

THE HORUS HERESY®

THE LION

Gav Thorpe



In taking the war to the traitors, the
Dark Angels primarch courts disaster

The Lion

Gav Thorpe

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

The I Legion 'Dark Angels'

Lion El'jonson, Primarch

Corswain, Primarch's Seneschal

Stenius, Captain of the Invincible Reason

Tragan, Captain of the Ninth Order

Nemiel, Brother-Redemptor

Asmodeus, Battle-brother

The X Legion 'Iron Hands'

Lasko Midoa, Iron Father

Casalir Lorramech, Captain of the 98th Company

The XIV Legion 'Death Guard'

Calas Typhon, First Captain

Vioss, Captain

Imperial Personae

Theralyn Fiana, Navigator of House Ne'iocene

Khiri Doth Iaxis, High Magos of the Mechanicum

Non-Imperial Personae

Tuchulcha

'There is but one reason and one reason alone in the exercise of power: to further

one's agenda. Be it selfish or altruistic, such agenda should be the whole of one's concern without distraction if power is to be expended to its benefit. One need only look to the example of the Emperor's Great Crusade for proof of this eternal truth; when distraction came it was to the ruin of all.'

– Lyaedes, Intermissions, M31

I

The lord of the First Legion sat as he so often sat these nights, leaning back in his ornate throne of ivory and obsidian. His elbows rested upon the throne's sculpted arms, while his fingers were steepled before his face, just barely touching his lips. Unblinking eyes, the brutal green of Caliban's forests, stared dead ahead, watching the flickering hololith of embattled stars.

Aboard the *Invincible Reason*, flagship of the Dark Angels, Lion El'Jonson thought long and hard. There were many things for him to reason out, yet no matter how hard he tried to stay focused on the military effort to bring the Night Lords to battle, his mind was drawn back to an imponderable dilemma.

Eighty-two days had passed since his confrontation with Konrad Curze on the desolate world of Tsagualsa. Eighty-two days had been enough for his body to heal, for the most part, the grievous wounds the Night Haunter's claws had inflicted upon the Lion's superhuman flesh. The armour he wore had been repaired and refurbished and repainted, so that not a mark of Curze's violence showed upon its ebon surface.

On the outside, the Lion was fully recovered, but within lay the most hideous injuries, inflicted not by the Night Haunter's weapons but by his words.

No risk of the fair Angels falling? When did you last walk upon the soil of Caliban, oh proud one?

The tides of the warp influenced communication as much as they did travel, and no sure word had been heard from Caliban for two years. In times past, the hateful words of Curze would have been easy to dismiss. The loyalty of the Dark Angels had been beyond question. They were the First Legion, ever the noblest in the eyes of all; even when the Luna Wolves earned great praise and Horus was raised to Warmaster, no others could claim the title of First Legion.

Yet such times seemed a lifetime ago now; civil war and schism tore apart the Imperium, and the surety of the past was no guarantee of the present, or the future. Could the Lion trust that his Legion remained loyal to him? Trust was not a natural state for the primarch. Was there some deeper purpose to the Night

Lords' endless war in the Thramas system? Did Curze speak the truth and keep the Lion occupied here while agents of Horus swayed the loyalty of the Dark Angels to another cause?

Trust had been a scarce commodity for the Lion before Horus's betrayal, and even then he had been taken for a fool. Perturabo had used his status as a brother to trick the Lion, taking control of the devastating war engines of Diamat under the guise of alliance, only to turn those weapons against the servants of the Emperor. The shame of being so manipulated gnawed at the Lion's conscience, and he would never again accept the simple word of his brothers.

It was an impossible question and an impossible predicament. The Lion had pondered the meaning of the Night Hunter's words every night, even as he analysed the movements and strategy of his foe, trying to get one step ahead of his elusive enemy. The Night Hunter had had no reason to lie; Curze had been trying to kill his brother as he spoke. Yet they might just be random spite, as had so often spilled from the lips of Konrad Curze, who had used falsehood as a weapon long before he had turned from the grace of the Emperor; lies were second nature to the primarch and came to him as easily as breaths.

The Lion despised himself for giving credence to the lie, creating the poison that ate away at his resolve. It was simple enough to vow that Thramas would not be surrendered to the Night Lords; it was another matter entirely to prosecute a war against an enemy determined not to fight. With every night that passed, the prospect of decisive battle lessened and the desire to return to Caliban and ensure everything was in order strengthened. Yet the Lion could not abandon the war, if only because it might be a return to Caliban that the Night Hunter desired.

While these thoughts vexed the primarch, at the appointed hour three of his little brothers arrived to brief him on the current situation.

The first to enter was Corswain, former Champion of the Ninth Order, recently appointed as the Primarch's Seneschal. Across the back of his armour he wore the white pelt of a fanged Calibanite beast, and beneath that hung a white robe split at the back, its breast adorned with an embroidered wing sword. His helm hung on his belt, revealing a broad face and close-cropped blond hair.

Just behind Corswain came Captain Stenius, commander of the Invincible Reason. His face was a literal mask of flesh, almost immobile due to nerve damage suffered during the Great Crusade. His eyes had been replaced with smoky silver lenses that glittered in the lights of the chamber, as inscrutable as the rest of his expression.

The last of the trio was Captain Tragan of the Ninth Order, who had been raised to the position by the primarch following the debacle at Tsagualsa. The captain's soft brown eyes were at odds with his stern demeanour, his curls of dark brown hair cut to shoulder-length and kept from his aquiline face with a band of black-enamelled metal. It was Tragan that spoke first.

'The Night Lords refused engagement at Parthac, my liege, but we arrived too late to stop the destruction of the primary orbital station there. The remaining docking facilities cannot cope with anything larger than a frigate, as I suspect was the enemy's intent.'

'That's three major docks they have taken out in the past six months,' said Stenius. 'It is clear that they are denying us refitting and resupply stations.'

'The question is why,' said the Lion, stroking his chin. 'The Night Lords cruisers and battle-barges require such stations as much as ours. I am forced to conclude that they have abandoned any ambition of claiming Parthac, Questios and Biamere and seek to hamper our fleet movements for some manoeuvre in the future.'

'I would say that it has the hint of desperation, a stellar scorched earth policy,' said Stenius.

'We cannot rule out Curze commanding such attacks simply out of spite,' added Corswain. 'Perhaps there is no deeper meaning behind these recent attacks, except to exasperate and confuse us.'

'Yet that will still be a part of a bigger plan,' said the Lion. 'For more than two years we have duelled across the stars, and throughout that war the Night Haunter has always been moving towards some endgame I have not yet fathomed. I will think on this latest development. What else have you to report?'

‘The normal fleet movements and scouting reports are in my latest briefing, my liege,’ said Tragan. ‘Nothing out of the ordinary, if there is such a thing.’

‘There was one report that I found odd, my liege,’ said Corswain. ‘A broken astropathic message, barely discernable from the background traffic. It would be unremarkable except that it contains mention of the Death Guard Legion.’

‘Mortarion’s Legion is in Thramas?’ The Lion growled and glared at his subordinates. ‘You think this is not a matter to bring to me immediately?’

‘Not the Legion, my liege,’ said Tragan. ‘A handful of ships, a few thousand warriors at most. The transmission does not seem to originate from the Thramas theatre, my liege, but from a system several hundred light years from Balaam.’

‘The message fragments also mention a task force from the Iron Hands in the same vicinity,’ said Corswain. ‘Some skirmish I think, unlikely to impact on our conflict here.’

‘The system, what was it called?’ said the Lion. The primarch’s eyes narrowed with suspicion as he asked the question.

Tragan consulted the data-slate he held in his hand.

‘Perditus, my liege,’ said the Ninth Order captain.

‘It’s barely inhabited, my liege,’ added Stenius. ‘A small Mechanicum research facility, nothing of import.’

‘You are wrong,’ said the Lion, standing up. ‘I know Perditus. I claimed the system for the Emperor, alongside warriors of the Death Guard. What your records do not show, Captain Stenius, is the nature of the research undertaken by the Mechanicum there. Perditus was meant to be kept secret, off-limits to every Legion, but it seems that the Death Guard have other plans.’

‘Off-limits, my liege?’ Tragan was taken aback by the notion. ‘What could be so dangerous?’

‘Knowledge, my little brother,’ replied the Lion. ‘Knowledge of a technology that cannot be allowed to fall into the hands of the traitors. We must assemble a

task force at Balaam. A force that can overwhelm anything the Death Guard or Iron Hands have in the area.'

'What of the Night Lords, my liege?' asked Corswain. 'If we relent in our hunt across this sector, or weaken our forces here too much, Curze will make fine sport of the systems we cannot protect.'

'That is a risk I must take,' replied the primarch. 'Perditus is a prize that we must seize from the traitors. I had almost forgotten about it, but now it is brought to mind, I think that perhaps Perditus may hold the key to victory in Thramas too. I shall lead the task force personally. The Invincible Reason will be my flagship, Captain Stenius. The Fourth, Sixth, Ninth, Sixteenth, Seventeenth and Thirtieth Orders are to muster at Balaam.'

'More than thirty thousand warriors!' said Tragan, forgetting himself. He bowed his head in apology when the Lion directed a sharp glare at him.

'When, my liege?' asked Corswain.

'As soon as they can,' said the Lion. He strode towards the door. 'We cannot afford to arrive too late at Perditus.'

II

Although almost as tall as the Legionis Astartes warriors with whom she travelled the warp, Theralyn Fiana of House Ne'iocene was far slighter, willowy of build with slender fingers. Her hair was copper in colour, as were her eyes; her normal eyes, at least. In the middle of her high forehead, from which her hair was swept back by a silver band, was her Navigator's eye. To call it an eye was to compare a glass of water to the ocean. This orb, translucent white but dappled with swirling colours, did not look upon frequencies of light, but delved through the barrier that bounded the warp, looking upon the raw stuff of the immaterial realm.

Now that warp-sight was employed moving the Invincible Reason away from the translation point at Balaam. The streaming threads of the warp currents were tugging hard at the ship, which sat cocooned within an egg-shaped psychic field, buoyed upon the immaterial waves like a piece of flotsam on the ocean tides. She sat in the navigational spire high above the superstructure of the battle-barge. Out of instinct, Fiana looked for the bright beacon of the Astronomican, and as she had done for the last two and a half years she felt a part of her soul grow dim at the realisation that it could not be found. That the light of Terra no longer burned had been a source of constant argument amongst the Navigators attached to the Dark Angels Legion, with Fiana amongst the growing camp who believed that the only explanation was that the Emperor was no longer alive. This was not a popular viewpoint, and one not to be raised with the primarch, but the logic was inescapable to Fiana.

In the absence of the galaxy-spanning Astronomican, the Navigators relied on warp beacons – tiny lanterns of psychic brightness from relay stations in real space. They were candles compared to the star of the Astronomican, and only one in ten systems in the sector had them, but they were better than moving wholly blind; so much so that both the Night Lords and Dark Angels had tacitly agreed to treat the beacon stations as no-go areas. The risk of stranding one's own ships in the warp was too great to chance the destruction of the fragile orbital stations.

Perditus was not a beacons system, and was located only one hundred and

fourteen light years from Balaam, on a two-hundred-and-thirty-degrees, seven-point incline heading from the Drebbel beacon, which in turn would be found on a path at one-hundred-and-eighty-seven degrees, eighteen-point negative incline three days out towards the Nemo system. Glancing at a hand-drawn chart draped over the edge of her rotatable chair, Fiana confirmed this and examined the currents lapping at the barrier of the Geller field surrounding the Invincible Reason.

The warp did not look like its true state, even to her. Yet Fiana's warp sight allowed her to sense an approximation of its tidal powers and whorls of immaterial confluence. The Balaam system had been chosen for the rendezvous because from here a near-constant current ran through the warp almost as far as Nhyarin, nearly three thousand light years away. Nothing was ever certain with the warp, and its strange ways meant that sometimes the Nhyarin Flow ran backwards or could not be located at all, but eight times out of ten it could be relied upon to speed travel to the galactic south-west, fully across Aegis and two other subsectors. The worlds along its route were amongst the most hotly contested between the Night Lords and the Dark Angels.

Fiana punched in a series of coded orders for the piloting team situated in the command deck. A few minutes later, the Geller field bulged to starboard, its psychic harmonics adjusting to the controls of the crew so that the Invincible Reason edged out of its current course and into the outlying streams of the Nhyarin Flow. Psychic power gripped at the shields like waves tugging at a leaf, and though there was no real sensation of movement, Fiana felt in her thoughts the battle-barge surging ahead, flung forwards across time and space at incredible speed.

Around her, the pinpricks of light that had been the other ships of the fleet winked out of existence. Within half a dozen minutes, nothing could be seen of the flotilla, scattered to the four points of the compass and stretched through time by the eerie workings of warp space.

Turning in place, Fiana conducted a quick scan for storm activity. The whole of the warp was alive with tempests, but the Nhyarin Flow seemed stable enough for the moment. There was no horizon, no distance or perspective, and for just a moment Fiana teetered on the brink of being swallowed by the abyssal nature of the warp. She reeled her mind back into her skull, pulling down the velvet-

padded silver band so that its psychic-circuitry-impregnated metal covered her third eye.

Just before her othersense was curtailed she thought she glimpsed another ship, riding on a swirl of energy behind the battle-barge. It was probably another Dark Angels vessel, caught by fortune on the same timeflow as the Invincible Reason. She made a note of it in her log and signalled for her half-brother Assaryn Coiden to ascend the pilaster and take over. As the senior member of the household, it was her responsibility to see that the ship was safe during transitions, but now that the task was complete, she was glad to be able to delegate to her younger siblings. Things were far more peaceful in her quarters, and ever since Horus's rebellion had begun and the storms had come, just an hour of exposure to the warp had left her with splitting headaches and a soul-draining fatigue.

There had always been talk amongst the household, of what the warp really was, and whispered stories of the strange phenomena that the Navigators sometimes glimpsed on their travels. Now Fiana was certain that there was something else out there; not just aliens living in the warp as she had been warned, but something that existed as part of the immaterium itself.

And the stories had grown in number, and in horror. Ships had always gone missing, but the frequency with which they were now lost was frightening, as if the warp itself was rebelling at their presence. Having felt dark swirls and malignant tendrils tugging at the edges of her thoughts, Fiana knew too well that the warp was far from a welcoming place.

The Lion's stare was cold as it fell upon the chief Navigator, Theralyn Fiana. This was the fourth audience in seven days that he had granted her, and twice also had he received representation from her through Captain Stenius. Her complaints were becoming tiresome, and made all the more irritating because there was nothing the Lion could do to alleviate the problems she and her fellow Navigators were experiencing. She had joined the Invincible Reason at Balaam, highly regarded as an expert of the warp tides they were travelling, but so far the Lion's only impression was of a thin-faced woman who had nothing but excuses to offer for their slow progress.

This time she had Captain Stenius for company, and looked even more agitated

than normal. The Lion waved Fiana forwards with a gauntleted hand, suppressing a sigh of annoyance. The Navigator stopped five metres from the primarch's throne, the ship's captain a few paces behind. She was dressed in a flowing gown of green and blue, of a material that shimmered like water when she walked. Her bare arms were painted with rings of varying design from shoulder to elbow and the backs of her hands were tattooed with intricate intersecting geometric shapes copied by a cluster of pendants that hung on a thin chain around her neck.

Fiana's third eye was concealed by a broad silver band across her brow, but the Lion could feel its touch upon him, like a spark of heat on his flesh. Navigators, and all psykers for that matter, caused him pause; he was not well disposed to those who might see him in ways that normal men did not. Only the Emperor did he trust with such knowledge.

'What is it?' said the Lion. He fluttered a hand towards Corswain, who had just arrived and was due to brief his leader on the latest intelligence concerning Perditus. 'Be quick, there are other matters demanding my attention. If you wish me to still the warp with a wave of my hand, I must disappoint you again, Navigator.'

'It is on another matter, an urgent one, that we must converse,' said Fiana as she rose from her bow. She glanced at Captain Stenius and received a curt nod of reassurance. 'Lauded primarch, for the past several days, since we translated from Balaam, I and my family have witnessed a ship following in our wake. At first we thought it coincidence; a companion vessel of the fleet that happenstance had tossed upon the same course as ours.'

'But you no longer believe this to be the case?' said the Lion, leaning forwards. 'It is my understanding that it is extremely difficult, perhaps impossible, to trail a vessel in warp space.'

'That was our understanding also, lauded primarch. Many times have Navigators attempted to stay within reach of each other, but ninety-nine times out of a hundred all sight is lost within a day, and always within two days. We sometimes make analogy between the warp and the currents of the sea, but it is a simplistic comparison. The warp flows not only through space, within another realm beside our own, but also upon different streams of time.'

‘This I know,’ snapped the Lion, growing impatient. ‘An hour passes in the warp and several days have turned in real space. If a ship translates a day before another, it could be weeks ahead in its journey. You have not yet explained why coincidence is not a suitable explanation, Navigator. I have made hundreds of warp jumps in my life; it is not remarkable that on one journey another ship might be caught upon the same current.’

‘No, lauded primarch, it is not,’ replied Fiana. She straightened to her full height and met the primarch’s glare, though only for a moment before the intensity of his eyes forced her to look away again. ‘It is remarkable that we have changed stream four times in the last five days, seeking the fastest current to Perditus, and within the hour the ship is behind us again. It is following us, lauded primarch, and I know of nobody who possesses that capability.’

The Lion did not waste time asking if she was certain; the forthright tone of her voice and hard look in her eye convinced him that she spoke the truth as she believed it. He nodded and gestured for Captain Stenius to step closer.

‘I am sorry, Lady Fiana, for my curtness. Thank you for bringing this matter to my attention. Captain, I believe that you were already aware of this?’

‘Lady Fiana brought her suspicions to me yesterday, my liege. I asked her to confirm her findings for another day and decided it was worthy of bringing to you.’

‘It is an impossibility, lauded primarch,’ said Fiana. ‘No Navigator can track another vessel in the warp with such accuracy. We work on suggestions and instincts far too vague for such precision.’

No Navigator, thought the Lion, but not impossible.

During his infancy on Caliban, growing up alone in the dark, monster-infested forests, he had learned quickly that some beasts did not need to see to hunt. Some possessed senses other than sight and hearing and smell; they could stalk their prey by the spoor of their soul. Such creatures were the deadliest he had faced, not wholly physical. The knights of Caliban called them nephilla and it was only with great effort that they could be slain, though the Lion in his youth had killed several.

It was a stretch from nephilla roaming the dark forests of Caliban to a ship that could unerringly track another through the warp but, like Fiana, the Lion did not trust anything to coincidence. There were forces at play – forces unleashed by Horus and his allies – that he did not fully understand, and until proven to the contrary the Lion was willing to believe his foes capable of anything.

