ agreed Fulgrim. ‘It is only natural you should be entranced by my words.’

Fulgrim’s wrath evaporated and he slapped a powerful hand on Kaesoron’s shoulder guard, staggering the First Captain.

‘Ah, we are a pair are we not, Julius?’ reflected the primarch. ‘Reminiscing of past glories when there are fresh foes against which to beat our breast and fresh sensations to be wrung from each breath.’

‘Then let us hurry our steps to Apothecary Fabius,’ said Kaesoron, gesturing to

the shadowed cloisters at the end of the Gallery of Swords.

‘Indeed, we must,’ said Fulgrim, his voice aquiver with anticipation. ‘I wonder what delights he has for me this time.’

‘He promises wondrous things,’ said Julius Kaesoron.

11

Lucius watched Fulgrim and Julius Kaesoron draw near the end of the gallery. His breath was coming in short spikes, and he fought to keep his excitement from getting the better of his caution. As thrillingly treasonous as this was, he wanted to live to see another day. Attacking a primarch was, perhaps, a foolish way to go about that, but his heightened senses were alive with the rush of sensation flooding him.

The stone beneath his bare palm was a smorgasbord of textures, rough, smooth, indented and imperfect in its carving. Polished, moon-blush granite, its original surface planed smooth to microscopic tolerances, then hacked apart with gleeful chisels wielded with screaming abandon. He could no longer tell which of the Legion's heroes he sheltered behind, and that lacuna was like a missing tooth.

Lucius fought this newly-birthered obsession down and wrenched his thoughts back to the task at hand with a shuddering breath. To experience every sensation to the limits of endurance was sublime, but it had a nasty habit of diverting a warrior from his true goals. Bad enough that one warrior should be so caught up, but woe betide any world that became the target of the entire Legion's obsession.

He forced his gaze back down the length of the Gallery of Swords, watching as Kaesoron drew Fulgrim deeper into their trap. Vairosean's warriors were hidden in the shadows of the mighty statues, each shrouded with a falsehood and kept silent with implanted neural shriekers that bombarded their cerebral cortex with howling discordia. When the word was given, those shriekers would go silent, depriving the implanted warriors of the blissful howling and driving them to replace it with fresh stimulus. Vairosean had developed the implants on the journey from Prismatica, and, much as Lucius was loath to credit such a plodder with anything of merit, he had to admit the shriekers transformed the Kakophoni into obsessively fanatical killers on the battlefield.

Against the might of a primarch they would need to be.

It seemed inconceivable that Fulgrim could not be aware of their presence, but as Lucius and the Legion had become so caught up in their own self-obsessions, so

too had the primarch. Where Lucius's clouds of obsession were heavy and almost impenetrable, he could only imagine what heights of narcissism a luminous being such as Fulgrim might attain.

Lucius glanced to his right, seeing the shadowed opening that led down into the forsaken lair of Apothecary Fabius. He remembered descending into the dimly-lit labyrinth after his defection from the fools on Istvan III, his every nerve alive with fearful anticipation. He had set foot in the Apothecarion a handful of times only, his skills so great as to rarely require medical attention. He remembered it as a sterile place of clinical, antiseptic chill, but it had become a gallery of grotesqueries, its walls spattered with rust-coloured stains and hung with biological trophies, mutant curios and bubbling tanks of noxious fluids.

The stink had been incredible, but once Fabius had opened him up and remade him in the primarch's image, it had become a place of wonders to him. As much as he revelled in the glorious worlds opened up to him by Fabius, he could never bring himself to like him. He supposed such things were immaterial now.

He heard Fulgrim ask a question, but the words were lost to him, and he swore silently as he realised he had been distracted once more. Taking a grip on himself, Lucius narrowed his concentration to a sharp blade of focus. Fulgrim was almost upon him, and as architect of this plan, it fell to Lucius to make the first move.

Lucius stepped from the shadows, and the fractional space that separated life and death grew ever thinner. His senses surged with the vividness of this moment, the thrilling anticipation of what he was doing, the sheer madness of it and the irreversible nature of this act.

'Lucius?' said Fulgrim with an amused smile. 'What are you doing here?'

'I have come to speak to you.'

'No, "my lord", Lucius? Have you forgotten to whom you speak?'

'I don't know who I'm speaking to,' said Lucius, staring into the hard, opaque orbs of Fulgrim's eyes. He saw no pity, no humanity and nothing that spoke to him of the lord and master he had loved and served with all his heart. He

wondered if that was true or if he was just remembering a past that didn't exist, a fictive history invented to justify this moment.

'I am Fulgrim, Master of the Emperor's Children,' said Fulgrim, glancing about himself as though stretching his senses out and gradually becoming aware of the noose into which he had just placed his neck. 'And you will obey me.'

Lucius shook his head and rested his palm on the pommel of his sword. He wasn't surprised to realise it was slick with sweat.

'I don't know what you are, but you are not Fulgrim,' said Lucius, and the primarch laughed. It was a good laugh, infectious and rich with deep amusement. It was the laugh of a man who knows the joke he is hearing should be appreciated on a level beyond that which everyone else around him understands.

Fulgrim grinned, his dark eyes alight with perverse pleasure at the situation.

'You think you can take me, swordsman? Is that it?' asked Fulgrim. 'I see how you look at me, the obsessive study and drive to prove yourself better than everyone else. You think I don't see how you wish you could pit your blade against mine?'

Lucius hid his surprise. He had assumed Fulgrim to be too self-absorbed to notice his calculating scrutiny, but he should have understood that true self-obsession could only be fed by the attentions of others. Fulgrim would have basked in Lucius's study, and who knew what else he had done? Had his every movement been a pantomime to lull Lucius into assuming superiority or was this just a calculated bluff?

'I have watched you ever since Isstvan V, and you are not the same warrior I followed into battle on Laeran. The Fulgrim I followed onto the surface of that eldar world is not the same one looking at me and daring me to come at him. You are an impostor with my master's face and I will take no orders from a usurper.'

Fulgrim laughed once more, squatting down on his haunches as the hilarity of Lucius's words threatened to overcome him. Lucius scowled in petulant

irritation. What had he said that was so funny? He glanced at Kaesoron, but it was impossible to read the First Captain's expression.

'Oh, you are a rare and precious treasure, Lucius,' roared Fulgrim. 'Don't you see? We all take our orders from a usurper. Horus Lupercal has not yet earned the title of Emperor. Until then, what else is he but a usurper?'

'That's not the same,' said Lucius, feeling his moral high ground in this confrontation eroding beneath him. 'Horus Lupercal is the Warmaster, but you are not Fulgrim. I see his face, but something else lurks behind it, something spawned by the same powers that granted us the power to fully experience the wonders this galaxy has to offer.'

Fulgrim rose to his full height and said, 'If that were the case, swordsman, should you not then prostrate yourself before me and beg me to open your eyes to fresh wonders? If I am an avatar of the warp's Dark Prince clothed in the flesh of your beloved primarch, am I not doing a better job than he did in showing you how best to sate your hungers and desires?'

Shapes moved in the shadows between the alcoves of statues, and Lucius saw Heliton and Abranxe emerge from the opposite sides of the marble statue of Lord Commander Pelleon. Marius Vairosean marched along the grand processional with his long-necked cannon slung at his side, its dissonance coils thrumming with potential. His Kakophoni emerged from their hiding places, eyes wide with madness and the need to be driven into sonic ecstasy.

Apothecary Fabius stepped from the arched entrance to his subterranean kingdom, flanked by Kalimos, Daimon, Ruen and Krysander.

