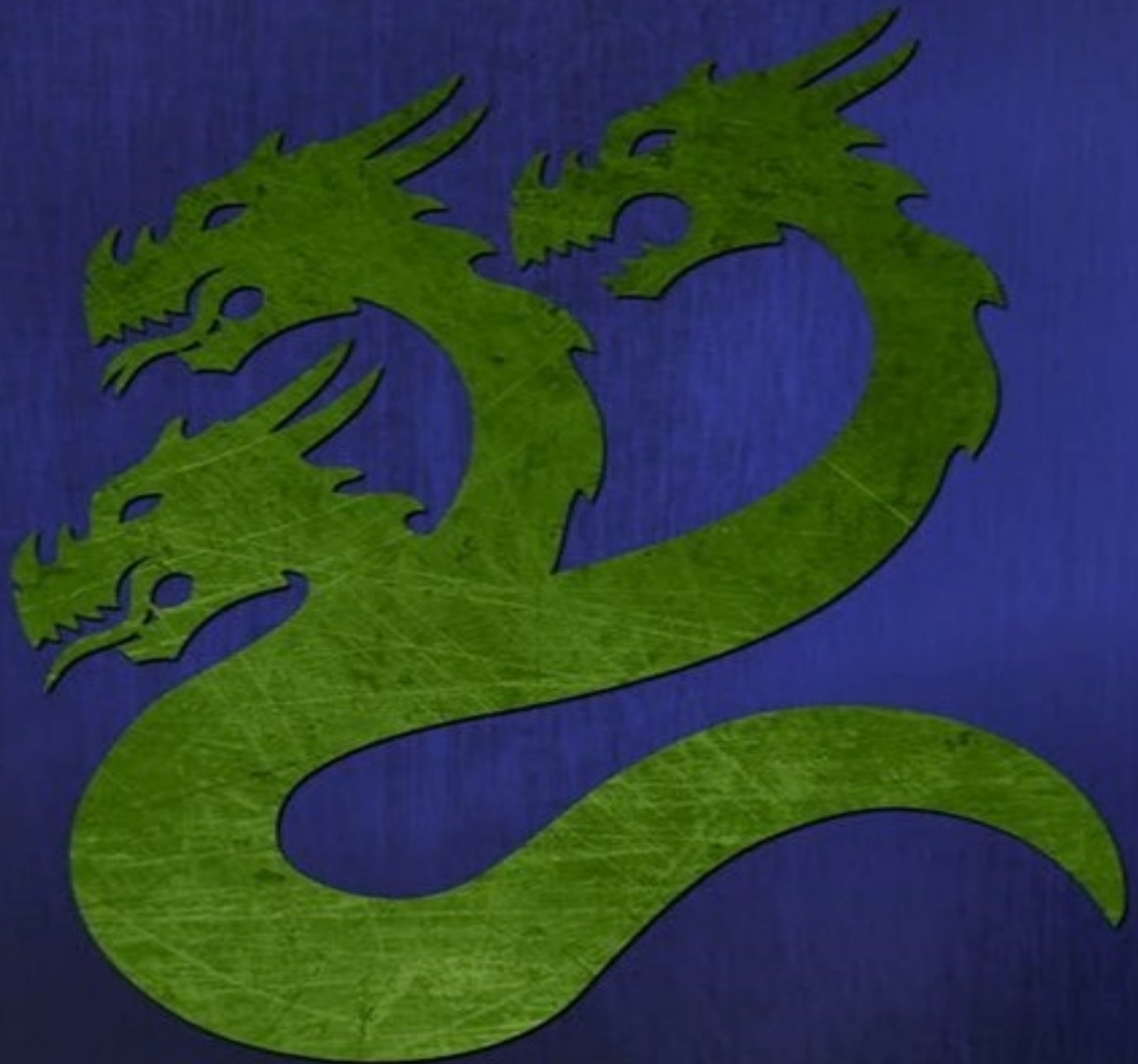


THE HORUS HERESY™

# THE SERPENT BENEATH

*Rob Sanders*



The impenetrable schemes of the  
Alpha Legion begin to conflict

# **The Serpent Beneath**

Rob Sanders

*DRAMATIS PERSONAE*

The XX Legion 'Alpha Legion'

Alpharius/Omegon, Twin Primarchs

Sheed Ranko, Captain, Lernaean Terminator Squad

Ursinus Echion, Librarian

Arvas Janic, Commander, Tenebrae 9-50 Installation

Goran Setebos, Sergeant, 3rd Company Squad 'Sigma'