‘For the moment it is sensible to assume that our mysterious pursuer is a Night Lords ship,’ the Lion said after a half-second of contemplation. ‘Do you think it is possible to elude this enemy without undue risk or excessive delay to our journey? I would not have the foe learn of our destination and the secret held there.’

‘I am not sure I would know what to do, lauded primarch,’ said Fiana. ‘It is not something a Navigator learns.’

‘Surely you have experienced pursuit by other than a ship?’ said the Lion. ‘There are denizens of the warp that are known to chase vessels.’

‘Of course,’ said Fiana. ‘I know a small repertoire of evasive manoeuvres, but the usual response when facing such a crisis is an emergency translation into real space.’

‘That will be our second option,’ said the Lion. ‘I would rather avoid the delay that would add to our journey. You have two days to shake our hunter. Report your progress directly to me, Lady Fiana.’

‘As you command, lauded primarch,’ said the Navigator, sweeping down into a long bow.

When Captain Stenius and Lady Fiana had departed, the Lion called to his seneschal to attend him.

‘I am deeply suspicious of this craft that follows us, Cor,’ the primarch said. ‘Have the weapons crews sleeping beside their guns, and double the watch strength.’

‘As you command, my liege,’ said Corswain. ‘If you have time, we should discuss the strategy you wish to employ when we arrive at Perditus. The last contact we have shows that the Iron Hands and Death Guard were just beginning

hostilities. It is possible that one side or the other may have gained the upper hand since then.'

The Lion pushed aside thoughts of phantom ships and concentrated on the wider task.

'We treat Perditus as hostile,' he declared. 'It is impossible to say for which cause any other force fights. Death Guard, Mechanicum, Iron Hands: all are to be treated as enemy until I say otherwise.'

For two days Fiana and the other three Navigators aboard the Invincible Reason performed several manoeuvres that would, in normal circumstances, separate them from the following ship. They frequently changed flows within the warp, shifting the battle-barge from the fast-moving stream of the Nhyarin Flow to the more sedate currents that drifted from its outer edges. They dived into swirling eddies, a risky proposition even before the recent tumults that had engulfed warp space. Twice they turned the ship fully about and forged into counter-flows, taking them away from the route to Perditus.

Always the other ship found them again, sometimes never breaking away, other times vanishing only to appear on the edge of detection an hour or two later, following unerringly in the battle-barge's wake.

After the two days allowed by the Lion, Fiana and Stenius convened again with the primarch to discuss the next course of action. With the Lion was Corswain, summoned by his master. It was Stenius who spoke first.

'Whatever force guides our pursuer, it is beyond our means to shake them loose, my liege,' announced the ship's captain.

'Not wholly beyond our means,' said Fiana, earning herself a sharp look from Stenius; enough to betray the existence of a previous argument between the two, though his partial facial paralysis prevented any more meaningful expression.

'I will not risk my ship,' Stenius said flatly.

'You have an alternative?' said the Lion, directing his gaze to Fiana.

'Three days ahead, perhaps four, there is a well-known anomaly, which we call

the Morican Gulf. It corresponds roughly to the Morican star, a dead system. There is a region that is like a gap in the warp, a bottomless gulf surrounded by a turbulent maelstrom. It is possible to run the outer edges of this whirl, and the storm should mask our departure route.'

'And the risks?' asked Corswain.

'The null space, the void in the eye of the storm, can becalm a ship, leave it stranded for days, for weeks, sometimes forever,' said Stenius, shaking his head in disapproval. 'It should not be considered at the best of times, and our mission at Perditus is too important to risk delays or worse.'

The Lion considered this, weighing up the merits of losing the pursuer against potential calamity. He disregarded the Navigator's plan, but remembered the earlier conversation he had shared with Fiana.

'Lady Fiana, you suggested before that we might make an emergency jump to real space. Is it possible that we could do so whilst the other ship has been blinded by one of your manoeuvres?'

'Possible, yes, lauded primarch,' said Fiana.

'There is no guarantee that our phantom ship has not the means to detect such a thing,' said Corswain. 'We have no idea of their capabilities. As I understand it, any translating ship creates ripples, an echo along the warp currents. If the Night Lords have a psyker or some other means to track our normal movements, a translation would be as clear as a summer day to them.'

'An emergency jump even more so, lauded primarch,' added Fiana. 'The backwash would be like dropping a boulder into a lake; even an inexperienced Navigator could detect it.'

'There is also the danger that our warp engine rift will collide with the Geller field of the other ship,' said Stenius. 'Whatever means they have to follow us, they have to stay close to use it.'

'Interesting,' said the Lion, a chain of thought set in motion by the Captain's warning. He looked first at Corswain and then fixed his eyes on Stenius. 'Little brothers, have the ship secured for an emergency translation, but keep the

gunnery crews at their stations. Lady Fiana, I want you to position the ship in a particular way. Find a swift-moving warp current from which you can quickly move to a contra-flowing one.'

'What is your intent, lauded primarch?' asked Fiana, a worried frown creasing her pale skin beneath the silver of her headband.

'Our enemy shadow our movements closely but not instantaneously,' explained the Lion. 'We will move in such a way as to draw them extremely close, and then we will activate the warp engines to jump back to real space. The other vessel should be caught in our exit wake and drawn from the warp after us. In real space our enemy will become vulnerable to attack.'

'If both ships are not torn apart, my liege!' said Captain Stenius. He was about to continue his objections, but the Lion cut him off with a sharp gesture.

'You know my intent. The plan is not a subject for discussion. Lady Fiana, it will be up to you to choose the optimum moment for translation. From everything I have heard of your skill previously, I expect success.'

'Of course, lauded primarch,' said the Navigator, her face set with determination. Her reputation had been placed on the line, and for a Navigator aspiring to be the next Matriarch of her House there was no commodity more valuable than the praise of a primarch.

The Lion looked at Stenius and leaned forwards, his voice dropping low.

'You understand my orders, captain?' asked the primarch.

'I do, my liege,' Stenius replied quietly.

'Then you are both dismissed,' said the Lion. He reached a hand out towards Corswain. 'Stay a moment longer, little brother.'

When the ship's captain and Navigator had departed, the Lion motioned for Corswain to approach the throne.

'I am worried about Stenius,' confessed the primarch. 'At first he delays bringing the fact of our pursuit to my attention, and now he seems reluctant to

resolve our predicament.'

'I am sure there are no grounds for suspicion, my liege,' said Corswain, affecting a formal tone, disquieted by the subject of Stenius's loyalty.

'Sure, little brother? One hundred per cent certain? You would vouch for Stenius yourself?'

Corswain hesitated at the challenge in the Lion's voice. After a moment, he lowered to one knee and bowed his head.

'I have no doubt about Captain Stenius, my liege. However, to allay any reservations you may harbour, I shall have Brother-Redemptor Nemiel report to you.'

'As you see fit, little brother,' the Lion said, offering a rare smile.

III

The narrow chamber atop the navigational pilaster could barely hold all four of the Navigators. What the primarch had asked for required a very specific set of circumstances. Fiana and her fellow Navigators each surveyed a stretch of the warp, seeking the conjunction of flows needed to bring the Invincible Reason quickly back towards the phantom ship. All other preparations had been made; the ship's company were braced for the potentially devastating drop back into real space, while Fiana had warned her companions of the deleterious effect it could have on their minds.

'I have something,' said Ardal Aneis, Fiana's younger brother. 'A counter-nebulous promontory, on the port bow.'

Fiana directed her unnatural gaze in the direction Aneis had mentioned and saw what had caught his attention. Three warp streams, one very strong, the other two weaker but approaching each other at steep angles, came together to create a three-dimensional whirlpool. The outflow curved back over the battle-barge's path and intersected with a dead pool that slowly leached back into the Nhyarin Flow.

'Captain Stenius, please direct primary navigational control to my console.' The communications pick-up buzzed in Fiana's shaking hand and she resolutely avoided the concerned looks in the eyes of her fellow Navigators. She received the affirmative from Stenius and a few seconds later the screen below her left arm flickered into life. A diagnostic sub-routine scrolled quickly across the pale green glass and then the screen went blank.

Fiana's voice dropped to a whisper as she keyed in the manoeuvre required to plunge the ship into the heart of the promontory. 'Remember the pride of House Ne'iocene.'

There was no sound, in the warp. No real tidal pressures or inertia pulled at metal and ferrocrete, but even so Fiana could sense the tortured mass of the Invincible Reason as its Geller field realigned, shoving the battle-barge from one streaming eddy of warp energy into another. Fiana felt a moment of sickness as

her othersense lurched and spun, while all around her, the clashing currents of the psychic promontory smashed together like the slaving jaws of an immense, immaterial beast.

Kiafan, youngest of her siblings, fell to his knees beside the chief Navigator, emptying the contents of his stomach upon the floor between snarled gasps of pain. Fiana ignored the distraction and keyed in another instruction on her runepad. The ship settled into a trough of psychic power for several seconds, before rising up, ejected from the promontory like a grain of sand caught in the spume of a breaching whale.

Fiana gritted her teeth and made a final adjustment to their course, forcing herself to peer along the unwinding threads of energy that unravelled before her. She anchored the Geller field onto the strongest and then pushed aside her companions to collapse into the only chair in the chamber.

‘Captain, we are on our new heading,’ she gasped over the comm. Steadying herself, she looked for the bobbing mote of energy that was the other ship’s warp signature. She located it ahead, approaching quickly. There was no time to waste. Even from their prepared idling state, it would take several minutes for the warp engines to charge to full power. Any longer and they would be right on top of the phantom ship, their Geller fields merging. The effect of translating in such close proximity to another vessel would be certain destruction for both ships.

‘Translate now, captain! Activate the warp engines!’

Trying to emulate the example set by his primarch, Corswain stood immobile on the gallery above the Invincible Reason’s strategium, just behind and to the left of the statuesque Lion. On the other side of the primarch was Brother-Redemptor Nemiell. The Chaplain wore a skull-faced helm, so that nothing could be seen of his expression, concerned or otherwise. Lady Fiana’s snarled command had not helped settle Corswain’s mood, and had set the command crew below into frenetic activity. The navigation aides moved quickly from station to station in the bright glow of their screens, monitoring power outputs and safety thresholds as the plasma reactors of the battle-barge went up above one hundred per cent output in preparation for the warp engine activation.

Corswain clenched his jaw as he felt an ill-defined pressure building in his skull. It was not like a concussive shockwave or the pull felt in a plunging drop-pod, but more like a container slowly being filled, reaching its capacity and yet not bursting. The ache was behind his eyes, mental not physical. Aside from the brain-juddering dislocation of teleportation, it was the most unpleasant sensation he had ever encountered in his long years of service to the Legion.

A glance at the Lion confirmed that if the primarch suffered the same discomforts as his little brothers, he showed no outward sign of it. The commander of the First Legion stood with legs braced apart, arms folded across his breastplate, eyes fixed on the multiple screens that made up the strategium's main display wall. The aides working below acted and interacted like organic parts of a complex machine, the hub of which was Captain Stenius in the command throne. Inquiry and reply, report and command all flowed through the ship's captain, who orchestrated the whole endeavour with curt responses and clipped orders.

Corswain could only imagine the thoughts occupying Stenius at the moment. Warp translation was difficult enough in perfect conditions, and the current conditions were far from perfect. Another glance at the Lion showed Corswain that the primarch's attention had moved, from the grey blankness of the screens to Stenius.

It was impossible to discern real meaning from the primarch's inscrutable glare, but that did not stop Corswain from speculating, occupying his mind with such idle thoughts in order to distract himself from the coming moment when reality and unreality would clash and they might all be wiped from existence.

The Lion's comments regarding Stenius concerned Corswain on two levels. At first hand, he wondered what he had missed that had been seen by the primarch's insight. Corswain was, for the moment at least until they were reunited with Luther and the rest of the Legion on Caliban, the right hand of the primarch. It was his duty to foresee his master's commands and act before they required the Lion's attention. If there was some facet of Stenius's manner that he had missed, Corswain felt he was not properly fulfilling his duties.

Contrary to this was the worry that there was nothing amiss in Stenius's behaviour, which did not bode well for the Lion's current state of mind. Since

Tsagualsa the primarch had brooded, even more than Corswain had become accustomed to. His master had said nothing of what preoccupied his thoughts, speaking only of the ongoing campaign against the Night Lords, but even those conversations had been touched by a new determination, bordering on a hunger for victory that Corswain had not seen in the Lion since the earliest days of the Crusade. The seneschal's brush with death had forced Corswain to acknowledge his own shortcomings and apply himself to his duties with greater endeavour; perhaps the primarch felt the same.

‘Warp translation in ten seconds.’

Stenius's monotone declaration cut through Corswain's meandering thoughts. He balled his hands into fists, knowing what was to come. The Lion stepped forwards, gripping the balcony rail in both hands as he stared down at Stenius, eyes narrowed. The primarch opened his mouth a little, as if he was about to speak. He said nothing and shook his head slightly, lips pursed.

‘Beginning translation to real space.’

This was the part Corswain hated the most, in sensation most alike to the disembodied lurch of teleportation. For an endless moment the Invincible Reason was held between two dimensions, perched on the precipice between the material and immaterial like a wanderer standing at the crossroads of fate. A moment before, it had been adrift on the tides of the warp, cocooned within a bubble of reality kept intact by its Geller field. Now it was in the true universe, plucked from the unnatural currents, its Geller-borne reality imploding as real space engulfed the vessel.

Corswain's head reeled for several seconds, dizzied by a sense of unreality, his surroundings seeming out of step with him, disjointed and fragile.

The sensation passed, leaving a faint pulsing behind Corswain's eyes.

The Lion was already barking orders for the short-range scanners to be brought online, eager to see whether his plan had worked and the phantom ship had been dragged out of the warp by the risky manoeuvre.

‘All power to local augurs and broad-band auspex sweeps,’ said the primarch,

striding towards the long sweep of stairs that led down into the main chamber of the strategium. 'Redirect long-range signalling and sensors to comm-net scans. Find me that ship!'

The systems of the Invincible Reason scoured the surrounding space for seven minutes. Corswain and Nemiel had followed their primarch down to the main floor, and had been joined by Captain Stenius who had surrendered his position of direct command to the Lion. Nothing was said for those seven minutes, as the scanner technicians worked feverishly to determine whether the plan had succeeded.

'Legiones Astartes ident-contact, my liege,' announced one of the strategium attendants. 'Twenty-two thousand kilometres from starboard bow. Eclipse-class light cruiser. Night Lords. Broadcasting as the Avenging Shadow.'

'Monitoring warp field fluctuations, my liege,' said another. 'Transferring to main display.'

The largest of the strategium's screens blurred into life, filled with an expanse of stars. In the bottom right corner, a shifting corona of light silhouetted the enemy light cruiser, trapped in a vortex between real space and the warp.

'Hard starboard, thirty degrees, down-plane twelve degrees,' snapped the Lion, having made the navigational calculations in only a couple of seconds; even with the aid of a trigometric cogitator Stenius would have taken at least two minutes to get the exact heading required. 'Ready torpedoes, tubes three and four. Flight crews to Thunderhawks and Stormbirds.'

The primarch's orders rang across the strategium, setting teams of officers and functionaries into motion. As this new activity settled, the Lion crossed the floor to the weapons control consoles. Stenius took a step after him.

'My liege, a full torpedo salvo will have a much greater chance of destroying the enemy.'

'I do not wish to destroy them, captain. We will capture the ship and seize whatever technology they have employed to track us here. I am inputting the torpedo guidance codes; they will not miss.'

‘Of course not, my liege,’ said Stenius, stepping back, only the tone of his voice betraying his chagrin.

‘I request permission to lead the boarding parties, my liege,’ said Corswain.

‘Denied, little brother.’ The primarch did not look up, his fingers dancing across the rune keys of the main weapons console. ‘We will cripple their ship and I will lead the attack myself.’

‘I do not think that is a good idea, my liege,’ said Corswain, daring his master’s displeasure. ‘The warp interference surrounding the enemy vessel is highly unstable. The ship could be dragged back into the warp while you are aboard.’

The Lion’s fingers stopped their tapping for a moment and the primarch straightened. Corswain prepared himself for a rebuke.

‘Denied, little brother,’ said the Lion, resuming his work. ‘I will need you to remain on board the Invincible Reason.’

Corswain automatically glanced at Stenius, guessing his primarch’s intent. The Lion’s distrust remained.

‘Brother-Redemptor Ne—’

‘Is not a command-level officer, little brother.’ The Lion’s words were curt but not harsh. He finished his task and turned towards Corswain, deep green eyes boring into the seneschal’s skull. ‘You will remain on board, Cor. Unless you have any other reason why that should not be the case?’

‘Torpedoes bearing on target, my liege,’ declared a weapons tech, stilling any reply that Corswain might utter; he had none. ‘Firing solution has been plotted as per your calculations.’

‘Launch when at optimum angle,’ said the Lion. ‘Engines all ahead full towards the enemy.’

‘Aye, my liege,’ replied Stenius. He activated the internal communication system and repeated the order to the Techmarines manning the reactor chambers.

‘Tube three cycling. Tube three launching. Tube four cycling. Tube four launching.’ The words were spat mechanically from the mouth grille of a half-human servitor enmeshed by a tangle of wires to the weapons bank. The haggard figure was little more than a torso and head protruding from a cylindrical console, his eyes stapled shut, ears replaced with antenna-jutting vocal receivers.

On the main screen, the beleaguered Night Lords ship was dead ahead, the streak of the two torpedoes racing from the battle-barge towards it.

‘Twenty-three seconds to torpedo separation. Twenty-seven seconds to impact,’ grated the weapons servitor. Already the blazing plasma drives of the torpedoes were just another glimmering pair of stars against the backdrop of the galaxy, gradually dwindling with distance.

‘My liege, I have Lady Fiana requesting contact on the internal comm,’ said an aide.

‘Direct through speakers,’ replied the Lion, long strides taking him back across the strategium to stand beside the command throne.

‘The Night Lords ship is doing something strange with its warp engines,’ the Navigator reported over the internal address system. Corswain saw his primarch frown at her imprecise language.

‘Be more specific, Lady Fiana,’ said the Lion. ‘What can you see?’

‘Forgive my vagueness, lauded primarch. It is hard to describe to one possessed of normal sight alone. There is something – some things – moving in the Geller field around the enemy ship. It looks like fragments of warp space are actually inside the ship, but that is impossible.’

‘I have heard the word too often lately,’ snarled the primarch. ‘What is the significance of this to us?’

Before Fiana could reply, the Lion’s attention was drawn elsewhere.