Fulgrim turned in a slow circle, taking in the measure of the warriors arrayed against him.

Lucius counted perhaps fifty warriors and wished he had fifty more. And then a hundred more beyond that.

The captains of the Legion encircled Fulgrim, each with their weapon unsheathed and with murder in their hearts. Lucius drew his blade and rolled his shoulders to loosen the muscles. They had not come to kill Fulgrim – if such a

thing was even possible for mortals – but this rapidly-unfolding drama had all the hallmarks of a situation spiralling out of control.

‘Alas, I am betrayed by those I hold most dear,’ said Fulgrim, clutching his hands to his breast as though his heart was broken. ‘You all countenance these lies? Can you all truthfully believe I am not your beloved gene-sire, who brought us all back from the brink of extinction and who led us to truths denied us by our once-father?’

Fulgrim’s face crumpled and Lucius was not a little unsettled to see a single tear work its way down the marbled flawlessness of the primarch’s face.

The primarch turned to Julius Kaesoron with a hurt look of betrayal in his eyes.

‘Even you, Julius?’ said the Phoenician. ‘Then fall, Fulgrim!’

‘Take him!’ bellowed Julius Kaesoron, and the captains of the Legion stepped away from Fulgrim as Marius Vairosean unleashed a barrage of shrieking reverberations from his cannon. Statues split under the sonic assault, and Lucius felt a delicious frisson throughout his body as the aural blast wave threw him to the flagstones of the gallery.

Fulgrim staggered under the impact, his robes ripped from his body with the tearing power of the shockwave. He dropped to one knee, his wreath of golden laurels shattering into thousands of fragments. Beneath his robes, Fulgrim was naked but for a crimson loincloth and Lucius marvelled at the almost serpentine fluidity of his body. Daimon leapt towards the downed primarch with his grotesque maul swinging down like an executioner’s axe.

Fulgrim swayed aside from the blow, letting the barbed head of the weapon bury itself in the stone decking. Splinters exploded from the impact, and before Daimon could retrieve his maul, Fulgrim stepped in and drove the heel of his palm into the captain’s face. Daimon had no time to scream before his face was smashed hollow. Even as the warrior fell, Fulgrim swept up the maul in his right fist as Ruen darted forwards and rammed his envenomed blade to the hilt into Fulgrim’s side.

The haft of the maul slammed down into Ruen’s elbow, shattering the bones of

his upper and lower arm. The captain's howl of pain was music to Lucius's ears, as Fulgrim tore the absurdly small blade from his body. Fulgrim kicked Ruen away, sending him spinning across the gallery to slam into a statue with a crack of shattering plate and breaking bone.

Lucius circled Fulgrim, not yet willing to commit to the fight. His blade tingled in his grip, eager to taste such rarefied blood and hungry to draw him into the dance of swords.

'Not yet, my beauty,' he whispered. 'Not when there are others to suffer the worst of the primarch's ire and strength.'

If Ruen's toxins were having any effect on Fulgrim, Lucius couldn't say, but it appeared that the captain of the Twenty-First had been premature in his boasts that his banes could fell any living foe.

The Kakophoni unleashed a roaring series of blasts from their sonic weapons, filling the Gallery of Swords with clashing echoes and reverberating harmonies that drew blood from the ears of all that heard them. Fulgrim shrieked in pleasure as the sound vibrated his flesh and bones with a ferocity that should have killed him thrice over.

Heliton stepped in and drove the spiked fist of his cestus gauntlet into Fulgrim's lower back, a blow that would have shattered the spine of even an armoured Adeptus Astartes. The primarch took the blow and spun on his heel. A jabbing elbow put Heliton on his back, his lower jaw hanging by a thread of glistening sinew and pulped bone. Abranxe screamed to see his boon companion laid low and swept his twin swords for Fulgrim's neck. The primarch deflected one sword with the head of Daimon's maul, as Abranxe spun inside the weapon's reach to slide his second blade across Fulgrim's throat.

Blood cascaded down Fulgrim's throat, and his eyes widened with genuine surprise. Lucius felt a fleeting moment of bitter disappointment and venomous jealousy at the thought of a merely competent swordsman like Abranxe landing such a blow. But no sooner had the blood begun to flow than it stopped, and Fulgrim took hold of Abranxe by the neck and hurled him away.

'A good move, Abranxe,' said Fulgrim with a rasp of gratification. 'I will

remember it.'

Kalimos cracked his lash, its toothed length wrapping around Fulgrim's left arm. The carnodon teeth tore into his flesh, and squirts of blood sprayed from the wounds. As Kalimos hauled on his lash, Julius Kaesoron stepped in and delivered a thunderous left hook with his crackling fist. Augmented with strength enough to tear apart a battle tank, Kaesoron's blow drove Fulgrim to his knees, but before he could strike again, Kalimos jerked on his lash as Krylander plunged his dagger between the primarch's shoulder blades.

Fulgrim closed his fist on the gnawing lash and gave what appeared to be no more than a gentle tug. Kalimos was plucked from his feet and spun around the primarch, slamming into Krylander and sending the pair of them crashing to the ends of the gallery. Kaesoron swung again, but Fulgrim was ready for him, blocking the blow with Daimon's maul and thundering a naked fist into his face. Kaesoron dropped with a grunt, but Fulgrim made no move to finish him.

'Now Lucius, strike!' shouted Fabius, and the swordsman cursed the Apothecary as Fulgrim spun to face him. The primarch dropped the maul and drew the glitter-sheened blade Horus Lupercal had gifted him aboard the Vengeful Spirit.

'Now we come to it, swordsman,' grinned Fulgrim, swaying on his feet.

Lucius saw the pale complexion of his primarch was ashen and spat to the deck.

'This would be no contest worth making,' he said. 'Ruen's venom and your wounds render it meaningless.'

Fulgrim spread wide his arms and took stock of the blood dripping from his body. 'This?' he said. 'This is nothing. Come at me with the blade I gave you and we will settle this question once and for all, yes?'

Lucius cocked his head to one side, meeting the primarch's maddened gaze and seeing a truth he knew was as unshakable as it was inevitable.

Even in his wounded state, Fulgrim would kill him.

And Lucius wasn't ready to die, not for this.

Before he could consider the matter further, Julius Kaesoron rose up behind Fulgrim and slammed his energised fist down on Fulgrim's skull. A blow that should have pulped its victim's head to a smeared red ruin merely drove Fulgrim to the ground. The Phoenician shook his head and his bloody rictus grin put Lucius in mind of the deathly iconography he had seen carved into Isstvan V's ruins.

As Fulgrim sought to push himself to his feet, Marius Vairosean jammed the end of his sonic cannon into Fulgrim's neck and unleashed a barrage of squalling harmonics that filled the gallery with ear-bleeding noise. Lucius cried out in pain, and Fulgrim's eyes rolled back in their sockets as he let out a groan of what sounded very much like delirious pleasure.

The sword fell from the primarch's hand, and he toppled to the cracked flagstones with a heavy thump. Lucius looked up, blinking away bright spots of light from his vision and hearing what sounded like a million bells clanging at once. He stood a few metres from Vairosean, so he couldn't begin to imagine the effect the blast must have had on Fulgrim.

The surviving captains picked themselves up from the ground and formed a ring of dazed warriors around the fallen god. It had been a battle like no other, the warriors of a Legion turning on their own primarch, and the enormity of what they had done was not lost on them.

Lucius did not know what to feel. He had been cheated of his duel with Fulgrim, a duel he felt in his bones he would have lost. But some secret instinct told him that he would yet get his chance to test his blade against the primarch's alien weapon and yet live to speak of it.