Isidor, Legionnaire

Arkan, Legionnaire

Krait, Legionnaire

Volion, Legionnaire

Braxus, Legionnaire

Zantine, Legionnaire

Charmian, Legionnaire

Vermes, Legionnaire

Tarquiss, Legionnaire

Imperial Personae

Volkern Auguramus, Mechanicum Artisan Empyr

Gresselda Vym, Witchseeker Pursuivant, Brazen Sabre Cadre

Mandroclidas, Strategarch, Geno Seven-Sixty Spartocid

Non-Imperial Personae

Xalmagundi, 'Calamity', Soulfuel, Witchbreed

# ALPHA

Operatus Five-Hydra: Elapsed Time ?1/-806.44//XXUXX Legion Strike Cruiser  
Upsilon

‘Everything proceeds in accordance with the primarch’s wishes, my lord.’

‘And yet, I am uneasy,’ replied Omegon. The mighty warrior wandered the darkened oratorium, his attention moving slickly between schematics on the walls and data-slates on the round table at its centre. Ursinus Echion stood before him only as a hololithic ghost. ‘The Tenebrae 9-50 array is a tactical priority, brother. Much relies upon the technology’s continued operation.’

He seated himself in one of the chamber’s thrones. He rested his elbows on the armrests, and steepled his fingers pensively. ‘You understand my concerns?’

‘Of course, Lord Omegon,’ the pellucid Echion replied.

Omegon remained thoughtful. Echion no longer wore the robes of the Librarian, instead opting for the plain attire of a company legionnaire. As one of the Legion’s senior psykers, he had been an obvious choice to oversee the operation of the new empyreal technology, even if his status as a Librarian had remained a secret.

‘You understand my concerns,’ Omegon repeated, ‘but do you share them?’

He watched a shimmer of doubt cross the Librarian’s hololithic face. The temptation to lie. The decision not to.

‘The Pylon Array was constructed precisely to specification,’ Echion admitted. ‘It is operating satisfactorily.’

‘Speak your mind,’ Omegon told him, ‘as all of our calling are encouraged to do.’

‘This technology is as ancient as it is alien,’ Echion said, at length. ‘If the designs for its construction and the orders to realise the project had not come

from Alpharius himself, I would have thought the endeavour... misguided.'

'Your vigilance and mistrust serve your Legion well,' Omegon assured him. 'I have as much distaste for the xenos and their despicable ways as you, brother. But the hydra strikes with many heads, and we must indulge variety over prejudice, however natural such aversion might be. You know this, Echion.'

'Of course, Lord Omegon.'

'And as you said, it is the primarch's wish.'

'Yes.'

'Yet you are right to be cautious. Are you experiencing any difficulties?' he asked.

Again, Echion balanced honesty against prudence, against the prudence of honesty.

'From time to time we experience problems acquiring psyker slave-stock – on occasion this has brought us into conflict with the Sisters of Silence and their Black Ships. Nothing my legionnaires can't handle, of course.'

'Does it trouble you, brother? Trading in your own kind, thus?'

Echion considered his answer. 'The technology is... demanding. We all have our part to play. My kind, as you call them, must play theirs just as the Legion plays its own.'

'Quite,' Omegon agreed. 'Anything else? What of our allies?'

'The Geno Seven-Sixty Spartocid make restless sentinels but they carry out their duties peerlessly. The Mechanicum...' The Librarian paused. 'Artisan Empyr Auguramus is a difficult man. I monitor the Pylon Array's operation but he is responsible for its maintenance. He is unnecessarily harsh with the slave-stock and interprets his directives – how might one say? – creatively. I suspect he knows more about the technology's workings than he or his people let on.'

'That sounds like a problem.'

‘He knows he is essential to the Tenebrae operation, so he takes liberties. It’s probably me. I just don’t like him.’

‘A man would be ill-advised to take liberties with the Alpha Legion,’ Omegon said coolly. He was out of the throne and back to pacing the oratorium. ‘Master Echion, your work on Tenebrae has been outstanding but I want it to remain that way. I feel you would benefit from a fresh pair of eyes, to look to your interests.’

‘If you feel that is necessary, my lord,’ Echion replied. ‘Do you have intelligence placing the operation in any jeopardy?’

‘Not directly, but our allies and enemies alike have learned much from us. We do not only have to guard against the Emperor’s spies in our midst; the Warmaster, too, has his fiendish ways. We should never underestimate the threat of the xenos and then, of course, we must keep our own friends faithful. Operatives can be bought, but those that share our path can also lose their way.’