‘My liege, the enemy ship is turning, trying to break free from the warp breach. They are closing quickly with our position.’

‘Detecting an incoming hail, my liege.’

The two reports came almost at the same moment and the Lion hesitated for the first time since coming to the strategium, unsure which piece of information to respond to first. The pause only lasted a fraction of a heartbeat before the decision was made.

‘Adjust course by two points to port and ready starboard batteries,’ ordered the primarch. ‘Decrypt hail and transfer to main speakers.’

The air was filled with static hiss for several seconds while the automated decryption systems deciphered the incoming transmission. What came out of the speakers sounded like the garbled hissing of a snake, every syllable spat with derision. The Lion’s face twisted in a lopsided smile and he looked at Corswain.

‘I never cared much for Nostraman, Cor. You have studied it, I know. Tell me, what do they say? I cannot imagine that they are begging for mercy.’

‘They praise you for the trick in dragging them into the light, but then there come the obtuse threats. They say that they will have a reckoning in Slathissin and we will all meet our doom.’

‘I do not recall any system called Slathissin, in Thramas or elsewhere,’ said the Lion.

‘It is a reference to their barbaric past, my liege,’ explained Corswain. ‘It is the lowest hell, where the souls of the fallen exact vengeance on those that wronged them, reserved for traitors, patricides and worse.’

‘There is no such place, their threats are empty,’ said Nemiell, speaking for the first time since he had arrived at the strategium. He looked at Corswain through the lenses of his skull-shaped helm, his expression hidden. ‘There is no hell, and there are no such things as souls.’

A few seconds later, laughter sounded over the transmission, edged with insanity.

‘You are wrong, son of Caliban. So wrong. As you will find out very soon. Slathissin opens its gates for you all.’

‘I gave no order to transmit,’ said the Lion. ‘Cut the feed now!’

‘We have ears nonetheless, proud Lion.’

‘We are not transmitting any signal,’ confirmed one of the communications attendants.

‘My blade waits for your throat, disbeliever. I am Nias Korvali, and at the last midnight I will have a bloody revenge.’

There was a shout from one of the technicians monitoring the scanning arrays, just a few seconds before an automated siren blared across the strategium.

‘The enemy ship is activating its void shields and warp engines, my liege!’ came the panicked cry.

‘Madness,’ muttered Nemiell. ‘The feedback from the void shields will tear them apart.’

‘Fire arrestors, full turn to port!’ snarled the Lion. ‘That same feedback will create a wave in the warp breach, ripping it apart. Activate Geller fields, prepare for unplanned translation!’

‘Torpedoes separating.’ The servitor’s monotone declaration cut through the activity, and Corswain looked up at the main screen, as did the Lion, Stenius and several others.

There was a brief twinkling as thrusters fired and the torpedoes ejected their multiple warheads towards the Night Lords ship. As if in response, the multicoloured bruise on reality that surrounded the target vessel shimmered violently, waves of kaleidoscopic energy pouring from the warp breach in iridescent flares.

The light cruiser appeared to fold in upon itself, the implosion releasing another blast of warp power as its void shields tried to shunt raw psychic energy back into the warp itself, creating a loop that fed into the breach between universes. One moment Corswain was looking at the enemy vessel in the heart of an ever-moving circular rainbow, the next the whole screen was filled with rippling lines and coils of pulsing warp energy; and then he realised that the convocation of

energy was not on the screen, but in the air around him.

IV

‘Stay calm.’

The Lion spoke without haste, pouring reassurance and strength into those two words as he felt the touch of panic settling upon the dozens of crew manning the strategium. There was not a man or woman aboard the ship that had not faced death more than once, but being engulfed in the warp breach was a test that none of them had faced before.

He activated the internal comms system with a flick of a finger.

‘All captains and other officers maintain discipline in your sections. We are experiencing a temporary situation that will be resolved swiftly. You have your standing orders, obey them.’

The primarch felt his heart beating a little faster than normal, but it was just an expected response to an emergency. He took a moment to review the situation.

The Invincible Reason was caught betwixt the warp and real space, trapped in a rift caused by the Night Lords’ detonation of their warp engines. The Lion could feel the energy of the warp pulsing through and around him, suffusing the material of the ship, the air, his body. Only a few seconds had passed since the warp tide had engulfed them and everything seemed slightly distorted, as if he was standing at an angle to normality, looking in from a slightly different place.

The lights on the display consoles winked strangely, fluttering to an aberrant rhythm that represented no system on the ship. The muted voices of the crew were dislocated, sounding as though they came from a great distance. The visual screens had gone blank, unable to replicate the vortex of power that was whirling about the ship. Captain Stenius stepped up beside the primarch, a faint afterglow left in his wake, trails of glimmering sparks falling from the edges of his armour as he moved.

‘Status report,’ said the Lion. ‘Void shields. Geller field. Warp engines.’

‘Aye, my liege,’ replied Stenius, his voice echoing for a moment inside the

Lion's head. More fiery trails danced in the air as the captain raised his fist to his chest in salute.

'We have reports of fighting!' This came from Corswain, who had moved to one of the main monitoring stations, his voice sounding like a distant shout though he was less than ten metres away. 'Starboard gun decks, levels eight and nine.'

'Enemy?' snapped the Lion. 'A Night Lords teleport attack?'

'No clear report, my liege,' said Corswain. 'It is very confusing.'

'Get down there and establish some order, little brother. Clear head, discipline and courage.'

Corswain nodded and headed towards the doors while the Lion turned his attention back to Stenius, one eyebrow raised in question.

'Warp interference prevents us raising void shields, my liege. We would suffer the fate of the Night Lords. The same is true of the Geller field; we've not fully translated and to activate it would risk a massive feedback loop. Warp engines are still cycling back to potential from our translation.' Though the captain's face was immobile, his shoulders sagged. 'We are trapped here for the moment, my liege.'

The Lion absorbed this without comment, the reality of the situation brought home by the captain's stark words. He formed a plan of action.

'We cannot break free from this storm, so we must ride it to the heart. Have the warp engines readied as soon as possible. We will make a full translation back into warp space and activate the Geller field to stabilise normality. Have Lady Fiana report to me immediately. Understood?'

'Yes, my liege.'

The main doors hissed open and fifteen Dark Angels in Terminator armour entered, combi-bolters and power fists at the ready. Their immense armour was black as pitch and trimmed with silver, broken only by the sigils of the Legion on their shoulder pads and the scarlet skull emblems on their huge chestplates; the personal blazon of Brother-Redemptor Nemiel who was there to meet them.

‘Maintain order, brothers,’ the Chaplain told his bodyguard. ‘Be watchful and show no hesitation.’

Stepping off the conveyor at gun deck nine, his retinue of ten legionaries in close step behind him, Corswain still had no better idea what was happening or who had attacked the ship. The comm-feed was alive with reports of the unidentified assailants sweeping from bastion to bastion and he could hear bolter fire and heavier weapons echoing along the corridor from the gun platforms towards the prow. It was possible, though highly unlikely, that the Night Lords had managed some form of long-range teleport as a last-ditch act before their ship was destroyed; it would not be the most unbelievable act the Night Lords had performed recently.

The gun deck was composed of a main corridor nearly a kilometre long, with access passages every two hundred metres leading to each of the gun turrets, which in turn were self-contained keeps housing the macro-cannons and missile pods used for close attack against enemy ships. They were designed to withstand boarding and Corswain could see that the defence bulkheads had been dropped on the closest platforms, isolating them from the rest of the ship. How any attacker had managed to breach several platforms at once in such a short space was beyond his reckoning.

Several dozen unarmed crew members wearing plain black livery came streaming past, heading to aft, fleeing the fighting. There was a wild look in their eyes and they paid him no heed as he called for them to stop and explain what was happening. Corswain had never seen such terror in the eyes of seasoned men before.

Another burst of furious gunfire sounded ahead as the seneschal and his bodyguard pounded down the corridor towards the fighting. Deck Captain Isaases was supposed to be in charge, but was not responding to Corswain’s calls on the comm; probably already dead.

Amidst the detonation of grenades, a handful of Dark Angels backed into the main passage, bolters blazing into the turret doorway of Gun Keep Four fifty metres away, two flamers licking promethium fire into the opening.

Corswain’s auto-senses dimmed his sight for an instant as a flare of bright

energy erupted from the opening; pink and blue flames exploded into the passageway, carrying with them the burning bodies of two more Dark Angels. The seneschal had never seen any weapon like it, and broke into a sprint, readying his pistol and power sword as he closed with the group of legionaries. The two warriors who had been caught in the attack flailed around on the floor as multicoloured flames danced across their armour, melting through their suits like a plasma blast.

A demand for a report died on Corswain's lips as he came level with the turret doorway and saw what was within, all reason driven from his thoughts for a moment.

The interior of the gun keep was ablaze with multicoloured flames, and in the heart of the blinding inferno cavorted strange shapes. They were like nothing Corswain had seen before, and he had encountered many strange enemies in his years of service to the First Legion. The alien creatures seemed to be composed of the fire itself; headless, legless bodies with faces in their chests and long gangling arms that spouted more fire from maw-like openings at their ends. Their torsos flared out to frilled edges where legs should have been, jumping to and fro with contorted twists. The creatures were setting everything ablaze with abandon, the crackling of the fires accompanied by inhuman screeching and cackling.

Corswain's pistol felt heavy in his hand as he raised it and for the first time since he had been old enough to hold a weapon his hand trembled as he took aim. Eyes that were made of pure white fire regarded him malignly from the heart of the inferno, burning into his psyche as surely as the flames had melted through the armour of the dead Dark Angels. It seemed as if Corswain looked into a bottomless abyss of flame, the sight searing into his memory like a brand.

He opened fire, but the explosive bolts detonated in the flames before they reached their targets.

The creatures were at the doorway, flames licking at the floor of the main passage. Corswain adjusted his aim and sent two bolts hammering into the emergency release controls. The bulkhead slammed down just in front of the maniacal aliens, cutting off the infernal fire, and eerie silence descended.

Trying to make sense of what he had seen, Corswain noticed that the bulkhead was starting to glow at its centre, the unnatural flames of the attackers now turned to the purpose of burning through the metres-thick portal. As he watched the glow spreading, droplets of molten material starting to stand out on the plasteel like the sweat on his brow, the seneschal judged that it would only be a matter of a few short minutes before the creatures escaped their temporary prison.

In the quiet that had descended, he looked at the other Dark Angels, but like them could think of nothing to say, no orders to give, numbed by the bizarreness of what they had encountered.

‘Seneschal!’ The warning came from Brother Alartes, one of his personal guard.

Turning to look aft, Corswain saw the air swirling with power, as it had done when the warp rift had first engulfed the ship. Shapes were forming in the miasma: monstrous red hounds with scaled flesh and fangs of iron, their tails tipped with venom-dripping barbs, heads surrounded by an armoured frill. The infernal hounds were almost fully formed now, their growls and snarls resounding along the passageway. In moments they would be upon them.

The apparitions reminded him of old tales from Caliban and a word sprang to mind, loaded with loathing and fear: nephilla. Corswain found himself speaking, issuing a command out of instinct that he thought he would never utter as a Dark Angel.

‘Fall back! Retreat and seal the gun deck.’

He stepped back towards the closest conveyor, firing his pistol at the monstrous dogs, though he knew his bolts would have little effect. The other Dark Angels were with him, filling the corridor with the flicker of bolts.

The swish of the conveyor doors opening behind him flooded the seneschal with relief in a way he had never thought possible. He gratefully backed into the chamber as the enormous, incorporeal hounds bounded down the corridor towards him.

To stay would be to die.

The walls of the Navigator's lounge shimmered with pre-echoes of what was to come. Fiana could see before-images of monstrous creatures pawing at the substance of the ship, her third eye granting her a vision of what was to be. Coiden stood at the door, a laspistol dangling pointlessly in his left hand, his right on the frame of the open portal as he peered into the antechamber, looking not so much with his eyes as his othersense.

'It's clear,' said Coiden, turning to look at Fiana past the high collar of his long vermillion coat.

'Kiafan, follow Coiden; Aneis, stay with me.' Fiana ushered her siblings towards the door with a last look back to the spiralway that led up to the navigation pilaster. Something large and slug-like was heaving its bulk through the metal of the escalator steps, becoming more solid as it pushed through from the warp.

Fiana slid up the metal band blocking her third eye and opened the leathery eyelid covering the orb. She concentrated on the solidifying apparition, channelling the energy stream that allowed her to pierce the veils of the warp. Here, in real space, that stream erupted as a scourging beam of black light that struck the beast between the waving fronds surrounding its fanged maw. The thing withered under Fiana's psychic glare. Its insubstantial form scattered into tattered mist as the energy that bound it to the material plane was thrust back into warp space.

A cry from Kiafan alerted her to more creatures in the passageway outside and she joined the others at a run. Winged, hook-clawed spectres hung from the vents in the ceiling, having seized the hood of Kiafan's robe to drag him into the air. With her normal eyes, Fiana could see a smudge of movement above Kiafan as the desperate Navigator tried to turn his third eye on the two creatures who had seized him from behind; with her othersense she saw gargoyle-like creatures with long bony limbs and stone-like flesh.

Coiden and Aneis combined their third eyes to blast the hideous creatures back into their immaterial realm, causing Kiafan to fall heavily to the floor. He grasped his ankle and looked up at Fiana with tear-filled eyes.

'I think it's broken,' he moaned.

‘They’re coming through the walls,’ said Aneis. Humanoid and other shapes were coalescing through the bare plasteel bulkheads around the Navigators; too many to destroy.

‘Pick up your brother,’ Fiana told Coiden. She grabbed Aneis by the shoulder and dragged her brother past the pair. She gave him a shove towards the door leading through the next bulkhead. Something pot-bellied and cyclopean was forming out of a dark pool of rust and slime spreading across the floor of the passage beyond.

‘Clear a path,’ Fiana said.

‘Where to?’ Aneis asked, his youthful face almost white with fear.

‘The strategium,’ replied Fiana. ‘We must reach the protection of the Lion.’

Having recovered some of his equilibrium, Corswain did all that he could to organise a defence of the gun decks, but the mysterious invaders were all but impossible to confront. From the scattered outbreaks across the Invincible Reason, it was clear that the attack was not confined to the gun batteries, or even the starboard decks. Pockets of foes were appearing across the vessel, with a large number seemingly intent on taking over the warp core chamber. With foes materialising behind defensive lines, making a mockery of any physical barrier that could be erected, Corswain had mobilised the ship’s company into hundred-strong patrols.

Not far from the strategium, he and his bodyguard came across Lady Fiana and her family. They were being escorted by Sergeant Ammael and his squad and though the Navigators looked distraught and haggard none of them seemed to be seriously injured. The seneschal relieved Ammael of his obligation and sent him to the engine decks where the fighting was becoming protracted.

When the group reached the strategium, they were confronted by an unexpected sight. There were no signs of fighting here; the technicians went about their duties with crisp calmness, diligently ignoring the scene that was playing out in their midst.

The Lion stood at the centre of the main chamber, and before him knelt a Dark

Angel, a white tabard over his black armour, head bowed in obeisance. Surrounded by his personal guard, Brother-Redemptor Nemiel stood over the kneeling legionary, his pistol and crozius in his hands.

‘Wait here,’ Corswain quietly told the Navigators, motioning for them to stand to one side. The Lion heard the whispered words and looked across at Corswain.

‘Your timing is unintentionally impeccable, little brother,’ said the primarch. ‘I am faced with a dilemma.’

‘My liege, I do not know what is happening here, but I am sure it can wait a while. We need your guidance. The ship is under sustained attack, from creatures that are almost impervious to our weapons.’

‘The punishment of oath-breakers brooks no delay,’ said Nemiel. As he approached, Corswain recognised the kneeling legionary. His helm was under his arm, his face half-hidden behind long waves of black hair. It was Brother Asmodeus, formerly of the Librarium.

‘Oath-breaker?’ said Corswain. ‘I do not understand.’

‘My little brother has transgressed,’ said the Lion, though there seemed no anger in his voice. ‘Upon being attacked, he broke the Edict of Nikaea and unleashed the powers of his mind.’

‘He performed sorcery,’ snarled Nemiel. ‘The same vileness perpetrated by the Night Lords that now threatens our ship!’

‘That is to be decided, Brother-Redemptor,’ said the Lion. ‘I have not yet delivered my verdict.’

‘The Edict of Nikaea was absolute, my liege,’ said Nemiel. ‘Warriors of the Librarium were to curtail their powers. Asmodeus has breached the oath he swore.’

‘Did it work?’ said Corswain.

‘What?’ said Nemiel, turning his skull-faced helm in the direction of the seneschal.

‘Asmodeus, did your powers destroy the enemy?’

The former Librarian said nothing, but looked up at the primarch and nodded.

‘Interesting,’ said the primarch, his green eyes fixing on Corswain as if to see into his thoughts.

‘I have seen first-hand what these things can do. They are...’ said the seneschal, hesitating to use the word. He took a breath and continued. ‘We face nephilla, my liege, or something akin to them. They are not wholly physical and our weapons do little damage to their unnatural flesh.’

‘They are creatures of the warp, lauded primarch.’ The group of Dark Angels turned as Lady Fiana approached. ‘They are made of warp-stuff, and the breach has allowed them to manifest in our world. They cannot be destroyed, only sent back. The gaze of our third eyes can harm them.’

‘Is this true?’ asked the Lion, stooping to lay a hand on the shoulder of Asmodeus. ‘Were your powers capable of harming our attackers?’

‘From the warp they come, and with the power of the warp they can be banished again,’ said the Librarian. He stood as the Lion changed his grip and guided the legionary to his feet. He met the primarch’s gaze for a moment and then looked away again. ‘Brother-Redemptor Nemiel is right, my liege. I have broken the oath I swore.’

‘A grave crime, and one that I will be sure to prosecute properly when the current situation has been resolved,’ said the Lion. He looked at Nemiel. ‘There are two others of the Librarium aboard: Hasfael and Alberein. Bring them here.’

‘This is a mistake, my liege,’ said Nemiel, shaking his head. ‘The abominations that attack us, these nephilla, are a conjuration of sorceries. I swore an oath also, to uphold the Edict of Nikaea. To unleash further sorcery will endanger us even more. Think again, my liege!’

‘I have issued an order, Brother-Redemptor,’ said the Lion, drawing himself up to his full height.

‘One that I cannot follow,’ said Nemiel, his tone hard, though Corswain could

see the Chaplain's hands were trembling with the effort of defying his primarch.

'My authority is absolute,' the Lion said, clenching his fists, his lips drawn back to reveal gleaming teeth.

'The Edict of Nikaea was issued by the Emperor, my liege,' said Nemiel. 'There is no higher authority.'