Lucius turned his gaze upon his fellow captains. None marked his stare, for they could not tear their eyes from the downed primarch. Kalimos bled from numerous cracks in his armour, and Krysander's breastplate was dented so deeply that the bone shield of his chest must surely be in fragments. Abranxe knelt by Heliton, holding the hanging fragments of his brother's lower jaw in his hands. Vairosean's howling mouth was spread even wider in a hissing grimace of triumph, and Julius Kaesoron stared at his fist as though unable to believe he had raised it in anger against Fulgrim.

None spoke. None knew what to say.

They had taken arms against their primarch and they had enjoyed it.

Apothecary Fabius broke the spell of their silence.

‘Fools!’ hissed the lifeless voice of the Apothecary. ‘You would stand gaping like landed fish until he awoke!’

Fabius turned away and made his way to the arched entrance to his necropolis of freakish surgeries. As he reached the edge of shadow, he turned back to the Legion captains.

‘Bring him below,’ said Fabius. ‘We have much to do.’

‘What exactly are you going to do, Apothecary?’ demanded Kaesoron.

‘I am going to exorcise the creature that has stolen the primarch’s flesh.’

‘How?’ asked Lucius.

‘By any means necessary,’ said Fabius with an odious grin.

12

It was the most terrible thing he had ever seen.

It was the most wondrous thing he had ever seen.

Fulgrim, the Phoenician, Lord of the Emperor's Children, Master of the III Legion, bound with the heaviest of fetters, chemically subdued and laid naked on a cold steel gurney like a corpse bound for dissection. Fulgrim's arms were thrown up above his head, his legs spread like the Vitruvian man of old.

Lucius's eyes roamed Fulgrim's pale flesh, the alabaster firmness criss-crossed in a web of surgical scars and incisions; knotted ridges that spoke of unknowable procedures and unspeakable experimentation upon the secret flesh within.

The delicious treason of this moment was something to be treasured, a wondrous sensation of the most terrible betrayal. Yet, for all that he called it betrayal, wasn't it an act of loyalty to cast out the creature that had taken possession of their master's soul?

Fabius circled the supine primarch, sliding needles as thick as Lucius's little finger into Fulgrim's arms and chest. Chem-shunts pumped powerful soporifics and muscle relaxants that would have dropped even the largest greenskin. Gleaming silver wires hooked to humming generators trailed from the primarch's temples and groin, and from every point on his body where pain might be heightened.

The lights were kept low, as befitted this act of violation, and the only sound was the murmuring of the hooded null-wretches in each shadowed corner of the chamber and the wheezing breath of the machines Fabius had set up around his...

Lucius wanted to say patient, but the word that came to mind was victim.

Julius Kaesoron stood silently at the foot of the slab, while Marius Vairosean paced like a caged raptor. Lucius smiled at his discomfort. Vairosean had ever been the lackey and the blindly obedient slave. Caught in a quandary of

obedience to something that might not be Fulgrim and the possibility of betraying his master, Vairosean's mind must be alive with contradictory thoughts and fears.

Lucius almost envied him.

Fabius's thrall-slaves had carried the mewling forms of Heliton and Ruen deeper into the labyrinth; flesh-vats and xenosalival-sutures already prepared for their treatment. Daimon was beyond help, his skull smashed to concave ruin by the primarch's fist, but the rest of their treasonous band would survive. The thought sent a sliver of unease worming through Lucius's brain, and he turned to Kaesoron.

'Did you think we could do it?' he asked.

'Do what?'

'This,' said Lucius, gesturing towards the fallen primarch. 'Capture Fulgrim. I wasn't sure we could do it.'

'You didn't do it,' pointed out Kaesoron.

'What do you mean?'

'Look at you,' hissed Kaesoron. 'Not a mark on you, swordsman. You bring this matter to the brotherhood, and then step back and let us do the fighting for you.'

Lucius grinned, energised by Kaesoron's anger. 'What happened up there was a brawl. I fight with perfect grace, total immersion and fluid perfection. That was not a fight that required any of those qualities.'

'More like you saw you couldn't beat him.'

'That too,' added Lucius, 'but there's no shame in that.'

'True enough,' said Kaesoron, his capricious anger fading as quickly as it had come.

Marius Vairosean moved around the edge of the gurney, his stretched-out face

making it impossible to read his expression. The captain of the Third had slung his sonic weapon over his shoulder, but the pulsing waves of hard-edged sound still rippled from its energised coils.

‘Daimon is dead,’ said Vairosean. ‘And Heliton died on the way down.’

‘And the Legion will be no worse off for their loss, if you ask me,’ said Lucius.

‘Ruen’s arm is shattered beyond repair,’ continued Vairosean, as though Lucius had not spoken. ‘Krysander and Kalimos will live, but they will play no part in... this.’

‘A small price to pay for subduing a primarch,’ noted Kaesoron, as Fabius approached.

The Apothecary wore his white hair bound in a long scalp-lock, which only served to render his already gaunt features more skeletal and emaciated. His eyes were black, and Lucius couldn’t remember if they had always been that way or had been changed to match those of the primarch. He wore a floor-length coat of flayed human skin, taken from the bodies of the dead on Isstvan V. Here and there, it was possible to recognise the features of a face, a mouth stretched in an endless scream of agony or eyes wide with horror at the sight of the skinner’s knife. Some of the faces seemed familiar, but Lucius knew that without the architecture of bone, every face tended to similarity.

Eschewing his surgeon device, Fabius favoured a belt of knotted sinew pierced through with metal loops, from which hung the tools of the excruciator’s art. Hooks, blades, spikes, pliers and barbs glittered in the half-light, but Lucius wondered if such banal instruments would draw screams from a being as powerful as Fulgrim.

‘We are ready to begin,’ said Fabius, drawing on a clicking pair of silver steel gauntlets.

‘Then let us be done with this,’ said Kaesoron. ‘If Lucius is right and there is something else concealed behind Lord Fulgrim’s face, then the sooner it is gone the better.’

They spread out around Fulgrim, each weighing the enormity of what they were

doing against the potential for wonder and fresh sensation. That they had managed to subdue a primarch was miracle enough, but to drive out a creature of the warp...

Was such a thing even possible?

Lucius looked from face to face, understanding that no one gathered around the body of Fulgrim could answer that question. The Emperor's Children had been a Legion reticent in employing Librarians. The genetic quirk that allowed a psyker to wield the power of the warp came about as a result of a genetic mutation, a flaw. And nothing that could be considered a flaw would be permitted within the ranks of Fulgrim's Legion.

'So what do we do?' asked Kaesoron.

'First, we wake him,' said Fabius, stroking needle-tipped fingers over Fulgrim's chest.

'Assuming he doesn't just break free and kill us all, what then?' said Lucius.

'We drive the creature out,' said Fabius. 'With reason, with threats and with pain.'

'Pain?' snorted Vairosean. 'What pain can you administer that a primarch would feel?'

Fabius smiled his reptilian grin that promised a host of pains he alone knew and would be only too glad to demonstrate.

'I know this body like no other,' said Fabius, running his surgically-enabled digits over Fulgrim's skin with a lover's familiarity. 'I know everything about how it was put together, the secret powers alloyed to its flesh and bone, the unique organs crafted for the creation of such a numinous being. What the Emperor created, I have broken down into its constituent parts and remade in a greater whole.'

The arrogance of Fabius was astounding, but Lucius felt himself warming to it. To have opened up the body of a primarch and gazed upon the wonders within was an honour few, if any, would have known, so perhaps it was arrogance born

of knowledge.