‘Of course.’

‘That is why I must ask you to send me encrypted specifications for the Tenebrae base’s security and defences,’ Omegon continued.

Echion raised an eyebrow. ‘Commander Janic is in charge of base security—’

‘Then I’ll need them from him. Schematics for the installation, the full designation of troops at your disposal and details of garrison rotations. That should get us started.’

Echion nodded. ‘What do you intend to do with such information, my lord, if you don’t mind my asking?’

‘It will guide me in the best ways to serve you, Master Echion. It will help me decide where the vulnerabilities lie, and what other resources I can put at your disposal to ensure the continued, smooth operation of this most important of Legion projects.’

‘I thank you for your concern and attentions, Lord Omegon.’

The primarch was standing by the thick armourglas of the lancet port. He stared

out at the void – cold, empty and eternal.

‘And yet I feel there is something else,’ he said, absently. ‘Something you have yet to confide, brother. Something beyond these mortal concerns.’ He turned, noting Echion’s look of uncertainty. ‘Perhaps your gift has given you some special insight, something that brings you unhappiness.’

The Librarian lowered his head slightly.

‘Might I have permission to speak freely, sir?’

Omegon continued to stare out into deep space. ‘Always.’

‘About the Pylon Array. The aether is in a state of calmness that I have never known. I reach out across it with my mind and my thoughts travel far, like a stone bounced across the glassy surface of a still pool.’

‘Continue, brother.’

‘I have always suffered a touch of the sight. What the Chief Librarian used to call a “foreboding”. Useful in the chaos of battle – momentary glimpses of blades before they strike and las-bolts before they are sent my way.’

‘You have prognostic abilities,’ Omegon confirmed tightly.

‘Yes, my lord,’ Echion said.

‘Enhanced in the presence of this xenos abomination?’

Echion was careful with his words: ‘Flowing more freely, from a becalmed source.’

‘And what do you see?’

‘The future, my lord. Terrible and true.’

‘Your own?’ Omegon asked.

‘The Legion’s.’

‘And...?’

‘I fear we have taken a wrong turn, my lord,’ the Librarian said with a pained expression. ‘Or that we soon will. Our current path takes us to a dark place.’

Omegon nodded. He understood all too well what Echion was saying.

‘Have you spoken of this to anyone else?’ Omegon asked.

‘Of course not,’ Echion replied. ‘The Librarian was formally disbanded, but for the requirements of specific missions and assignments. The legionnaires under my command are not aware of my gift.’

‘What about your former master, the Chief Librarian?’

‘No. I confide only in you, Lord Omegon.’

‘And I am listening, brother. I do not doubt your capabilities, enhanced under these special circumstances. I fear, however, that you glimpse the journey and know not the destination. Trust in this: there are many futures, many eventualities, many paths that the Alpha Legion might take. It is our enemies’ failing to see only what is presented to them in plain terms. Their undoing is to be blind to our myriad methods. Let us not make the same mistake. You can rest assured that Alpharius knows the darkness you have witnessed and has seen the light beyond. If we stay true to one another, to the purpose for which we were all created and to the principles upon which our Legion was founded – we will find the light together. We will achieve enlightenment. We will secure the ultimate victory.’

Echion bowed his head. ‘I thank you for your confidences, my lord.’

‘And yours, Master Echion. I shall expect Commander Janic’s triple-coded transmission shortly. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have matters of equal gravity to attend to.’

‘Of course. Hydra Dominatus, Lord Omegon.’

‘Hydra Dominatus.’

The hololithic display crackled to a static miasma and then blinked into nothingness above the display tablet. Omegon stood framed by the deep darkness of the lancet port.

A voice came from the shadows. 'He's going to be a problem.'

Sheed Ranko emerged from the rear of the chamber, and strode around the breadth of the table. He was a hulking warrior – almost as big as Omegon himself – and captain of the Lernaean Terminator squad, and master of the strike cruiser Upsilon. An honoured veteran and gifted tactician, he had been at the twin primarchs' collective side since the Legion's first irregular conquests of the Great Crusade. 'I mean it,' he said again. 'Echion's going to be a problem.'

'Or the solution to one,' Omegon mused. Ranko joined him by the viewing port.

'As much as I enjoy sitting in on your status reports,' the captain said, 'I presume you grace the Upsilon with your presence because you need something.'

Omegon gave him a thin smile. 'A favour. The advice of an old friend. Nothing you haven't done for me a thousand times before.'

'I serve your interests,' Ranko told him, taking a throne at the obsidian table and indicating for the primarch to do the same.