'Enough!' The Lion's roar was so loud it caused Corswain's auto-senses to dampen his hearing, as they would if he was caught in a potentially deafening detonation.

The seneschal was not entirely sure what happened next. The Lion moved and a split-second later a cracked skull-faced helm was spinning through the dull-glowing lights of the strategium, cutting a bloody arc through the air. Nemiel's headless corpse clattered to the floor as the Lion held up his hand, pieces of ceramite embedded in the fingertips of his gore-spattered gauntlet.

Corswain looked at the face of his primarch, horrified by what had happened. For a moment he saw a vision of satisfaction, the Lion's eyes gleaming as he stared at his handiwork. It passed in a second. The Lion seemed to realise what he had done and his face twisted with pain as he knelt beside the remains of the Brother-Redemptor.

'My liege?' Corswain was not sure what to say, but as seneschal he knew he had to act.

'We will mourn him later,' said the Lion. The primarch stood up, his gaze still on Nemiel's body. He broke his stare and looked at Lady Fiana, who flinched as if struck. There were three droplets of blood across the pale flesh of her right cheek. 'Tell the Librarians they are relieved of their Nikaeian oaths. Lady Fiana, you and your family will each lead a company of my warriors. Cor, assemble eight counter-attack forces.'

'Eight, my liege? Three for the Librarians, and one each for the Navigators, I understand. Am I to lead the other?'

'I am,' said the Lion. 'No creature, nephilla or any other, attacks my ship without retribution.'

V

While his seneschal organised the forces of the Dark Angels, the Lion made his way to his personal arming chamber. Five Legion serfs were awaiting him inside the stone-clad room, dressed in dark green surplices, with heavy boots and gloves. Each wore a pistol at his belt too, though the Lion had encountered no enemy on his way there and they appeared unmolested.

The reports of attacks were growing in frequency as the nephilla – or whatever their immaterial assailants were – seemed to be widening the breach from warp space to allow more of their kind to manifest.

The walls of the chamber were covered with weapons of dazzling variety, either made for the primarch or seized as spoils of conquest from the hundreds of cultures he had encountered during the Great Crusade. It had begun with his first Calibanite short sword, presented to him by Luther on acceptance into the knightly order; that simple blade held pride of place at the centre of the display.

It was the one affectation he allowed himself, this collection of weaponry. He had spent long times here contemplating the many ways mankind had devised to kill an enemy, though of late his throne chamber had been a more regular haunt. He paused for a moment of thought, moving along the walls, touching a hand to favourite pieces, running a gauntleted finger along blades and spikes in appreciation of their craftsmanship. In war, just as in other pursuits, mankind was creative, showing insight and genius even with the most barbaric level of technology.

Many of the weapons were too small for his fist and were mounted for ornamentation only, while others served a different purpose in his hands: swords for normal men wielded as knives by the Lion. Some were traditional, ancient designs, while others had monomolecular edges, power field generators, electro-fields and other technological improvements.

There were spatha, longswords, bastard swords, mortuary swords, flambards, rapiers, sabres, scimitars, khopeshes, colichmardes, tulwars, shotels, falchions, misericordes and cutlasses; myrmex, cestus and knuckle dusters; baselards,

stiletos, dirks and daggers; cleavers, sickles and kopis; mattocks, clubs, picks, maces, flails, morning stars, mauls and war hammers; hatchets, tomahawks, hand axes, double-bladed axes, long-bearded axes and adzes; pikes, partisans, fauchards, sarissas, voulges, Lochaber axes, boarspears, tridents, halberds, scythes, half pikes and hastas.

He did not rush himself, but took the time to collect his thoughts, considering the enemy of the day. In his youth he had slain nephilla with his bare hands out of necessity, though they were all but impervious to most mortal weapons; another benefit of his primarch heritage. This day he would go armed, and he took up two blades, heavy hand-and-a-half broadswords by the reckoning of normal men but easily held in each fist by the giant primarch. They were superbly crafted, the product of a Calibanite artisan whose name had been lost to history. Their names were inscribed along the edge of each blade in florid lettering: Hope and Despair. Each had a long fuller to lighten the blade weight, and they were edged with a crystalline compound sharper than any metal, unbreakable and never needing to be sharpened. The Lion had found the pair of swords used as ceremonial pieces by one of the order masters, and becoming enchanted by their glittering edges had insisted on a trade, gaining them for the exchange of an unblemished sablesabre pelt the primarch had prepared by his own hand.

Armed with the twin blades, the Lion joined his allotted company at the main gateway above the reactor rooms and warp core, where the fighting was fiercest. Several wounded legionaries were being dragged up the access ramp, suffering a variety of horrendous wounds: burns and slashes through their armour that had gouged down to the bone.

‘Fight with pride, die with honour,’ said the Lion, raising his swords in salute to his little brothers. They fell in behind their primarch, forming five lines each fifty strong.

The corridors were littered with the dead; unarmoured serfs and crew for the most part. Their ragged bodies were heaped in bloody piles and choked the doorways to side chambers. Some had heads or limbs missing, others were little more than blackened lumps of charred flesh. Some were arranged in lewd poses with each other, eliciting a growl of disgust from the primarch.

Here and there, flies and maggots were already crawling through the filth of the

dead, burrowing beneath the skin of the fallen and feasting on lifeless eyes. The Lion heard muttered curses uttered by his company, but had no desire to silence them, for he felt like cursing also.

He stopped as he came across the form of two dead Dark Angels. He knelt beside them. Their armour was half-melted as if by acid, and their skin was pock-marked by blisters and buboes. Caliban had occasionally been wracked by strange plagues, and the clusters of triple pustules that corrupted the skin of the pair of dead Space Marines struck a chord in the memory of the Lion.

‘We have to burn the dead, lest corruption spread,’ he said solemnly as he straightened. A trail of slime, like that of a snail, only a metre wide, led away from the bodies and passed into one of the passages leading away from the main corridor. The primarch detailed a squad to hunt down the creature that had left the trail and pressed on towards the main engine rooms several hundred metres ahead.

From nowhere, eight nephilla sprang into being ahead of the primarch. The warp rift had become so strong that it took almost no time at all for the attackers to materialise. These creatures were vaguely humanoid in shape, with lean, hunched bodies and wiry arms. They had legs like those of a dog and their flesh was the colour of blood and faintly scaled. Their heads were elongated, with black horns running back along the sides. In clawed hands they held triangular swords of gleaming bronze. Eyes of pure white regarded the Lion for a moment while forked tongues licked needle-like teeth.

With snarling war cries the nephilla attacked as one, raising their swords as they rushed towards the Lion. He did not wait for the enemy to come to him, but sprang forwards to meet them. In his left hand, Hope parried two blades swinging towards his groin, while Despair hacked through the neck of one of the creatures, parting the immaterial tissue of its body without pause.

The Lion felt a shock of energy ripple through him from his hand as the creature exploded into a shower of blood, coating the floor and the Lion’s armour with crimson. There was no pause to marvel at this strange death, for the remaining seven creatures were trying to encircle the primarch.

Bolt shells whined and cracked as the other Dark Angels did their best to help

their commander. The detonations had little effect on the nephilla, but provided distraction. Sweeping Hope in a wide arc, the Lion sheared through an upraised blade and parted the bodies of two more attackers even as he stabbed Despair through the face of another. The blades of the nephilla bit at his black-and-gold armour, cutting deep into the enamelled plates in a way no mortal weapon had ever done, though the Lion's flesh remained unmarked.

Parrying another swing of an infernal blade, the Lion twisted and brought Despair down onto the head of a nephilla circling behind him, cleaving through black horn and red skin. There was no skull beneath the flesh, and the creature collapsed into a crimson pool like the others. In two more seconds and a flurry of blows, the Lion had despatched the rest of his assailants, and his armour was awash with sticky red fluid. It smelt like blood, but he knew it could not be; the creatures had possessed no veins or arteries or hearts to carry such a thing.

Perturbed by this discovery, the Lion continued on, calling for his guard to follow swiftly as he splashed through the slick of red. He signalled Stenius, who had remained in the strategium.

‘How long until the warp drive is operational, captain?’

‘Less than twenty minutes, my liege,’ came the reply after a few seconds. ‘We have a problem, though. The enemy have driven the engineers from the warp core and are attempting to break into the containment chamber. Lord Corswain and Lady Fiana are trying to break through from the aft decks, my liege.’

‘I will meet them in the main core chamber, captain.’ The Lion broke into a run, his long strides quickly leaving behind his company of Dark Angels.

Corswain felt only a little better that he had Lady Fiana for company. The gaze of her third eye was devastating to the enemy, but she tired quickly and had to rest for several minutes between bursts. For those periods, it was up to him and the other Dark Angels to protect her with their mundane weapons. It was not impossible – the nephilla could be destroyed by weight of fire or a particularly powerful blast of a lascannon or such – but it was hard work and the force was expending ammunition and power packs at a prodigious rate. They had less than half the stores they had set out with by the time they reached the conveyors and stairwells that dropped down into the warp core chambers.

They had encountered all manner of horrifying foes on the two-kilometre journey afterwards: soaring disc-like beasts ringed with razor-sharp claws and possessing mouths that could chew through a legionary's armour in a few seconds, six-limbed entities with giant lobster claws and lashing tongues coated with venom, ever-changing apparitions with leering faces in their torsos that cavorted and wheeled about whilst spitting sorcerous fire from their fingertips.

Corswain's original force of two hundred Dark Angels now numbered just over half that; twenty-eight had been slain or were in the apothecarion, the others had been left as rearguard to defend against the enemy who could materialise anywhere.

With his personal guard close by him, the seneschal descended the main stairway into the bowels of the engine decks while other squads split to clear out secondary access routes. The steps were littered with the bodies of dead crew. Amongst the decapitated and disembowelled corpses were a few legionaries, their black armour rent open, their flesh hideously corrupted and twisted. Corswain had no idea what could have caused such horrendous injuries, and agitation caused him to tighten his grip on his bolt pistol and power sword as they reached the deck below.

All was clear, save for the stench of death coming from the bloated corpses of engineers and serfs. The passages here were lined with power conduits, piping and cables, which all showed signs of decay and disrepair, marked by patches of corrosion and slicks of moss and algae. Knowing that Stenius would never allow such a poor state to exist on his ship, Corswain was forced to conclude that the decrepitude was somehow a side effect of the nephilla's presence.

The same was true on the next level down, and still no foe could be found. Meeting up with sixty of his Dark Angels, Corswain readied himself for the descent to the warp core deck. The corridor and stairwells thrummed with energy, but not just the power of the reactor that was being fed into the area; there was a tension in the air, an intangible shadow that clouded his thoughts.

'The warp presence is almost total here,' warned Fiana. Her face was screwed up with effort, sweat running down her brow and cheeks, her lip trembling. 'If it were not for the lack of alarms, I would think the warp core had been breached.'

‘Everybody stay alert,’ Corswain told his warriors; somewhat unnecessarily he realised, as everybody was on edge. ‘No friendlies. Destroy everything that moves.’

He led the force down into the warp core sector. The walls were plated here, thick ferrocrete layered with adamantium. In layout, the deck was oval, a main corridor running around the core room itself, with branching passageways leading to monitoring stations and watch rooms.

The dead were everywhere, some of them so horrendously mutilated that it was hard to tell that they had once been men and women. In the first hundred metres, Corswain counted seven dead Dark Angels, two of them in the livery of Techmarines. The first door to the warp core was another hundred and fifty metres ahead and the piles of the deceased grew larger the closer they came to the gate.

Gunfire sounded from behind, and at the same time a wave of nephilla poured from the doorway leading to the main core chamber. They were of a type, all small creatures with faces in their chests, their unnatural flesh a glowing pink colour. Sparks and trickles of fire dripped from the open ends of their splayed fingers as they gambolled and cartwheeled along the corridor.

The Dark Angels opened fire, a hail of bolts meeting the nephilla fifty metres away. Corswain fired his pistol repeatedly, directing his shots against the same target until finally the creature ruptured, clouds of pink mist erupting from the wounds. Rather than fall, the nephilla started to shudder and spin crazily, a juddering shriek emitted from its lipless mouth.

Corswain stopped firing, shocked by what happened next.

The pink nephilla was mutating, growing an extra head, splitting into two other forms. Its pinkness turned purple and then into a deep blue as two smaller versions of its former shape snapped into existence with an audible popping noise. The blue creatures snarled and frowned at their attackers, fingers flexing menacingly. The same was happening to others, turning the pink tide into a wash of pink and blue as other nephilla were torn apart by gunfire only to re-emerge in their newer forms.

Firing on semi-automatic, Corswain plunged forwards, sword raised. He was just a few strides from the front of the blue mass when a black beam seared past him; the third eye of Lady Fiana. It tore a gouge through the mass of nephilla squeezed into the passageway, causing their bodies to disperse into blue and pink sparks where it touched them.

His pistol empty, Corswain swung his sword at the closest enemy, the power-field-edged blade hitting the outstretched arm of the creature. The impact felt strange, not at all like the slowing of a sword cutting into flesh, nor like the sudden jar of a strike against armour; it felt as though Corswain struck some fantastic rubber that bent under the strength of the blow before rebounding into its former shape.

Fiana's third eye blazed again, opening up a gap for the Dark Angels to plunge forwards into the midst of the foe, their bolters roaring, the sergeants' chain-swords whirring and power fists crackling. Fire engulfed them, purple and red, crackling along the edges of their armour, seeping into the cracks and joints. Corswain's right greave was set alight, the paint peeling away to reveal the ceramite beneath, which started to slough away. As he chopped his sword into the leering face of a nephilla, he noticed in a detached way that the flame gave off no smoke, and that unsettled him even more than the fact that his leg was on fire.

The edge of the pelt hanging down his back caught fire, but before the flames spread, they dissipated, vanishing as swiftly as they had materialised. Turning his attention back to the enemy, he realised that they had all been destroyed. A multicoloured mist hung in the air, like droplets of dye in a zero-gravity environment.

As he reloaded his pistol, Corswain signalled his primarch on the direct command channel.

'My liege, we are about to enter the main core chamber,' he reported. 'How close are you?'

'Two decks down, little brother.' The Lion's voice betrayed no strain, though his next words were a testament to the ferocity of the opposition ranged against him. Corswain could hear feral howling and inhuman shrieking in the background,

much of it cut abruptly short. 'I am facing several dozen enemies at the moment. It will take me some time to slay them all. My force is moving up, about three hundred metres behind me. Secure the core chamber and I will meet you there shortly.'

Acknowledging his primarch's reply, Corswain reloaded his pistol and gathered his warriors – seven fewer after the latest encounter – and headed towards the gateway to the core chamber. The gate itself was several metres high, the blast doors that had been brought down still in place but torn and melted through, leaving a hole large enough to step through.

Corswain expected the portal to be held against them, but no nephilla opposed the Dark Angels as they entered the portalway. High pitched shrieking and wailing sounded from the main chamber beyond, a sound impossible for humans to make. Stepping through the breached barrier, weapons at the ready, Corswain moved into the hall housing the warp core.

The core itself was in a heavily shielded octagonal structure at the centre of the high-domed chamber, enclosed by layer after layer of protective sheaths. Mechanicum symbols were etched into the housing, forming an intricate web of lines and shapes filled with gleaming metal against the obsidian-like stone of the warp core.

Dozens of nephilla – the pink and blue creatures they had just fought – were frenziedly hurling themselves at the core, clawing at it with their hands, trying to burn their way through with jets of pink flame. Their screeches were utterances of rage and frustration. Other creatures swirled about the upper gantries surrounding the core, swooping and climbing like Gadian skysharks. The nephilla paid the Dark Angels no heed as they strode into the chamber, weapons levelled, intent as they were on breaching the warp core.

'Destroy them all!' barked Corswain, opening fire with his pistol.

The fusillade of the Dark Angels – bolters, heavy bolters, lascannons and missiles – ripped into the mass of creatures gathered around the core structure. Spreading out along the walkways, the legionaries kept up the murderous rain of fire, some turning their weapons towards the ceiling as the circling beasts above dived down with piercing screams, their tails lashing, the barbs and serrations

that ringed their manta-like bodies undulating as they descended.

The chamber filled with a swirling miasma of dissipating energy as the Dark Angels let fly with their fury, billowing clouds of warp power streaming upwards. Through the mist, Corswain saw something else moving, coalescing from the floating fragments that drifted up like embers from a fire. Something larger than anything he had yet seen, towering above the Space Marines, even taller than the Lion yet not so bulky.

Red lightning flared from the mist, ripping through Sergeant Lennian's squad, cracking open armour and searing flesh in a long burst of raging energy. Their smoking bodies were flung through the air by the blast, smashing high up against the ferrocrete walls.

The thing that emerged from the swirling maelstrom of dying nephilla looked like a giant, nightmarish bird, at least four metres tall. It stood upright like a man, but its thin, twisted body was supported on legs like those of a hawk or eagle, taloned feet scarring the metal floor, leaving sparks in its wake as it advanced. Robes of fire hung from its torso, blown about by some unnatural wind. Its arms were long and sinewy, and in its clawed hands the creature held a staff made of solidified flame, ever-changing in colour. A pair of wings spread from the beast's back, almost reaching from one side of the chamber to the other, iridescent feathers trailing on the ground.

It had two heads on long scaled necks, one like some grotesque vulture, the other serpentine, both crested with long multicoloured feathers that dripped red and blue droplets of fire. And its eyes... Corswain regretted meeting that abominable gaze in an instant, but was unable to look away. The nephilla's eyes were black: the black of the gulf between stars, the black of the darkest cave of Caliban. The seneschal saw himself reflected in those ebon orbs, a tiny figure against the huge expanse of the universe – a tiny, insignificant mote surrounded by the enormity of existence.

The nephilla lashed out with the tip of its staff and more lightning filled the chamber, ripping apart another half a dozen legionaries. Bolter rounds exploded without effect against its ever-shifting hide and lascannon beams reflected harmlessly from its wings.

Lady Fiana stepped past Corswain, her whole body shaking as she pulled free her headband to reveal her third eye. The seneschal ripped away his gaze from her just before that warp eye was opened, and watched the beam of darkness that sprang towards the nephilla. It struck the creature full in the chest, detonating with a flare of dark energy, rocking it back a step but doing no more.

With a horrified gasp, Fiana unleashed her warp sight again, but this time the nephilla released one hand from its staff and stopped the beam with its palm. The energy coalesced around its fingers, playing from fingertip to fingertip like a miniature storm, while its snake head arched down to examine the flashing cloud of power. Eyes narrowing, it looked up at Fiana and thrust its hand back towards her, releasing the energy.