‘Then do it,’ said Kaesoron.

Fabius nodded, though there was more amusement to the gesture than any real acquiescence. How long would it be, wondered Lucius, before Fabius’s arrogance lifted him from the chain of command entirely? Once so rigid and unbending, the Emperor’s Children adhered to the old structure in lieu of anything better, but even that was breaking down as its warriors put their own desires and whims above those of the Legion.

How long before we are little more than squabbling warbands fighting for our own self-gratification?

Lucius had no answer to the question, and nor did that lack trouble him overmuch. Whether any remnant of the old Legion survived their rebirth was a matter of supreme indifference to him.

Fabius clipped a fluid drip to Fulgrim’s arm and a shimmering crimson fluid sprinted along its length. No sooner had it entered the primarch’s body than Fulgrim’s black eyes opened and he blinked rapidly, like a sleeper suddenly awoken from a vivid dream.

‘Ah, my sons...’ said Fulgrim. ‘What is this new diversion you have for me?’

Fabius leaned over to speak in Fulgrim’s ear. ‘You are not Fulgrim, are you?’

Fulgrim’s eyes darted to the Apothecary, and Lucius caught the whiff of conspiracy in the glance. He leaned forwards and lifted Fabius’s hand from Fulgrim’s chest.

‘Lucius,’ breathed Fulgrim with perfumed breath. ‘Such a shame we were denied the caress of steel, don’t you think?’

‘I think you have been luring me into that fight for some time,’ answered Lucius.

Fulgrim laughed. ‘Was I really so obvious? It would have made for a sublime experience, Lucius. How can you say you are truly alive unless you have first tasted death? To rise anew from the ashes of one life and be reborn into another.

To taste oblivion and then return, ah, now that is an experience not to be dismissed so lightly.'

'I think death might sour of its charms in short order,' said Lucius. 'I think I will stick to the pleasures life can offer.'

Fulgrim's face twisted in a pout of disappointment. 'How short sighted of you, my son. No matter, you will reconsider in time, I think. Now, to the rest of you. Can you seriously believe I am not who I say I am when I tell you I am your master?'

'We know you are not Fulgrim,' said Kaesoron.

'Then who do you believe me to be?'

'A creature of the immaterium,' said Vairosean. 'A daemon spawn.'

'A daemon?' laughed Fulgrim. 'And how else would you describe a primarch? Are you so naive as to believe that all things named daemon are evil? Daemon or primarch, both are creatures fashioned from immaterial energies, hybrids of flesh and spirit brought into this world by unnatural means. If you knew anything of my creation then you would not bandy such words so carelessly.'

'So you admit that you are a daemon?' hissed Kaesoron.

'Julius, my beloved son,' said Fulgrim. 'Have you become so eager for conflict that you consciously blind yourself to reality? I have already told you that by Marius's dull definition, yes, I am a daemon! A daemon willed into creation by a being who seeks to win his immortality through storming the realm of gods by clambering over our corpses.'

'It speaks with lies masquerading as truth,' warned Fabius. 'Like the horse of ancient Truva, it will send its falsehoods garbed in that which sounds pleasant to your ears.'

'Then we should cut out his tongue,' said Lucius, and he was rewarded by a flicker of unease in Fulgrim's dark eyes. He saw anger, amusement and disappointment in that flicker, but which was the true emotion, he could not tell.

‘Marius,’ said Fulgrim. ‘Of all my sons, you were the last I expected to see here.’

The words dripped with anguish, but Marius Vairosean did not flinch from them. Ever since Marius had failed Fulgrim on Laeran, he had been the most devoted servant, ever eager to please and determined to obey any order without question. If Fulgrim hoped to appeal to that aspect of Vairosean, he was to be sorely disappointed.

‘My love for my primarch knows no bounds,’ said Marius, leaning forwards as though to spit in the bound primarch’s face. ‘But you are not he, and I will do whatever it takes to cast you from his body. No pain is beyond me, no suffering too great to make that happen. Do you understand, daemon spawn?’

Fulgrim’s face split apart in a wide grin.

‘Then enough talk, whelps,’ he said. ‘Let us begin our journey into madness together!’

13

Fabius began with that most ancient of interrogation techniques, the unveiling of his many devices of excruciation and explaining of the purposes to which they would be put. They ranged from mundane artefacts, such as any fashioner of metal or wood might employ – hammers, needle-nosed pliers, nails, welding torches, awls, planes and slow-bit drills – to more exotic implements of suffering. Nerve-splicers, organ-liquefiers, chakra-inflamers, marrow-augers and brain-stem impellents.

‘This last device is one that will give me great pleasure to use,’ said Fabius, hooking a number of metal barbs into Fulgrim’s spine. The gurney upon which Fulgrim lay had rotated about its long axis, revealing flagellated shoulders and a back that was a corrugated landscape of scar tissue and healing weals. Lucius saw an admirable devotion in the primarch’s flesh, a single-minded pursuit of pleasurable agony that only the true devotee of pain could attain.

‘What is it and what does it do?’ asked Kaesoron.

Fabius smiled, pleased to be able to elaborate on his tool of suffering. ‘It is a neural parasite I have engineered from gene-spliced xenos brain fluids and nanotech recovered from the Diasporex hybrid-captains.’

‘That doesn’t answer his question,’ snapped Marius.

Fabius nodded and tapped a long-nailed finger on the back of Fulgrim’s skull. Lucius frowned at the gesture, the implications of detachment altogether too complete. To Fabius, Fulgrim was simply another piece of meat upon which he could work his biological conjurations. The outcome of this betrayal would decide the future course of the Legion, but it was already simply a means to uncover some new biological quirk and a test of a new invention. Lucius’s feelings towards Fabius went from dislike to hate.

Fabius lifted an artefact that looked like the rear portion of a battle helm and turned it around in his hands. Thin spikes jutted from one side, each hooked to an array of injector shunts loaded with glittering silver fluid that rippled like expectant mercury.

‘Once placed upon the subject, nano-fluid is introduced to the subject’s body, whereupon it latches onto the brain stem and follows the neural pathways into the brain. The various xenos species employed in the creation of the serum were possessed of enhanced psychic potential, and the invasion of the brain chemistry allows the manipulator of the device to access any area of the brain and stimulate it as required.’

‘To what end?’ asked Lucius, though he had a good idea.

‘All things mortal are simply engines,’ said Fabius. ‘Mechanical animals of flesh and blood, but driven by essentially mechanistic imperatives. What we mistake for personality and character are simply expressions of response to stimuli. With a complex enough algorithm, it would be possible to exactly replicate a functioning machine persona that would be indistinguishable from a living creature. Knowing this, we can stimulate certain areas of the brain, enhancing whatever aspects we choose while blocking others. I could dash the brains of a newborn infant against a wall in front of its mother and this device would see her delirious with ecstasy should I so choose. Or I could lightly touch a man’s chest and make him believe I was tearing his heart out with my bare hands.’

‘Then why the need for the other devices?’ asked Kaesoron.

‘As much as this device can make a man believe he is burning to death without so much as a spark being near him, there is a certain pleasure to be taken from a... simpler approach to pain,’ admitted Fabius.

‘On that at least we agree,’ said the First Captain.

‘So what are we waiting for?’ demanded Vairosean. ‘Let us begin and be done with this.’

Fabius gave a slow nod and rotated the gurney around once more. Fulgrim’s face was ruddy and Lucius could see he relished the prospect of their attempted rescue of the soul whose body he had stolen.