The Navigator shrieked as her body was engulfed by blackness, veins and arteries pulsing under her skin, blood streaming from eyes, ears and nose. She fell, and lay unmoving.

Corswain turned his attention back to the nephilla, and raised his pistol. Both of the creature's pairs of eyes were scanning around the chamber, necks craning to take in all of the Dark Angels. With a sweeping gesture, it sent a wave of power surging across the hall, smashing the legionaries from their feet. Corswain was hurled back with the others, crashing to his back beside the portalway.

Stretching up to its full height, the nephilla turned both heads towards the seneschal. It seemed to relax, staff held out to one side in one hand, the other stroking through the fires of its robes.

As all four of those black eyes fixed upon him, Corswain felt something inside his head, like a warp translation but sharper, like a pinprick in the centre of his mind. He tried to block out the sensation of fingers pulling apart his thoughts and memories, examining them one by one, but could not stop the creature's mental assault.

Suddenly the seneschal's limbs went numb. He stood up, with no volition, but was otherwise immobile. Around him, the other Dark Angels were just recovering from the shockwave of the creature's last attack.

Corswain tried his best to resign himself to his death, but it was hard. He never

had thought his life would end like this, as helpless as a newborn, facing an enemy that he could not even begin to comprehend. He wanted to spit a curse, or dedicate his last breaths to his primarch and Emperor, but he was denied even this honour. His body was not his to control.

The nephilla reached out a bony finger and beckoned him forwards.

Lashing out with an armoured boot, the Lion sent the hound-like beast tumbling down the corridor. Taking half a dozen strides, the primarch brought both of his swords down across its back as it tried to right itself, carving it into three pieces that splattered into gore across the decking.

He stopped for a moment to assess the situation. The flight of stairs down to the main core chamber was only fifty metres ahead, and the passageway was free of enemies. He could hear his company fighting behind him, the retort of bolters echoing up from the stairwell he had just left. Though he knew his little brothers were in a dire situation, he had to focus on his objective: regaining control of the core so that the warp engines and Geller field could be engaged.

The comm buzzed as he stepped forwards, and he heard Corswain's voice. The seneschal sounded strained, as if speaking through gritted teeth.

'My liege, the way is clear to the warp core. You must come at once. There is something else here, something we cannot destroy.' The comm-link hissed for a few seconds. 'It... It wants to speak with you.'

The Lion entered the warp core chamber at a full run, taking in the scene in a few moments. Several dozen Dark Angels were stood around the perimeter, their weapons directed at a monstrous bird-like nephilla but not firing. In front of the creature was Corswain, standing immobile just a few metres from it, arms hanging limply by his sides.

Cease your attack or this one will be destroyed.

The words came to the Lion's thoughts directly, bypassing his ears. Their tone was soft and melodic, in contrast to the haggard, harsh-looking creature that had undoubtedly sent them. The nephilla's intent was immediately clear and he skidded to a halt, coming to a stop with his swords held ready to defend himself.

There was no reaction from his warriors, and he guessed that the words were directed to him alone. He did not know whether their passivity was voluntary or enforced, but it was clear they were in grave danger.

‘It is not I that launched an attack,’ said the Lion, taking a step closer to the apparition. ‘Leave now.’

And make a waste of all the effort that it took to reach this place? I have been searching for you a long time, Lion of Caliban.

There was something familiar about the creature’s voice, like a half-remembered dream. The Lion could not place from where, but it was not the first time he had heard this. His mind stirred with vague recollections, of pleading and entreaty.

Yes, that is true. I have come to you before.

‘Get out of my thoughts.’ The Lion stepped to his left and focused on blocking the creature from his mind, mentally bringing up a shield as though he were defending himself against a physical attack. It was a trick he had learnt as he had stalked nephilla on Caliban. One of the bird-beast’s heads followed him with its inscrutable gaze, the other stayed fixed upon Corswain.

That might work in the real universe, but not here. You are in my realm now, or at least teetering upon the brink of it. You cannot ignore me this time.

‘I do not treat with aliens,’ said the Lion, taking a few more steps to his left, closing the gap between himself and the nephilla.

Alien? Alien? There was despair in the voice. I am more than some simple creature of your universe. I am the giver and the receiver, the crux of fate, the master of the parallels. The past and the future are laid before me. Do not mistake me for some petty foe to be vanquished by mere might of arms.

‘You have nothing to offer that I will accept.’ The Lion was directly behind the creature now, its snake head still regarding him with an unblinking stare while the vulture transfixed Corswain.

That is not true. However, you do not desire power, that much is plain. Your ambition is woefully stunted for one of your abilities. You are happy to let your

brothers dwell in the light of your father's adoration. You even sacrifice your own to stay true to the memory of what once was.

The two necks were starting to cross each other as the Lion continued his circling. He resisted the lure of the accusation in the creature's words, which echoed with the taunt made by the Night Haunter.

Freedom, Lion of Caliban. I can give you freedom. You know that you do not really care for these lesser beings. They are a distraction to you. Their frailties, their petty squabbles, are unnecessary trifles to be avoided. Even this war that you fight, it is without consequence.

'Horus cannot be allowed victory.'

Horus's victory is not your concern. All things are fleeting, even the lives of great Warmasters. I have witnessed the rise and fall of every civilisation in the universe. None of them can endure, Chaos always consumes them in the end.

That word – Chaos – resonated through the Lion's thoughts. He had a fleeting glimpse of eternity, of the entropy of the universe, ever-changing, new lives born out of death, of stars decaying to create worlds and worlds dying to form new stars, all in constant flux.

'The Emperor has shown us a new way. The Imperial Truth will endure for eternity.'

Laughter resounded inside the primarch's skull.

Foolish! Your Emperor is nothing more than a fraudster with grand ambitions. His empire is no greater than any other edifice of Mankind, and it will tumble just as easily.

The words were spoken with scorn yet they lit a spark of hope in the Lion's breast – the creature spoke of the Emperor in the present tense. It thought that the Master of Mankind still lived.

The nephilla could not follow the Lion's progress any further with its snake eyes, and for a moment it broke its gaze from Corswain, serpentine head swinging towards the seneschal while its vulture-like visage fixed on the primarch.

It was only a split second but it was all the Lion needed.

Before its gaze was on Corswain again, the Lion launched himself at the nephilla, sword outstretched. With astounding speed it reacted, twisting its whole body in his direction, staff coming up to spew forth a sheet of forking energy.

‘Kill it, Cor!’ snarled the Lion as wreaths of crackling energy enveloped him, sending pain coursing through every limb, surging into his chest and pounding in his head.

With a roar, the primarch broke free from the net of lightning that surrounded him, still lancing his sword towards the nephilla’s body. A hail of fire hammered into the creature from the encircling Dark Angels as Corswain leapt away, the seneschal’s bolt pistol spitting rounds.

Predictable fool.

The nephilla’s staff swept out, turning aside the Lion’s first blow. Twisting, wings furling, the creature side-stepped the Lion’s charge, its serpent head lashing out towards his throat with bared fangs.

The Lion turned mid-stride, dropping Hope which had been deflected by the nephilla’s parry. His gauntleted fingers curled around the slender serpentine neck as the primarch allowed himself to fall to the ground. His grasp unbreakable, the Lion dragged the nephilla down with him, its chest plunging onto the waiting point of Despair.

Harmed but not slain, the nephilla reared up, taking the sword from the primarch’s grasp, wings spreading once more, now bat-like and shimmering gold. Its vulture’s beak rammed into the side of the Lion’s helm as it sought to pull its other head free from his grip. Wings beating fiercely, it tried to lift away, but the Lion’s grasp held firm as he was pulled back to his feet.

‘Did you see this coming?’ snarled the Lion, hammering his fist into the pommel of the half-buried sword, driving the blade fully into the nephilla. The primarch felt a moment of contact, something deep within him connecting with the substance of the nephilla. His anger raged, finding conduit through his arm, into his fist, given vent along the blade of the buried sword like white fire pulsing

from the Lion's heart.

The creature's piercing shrieks ripped through the Lion's mind. Its body burst into a globe of power, filling the chamber with expanding flame that sent the primarch reeling, droplets of the molten sword pattering against his armour.

Silence descended. The black of his armour was covered with a patina of roasted gore and his mind was still throbbing with the death-scream of the nephilla. The primarch picked himself up, retrieved Hope from where it lay on the deck and made his way over to the warp core control panel. Much of it was scorched and broken, and he started to pull away cracked panels to expose the circuitry beneath. He made a quick assessment of the damage and activated the comm.

'Captain Stenius, I will have the warp engines operational in seven minutes. Ready the Geller field and prepare for translation.'

VI

Once the Invincible Reason had translated fully into the warp, protected from the maelstrom of energy by its Geller field, the Dark Angels took the offensive. As had been proposed by Lady Fiana, the nephilla were much weakened, unable to draw on the power of their realm, making them vulnerable to the weapons of the Dark Angels. With the newly-restored Librarians and the Lion leading the purge, every part of the battle-barge was scoured, the remnants of the attackers driven out of hiding to be gunned down. For two days the scourging continued, passageways and gun decks, engine rooms and mess halls, dormitories and drill ranges resounding to the roar of bolters and the vengeful battle cries of the First Legion.

Nearly three hundred Dark Angels had fallen during the fighting, many of them within the first hours of the assault. More than twice that number of Legion serfs and crew had also been slain. The apothecarion was filled with those legionaries who had survived, some of them with hideous, grotesque wounds that festered with unnatural decay or continued to blister and bleed despite the best efforts of the Apothecaries.

Amongst those being treated was Fiana, who had survived the backlash of her third eye, but only barely. She looked to be a wizened, aged crone as she lay in her bunk, her body otherwise undamaged but her mind dislocated by the psychic assault suffered at the whim of the nephilla. Despite this, she and her fellow Navigators did all they could to assist the legionaries. Cut off from the warp by the Geller field, the nephilla's presence was easily discernable by their othersight, and they guided the Dark Angels kill squads unerringly to their targets, no matter how dark and isolated their hiding places. On top of this, the Navigators had to guide the Invincible Reason to Perditus, pressed to find the utmost speed by the urging of the Dark Angels' primarch.

It was eight more days of travel before the Navigators announced that they were in the vicinity of Perditus. Lady Fiana had recovered a little more from her ordeal, and was able to take her place in the rota of Navigators steering the ship. On reaching their destination, she requested an audience with the Lion before she would allow the Invincible Reason to translate back to real space. As before,

the Lion met with her in his throne chamber, attended to by Stenius and Corswain. Fiana had noticed the seneschal check on her condition several times when she had been in the apothecarion, but she had not had the opportunity to discuss what they had encountered. Now was not the time, the Lion was clearly impatient with the delay in translation.

‘There is something amiss, lauded primarch,’ Fiana explained when the primarch demanded to know the cause of her hesitation. She was forced to lean heavily on a cane that one of the Techmarines had constructed for her from a length of ribbed piping, its finial fashioned from a piece of jet-black stone, the ferrule made from a carefully cut section of the material used in the joints of power armour. Her voice had become a wheezing whisper, her words punctuated by heavy gasps. ‘By all calculation and observation, we have reached Perditus, yet for the last three hours we have been unable to sight any warp beacon to confirm this categorically.’

‘The storms?’ suggested Corswain.

‘On the contrary, the warp is incredibly placid in this locale, disturbingly so. There is almost no movement whatsoever, as if the currents have been flattened, stretched into non-existence. It is this dampening effect that I believe obstructs the beacon signals.’

‘It is no mystery,’ said the Lion, his expression easing into a less agitated state. ‘We observed the same when we first came here. This pooling phenomenon is, I was led to believe by the Mechanicum, a side effect of the work they are performing at Perditus. It confirms that we have arrived. Make arrangements for translation as soon as possible, Captain Stenius.’

‘There is something in the warp causing this oddity, lauded primarch,’ insisted Fiana, taking a laboured step towards the primarch. ‘I and the others can feel its presence, sense the pressure it is placing on the warp. The stability here is hiding a far more turbulent undercurrent.’

‘Your observations have been noted, Lady Fiana,’ said the primarch. He stood up, ending the conversation. ‘Please continue to make your reports on the matter to Captain Stenius.’

Fiana railed against this casual dismissal, unable to shake the disquiet she had felt at this sinister discovery, but knew better than to debate the matter with the primarch. He was already turning his attention to Corswain. She dipped her head in acquiescence, understanding that the mystery would have to be solved another day.

Several Dark Angels ships had already made transition to the Perditus system when the Invincible Reason broke through into real space and established contact, though nearly a dozen vessels were still in transit in the warp. Fleet movements had never been easy through the warp, and the storms had exacerbated the problem considerably. It was one of the main reasons the Dark Angels had been unable to force a decisive encounter with the Night Lords in Thramas; by the time sufficient vessels arrived in a system to confront the enemy the elusive Night Lords had time to escape direct conflict.

The Lion weighed up his options: to wait for more of his flotilla to arrive or to press on towards the Mechanicum station on Perditus Ultima. Surmising that the Iron Hands and the Death Guard would both be aware of their arrival, the primarch saw no cause for delay and directed the five ships present in his fleet to advance in-system at full speed.

Passing the uninhabitable gas giants at the edge of the system, the Dark Angels picked up sensor readings of two fleets engaged in a protracted manoeuvre for position around Perditus Ultima, the closest planet to the star, on the very edge of the habitable zone. Ident-codes and intrafleet signals marked out the vessels as Iron Hands and Death Guard ships, each flotilla numbering no more than half a dozen ships; even combined they would be no match for the might of the Dark Angels that would be arriving. Despite hails, communications could not be established with either fleet, or the ground station on Ultima.

Crossing the orbit of Perditus Secundus, just five days from their destination, the warriors of the First Legion were in range to detect forces deployed onto the surface of Perditus Ultima. Comm-intercepts indicated that a stalemate persisted there as well as in space. The ships of both the Iron Hands and Death Guard were conducting an extra-orbital ballet, each trying to gain position over the world to support their troops on an offensive action, but neither was able to gain the upper hand without risking a decisive, and potentially devastating, space-borne engagement; thus the two sides were locked together at arm's length,

neither prepared to wager possible defeat against a push for victory.

Summoning a council of his captains, the Lion determined a course of action for the Dark Angels.

‘We will position our fleet directly between the Iron Hands and Death Guard, and announce that all hostilities are to cease,’ he told the assembly of officers gathered in his throne room aboard the Invincible Reason. ‘If neither side is willing to risk an engagement with each other, for certain they will not be keen to take on a fresh foe.’

‘A risky proposition, my liege,’ said Captain Masurbael, commanding the frigate Intervention. ‘What is to be gained by placing ourselves in harm’s way? Our arrival and numbers will be known to both sides already, there is no reason to expose ourselves to the danger of direct attack.’

‘Purpose and threat,’ replied the Lion, smiling coldly. ‘We are to make our intent and determination crystal clear from the outset, lest our adversaries think we issue idle demands. Perditus is under the aegis of the Dark Angels and the sooner we establish the fact, the swifter we will conclude our business here and return to the battle with the Night Lords.’

‘What of the Death Guard, my liege?’ asked Corswain. ‘Should we not simply attack, with the aid of the Iron Hands? They are known to have declared with Horus from the earliest days of the rebellion.’

‘Until we can establish the loyalty of both factions here, and that of the Mechanicum as well, we should not suppose any aid from either side. The Iron Hands have been leaderless since Manus was slain at Isstvan. Who can say what their current agenda is or where their true loyalties lie? Similarly, it has been reported that those Legions that sided with Horus did not do so wholly. Whole companies and fleets have been spread far across the galaxy, and with the warp storms isolating many sectors we must not hastily pre-judge any situation, little brother. It may be the case that in Perditus, it is the Death Guard who are loyal and the Iron Hands who have turned from the Emperor’s cause.’

Corswain absorbed his primarch’s wisdom with a nod, while Captain Stenius took up the conversation.

‘Is it your intent that we also gain position to place troops on Perditus Ultima, my liege?’ said Stenius. ‘Are we to break through the Iron Hands and Death Guard cordons for low orbit?’

‘That is exactly my intent, Captain Stenius,’ replied the Lion. ‘The Invincible Reason will spearhead the thrust to Perditus Ultima, passing between the lead elements of the two enemy fleets. We shall broadcast warnings that any hostile action will be met immediately and decisively with overwhelming force. I will issue fleet instructions when we have concluded here. Are there any more questions?’

The tone of the Lion indicated that he did not expect any further debate and the assembled captains lowered to their knees to accept their primarch’s command. When the others were dismissed Corswain loitered in the audience chamber, wishing to speak with his lord in private. The Lion waved for him to speak his mind.

‘It is possible that what you say is true, my liege, but the likelihood of the situation is that the Iron Hands are loyal to Terra and the Death Guard are sworn to Horus,’ said the seneschal. ‘We should arrange our advance to favour defence against attack from the Death Guard.’

‘As you say, little brother,’ said the Lion. ‘Yet do not be so sure in the loyalties of the Iron Hands. We are living in complex times, Cor, and there is no easy division between those who fight on our side and those who fight against us. Antagonism towards Horus and his Legions no longer guarantees fealty to the Emperor. There are other powers exercising their right to dominion.’

‘I don’t understand, my liege,’ confessed Corswain. ‘Who else would one swear loyalty to, other than Horus or the Emperor?’

‘Whom do you serve?’ the Lion asked in reply to the question.

‘Terra, my liege, and the cause of the Emperor,’ Corswain replied immediately, drawing himself up straight as if accused.

‘What of your oaths to me, little brother?’ The Lion’s voice was quiet, contemplative. ‘Are you not loyal to the Dark Angels?’

‘Of course, my liege!’ Corswain was taken aback by the suggestion that he might think otherwise.

‘And so there are other forces whose foremost concern is their primarch and Legion, and for some perhaps not even that,’ the Lion explained. ‘If I told you we would abandon any pretence of defending Terra, what would you say?’

‘Please do not joke about such things,’ said Corswain, shaking his head. ‘We cannot allow Horus to prevail in this war.’

‘Who mentioned Horus?’ said the primarch. He closed his eyes and rubbed his brow for a few moments and then looked at Corswain, gauging his mettle. ‘It is not for you to concern yourself, little brother. Prepare the task force for the attack, and let wider burdens sit upon my shoulders alone.’

From his vantage point behind the armoured windows that pierced the central tower of Magellix station, Captain Lasko Midoa had an uninterrupted view of the whole Mechanicum complex. His attention was directed to the south and east, towards outposts Seven, Eight and Nine, currently occupied by his Death Guard adversaries. Behind the low octagonal structures spread the mirrored screens that ran the circumference of the entire facility, creating a micro-climate of thermal updrafts that assisted in keeping down the temperature at Magellix, making it inhabitable if not tolerable. Beyond were the upthrusts of Perditus Ultima’s mountains, their bases hidden behind a blanket of dense greenish fog a thousand kilometres across, their summits many kilometres above the plain glistening from golden refractive materials that coated the rock.

The ever-present mist layer distorted the distances, so that although the outer stretches of the facility were several kilometres away, their bulk was magnified to make them seem almost within bolter range. Heat shimmer from the mirror wall compounded the problem. It did not help the captain’s sense of perspective to know that his foes were inside the stubby keeps, ready and able to launch an attack at any moment.

With Midoa stood Captain Casalir Lorramech, commander of the Ninety-Eighth Company. The two Iron Hands officers had their helms removed, making the most of the processed atmosphere inside Magellix; for the bulk of the thirty-eight days since they had arrived on Perditus Ultima they had been in full battle

gear. The pair were almost identical, with close-cropped silvery hair, broad faces and leathery skin. Only two features separated them. Lorramech had natural blue eyes while Midoa had silver-lensed inserts. Midoa also had a tracheal respirator replacing his lower jaw and throat, which hissed rhythmically with his breathing. When he spoke, his voice issued from a small speaker-comm unit set into the bone of his right cheek. The speech device transmitted Midoa's words in a sing-song cadence that was quite at odds with his mechanical appearance.

'And you are sure that they are heading directly for orbit?' Midoa asked, responding to Lorramech's report that the Dark Angels had continued towards Ultima at full speed.

'Yes, Iron Father,' said Lorramech, whose voice was deep and gravelly, each word uttered with gritted teeth and barely moving lips. Midoa was incapable of smiling at the use of the ancient honorific, but it was a source of pride that his fellow captains had chosen to raise him up to command of this expedition. 'Course and speed are consistent with an orbital heading. They will be in high orbit in less than three hours.'

'But they still have not breached the comm-dampening shell?'

'We have not yet been able to directly communicate with the Dark Angels.'

'And what of them?' said Midoa, pointing out through the window at the Death Guard positions. 'What are they doing?'

'The enemy seem intent on an intercept course,' replied Lorramech. 'With your permission, I will signal the fleet to counter-manoeuvre. We will engage the Death Guard ships and provide a screen for the arriving Dark Angels. They have two battle-barges amongst their flotilla, which would be valuable orbital support.'

'You have my permission,' said Midoa. 'We have an unforeseen and fortuitous opportunity, Casalir. Have all but one in ten squads drawn down from their patrols and garrisons and mustered in the main vehicle pool. It is my intent to launch an attack.'

'It will be as you say, Iron Father,' said Lorramech. 'With the aid of the Dark

Angels, we will drive the Death Guard from Perditus and secure the Tuchulcha engine.'

It took most of the next hour for Midoa to gather together the forces he required for the counter-offensive. Squads and companies were drawn in from their positions across Magellix and the surrounding rocky plateau, moving in secret along underground highways that had been dug beneath the surface of Perditus Ultima long before the Emperor's compliance fleet had arrived.

The Iron Hands sallied forth from the main gateway of Tower Two, Predator battle tanks and Land Raider armoured carriers spearheading the thrust, while the force's Rhinos and the larger Mastodon transports followed behind the more heavily armed screen.

Almost immediately, defensive fire from Tower Eight punched through the gloom of Perditus's atmosphere: stabs of laser and the flare of heavy cannon fire. The vanguard of the column spread out into covering positions, the tanks taking up stations behind enormous scattered boulders, jagged escarpments and the shallow ferrocrete blocks that housed the station's atmosphere filtration fans. Soon the return fire of the Iron Hands was lancing into the slab walls of the outer towers, ripping trails through ferrocrete and cracking massive glassite observation decks.

Behind the storm of fire, the next wave charged onwards in their Rhinos, hatches and doors battened down as the transports roared across the undulating rocky ground at full speed. Midoa was in the lead vehicle, keen to set an example for his warriors to follow. The slower, bulkier Mastodons, each quadruple-tracked and towering above the Land Raiders, powered through the dust and fog as quickly as they could, their heavy tracks carving fresh ruts in the baked surface of Perditus Ultima.

Before they reached Tower Eight, the Iron Hands came into range of the guns at Tower Nine. Midoa had known this and speed was the best defence against the strengthening crossfire. There were three hundred metres of ground to cover where both towers could fire at full intensity, before the bulk of Tower Eight obscured the arcs of fire of its neighbours.

Being first across the killing zone had its advantages. The gunners were unable

to adjust their aim quickly enough to target Midoa's Rhino, but ten metres behind him Sergeant Haultiz's transport was struck full-on by a lascannon beam. Engine boiling smoke, the breached Rhino skidded to a halt, the black-and-silver armoured warriors within spilling out onto the dusty rock while more transports poured past them. Midoa's orders had been simple: stop for nothing. The Iron Hands in the other transports barrelled past their stranded brethren, knowing that the surest way to protect their fellow legionaries was to mount an assault on the gun positions manned by the Death Guard.

The fifteen seconds it took to dash through the blazing kill zone was the longest fifteen seconds Midoa had felt in his life. He was crouched in the rear compartment with his command squad, all of them tensed and ready to extract if a hit forced them to bail from their transport even while it was moving. Over the comm, Midoa learnt of a second Rhino being hit, and then a third, but by the time the lead transports were within a hundred metres of Tower Eight's secondary gate, seven of the Rhinos and three Land Raiders had pierced the cordon of fire. A further eight Mastodons followed behind, each carrying forty Iron Hands warriors, their power fields soaking up autocannon shells and lascannon blasts with actinic flashes of energy.

As the Rhinos slewed to a halt beneath the guns of Tower Eight, Captain Tadurig and his squad disembarked swiftly, approaching the wall of the tower ahead. With them they had brought a phase field generator; a device Midoa had overseen the creation of since arriving, with the aid of his Mechanicum allies. It took only a few seconds for the Iron Hands legionaries to assemble the four-legged platform and install the phase field generator, the bulk of the machine taken up with an energy distillation dish at the centre of which were thousands of wire coils to transmit the phase field into place.

Joining his warriors, Midoa made a last few adjustments to the machine which he had painstakingly assembled and rigged from old tunnel-delvers and other pieces of warp-tech machinery left over by Perditus's previous inhabitants. They had used the channelled power of the warp as freely as the Imperium employed plasma and electricity, much to the amazement of Midoa.

With a thrum of magnetic actuators sliding into position, Midoa pulled the activation lever and stepped back. He had not yet had time to test the device – he had been planning on using it during a subterranean assault on Tower Nine in a

few days' time – but he knew that in theory it would work. Muttering an old Medusan proverb, he waited for the power capacitors to reach full potential and then switched on the conductor coils.

The phase field sprang into life, looking like a cone of pearlescent energy. Everything within the field disappeared, including a circle of the Tower Eight wall some three metres in diameter. After a few seconds, Midoa signalled for the machine to be shut down and with his squad on his heels, stepped through the newly-made gap.

Inside, the phase field had displaced a swathe of the room within the tower, along with another interior wall and the ceiling twenty metres further on, exposing the floor above and a basement level below. Neatly severed cables sparked while sliced atmosphere recycling pipes dribbled contaminant-laden steam into the air. Their suit lamps piercing the darkness inside the tower, the Iron Hands pushed on with weapons ready.

‘What do you mean, Tower Eight has been breached?’ Calas Typhon, First Captain of the Death Guard Legion, Commander of the Grave Wardens, was in a foul mood already, and the news of the Iron Hands’ success did not improve his humour.

‘A phase field generator, commander,’ replied his second, Captain Vioss, who was forced to take a step back as his senior turned; Typhon and his subordinate’s massive suits of Terminator armour almost filled the command blister on the top of Tower Seven. Vioss’s voice was a low, slurred hiss, his speech impaired by an ugly suppurating wound in the right side of his jaw. ‘Sarrin had too much focus on the gateways and the breach through the wall has him outflanked.’

‘Why now?’ demanded Typhon, his top-knot of dark hair flicking like a horse’s tail as he twitched his head in annoyance. ‘Have they received some signal from the Dark Angels?’

‘Impossible, commander,’ said Vioss. ‘The Terminus Est’s dearthfield is still functioning, no communication is able to pass from surface to outer orbit.’

‘And the Dark Angels continue on their course directly towards Perditus Ultima?’

Vioss nodded, his sallow face deeply creased by a scowl.

‘They will have orbit in less than two hours, commander.’

‘Then we have less than two hours to punish our idiot foe for his foolhardiness. He should have waited until orbital supremacy was guaranteed. Signal the fleet and tell them to stave off engagement as long as possible. That should afford us an extra hour at least while the Dark Angels are forced to consider their options.’

‘You plan to bring forward the next attack, commander?’

‘Yes, right now, may the Father take your eyes!’ Typhon crashed his fist into Vioss’s shoulder, sending him reeling into the wall of the glassite-domed cupola. Motes of rust drifted in the air from the impact, shed from the corroded edges of Vioss’s armour. ‘We must free Tuchulcha while we have the chance. A lot depends on our success here. Tell Ghrusul to assault from Tower Nine, we will trap our enemy between us and drive onwards to the central facility.’

‘For the Father,’ said Vioss, bowing his head. ‘The Grave Wardens will not fail.’

The subterranean passageway was five metres high and twice as broad, lit by thin, dust-covered yellow strips in the floor and ceiling. The rails of an ancient locomotive system rusted at the centre of the tunnel and raised platforms ran along the walls to either side. Normally it was a gloomy place, but the arrival of the Iron Hands and Death Guard had turned it into a place of pyrotechnic brilliance.

Bolter fire echoed along the five-hundred-metre length of the interchange, the shells expelled by the exchange hurtling in both directions in a criss-cross of bright flares. Now and then the miniature blue star of a plasma shot shrieked across the gap or the red flare of a missile trail illuminated the murkiness. Blossoms of frag missile detonations appeared amongst the line of twenty Death Guard Terminators advancing on Tower Eight.

At their head, Commander Typhon roared his men onwards. Like his warriors, he was protected by the massive bulk of his modified cataphractii armour, painted white in the colours of the Death Guard. Rounded plates that heaped up higher than the top of his knightly helm protected his shoulders, his chest and

gut encased in segmented slabs of ceramite, arms and legs sheathed in thick greaves and vambraces. Adamantium mail hung in sheets across the joints of his armour. The left arm of his suit was incorporated into the bulk of a reaper autocannon, its twin barrels spitting a rapid-fire hail of shells towards the Iron Hands, chewing through the ammunition belt like a starving dog devouring a strip of sinew. In his right Typhon held a manreaper, a wickedly-bladed power scythe, symbol of his rank, and a smaller copy of the weapon wielded by his primarch, Mortarion. The glow of its power field shone a sickly yellow light on the white Terminators around him.

Heavy support Terminators backed up the twenty warriors of the spearhead, their cyclone launchers sending showers of missiles over the heads of their companions, detonations cracking the plastite sheathing of the tunnel walls and tossing silver-and-black armoured legionaries into the air. Combi-bolters spat rapid-fire rounds as the Grave Wardens continued to close, marching unharmed into the teeth of the enemies' fire.

The Iron Hands fell back, unable to match the Grave Wardens with their heavier armour and weaponry, but progress was slow. Ghrusul had reported entering Tower Eight twenty minutes earlier, yet Typhon was still two interchanges from breaching the tower from below. He was expecting word from Vioss at any moment, telling him that the Dark Angels were in orbit, but until then he was determined to press on with the attack.

The leading squads of the Grave Wardens were within fifty metres of the end of the interchange held by the Iron Hands when Typhon's helm crackled with the signal of an incoming comm-link. Rather than the sibilant whisper of Vioss, he heard a deep voice filled with authority that caused him to involuntarily stop in his tracks. Around him, the rest of the Death Guard were similarly immobilised and the fire from the Iron Hands died away within seconds.

'The world of Perditus Ultima is under the protection of Lion El'Jonson of the First Legion,' boomed the message. 'You are to immediately cease all warring and quit this planet. Any resistance will be met with ultimate force and there will be no prisoners taken. Failure to comply with my demands will result in your immediate destruction.'

As if breaking from a trance, Typhon staggered forwards a step, almost losing

his footing. Only in the presence of Mortarion had he ever experienced anything like the reaction he had just felt and he quickly realised that it was not just the Dark Angels that had arrived: their primarch was with them. He could sense the unease of his warriors as they came to the same conclusion, and the advance that had shuffled to a halt was slowly turning into a withdrawal. Ahead, the Iron Hands were backing away from their positions too, cowed by the same tone of authority that had pierced the minds of the Death Guard.

Typhon gritted his teeth and shook his head to rid himself of the fugue that had descended on him following the Lion's proclamation. He knew that there was something else at work here, not just the innate command of a primarch. Typhon opened up his mind to the warp, sensing the waves of energy that were part of, yet separated from, everything in the material universe. When he had been a member of the Librarius his powers had been considerable. Mortarion's hatred of warpcraft had finished Typhon's exploration of his other nature when the Dusk Raiders became Death Guard, and so he had committed himself to becoming First Captain. Now, with the encouragement of darker sponsors, Typhon had once again embraced the warp-born side of his powers, learning far more about the universe and its mysterious ways than he had ever thought possible.

It was this that had first brought him in contact with the Father, and it was his warp-self that now detected the gentle interplay of energies being directed at the surface of Perditus Ultima. It seemed the Lion was no longer impressed by the Council of Nikaea's decision either and had allowed his Librarians to reclaim their birthright.

With this knowledge, Typhon was able to extend a little of his will, seeking a means to block the resolve-weakening presence of the Dark Angels Librarians. Despite his personal prowess, he was up against several trained minds, and so he turned to that shadowy force that had accompanied him these past years. He asked the Father for help, and help was granted.

With a surge of psychic energy buzzing through him, its touch like the tread of a thousand tiny insects in his mind, Typhon cast a pall of shadow over his Grave Wardens, shielding them from the assault of the Dark Angels psykers. Almost immediately they ceased their withdrawal and turned to him, expecting orders.

'Fools!' he rasped, pointing his manreaper at the retreating Iron Hands. 'Now is

not the time to step back, now is the time to attack! Slay them all.'

In a darkened chamber in the bowels of the Invincible Reason, the Lion stood between four of his Librarians, listening to their murmuring voices. All of the psykers had donned their old ceremonial robes of blue, their faces hidden by the shadows of the cowls pulled over their heads. It was better that this was kept from the sight of the ordinary battle-brethren. Confusion and hearsay could breed superstition faster than any explanation could thwart it.

Corswain stood to one side, his agitation audible as he shifted his weight from one foot to the other and back again, his armour creaking with each movement. The Lion ignored his seneschal's discomfort. This way was better, cleaner. If the Death Guard and Iron Hands could be forced to parley without fighting, it would be in the best interests of the Dark Angels.

The Lion sensed Corswain straighten and he turned his gaze upon the seneschal.

'It's not working, my liege,' said Corswain, sounding relieved by the fact.

'Sensors show that the Iron Hands are retreating from a renewed Death Guard assault. They are being pushed back into the main facility.'

'I warned them,' snarled the Lion. 'None will doubt my authority.'

'Shall I signal Captain Stenius, my liege?'

'Yes. If the Death Guard do not comply with my wishes, Magellix station will be obliterated. Tell Stenius to launch the torpedo.'

VII

Slashing the yellow-gleaming blade of his manreaper across the chest of an Iron Hands sergeant, Typhon shouldered his way through the doorway leading out onto the courtyard in front of Tower Eight. He was swathed by the shadow of the eight great Mastodons, their gun sponsons silenced and their canopied driver's cabins emptied by the boarding actions of his Grave Wardens, who were now pressing on towards Tower Three. From there the main gate of Magellix would be within reach.

'Commander, we have received a signal from the fleet.' Vioss's tone was urgent.

'Why have they not yet attacked the Dark Angels?' snapped Typhon as he lumbered up the gentle slope of the courtyard not far behind the line of his advancing warriors.

'The Dark Angels have positioned themselves between our ships and the enemy. Any attack against them will allow the Iron Hands to move around the flank of the flotilla. We have more urgent concerns, commander. The Lion's battle-barge has launched a torpedo towards Magellix.'

'A bluff,' Typhon replied instantly. 'The Lion will not destroy Magellix any sooner than I or my counterpart in the Iron Hands. The contents of that facility are too precious to risk destruction. Continue the attack.'

'Are you sure, commander? We have detected a cyclotronic warhead. It will obliterate everything at Magellix and a hundred kilometres around. It will destroy Tuchulcha as well as us. The fleet also reports detection of seven more Dark Angels vessels heading in-system.'

Typhon paused, a thought occurring to him. He voiced his doubt to Vioss.

'What if the Lion does not desire Tuchulcha, but merely wants to prevent us from gaining possession?'

'Commander, we cannot risk guessing the Lion's intent. We must pull back. We can achieve nothing if we are annihilated.'

Growling to himself, Typhon activated the company-wide comm-stream. He snapped out a series of commands, pulling back his warriors from their final assault on the main gate. Instead, he established them in positions overlooking the central tower of Magellix and guarding the tunnel network beneath. When he was finished issuing orders, he switched his comm-unit to a general broadcast.

‘Happy now, Lion of the First?’ he snarled. ‘I will respect any ceasefire observed by the enemy. Know now that you intrude upon the business of the Death Guard Legion, and it will go poorly for you.’

Surprising Typhon – he had expected no reply to his invective – the comm crackled with a return signal. It was the same resonant voice as before – the Dark Angels primarch. It was too late to reconsider his scornful words, and his disdain would not allow him to offer any apology for them even if the Lion demanded it.

‘Look to the western skies.’

Typhon turned his gaze as instructed. He saw a flash of light in the upper atmosphere, and what appeared to be a suddenly-spreading electrical storm set the jade clouds roiling. Seconds ticked past before the crack of the torpedo’s detonation reached the commander’s audio pick-ups.

‘You are to pull back all forces from Magellix station. I will grant you safe passage back to your vessels. You, Captain Typhon, will remain at Magellix with a bodyguard of no more than one hundred warriors to attend a parley under my aegis. The rest of your force will remove themselves to two hundred thousand kilometres from orbit. Failure to comply will result in your destruction. The same conditions have been transmitted to Captain Midoa of the Iron Hands.’

The link cut before Typhon could respond, not that he had anything to say in the face of such a bald ultimatum. He watched the dark clouds of super-heated gases expanding like a blue stain across the western sky and realised that the Lion did not make empty threats. For the moment, his mission was compromised, but that did not mean he had to abandon his objective entirely; he had means unknown to the Dark Angels.

‘Vioss, one hundred of the Grave Wardens to form an honour guard. All other forces are to return to orbit. Have the remaining Grave Wardens embark on

Terminus Est and I want you to take personal charge of the dearthfield. We shall allow the Lion to believe he is master of Perditus for the time being.’