‘I remember that device,’ said Fulgrim. ‘Do you really believe it will work on a being like me? My consciousness is an order of magnitude greater than yours. It functions in realms beyond anything you can comprehend, its upper limits so

great they cannot be contained purely in a cocoon of bone, and must exist in realms which only gods can access.'

'We shall find out,' said Fabius, insulted that his genius was being impugned.

'Start with that one,' ordered Kaesoron. 'If we are successful, there must be a perfect body into which Fulgrim can return.'

'My sons, you have been led to this like sheep to the slaughter,' said Fulgrim. 'Lucius brings you an idea that generates a flicker of interest in your dull lives and you seize it as a golden lifeline just so you can actually feel something. Have you learned nothing since our ascension? Non-conformity in thought and deed is the only vital life. Brotherhoods are for sheep-minds, and heresy is godly!'

'Enough talking,' said Lucius, snatching up a set of bladed pliers and sliding them over the middle finger of Fulgrim's right hand. With one swift, even pressure, he severed the finger at the middle knuckle, and a squirt of blood pulsed from the wound before slowing to a drip.

Fulgrim howled, but whether it was in pain or pleasure Lucius could not tell.

Fabius snatched the pliers from Lucius with an angry scowl.

'Excruciation is a precise and meticulous art, a stepped pyramid of pain,' he said. 'To randomly cut and maim is the work of amateurs. I will have no part in such butchery.'

'Then stop talking and get on with it,' said Lucius. 'Because it sounds to me like you're stalling.'

'The swordsman has a point,' said Kaesoron, looming over the Apothecary. Clad in his Terminator armour, Julius dwarfed Fabius, and the Apothecary nodded in acquiescence.

'As you will it, First Captain,' said Fabius, turning to his instruments. 'We shall begin with the pain of fire.'

Lucius felt his pulse race as Fabius lifted a cutting torch from the bench, snapping the igniting mechanism three times before the flame caught. Used to

cut through sheet steel, the flame sharpened to a cone of blue-hot light as Fabius adjusted the gas flow.

Julius Kaesoron leaned over Fulgrim and said, 'This is your last chance, daemon spawn. Get out of my primarch's body and you need not suffer.'

'I welcome suffering,' said Fulgrim with bared teeth.

Kaesoron nodded, and Fabius brought the flame down on the sole of Fulgrim's foot.

The flesh curdled, running like molten rubber as it withered beneath the incredible heat. Fulgrim's back arched and his mouth stretched wide in a soundless scream as the veins and sinews at his neck lifted from his skin like colliding tectonic ridges.

Lucius watched bone rise from the melting skin as it peeled back, emerging white and gleaming for an instant before turning black. Marrow burned with a rich, fatty hiss, and the scent of seared flesh was a rich, gamey texture in the back of the throat. Lucius had smelled and tasted human meat before, but compared to that poor feast, this was an epicurean delight.

He saw the smell was having a similar effect on the others.

Kaesoron's molten features softened their hard edges, and Vairosean held himself upright only with an effort of will. Only Fabius appeared unaffected, but Lucius guessed he had already savoured many sights and smells of a primarch's body in his explorations of its divine biology. Fabius played the flame over Fulgrim's foot until all that remained below the ankle was a blackened mass of fused bone and boiled marrow that drooled to the tiled floor of the Apothecarion.

Julius Kaesoron took hold of the charred bone. 'This suffering can all end,' he said, regaining his composure with remarkable swiftness. Lucius licked his lips, still savouring the wondrously rich and flavoursome taste of Fulgrim's seared flesh.

Fulgrim looked up at Kaesoron with a taut smile and said, 'Suffering? What do you know of suffering? You are a warrior who fights where I tell him to fight, a tool to achieve my desires, nothing more. You do not suffer and should not speak

of it to those who do.'

'I choose not to suffer,' said Kaesoron. 'A man can be strong enough to master his feelings so that it is impossible to make him suffer. To suffer pain and indignity is a loss of control. It is to admit to human weakness. I am strong enough to deny suffering.'

'Then you are a bigger fool than I took you for, Julius,' said Fulgrim. 'Where do you think strength comes from if not suffering? Hardship and loss is what grants you strength. Those who have never known true suffering cannot have the same strength as others who have. A man must be weak to suffer, and by that suffering he will be made strong.'

'Then you will be made mighty when we are done with you,' promised Vairosean.

Fulgrim laughed. 'Pain is truth,' he said. 'Suffering is the sharp end of the whip, not suffering is the end of the whip the master holds in his hand. Every act of suffering is a test of love and I will prove this to you by enduring all the pain you can inflict upon me, because I love you all.'

'These are not Fulgrim's words,' snapped Kaesoron. 'They are honeyed lies to weaken our resolve.'

'Not true,' said Fulgrim. 'All the truths I have learned since taking the life of my brother have shown this to be indisputable. All things in this grand universe are linked to one another by invisible threads, even those things that appear as opposites.'

'How can you know that?' said Lucius. 'Lord Fulgrim was a lover of beauty and wonder, but he was hardly a philosopher.'

'To be a lover of beauty and wonder one must be a philosopher of the heart,' said Fulgrim with a disappointed shake of his head. 'I have gazed into the secret heart of the warp and know that all existence is a struggle between opposites; light and darkness, heat and cold, and – of course, pleasure and pain. Think of ecstatic pleasure and unimaginable pain. They are connected, but they are not the same thing. Pain can exist without suffering, and it is possible to suffer without feeling

pain.'

'Agreed,' said Kaesoron, 'but what is your point?'

'What you can learn from pain – that fire burns and is dangerous – is a lesson learned only for the individual, but what I have learned from suffering is what unites us as travellers on the road of excess and grants us entry to the palace of wisdom. Pain without suffering is like victory without struggle, one is meaningless without the other. But in the final analysis, real suffering can only be measured by what is taken away from us.'

'Then we are suffering now,' said Vairosean. 'For our beloved lord is lost to us.'

Lucius turned away from Vairosean's mawkish sentimentality and frowned as he looked upon the ruination of Fulgrim's foot. The flesh had been burned away, yet it appeared as though a thin, translucent film was forming over the bone, which had begun to lose the solid, vitrified look that had been burned onto it. Like a snake that had recently shed its skin, the filmy texture of Fulgrim's foot was oily and new, raw and yet to assume its final form.

'Look,' said Lucius. 'He's healing. You have to keep up the pressure.'

Fabius transferred his gaze from Fulgrim's face to his healing foot with academic interest, while Kaesoron and Vairosean each took up an instrument of excruciation. The battle captains took position either side of Fulgrim and turned their devices upon the bound primarch. Kaesoron crushed knuckles with crimping pliers, while Vairosean worked a flesh plane across Fulgrim's chest, peeling back long strips of skin with each caress.

'Ah,' grinned Fulgrim. 'Truly the burden of happiness can only be removed by the balm of suffering...'

Lucius smelled Fulgrim's blood and longed to take up an awl or hammer, but the look in the primarch's eyes stayed his hand. The tortures inflicted by Kaesoron and Vairosean would have reduced a mortal to frothing madness, but Fulgrim appeared to be enjoying the experience.

Their eyes met and Fulgrim said, 'Go on, Lucius, take up one of Fabius's devices. Make my flesh scream!'

Lucius shook his head and crossed his arms for fear that he might do as Fulgrim wished.

‘Are you sure?’ smiled Fulgrim. ‘You know better than these fools that it’s the temptations you don’t succumb to you’ll later regret.’

‘True enough, but I think that any creature powerful enough to take control of Fulgrim’s body is powerful enough to endure any amount of pain and suffering without real effort.’