‘I understand, commander. The Grave Wardens will re-arm and repair in preparation for the next offensive. We will not suffer defeat here.’

The fog covering the inner courtyard of Magellix station was dispersed by the plasma and steam of a descending Stormbird. The eagle-like craft put down, its landing struts taking the weight as the dust settled around it and the mists began to seep back between the perimeter towers.

There were already a thousand Dark Angels arranged by company between the arriving ship and the main gate of Magellix. To one side of the force waited the Death Guard while the Iron Hands were guarded behind a cordon on the opposite side of the open space. Only Typhon and Midoa had been permitted to approach the Lion’s landing craft, two armoured giants amongst a gaggle of a dozen Mechanicum acolytes dressed in red robes, the heads of all but two encased within breathing domes; those other two had rebreather attachments inserted into their faces and chests and required no further assistance in the thick Perditus atmosphere.

The Lion stepped out on the descending ramp of the Stormbird with Corswain to his right and the recently-arrived Captain Tragan to his left. Behind came a number of banner bearers and other attendants carrying such articles of Caliban as usually accompanied the primarch; plaques, goblets, crowns, shields and other items associated with the Lion’s multitude of ranks and duties. Behind them came the cabal of Librarians, now numbering six from the fleet mustering in orbit, their blue robes flapping in the slow but strong breeze – the higher-pressure air of Perditus turned even a sluggish gust into a wind that could bowl over a normal man. As one the Dark Angels silently lifted bolters, heavy weapons or swords in salute to their commander-in-chief.

The Lion needed no helm, though the air was acrid in his throat and made his lungs feel stretched by its weight. He wanted to impress upon all present that he was a primarch, with the force of an entire Legion to command, and not just any Legion; the Dark Angels, the First Legion. His standard bearers took up station on either side of the route to the main gate, the Lion’s many titles shouted through their external address systems.

The Lion's armour had been polished to a gleam, the black enamel as glossy as midnight oil alloyed with diamond, the gold shining like the heart of a star. A scarlet cloak draped from his shoulders, its train five metres long, kept aloft by the artifices of Caliban; ten suspensor-floating devices wrought in the shape of short blades etched with the names of the Knightly Orders of his homeworld. On his left hip the Lion wore his greatsword, Adamant, its ruby-encrusted pommels and gold-chased hilt and crosspiece glittering as brightly as his armour. Below the right side of his breastplate the Lion's belt was hung with six cylinders each the size of a man's forearm, bound with platinum, the dull red leather cases containing the Proclamations of Caliban; the first laws decreed by the Lion after his ascendancy to command of the Dark Angels, swearing Caliban to the service of the Emperor for eternity.

Sweeping down the ramp with his entourage keeping step as best they could, the Lion advanced on the waiting Mechanicum dignitaries. They introduced themselves in ascending order of rank, so that the Lion instantly dismissed the first eleven shrivelled, half-machine men and women and focused all of his considerably intimidating attention on the last: High Magos Khir Doth Iaxis, Overseer of Magellix and Custodian of Tuchulcha, as his heralds attested.

Iaxis was a tiny man, perhaps no more than a metre tall, taken to be a child attendant by the Lion until the magos had pulled back his hood to reveal a near-conical head and ageing, pinched face. The back of the magos's skull was extended by a series of segmented plates that came to a rounded point and moved strangely of their own accord, contracting and expanding slightly, perhaps as mood or effort occupied the Mechanicum priest. Thin bony fingers jutting from veined hands rubbed and entwined together, almost hidden in the cuffs of Iaxis's heavy sleeves, and his slight shoulders were no wider than the Lion's greave. If the diminutive tech-priest felt at all threatened by the giant looming above him – and the Lion could have easily crushed him with his foot like a titan of myth – the magos did not show any hesitation. His thin, reedy voice was almost muted by the bubble of the breather dome encompassing his small head, but the words were spoken with authority and precision.

'We are pleased to welcome you again to Perditus Ultima, Lion of Caliban,' said Iaxis, nodding his head inside the breather dome. 'Please follow me.'

The Lion felt a moment of impatience, expecting to be forced to check his stride

in the company of the minuscule Iaxis, but his fears were misplaced. As the magos's entourage dispersed, they revealed a set of mechanical legs, which Iaxis ascended quickly by means of a narrow ladder at their rear. Placing his own legs inside the struts of the machine's pelvic arrangement, his robe rucking up briefly to reveal pale, wiry legs interlaced with reinforcing struts, Iaxis settled into the ambulator. With a hiss of actuators, the legs straightened, bringing Iaxis almost to the height of the Lion's shoulder. In the presence of his minions, Iaxis would have been above them all, but the primarch still stood taller than the mechanically-bolstered magos.

As they walked to the main gate the Lion became aware of a silver-and-black shadow hovering close to Corswain's shoulder: Captain Midoa. Glancing to his left, the Lion saw Typhon walking shoulder-to-shoulder with Tragan. The Lion ignored the other captains until they were all inside the entrance chamber behind the main gate. Once inside, the Lion turned and addressed his 'guests'.

'Captain Typhon, Captain Midoa...' The Lion was not sure what he was going to say to them. They were an inconvenience at the moment, but as he had explained to Corswain aboard the *Invincible Reason*, it did not suit to make hasty or arbitrary judgements about the loyalty and agenda of others. He instead addressed Iaxis. 'Magos, please convey the two captains to a suitable part of the facility where they may await my return. Little brothers, you will watch them for me. Captains, I remind you that all of Magellix is under the protection of my aegis. Do not think for a moment to dishonour me.'

With that matter perfunctorily dealt with, the Lion turned his back on the two captains and continued across the gate hall. The chamber sloped downwards slightly, the far end broken by three archways, each leading to a set of moving steps that descended further into the bowels of Magellix.

'The door on the right, primarch,' prompted Iaxis. 'Let me show you what all of this fuss is about.'

Most of the Mechanicum facility had not existed the last time the Lion had been on *Perditus Ultima*, but the tunnels beneath were familiar to the primarch. Though they were now sheathed in plasteel struts and plastite board, the meandering passageways were etched into the Lion's memories, so that once they disembarked from the fourth internal conveyor, some half a kilometre

below the surface, he was able to find the path unerringly towards the cavernous chamber where the machine was kept.

The last time he had walked these tunnels, frenzied machine-cultists had been dying by his hand. The people of Perditus had been enslaved to the machine and died in droves to the guns of the Dark Angels and the newly-renamed Death Guard. The Lion's first encounter with Mortarion, a tense affair that had ended with neither primarch liking the other, had taken place only three months earlier, and the two Legions had been fighting side-by-side as a display of unity for the Emperor. The Perditians had howled praise to their inanimate overlord even as they perished. Now the tunnels rang only with the boots of the primarch and the thud of Iaxis's walking apparatus.

Coming to the central cavern, the Lion found further passage barred by an immense doorway, emblazoned with the symbol of the Mechanicum. Iaxis stalked forwards on his artificial legs and pushed a hand towards a reader-plate set into the metal beside the portal. The Lion's sharp eyes glimpsed a design on the wrist of the tech-priest as he extended his arm; a faint outline almost indiscernible from the rest of the overlying skin. The primarch knew it for what it was immediately: an electoo, a hidden mark that could be realised into being by a pulse of bio-electricity. The Mechanicum made wide use of them – as did some of the more secretive orders on Caliban and many other societies throughout the Imperium – but the Lion had never before seen the design concealed on Iaxis's arm. It was of a stylised dragon, wings furled, coiled tightly about itself so that its neck merged with its body and its head lay alongside its tail.

'Your electoo, what is its significance?' the Lion asked as door locks rumbled into the walls and a heavy clanging sounded from within the door itself. 'I thought myself learned in the customs of the Mechanicum, but it is a device I do not know.'

Iaxis inhaled sharply and glared at his wrist as if in accusation. His expression mellowed after a moment, becoming one of embarrassment rather than shock as he regarded the primarch with yellowing eyes.

'A childish totem, Lion, nothing more,' said Iaxis. He paused and a moment later the dragon appeared prominently on his withered flesh, glowing a deep red. 'The

Order of the Dragon, something of a defunct sect now, I am pleased to say. It is remarkable that you could see that pigmentation beneath my skin, I had quite forgotten it.'

The door opened with a hiss of venting gases, swinging inwards to reveal the cavern etched into the Lion's memories. Much had changed, but it was unmistakably the same place. The vaulted ceiling, nearly seventy metres high and banded with rock strata of many colours, was pierced now by rings bearing heavy chains from which hung guttering gaslights. The walls, nearly two hundred metres apart at their widest, were obscured behind panels of Mechanicum machinery and devices, so that the bare stone was hidden behind banks of dials and levers, flashing lights and coils of cabling and pipelines.

Gantries and walkways, steps and ladders were arranged around the device itself, with sensor probes, monitoring dishes and scaffolding further enmeshing the centre of the warp device. The thing itself was still there; the sentience, or at least semi-sentience that had enslaved a whole star system hanging in mid-air like a world in the firmament. It was a perfect sphere of marbled black and dark grey, with flecks of gold that moved slowly across its surface. Ten point six-seven metres in diameter – the Lion remembered the Mechanicum's first measurements exactly – it was made of an unknown material, impenetrable to every sensor, drill and device the Mechanicum had brought with them.

The Lion knew that the thing was regarding him with some alien sense. He was not sure how he could tell, nor how the warp device could sense him in return, but the fact remained that he was convinced it saw him this time as much as he had been convinced the first time he had entered this hall. On that occasion several hundred rag-clad Perditians had died in the next few minutes, unwilling or unable to lay down their primitive weapons, forced to defend their demigod to the last breath and drop of blood.

There was something else different, at first unnoticed amongst the rest of the Mechanicum clutter. Two protuberances now extended from the sphere, one at each pole, each only a few centimetres long. The rounded nodules touched against circuit-covered plates stationed above and below the device, which in turn were linked by a dizzying web of wires and cables to the surrounding machines. On a mat in front of the orb lay a small boy, aged perhaps no more than seven or eight Terran years. He lay immobile on his side, eyes unblinking,

as stiff as a corpse, which he might have been were it not for the gentle rise and fall of his chest; the Lion could hear the boy's heart beating ever so slowly, and could smell sweat and urine on the air.

A pipe extended from the boy's back, and another from the base of his skull, joining him with the mechanical array surrounding the warp engine. As soon as the Lion's eyes fell upon the boy, he sat up, moving jerkily like a badly-controlled marionette. The eyes were glassy, the limbs moving stiffly. With a glance at the alien orb, the primarch saw the golden motes were moving more swiftly than before, forming brief patterns in the dark swirl.

'You have returned.' The boy's voice was flat and devoid of emotion, his face featureless. A hand raised and waved erratically.

'It talks now?' said the Lion, the words half-snarled as he turned on Iaxis. The tech-priest shrugged.

'We could not discern anything of its construction or workings, but it seemed likely that it had some means to communicate with the Perditians before we were forced to wipe out their society. It took us nearly thirty years simply to devise this crude interface. We have learnt a lot from Tuchulcha. It is very cooperative, if a little enigmatic and, well, alien.'

'I hear too,' said the boy. 'You seem displeased.'

'You remember me,' said the Lion, before he could stop himself. He glared at Iaxis. 'Why the boy? We fought to rid Perditus of slaves and you have given it another.'

'Oh, that,' said Iaxis with a dismissive wave of the hand. 'It's just a servitor, Lion. We tried all manner of computational, logarithmic and cipher-based languages, but none of them worked. When presented with a servitor, though, it was able to tap into the established neural interface in only a few days.'

'What a coincidence,' said the Lion.

'There is no coincidence. I was designed to assimilate with the human form, Lion. May I call you Lion? I overheard the magos use it. Is that the correct form of address for one such as yourself?'

The primarch wanted to ignore the device's questions, but the boy's voice lingered in his thoughts.

'What are you?' said the Lion, stepping forwards until he was within arm's reach of the puppet-servitor.

'I am Tuchulcha, Lion. I am the everything. I believe the magos and I are friends, though he sometimes grows angry with me. I try to remain patient with his outbursts.'

'I asked what you are, not who you are. Curse you, what am I saying? You are a machine, a sophisticated machine and nothing more.'

'I am everything, Lion. Everywhere. I was once Servant of the Deadly Seas. Now I am the Friend of the Mechanicum.'

'You are dangerous,' said the Lion. 'A war is being waged for possession of you. I should destroy you and save much turmoil and bloodshed.'

'You cannot destroy me, Lion. Not physically, nor do you desire it. All things desire to possess me. The one they call Typhon dreams much about me. The mind of the other, Midoa, is closed to me. It contains too much iron for my liking. You... You are neither open nor closed. You scare me, Lion. It was not until you came that I knew what fear was. Your return scares me, Lion. I do not wish to be destroyed.'

It was hard not to imagine the words being uttered were from the boy, but the Lion forced himself to focus on the glistening orb rather than its animated avatar.

'Taxis, my puppet needs more nutrients.' As Tuchulcha said this, the boy's bladder emptied, sending a watery stream down his leg to puddle on the plasteel floor. 'My apologies, Lion. I have not yet mastered the basic functions of this form. Its pathways were underdeveloped.'

'It is the third servitor we have had to attach,' explained the tech-priest. 'The previous ones aged unnaturally, hence the youth of this specimen. We are hoping it will survive for a few years longer than the previous interfaces.'

‘You seem to know a lot about what is happening on the surface,’ said the Lion, suppressing the distaste he felt at Iaxis’s uncaring attitude to the expenditure of human lives, even if they were unthinking servitors.

‘They pass through me, and I come to know them,’ said Tuchulcha. ‘Their minds touch upon mine. Yours does too, but it is far too heavy to carry. How do you cope with such a burden?’

‘My intellect?’ said the Lion.

‘Your guilt.’

The Lion did not answer straight away, not trusting himself to reveal something in front of Iaxis that he would rather remained inside his own thoughts.

‘What use is it?’ he demanded of Iaxis, turning away from the boy-puppet. ‘It was agreed with the Mechanicum that Perditus Ultima and the device were spared only because you thought it might have some purpose we could harness for the Imperium.’

‘And it does, it does!’ Iaxis seemed quite animated at this. ‘Tuchulcha, will you please show the primarch what you are capable of.’

Before the Lion could offer any protest, he felt his mind and body lurch, the sensation somewhere between that of a warp translation and a rapid teleportation. Darkness clouded his vision for an instant, and when his eyes were clear, he found himself no longer in the cavern beneath Perditus Ultima.

They were unmistakably in his throne room aboard the Invincible Reason. Tuchulcha and his avatar, minus most of the monitoring equipment, floated behind the throne, while Iaxis stood where he had been, a couple of metres to the primarch’s right. Sirens were blaring and the voice of Captain Stenius was bellowing over the internal speakers.

‘Battle stations! All crew report to battle stations. Geller field is being raised. Five minutes to full enclosure. Repeat, we have unexpectedly translated to the warp, Geller field is being raised, be prepared for attack.’

The Lion was dumbfounded, unable to comprehend what had happened for

several seconds. He eventually realised that Tuchulcha must have moved the battle-barge into the warp and displaced itself, the primarch and tech-priest onto the vessel an instant later. Part of the Lion was appalled by the dangerous situation and Iaxis's naivete in allowing this to happen; a greater part of him marvelled at the unprecedented power on display.

'Tuchulcha,' the Lion said slowly, thinking it would be wise to be 'friends' with the unpredictable machine, 'where are we now?'

'We are adjoined to the place you call Perditus, Lion.'

The primarch turned to Iaxis, brow furrowed.

'Adjoined? We are in the warp. How is this possible? We were far too close to the world, to the star, for a translation.'

'Tuchulcha does not have to worry about that sort of thing, Lion,' the tech-priest said with a toothless grin. 'It is able to burrow directly from real space to warp space, without any backwash or graviometric displacement.'

'Why have I not learnt of this before?' demanded the Lion.

'Our studies are far from complete,' replied Iaxis. 'At the moment, we are at the whim of Tuchulcha, and as you see it is a little, well, temperamental.'

'Tuchulcha, I wish you to return us and the ship to Perditus Ultima.' The Lion kept his tone calm and friendly, suddenly aware of how precarious his position had become.

'Of course, Lion.' The boy's thin, blood-starved lips twisted into an abhorrent approximation of a smile. 'What do you wish me to do with the rest of your ships?'

VIII

The Lion's audience chamber was quiet, occupied only by the primarch and his seneschal. The Lion was seated in his throne, betraying no sign of his thoughts or mood, as impassive as a statue. Corswain stood at the primarch's right, trying his best to conceal his own misgivings at the emerging situation. As time silently ticked past, he could no longer hold his tongue.

'My liege, I do not question your judgement in this matter, but I must admit to my own ignorance. We have secured Perditus Ultima and possess enough force to destroy the Death Guard outright, yet you invite their commander to a parley? I have an ill feeling about this. And to have the Iron Hands' captain present at the same time seems counter-productive.'

The Lion turned his head and regarded Corswain for a moment, his expression stern.

'You are right not to question my judgement, Cor.' The primarch's lips formed a thin smile, lightening his demeanour, if only a little. 'However, my reason for this meeting is straightforward. Before I decide on our following course of action, I must ascertain for myself the extent to which the knowledge of Perditus's secret has spread. Though he probably does not realise it, I remember that Captain Typhon took part in our original expedition here. He was just a company captain, I recall. That he knows of Tuchulcha's existence is unsurprising, but I sense that his agenda is not as transparent as it would first appear.'

'And Captain Midoa, my liege?'

'His presence here is an oddity, little brother. It might be chance that he intercepted the Death Guard attack, but coincidence does not sit well with me as an explanation. I must know why he came to Perditus, and on whose authority he claims to act. The Iron Hands are leaderless, my brother Ferrus slain at Isstvan, and I thought his Legion rendered inconsequential. It appears that I am wrong, and so I must have answers to questions that nag at me.'

The comm-piece in Corswain's ear chimed and he listened for a moment to the

communique from Captain Tragan.

‘Our guests will be here imminently, my liege,’ Corswain said.

‘Good,’ replied the Lion, directing his gaze back to the double doors. A few seconds later, those doors hissed open, revealing Tragan and a guard of thirty Dark Angels. In their midst were Captains Typhon and Midoa; the first easily seen in his huge suit of Terminator armour, a head taller than the surrounding warriors. At first glance, Typhon’s armour appeared in poor repair, much patched and stained, the white of the Death Guard mottled in places with oil and battle damage. A moment’s further inspection, however, revealed to Corswain that the Terminator suit was poorly maintained only on a cosmetic level; Typhon moved freely, every step accompanied by a wheeze of servos and hiss of fibre bundles. A short blade hung at his belt and in his hands he held his scythe-like manreaper.