‘How insightful of you, my son,’ said Fulgrim. ‘This is... mildly diverting, I will admit, but pain to me is no more than an irritant. The pain you can inflict, anyway.’

Kaesoron paused in his mutilations and looked up at Fabius. ‘Is it speaking the truth?’

Fabius circled the gurney, reading the signs of Fulgrim’s biorhythms with increasing puzzlement. Lucius was no Apothecary, but even he could see the readouts confirmed that they might as well have been reciting poetry for all the effect it was having on the primarch.

Vairosean hurled away his flesh-plane, and a glass cylinder mounted in a shadowed alcove shattered. Noxious fluids spilled onto the floor of the Apothecarion, smoking like acid and bearing an unidentifiable mass of pulsating organs grafted to a vaguely humanoid host. Whatever it was, its convulsions lasted only a moment before its wretched existence was ended.

Fabius knelt beside the glistening remains and shot a poisonous glance at Vairosean.

Marius ignored the Apothecary’s anger and took hold of Fulgrim’s head, leaning down as though to kiss him. Instead, he slammed Fulgrim’s head down on the gurney and loosed a howl of grief-stricken rage that sent Lucius and Kaesoron flying.

The sound reverberated around the chamber like the sonic boom of a low-flying Stormbird, shattering every piece of glass in the room. Broken shards tumbled to

the tiles in a thousand sharp tinks.

‘You are a creature of evil!’ yelled Vairosean. ‘Begone or I will tear the head of this body from its shoulders. I would see Fulgrim dead before allowing you to possess it a moment longer!’

Lucius picked himself up, his senses reeling from the aural assault as Fabius launched himself at Vairosean and hauled him away from Fulgrim.

‘Fool!’ cursed Fabius. ‘Your careless anger has just ruined months of experimentation.’

Vairosean shrugged off the Apothecary’s anger and balled a fist, ready to pound Fabius to pulped blood and bone.

‘Marius!’ shouted Fulgrim. ‘Stay your hand!’

Decades of ingrained loyalty froze Marius Vairosean to immobility, and Lucius was reminded of the iron grip of innate authority possessed by the primarchs. Even he, no respecter of authority, felt himself cowed by the primarch’s words.

‘You call me evil, but how do you decide what is good and what is evil? Are they not simply arbitrary terms coined by Man to justify his actions?’ said Fulgrim. ‘Think of how one measures good and evil and you will see that what I am, what I am becoming, is a thing of perfect beauty. A thing of goodness.’

Lucius approached the steel slab and looked down upon the primarch, sensing that his words were profound on a level he could not yet understand, but upon which his future might depend. He lifted an awl with a long hooked tip and worked it into Fulgrim’s chest, through scar tissue that had not fully healed. Fulgrim grimaced as the metal pierced his flesh, but Lucius couldn’t decide on the emotion behind the primarch’s expression.

‘So what are you becoming?’ he asked.

‘You ask the wrong question,’ answered Fulgrim as Lucius worked the awl into him, inch by steel inch.

‘Then what’s the right one?’

Marius and Julius leaned in as Fabius spat curses at the months of lost work that swilled and frothed around his feet.

‘The right question is what does the universe move towards? And that can only be answered by understanding where we came from.’

Marius followed Lucius’s example and selected an instrument of torture from the collection of devices Fabius had laid out. He turned the pear-shaped device around in his hands, twisting a metal cog handle that gradually spread the leaves of the pear apart. Satisfied, he returned it to its original shape and moved down the gurney to place the device between the primarch’s legs.

‘We come from Terra,’ said Marius. ‘Is that what you mean?’

Fulgrim smiled indulgently and said, ‘No, Marius. Further back than that. As far back as it is possible to go.’

Marius shrugged and worked his device into position with a series of grunts as Julius lifted a series of silver wands, some long, some short, but all tapered to sharpness at one end. One by one, Kaesoron pierced Fulgrim’s body with seven needle-tipped wands, running in a line from the crown of his head to his groin. It was clear Kaesoron was no stranger to the apparatus as he attended to his work with a craftsman’s diligence. Lucius wondered if he had chosen poorly in comparison to these instruments of agony, but decided that he liked the simplicity of the awl as he pressed it deeper into Fulgrim’s unknown organs and inhuman biology.

Fulgrim watched Kaesoron with the attention of a proud master watching his student take flight for the first time without instruction. The primarch shook his head as Kaesoron stood erect and said, ‘Your positioning of the Swadhisthana chakra needle is slightly off, Julius. Perhaps due to the intrusion of Marius’s implement. A little higher might be better.’

Kaesoron bent to check and readjusted the needle as he saw that Fulgrim was correct. Without a word of acknowledgement, he ran a series of copper wires from the end of each needle to a thrumming bank of generators. With a flick of the switch, a deep bass note of power filled the chamber and arcing sparks of high voltage energy hummed from the wires.

Fulgrim's jaw clenched and caged lightning danced in the black vortices of his eyes. His skin darkened and Lucius smelled the electric tang of a body burning from the inside out.

Enduring enough pain to last innumerable mortal lifetimes, Fulgrim resumed speaking.

'This universe began in simplicity, with an event of such rapid expansion that it cannot ever be measured. In the first fractional moments of its existence, the universe was a place of such staggering simplicity that we cannot even begin to imagine it. But over time, those simple elements began to cohere, to come together in ever more complex forms. Particles became atoms, and atoms became molecules until they grew in complexity to form the first stars. Those newly-birthered stars lived and died over millions of years and their explosive deaths fuelled the birth of yet more stars and planets. You and I, we are luminous beings fashioned from the hearts of stars.'

'Poetic, but what does that have to do with good and evil?' asked Kaesoron as he manipulated the current through the silver needles, intrigued despite himself. Lucius was surprised, for he had always thought the First Captain had little interest in anything other than the gratification of his own desires or how he could wreak the greatest pain upon an enemy.

'I am getting to that,' promised Fulgrim, and Lucius had to remind himself that they were in the midst of torturing him and had not come to listen to a lecture on the substance of the universe. He wanted to speak out, but Fulgrim's words held him fast.

'None of this coming together is random,' explained Fulgrim. 'It is all part of the universe's nature, its tendency towards complexity. Ah... yes, that is most exquisite, Marius, another turn of the screw! Now, as I was saying, all things are part of this cycle of building and coming together, from the lowliest organism to the highest functioning sentience. Given the right circumstances, everything will tend towards becoming something more beautiful, more perfect and more complex. It has been this way since the beginning of this universe's lifespan, and that nature is as inescapable as it is inevitable.'

Lucius nodded and turned the awl in a wide circle within Fulgrim's body. 'And

where does this all lead? What lies at the end of this journey from simplicity to complexity?’

Fulgrim shrugged, though it was impossible to tell whether it was a conscious gesture or the result of the current broiling his bones. ‘Who can say? Some have called it godhood, others Nirvana. For want of a better term, I call it perfect complexity. It is the ultimate aim of all things, whether they are aware of their role in the universe or not. Now the question of good and evil is inextricably linked to this ongoing journey to perfect complexity. And the answer is simple.’

Fulgrim’s words trailed off as his back arched and a line of blood ran from the corner of his mouth. Lucius wanted to believe it was his penetrative awl pricking Fulgrim’s spine that was the cause of the pain, but with all three warriors working their excruciating arts it was impossible to be sure.

Fabius circled the gurney, monitoring Fulgrim’s vital signs with growing alarm.

‘You’re killing him,’ he said, urgently. ‘One of you must stop.’

‘No,’ said Marius. ‘The pain will drive the daemon-thing out. It will relinquish its hold on Fulgrim before it allows itself to die.’

‘Simpleton!’ snapped Fabius. ‘Do you think such things as daemons fear the destruction of their mortal hosts? Its essence will simply cohere in the warp once you have destroyed the physical vessel.’

‘Then what are we doing here?’ demanded Lucius, releasing his grip on the awl and taking hold of Fabius by the throat as he again sensed conspiracy to the Apothecary’s solicitousness towards Fulgrim. Lucius tightened his grip on the Apothecary’s windpipe, exerting enough pressure to make the man’s eyes bulge.

‘You cannot harm this daemon,’ gasped Fabius, ‘but if you can cause it enough pain, it might be possible to force it to release its hold.’

‘Might? Possible?’ said Kaesoron. ‘You speak without certitude in all you say.’

Lucius felt a sharp pressure at his groin and looked down to see a coiling armature of rusted metal and sinewy gristle protruding from the skinned-meat coat of Fabius. A hypodermic filled with cloudy pink fluid had pierced the

flexible joint at his thigh, and the needle was buried an inch into the meat of his leg.

Fabius gave a viper's grin and said, 'Lay a hand on me again and the injector will have filled you with enough Vitae Noctus to slay a battle company.'

Lucius released the Apothecary only with great reluctance, feeling the cold metal of the needle withdraw from his body. As much as he wanted to lash out and break Fabius's neck, he couldn't keep the grin of near death from his face.

Fabius saw the grin and said, 'It is always amusing until the elixir hits your system. Then it is sublime for six heartbeats. Then you are dead, and the world of sensation is over. Remember that the next time you feel the need to vent your anger upon me.'

Kaesoron pushed them apart and said, 'Enough. We have a task at hand. Apothecary, can we drive this daemon out with pain? And give me a straight answer.'

Fabius answered without taking his eyes from Lucius, and Lucius met his hostility with a calm insouciance he felt sure would irritate the Apothecary.

'I cannot,' said Fabius. 'Any mortal body would be destroyed long before we could ever reach the point where a daemon would lose its grip. But a primarch's body should survive long enough for us to reach a tipping point where the pain will be sufficient to drive it out.'

'Then perhaps the time has come to use the neural parasite device,' said Marius. 'The thing you crafted from the Diasporex hybrid-captains.'

Fabius nodded in agreement, and Lucius saw the Apothecary had been waiting for just such an opportunity. Bending low, he placed the half-helm upon Fulgrim's skull and attached thin lengths of clear plastic tubing to the silvered metal. The tubing coiled across the floor to a humming machine that looked to have been designed by creatures that bore no relation to humanity. It pulsed with a complex series of lights and sounds that existed in realms beyond the auditory perceptions of mortals, and Lucius watched as the iridescent mercury-like liquid pulsed eagerly along the clear tubing and into the primarch.

‘This had better work,’ said Kaesoron, jabbing Fabius in the chest. ‘If you have spoken false, none of your foetid elixirs will stop me from killing you.’

The sparkling liquid entered Fulgrim’s body, and the gasp of a sensualist who has at last discovered some sensation as yet unimagined escaped his full lips. Fulgrim’s eyes snapped open and he looked about himself like a dreamer awakening from golden memories of half-remembered friends and old loves.

‘Ah, my sons,’ he said, as though the pain of his torture was little more than the gentle caresses of butterfly wings. ‘Where was I?’

Blood sheened his flesh like a crimson gown, and the sharp tang of roasting meat oozed from his every orifice. Heat radiated along the silver needles jutting from his body, and his pelvis was bent up at an unnatural angle by the expansion of the macabre device of Marius.

‘You were talking of good and evil,’ said Lucius, taking hold of the plain wooden handle of his awl and pushing it in deeper.

‘Oh, you wield that spike like a master craftsman,’ said Fulgrim. ‘You are as skilled with a smaller weapon as you are with a larger.’

‘I practise,’ answered Lucius.

‘I know,’ said Fulgrim.

‘Is it working?’ Kaesoron asked Fabius, as he manipulated holographic dials and liquid gauges with sub-dermal xeno-haptics.

‘It is,’ confirmed the Apothecary. ‘I can alter the biochemistry of his mind to see what I want him to see, feel what I want him to feel. His mind will be ours to command soon.’

Fulgrim laughed, then burst into tears, his body convulsing in agony before shuddering with the greatest pleasure. He screamed at invisible terrors and licked his lips as flavours beyond imaging flooded his sensory perceptions.

‘What is happening to him?’ said Marius.

‘I am assuming control,’ said Fabius, clearly relishing this chance to manipulate so magnificent a physical specimen of supra-engineered perfection. ‘His mind is more complex than you can possibly imagine, a million labyrinths twisted within one another. It is no small matter to learn its connections.’

‘Master it swiftly,’ ordered Kaesoron.

Fabius ignored the threat in Kaesoron’s voice and made myriad alterations to the composition of the liquid and the operation of the machine. Too complex to follow, Lucius had no idea what the Apothecary was changing or how it might affect the primarch. Every vein on Fulgrim’s body stood taut on the surface of the skin, and it was clear the primarch wasn’t allowing Fabius to take control without a fight.

A thousand emotions and sensations warred across Fulgrim’s face, and Lucius envied him the touch of Fabius’s machine. What might it be like to allow another’s hand to guide his mind through a universe of sensation? But just as quickly as he imagined such a journey, he knew he was too self-absorbed to allow anyone else to take control of his flesh.

At last Fulgrim’s body relaxed, sinking back onto the gurney with a contented sigh of relief. His limbs settled on the cold metal and Fabius gave a triumphant grin that exposed his yellowed teeth and glistening, serpentine tongue.

‘I have him,’ he said. ‘What would you have me do, First Captain?’

‘Can you force it to speak truthfully?’

‘Of course, a manipulation of no consequence,’ Fabius told him.

Lucius frowned at the swiftness of Fabius’s assurance, wondering at the ease with which the Apothecary appeared to have mastered what he had described as being nigh impossibly difficult. He slid the awl clear of Fulgrim’s body and moved around the gurney to stand next to Fabius. Vitae Noctus or not, he would kill Fabius if it emerged that he was lying to them.

The faces on the Apothecary’s long coat flexed as though rising and falling on a gelid tide, and their mute howls implored Lucius to end their suffering. The swordsman ignored them, calculating where best to stab with the awl if he

needed to kill Fabius.

The Apothecary seemed oblivious to Lucius's presence, and worked his fingers over the alien device like a maestro at the keyboard of a templum organ. Fulgrim danced a jig on the gurney, and his face twisted into a delirious smile as he felt what was being done to him.

'Oh, my sons...' breathed the primarch. 'You want the truth? How artless of you. Do you not realise that the truth is the most dangerous thing of all?'

'Your time here is at an end, daemon,' snarled Marius. 'You have no place among our Legion. You are a thing of evil.'

Fulgrim laughed and said, 'Oh, Marius, you insist on calling me a thing of evil, but such a word is meaningless unless you understand the truth of what good and evil represent. Very well, you wish the truth? I will give it to you. If you accept that the universe is constantly moving towards its final state of perfect complexity, and that this is its inevitable destination, then anything that hinders this process must be defined as evil. By the same logic, anything that promotes this ongoing journey is surely good. I am moving towards that perfect complexity, and by hindering my ascension you are acting in the cause of evil. Alone in this chamber, I am the only thing that is good!'

'You seek to dull our wits with absurd talk of the nature of the universe and good and evil,' hissed Marius. 'I know evil, and I am looking at it.'