Midoa followed behind the Death Guard commander, his black-and-silver armour showing signs of fresh paint and polish. His black cloak was tattered at the edges and a fresh scar was healing on his brow. Corswain had expected someone older, Midoa’s fresh features a counterpoint to the seals and marks of honour that adorned the chestplate and shoulder guards of his suit. Like Typhon, he was still armed, with a power sword at his waist and a twin-barrelled combi-bolter slung on a strap over his shoulder.

‘Thank you, Captain Tragan,’ said the Lion. ‘You may leave us.’

Corswain turned in surprise, but his primarch’s attention was fixed on the two newcomers.

‘My liege?’ Tragan could not stop the question before he spoke it.

‘Please return to your duties, captain,’ said the Lion, keeping his tone affable. ‘I am certain that our guests refused to surrender their weapons on principle only. I would expect no less from officers of the Legiones Astartes. They would not be so foolish as to test me on my own ship.’

With a glance at Typhon, Tragan nodded. The Dark Angels fell in behind their commander as he departed. The Lion gestured for Typhon and Midoa to approach.

‘Am I to be your prisoner?’ snapped Typhon, his voice echoing from the external speakers of his suit. ‘If you are to execute me out of hand, then do so and be done with it.’

‘You will address me properly, commander,’ the Lion replied, showing no anger at the Death Guard’s accusation. ‘I have yet to decide your fate. Do not give me cause for upset.’

Typhon said nothing for a few seconds, subjected to an unblinking stare from the primarch. Under the force of that gaze he eventually nodded and slowly lowered to one knee.

‘Lord Jonson, Primarch of the First,’ said Typhon. ‘Forgive my impertinence.’

‘Perhaps,’ said the Lion. He waved a hand for Typhon to stand. ‘What is your purpose in coming to Perditus, commander?’

‘I’m sure you already know it, Lord Jonson,’ said Typhon.

‘And still I wish it heard in your own words.’

‘The warp device, Lord Jonson,’ Typhon said, glancing at Captain Midoa. ‘I came to Perditus to claim possession of it.’

‘Interesting.’

‘The Warmaster desires this device, for reasons that you should know well. It is inopportune that you should seek to thwart his plans in this way. He will take it badly.’

‘Horus will take it badly?’ snarled Corswain, stepping forwards. ‘The Dark Angels do not answer to Horus.’

‘In time they will, I am sure,’ Typhon replied smoothly, looking briefly at the seneschal before returning his attention to the Lion. ‘Your opposition to the Night Lords is expected, but unnecessary. It is an irrelevance, made personal by mutual antagonism. What is Thramas to the Dark Angels?’

‘They are the Emperor’s worlds, and we will protect them,’ said Corswain,

laying a hand on the hilt of his sword. 'Treachery does not go unpunished.'

'Be quiet, little brother,' said the Lion, shifting in his throne to rest an elbow on the sculpted arm, chin lowered onto his closed fist, eyes still fixed upon Typhon. 'Let the commander speak freely.'

'I have nothing more to say, Lord Jonson,' said the Death Guard.

'Your threat is meaningless, commander. What you say is irrelevant, but what you do not say is so loud that it deafens me.'

Typhon started to speak but the primarch silenced him with a raised hand.

'You make no mention of my brother, Mortarion, your primarch. Do you still fight for the Death Guard, commander? Or do you pursue an ambition at odds with your lord? If Mortarion desired the device you mention, he has the resources of an entire Legion at his disposal. Why would he send such a small flotilla to claim such a precious prize? No, Mortarion is not the hand that guided you here, commander.'

Straightening, the Lion rested his hands on his knees and leaned forwards.

'Similarly, you invoke the name of the Warmaster, but it is not Horus's will that despatched you to Perditus. Perhaps as you say, I am an irrelevance to my traitorous brother, but that does not mean Horus would wish to pit his sons against mine in open conflict. He destroyed three Legions at Isstvan, but my Dark Angels were not amongst them. Curze, Mortarion, Horus; none of them desire full scale war with my Legion, and for good reason.'

In reply Typhon was silent, perhaps regretting his words, or fearing that further argument would only serve to betray him more deeply. The Lion moved his dark gaze to the Iron Hands commander.

'And you, Captain Midoa, what purpose brought you here?'

'To secure Perditus Ultima against the traitors, Lord Jonson,' replied the captain, looking across to Typhon. 'We arrived just in time, it appears.'

'And who set you upon this purpose, captain?'

‘We were part of the four-hundred-and-sixth expeditionary fleet, lord, far from Istvan when the muster was called. When we learnt of the tragedy that had befallen our Legion, we did what we could, securing such worlds as we had newly brought to compliance, fighting those traitorous forces that we encountered. Six months ago we were intercepted by an Ultramarines fleet near Ojanus, and received summons that Lord Guilliman was gathering all loyal forces at Ultramar. We answered the call, and later the primarch despatched us to Perditus, fearing the traitors might attempt to seize the device held by the Mechanicum.’

The Lion accepted this with a slow nod, deep in thought.

‘And now that you have learnt of Perditus’s secret, what is your intent?’ asked the primarch.

‘It is not safe to leave the warp engine here, lord. It is too powerful to risk its misuse, and so I believe the best course of action is to relocate it to the safety of Macragge.’

‘Indeed,’ said the Lion, eyebrows arching high. ‘You took that decision upon yourself?’

‘Lord Guilliman had intimated that such a course might be necessary, lord.’

Fingers drumming quickly on the arm of his throne, the Lion moved his gaze from one commander to the other and back again, before looking at Corswain.

‘When we have concluded this parley, send word to the captains, little brother. The fleet is to assume formation for the bombardment of Perditus Ultima.’

There were outbursts from Typhon and Midoa, which fell on deaf ears.

‘As you command, my liege,’ said Corswain.

‘You cannot destroy the warp engine!’ said Midoa, taking a step forwards. ‘If its power can be harnessed, it could be the weapon that enables us to turn the tide on the traitors.’

‘You suppose too much, captain,’ the Lion replied sharply. ‘I too received

Guilliman's summons. I do not concur with his plans, and I would no more trust him with this engine than any servant of Horus. I consider Ultramar no safer place for this device than Perditus, and even if Guilliman does not use it for his own purposes I cannot allow it to fall into the hands of the Emperor's enemies.'

Typhon's laugh rang around the chamber as Midoa made further protest.

'Your good humour is misplaced, commander,' snapped the Lion, silencing Typhon's mirth and Midoa's arguments. 'I am of a mind to let you depart Perditus without the engine, so that you might take word of its destruction to whatever masters you wish to claim. However, slight me again or dishonour my audience and I will be content to allow your lieutenants to perform that errand in your stead.'

Silence greeted this proclamation and the Lion stood up, signalling that the audience was at an end.

'Perditus Ultima and its prize will be destroyed within hours. Tell my brothers that there is nothing for them here.'

IX

On the main display, the tiny speck of light that was Captain Midoa's shuttle disappeared behind the shadow of his heavy cruiser, the Fastidious Prosecutor. Looking at a sub-screen, the Lion saw the Terminus Est of the Death Guard powering away, its plasma engines almost lost against the light reflecting from Perditus Ultima's surface. The primarch was about to turn away, with both Typhon and Midoa now returned to their respective ships, when he overheard a message from Lady Fiana coming through to one of the communications attendants.

'Relay that connection to speakers,' the Lion demanded, pointing a finger at the Legion serf, who complied immediately, eyes wide with surprise.

'Lauded primarch, my family and I are detecting a distortion in the warp around Perditus Ultima,' Fiana repeated, her voice coming through the address grilles all around the strategium.

'Tuchulcha?' asked the primarch.

'No, this is something different. It is like a miniature vortex, a hole burrowing through the warp.'

'Burrowing from where? To what does this hole lead?'

'Give us a moment, lauded primarch. Ardal is ascending the pilaster for a better fix on the location of the disturbance.'

'Raise void shields,' snapped Captain Stenius. 'Arm weapons batteries and sound the call to battle order.'

The Lion was content to let his subordinate take the appropriate defensive measures. He waited with arms crossed, gaze moving between the main screen, the sub-display of the Terminus Est and the speaker located to the right of the display array, as if he could see Lady Fiana beyond.

'Detecting a power surge from the Terminus Est, captain,' announced one of the

serfs at the scanner consoles.

‘Just raising void shields, captain,’ said another almost immediately after.

‘The warp disturbance is local, very small.’ Navigator Ardal’s voice was reedy over the internal comm. ‘I do not know how, but it seems to be originating from the Death Guard flagship.’

‘Where to?’ snarled the Lion. ‘Where is it directed?’

‘Perditus Ultima, lauded primarch. It’s some kind of warp tunnel, straight into the heart of the facility. I’ve never seen anything like it.’

‘Corswain!’ The Lion’s use of the seneschal’s name automatically switched the battle-barge’s systems to a direct address channel. Almost unnoticed, a tiny icon blinked on a sub-screen, indicating on a schematic of the Invincible Reason that Corswain was in the transit corridor outside the starboard launch bays, having seen off Midoa and Typhon.

‘Yes, my liege?’

‘Assemble your guard, and the Librarians, at teleporter chamber two. I will meet you there.’

‘Where are we going?’

‘Lay in coordinates for the Magellix facility. The Death Guard are trying to steal the warp engine.’

Typhon’s manreaper parted the tech-adept from pelvis to throat, the scythe’s power field fizzing and cracking with vaporising blood. The ragged remains of the tech-adept flopped to the bare stone of the floor as a squad of skitarii burst from the doors ahead. The Mechanicum’s bionically-augmented warriors sported a variety of laser weapons and rocket launchers. As red las-blasts seared down the tunnel and the corkscrew contrails of guided rockets followed, the Grave Wardens opened fire. Typhon’s autocannon thundered in his fist while a counter-barrage of missiles and bolts hammered into the half-machine defenders of Perditus Ultima.

The Terminators continued their implacable advance, stepping over the sparking, bloodied remnants of the skitarii, passing into the corridor that led to Tuchulcha's prison. More skitarii appeared and were cut down, the Grave Wardens all but impervious to the weapons carried by their foes.

At the head of the column, Typhon was still trying to push aside the side effects of the warp-teleportation he had employed to bring his warriors inside the facility. The Father had not been so generous in his gifts this time, and Typhon's skin felt heavy beneath his armour. His whole body itched and his head occasionally swam with the effort he had expended to punch a hole through reality.

'Why did we not do this when we first arrived?' rasped Vioss, striding alongside Typhon to the left. 'We would have retrieved the device long before the arrival of the Dark Angels.'

'I did not know that Tuchulcha was awake,' replied Typhon. 'It will have to transport itself back to Terminus Est, for I do not have the power. It is of a far greater mass than it looks, the bulk of its construction existing only in warp space.'

'A feat of engineering,' said Vioss, his sarcasm plain to hear.

'A miracle of the Father,' Typhon corrected him as they came to the chamber of Tuchulcha. The Death Guard commander stopped, seized by a sudden pain in his abdomen. He gritted his teeth as he felt something squirming through his insides; or at least a sensation he considered similar to having his intestines burrowed out by some hellish rodent. In a few seconds the pain had passed and he barrelled forwards through the next set of doors.

The globe of Tuchulcha hung in the centre of the room, surrounded by the entrapments and delving devices of the Mechanicum. Typhon was struck by the beauty of the patterns that flowed across the device's surface. A melange of oily colours merged and split, creating a hypnotic effect. With some effort, the Death Guard leader broke his gaze from the floating orb, seeing a red-robed figure kneeling before the device, hood covering head and face.

Typhon aimed his reaper autocannon at the kneeling figure, but his finger did not

squeeze the trigger as a child's voice broke the quiet.

'Stop! Do not harm him!'

A youth had stepped out of the tangle of cables surrounding Tuchulcha, sallow-skinned, connected to the apparatus imprisoning the device. It took a moment for Typhon to realise that the servitor-body was being manipulated by the machine.

'He is of no consequence,' said the commander. 'He has been your jailer, and should be punished.'

A liquid-filled gasping emanated from the servitor-youth, which Typhon realised was laughter.

'I cannot be imprisoned, not by the likes of this creature,' said Tuchulcha.

'Good, then you will be able to come with us.'

The boy did not reply, but looked away, head tilted back as if he was gazing through the rocky ceiling of the hall.

'You do not have long, Typhon of the Dusk Raiders,' he said. 'The Lion comes, seeking your head. Your warriors are being slain.'

As if in confirmation, the first reports crackled across the comm-net. The rearguard of three squads of Grave Wardens were under attack. Their report was short-lived, talking of the blazing sword of the Dark Angels' primarch, and of nightmare hooded creatures by his side that had eyes of flame and claws of iron. Ten seconds passed and Typhon heard no more from his men.

'He has brought his psykers with him,' Typhon told Vioss. 'I cannot contend with their combined abilities. Warn Charthun and the second line, they must fall back towards this position.'

'As you wish, commander,' said Vioss.

'We are the Death Guard now,' Typhon corrected Tuchulcha. 'I cannot take you back to my ship by my own hand. You must come with me if you want to be free.'

‘Free?’ Again there was the strangled gurgling of laughter from the animated boy. ‘I have been waiting a long time for the Lion to return. I saw him, the first time he came, and knew that my saviour had been delivered to me. The Perditians trapped me here, but with the aid of Iaxis I have been able to loose my bonds. I have remained solely because I knew the Lion would return to me.’

‘He seeks to destroy you,’ said Typhon.

‘He seeks to possess me, as all others have before,’ replied Tuchulcha. ‘Fear not for me, brave Typhon. You must fulfil your own destiny. Your primarch awaits you. It would be such a waste for you to be slain here. Here, let me help you.’

Typhon’s protest died in his throat as he felt the surge of translocation. A moment later, he was on the strategium of the Terminus Est, his remaining Grave Wardens around him.

‘What was that about?’ said Vioss, shaking his head. The captain turned to the surprised attendants at the bridge controls. ‘Set course for the nearest translation point. The Dark Angels will be after us soon enough.’

‘No need,’ said Typhon, feeling a pressure in the back of his mind that he recognised well. ‘Tuchulcha has already put us well out of harm’s way.’

Dismissing his serfs, Typhon was left alone in his chambers, the bare metal bulkheads spotted with rust, lit by the unfettered glare of the light strips in the ceiling. He peeled off the last layer of his undersuit, tossing the sodden mesh aside to reveal his pallid flesh. He could not understand what had happened. The Father had sent him to Perditus to rescue Tuchulcha from the clutches of the Mechanicum, but he had failed.

The ache in his gut was still there, and the Death Guard commander looked down at his stomach. Beneath his flesh could be seen the rigid plates of his black carapace. There was something else, pocking his skin just below his breast plate. He could not see so clearly past the curve of his muscled chest, so Typhon turned and looked at himself in the polished bronze of his mirror.

Just beneath his solar plexus were three blisters, each as large as his thumbtip, arranged in a triangle, touching each other. They were dark red, surrounded by a

black ring, weeping clear fluid. He felt no pain as he gently prodded one of the buboes with his finger. In fact, the sensation sent a thrill of pleasure through his body.

Typhon had a moment of realisation. He had freed Tuchulcha. By travelling to Perditus, he had turned the Lion's eye towards the world, setting in motion a course of events that led somewhere Typhon did not know, but was to the grand design of the Father. The trio of blisters on his flesh was a reward; a sign from the Father that Typhon's loyalty had been noted. He was marked now and forever, marked by the love of the Father.

It was just the beginning, of course. The Grave Wardens were only the first. The Father wanted them all. The Father wanted the love and loyalty of every Death Guard; the love and loyalty of Mortarion above anything else.

'Are you sure that was all the message said?' Captain Lorramech shook his head, eyes fixed on Midoa. The two of them walked back to the strategium, heading from the conveyor that had brought them up from the docking bay.

'That was all the Lion said I was to say,' confirmed Midoa. 'He was very specific. "Tell Guilliman I have a reply for him," the Lion told me. "Tell him to wait for me. I am coming." That was it.'

The lord of the First Legion sat as he so often sat these nights, leaning back in his ornate throne of ivory and obsidian. His elbows rested upon the throne's sculpted arms, while his fingers were steepled before his face, just barely touching his lips. Unblinking eyes, the brutal green of Caliban's forests, stared dead ahead, watching the flickering hololith of embattled stars.

Iaxis and his device were safely stowed in the deepest holds of the Invincible Reason. Magellix station had been turned to molten slag and rubble in a few hours; nothing was left for any other Legion to claim.

The Lion's lips moved, so slightly that perhaps a casual observer would not have noticed. Also none but those with the superhuman hearing of a primarch would have heard the words that came from his near-unmoving lips.

'I have Curze now,' the Lion said, speaking only to shadows. His monologue

stopped every few moments, as though to allow someone else to speak. ‘With Tuchulcha, we will be able to trap the Night Haunter. We have to be careful not to act too swiftly. Yes, when the time is right, but not before. If Curze notices a drastic change in our strategy he will respond, perhaps abandoning Thramas altogether. You are right, that would not be helpful.’

The Lion paused and wiped a fingertip across his brow.

‘Guilliman is a misguided fool at best, and a traitorous dog at worst.’ He took a deep breath. ‘I know that, but I would no sooner bend my knee to him than to Horus. Curze has the truth of it, but I was blinded by my anger. It has fallen to me to be the scale upon which history will be balanced. Every event has its counter, every brother his equal. Curze seeks to sap my morale and the strength of my Legion with unending war. Such shall be the duty of the Dark Angels. Yes, they will be ready for the task. There will be no new Emperor, only a lifetime of war. My brothers will bleed each other dry, contesting for eternity until there can be no victor. No, not even him. There is only the Emperor, none is worthy of inheriting that mantle. I will ensure the Legiones Astartes destroy themselves before another matches the power upon Terra. That is true. Faced with the prospect of mutual annihilation, my brothers may come to terms. Horus will be forced to acknowledge the Emperor again, and Guilliman and the others will not usurp their true master.’

Again the Lion stopped, with a slight shake of the head. He turned his gaze to his left, and out of the shadows appeared a diminutive figure. It was no taller than the height of a man’s knee, clad in an ebon robe, tiny and nimble black-gloved hands visible, but the rest of its body and face hidden in shadow. The diminutive creature looked up at the Lion and two coal-like glows briefly lit the inside of its hood.

‘No, it is too important,’ said the primarch. ‘Even if what you say is true, I cannot return to Caliban yet. Come what may, I have to stop Horus and Guilliman.’

The small figure bowed its head, and the Lion did the same, his whisper full of sorrow.

‘Yes, even if it costs me my Legion.’