'You are looking at yourself, Marius Vairosean,' said Fulgrim. 'Have you not seen the truth of it yet?'

'The truth of what?'

'The truth of me!'

Lucius stepped away from the gurney as Fulgrim's biceps swelled with sudden power and his right arm tore free of the restraints that bound him to the gurney. An instant later, his left arm was free and the primarch sat bolt upright, tearing loose the needles piercing his skin and ripping free the bio-monitors Fabius had attached at the beginning of their tortures.

Fulgrim kicked Marius away and tore loose the opened device the Third Captain had worked upon with a sigh of regret. It fell to the floor of the Apothecarion with a wet clatter, and rolled like a viscous flower of red-stained iron.

‘A pity,’ said Fulgrim. ‘I was beginning to enjoy that.’

The primarch swung his legs from the gurney, breaking the bonds securing his ankles and thighs with no more effort than a child might throw back its blankets upon waking. Julius Kaesoron lunged forwards to hold Fulgrim down, but he was swatted aside with a casual backhanded gesture. Fabius backed away, but Lucius stood his ground, knowing there would be no point in running.

He saw how blinded they had been, how naive. How could they have believed that they had the power to subdue a primarch? They had succeeded only because Fulgrim had desired it, had wanted them to come to this point. The Phoenician had seen the doubts in his warriors and had led them to this place, to this moment, in order to reveal his true nature.

Fulgrim turned to face him and smiled. In that instant, Lucius saw the truth of everything Fulgrim had said and done since Isstvan. He saw recognition in Fulgrim’s eyes, and dropped to his knees.

‘Begging, Lucius?’ said Fulgrim. ‘I expected better from you.’

‘Not begging, my lord,’ answered Lucius, with his head bowed. ‘Honouring.’

Julius Kaesoron struggled to his feet, his fist bursting to life with shimmering arcs of purple lightning. Marius Vairosean swept up his sonic cannon, his mouth widening in preparation of unleashing a barrage of sound and force that would kill everything in the room.

‘You know now?’ said Fulgrim.

‘I know,’ agreed Lucius. ‘I should have always known you would never surrender your will to another. If I would not, why should you?’

‘What is it talking about, swordsman?’ demanded Kaesoron. ‘Have you betrayed us to this daemon-thing?’

Lucius shook his head and chuckled at Kaesoron's blindness to a truth that was now surely self-evident. 'No,' he said. 'I have not, for I was wrong.'

'About what?' said Kaesoron, fist raised to strike.

'About me,' said Fulgrim, answering for him.

'This is Lord Fulgrim,' said Lucius. 'Our Lord Fulgrim.'

14

Like the final player in a tragedy delivering his last soliloquy before the curtain falls, Fulgrim paced the stage of La Fenice with an actor's relish. Lucius watched him with a practised eye, seeing the fluid ease of his perfect motion and wondering how he could have failed to spot its truth for so long. Clad once more in his purple-pink war plate, the Phoenician was a sight to set the mind afire, a warrior god of perfect proportions and light.

No traces of the wounds or indignities he had suffered in the Apothecarion were evident, and Lucius marvelled at the incredible power wrought into the primarch's form that he could endure such horror and bear no ill-effects. Truly, Fulgrim was a god worth devotion.

First Captain Kaesoron stood shoulder to shoulder to Lucius, but Marius Vairosean set himself apart from them, his shame causing him to distance himself from their shared guilt. It was guilt only he felt, for Lucius had no regrets over their actions. They had acted to save their primarch, and – if he was honest – scratch a nagging itch to push their experiences to another level. There could be no guilt over that, not if any of the wonders they had been shown since Isstvan III were to be taken at face value.

Kalimos and Abranxe had joined them, amazed to hear of what had transpired in the Apothecarion, a revelation to which they alone in the galaxy were privy. Krylander stood erect with difficulty, and Ruen held to the wounded captain, his shoulder wrapped in vat-flesh as his augmetic bones knitted with his wounded physiology.

Lucius watched as Fulgrim paused beneath the dull portrait that graced the wall opposite the Phoenician's Nest, a secret smile that conveyed a lifetime's meaning in a slight upward tilt of his lips.

'You were right to suspect I was not myself,' said Fulgrim, finally deigning to face them. 'The killing of the Gorgon was an act that severed my last tie to a lost life, a past that means nothing to me now. And no act of such magnitude is free of consequence.'

Fulgrim squatted on the stage, as though reliving the moment of Ferrus Manus's death. His fists clenched as he stared into the middle distance, and Lucius saw the bloody parade of Isstvan V come alive in his eyes.

'I was vulnerable,' said Fulgrim, standing and resuming his pacing of the stage. 'A servant of the Dark Prince took my flesh for its own amusement. It was an ancient thing, a needy, capricious thing that revelled in its stolen prize, and for a time I allowed it to retain possession of my body while I learned of it and its powers. I think it hoped I would be crushed by the death of my brother...'

Fulgrim grinned, staring at his hands as though they were still bloody from the slaying of the Iron Hands' primarch.

'It should have known better. After all, it had started me down the road of self-indulgence and a life free of inhibitions or guilt. What did I care for one more betrayal? Manus was already a fading memory, a ghost who recedes with each passing moment, and everything I learned from it only made me stronger. In time, it was a simple matter to reclaim my body and cast it into the prison it had crafted for me.'

Lucius tore his gaze from his magnificent primarch and lifted his head to the portrait. Its lines were no less insipid, its colours no less bland, but knowing its truth now, Lucius saw the ageless pain of an immortal, inchoate being trapped forever in unending stagnation. To a creature of infinite possibility, there could be no greater torment, and his admiration for his primarch's brilliance soared anew.

'So now you know the truth, my sons,' said Fulgrim, dropping from the stage to walk among them. He spread his hands and touched them all as he walked past them. 'It is no easy thing to serve a master who demands so much of us and grants us so much in return. We must go further in our desires than any other, experience all things, even those distasteful to us. No sacrifice, no degradation and no bliss will exist beyond our reach. I have such sights to show you all, my sons. Secrets and power thought beyond comprehension, truths buried since the dawn of time and a route to godhood that will see me burn brighter than a thousand suns!'

Fulgrim spun on his heel as his warriors cheered his words. He basked in their

adoration and their devotions made him shine like the star that allowed them to live. At last he lowered his arms and swept his gaze over them all, benevolent and paternal, stern and unflinching.

‘I have much to do before deigning to join Horus Lupercal on Terra’s muddy soil,’ said the Phoenician. ‘My first task is to join with my Olympian brother, and yoke his builders and donjon keepers to my purpose.’

‘What purpose?’ asked Julius Kaesoron, daring the primarch’s wrath with a question.

Fulgrim ran his hands through his virgin-white hair and smiled, though Lucius saw this was a momentary indulgence. Further questions would not be tolerated. Not now, in the primarch’s moment of glory.

‘We have a city to build,’ he said. ‘A glorious city of mirrors; a city of mirages, at once solid and liquid, at once air and stone.’

Lucius felt his pulse quicken at the idea of such a city, a metropolis where every structure, tower and palace would throw his image back at him a thousandfold. At last he saw the attack on Prismatica for what it was, the gathering of raw materials to raise this astonishing architecture of reflections.

‘A city of mirrors,’ he whispered. ‘It will be wondrous.’

Fulgrim took a step towards him and cupped the swordsman’s face like a lover.

‘It will be better than wondrous,’ said Fulgrim, leaning down to kiss Lucius on each scarred cheek. ‘For in the heart of its million reflections I will meet the gaze of the Angel Exterminatus and the galaxy will weep to behold its terrible beauty!’