'And I the Legion's, captain.'

'Where's Alpharius?'

'Returning from council with the Warmaster,' Omegon told him honestly. 'He's assembling the fleet. I expect the Upsilon will receive her orders soon.'

'You are here on his behalf?' Ranko asked.

'In his interests, yes.'

'Then what can I do for you both, and the Legion?'

'Before I tell you, I need you to understand something, Sheed,' Omegon said, fixing the veteran's gaze. 'Legion operations always require a certain degree of

secrecy and discretion.'

'Yes.'

'This goes far beyond that,' Omegon said simply.

'Fair enough,' Ranko replied, intrigued. 'Want to tell an old friend why?'

'I'm mounting a sensitive operation.'

'All Alpha Legion operations are sensitive.'

'And none more so,' Omegon spoke in hushed tones, 'than when you are infiltrating your own Legion.'

Ranko stared grimly at him.

'No one knows the Legion like you,' the primarch continued. 'No one has operational experience across as many theatres. You've seen many of them prosecute their duty under fire. All Alpha Legionnaires are exceptional, but I need legionnaires not only of singular talent but also of a very specific disposition. It's going to get... confusing.'

'You want recommendations,' Ranko said, matter-of-factly. Gone was the warrior wit and the pleasure of seeing an old friend. This was something else entirely. 'It would help if I knew a few details of the operation, so I can gauge exactly what it is you need.'

'I'll have them shortly,' Omegon replied.

Ranko looked from the primarch to the hololithic tablet, and back to Omegon again.

'You're going to hit the Tenebrae installation?'

Omegon nodded. 'My informants and astrotelepathic intercepts have detected a leak.'

'Within the Legion?'

‘Yes. Sensitive data and information relating to the placement of Alpha Legionnaires and operatives, on both sides of the conflict.’

‘I don’t believe it,’ Ranko said. ‘I mean, I do, obviously. But how is this possible?’

‘This is a civil war,’ Omegon reminded him. ‘There are those placed among the Legions loyal to the Emperor who secretly supply the Warmaster with intelligence and appropriated materiel. Why not the other way round?’

Ranko continued to marvel in disappointment and disbelief. ‘Because this is the Alpha Legion, lord.’

‘A fact of which I am painfully aware,’ the primarch sighed. ‘I have been monitoring the situation, of course, in the hope that the leak could be identified and neutralised. That was until Alpharius’s own safety was almost compromised.’

‘Alpharius?’

‘A rendezvous from which he had to promptly withdraw,’ Omegon said. ‘Whoever they were, whether they fought for the Emperor or the Warmaster... they could have taken my brother right then and there.’

‘And you traced it back to Tenebrae?’

‘A partially decrypted astrotelepathic message, originating from the base,’ Omegon confirmed. ‘Times and movements. They knew exactly where and when to strike.’

‘Echion, then.’

‘Possibly. The Octiss System. It’s one of the few outlying regions uncompromised by warp storms. You heard him yourself – the Pylon Array calms the immaterium. An astrotelepathic message might reach Ancient Terra from there.’

‘How is Alpharius taking it?’ Ranko asked.

‘Spitting venom, as you might expect. We have no time to investigate. The war moves apace. We do not have the luxury of tracking this back to an enemy sponsor, not when even our attempt to do is likely to be reported. Tenebrae is compromised. It must be destroyed – leak and all – before knowledge of the array or even the installation itself falls into the hands of another Legion.’

Ranko placed a hand upon the table. ‘You need legionnaires, then, who can infiltrate an Alpha Legion base and will not question the order to kill their brothers. Many of whom they will know to be innocent.’

‘Yes.’

The captain paused for a moment, soaking up the enormity of the task.

‘Then you need Goran Setebos – Sigma Squad, 3rd Company. His team were responsible for hitting the matrix outpost on Oblonski’s World. Setebos is pretty cold, even for the Legion, but if it’s victory over everything else, then he will do what needs to be done.’

‘Where is he currently deployed?’

‘Running interference on the 915th Expeditionary Fleet, I believe.’

‘Thank you, Sheed,’ Omegon said.

‘You’re also going to need a psyker,’ the captain continued, ‘and you can’t just pull one from the Legion – in all likelihood, Ursinus Echion will have had some role in their training.’

‘An operative then?’

Ranko shrugged. ‘The question is, who? To go up against Echion, you are going to need someone really special. The problem is, the more special they are, the more dangerous they are to everyone else.’

‘You don’t always have to fight fire with fire,’ Omegon muttered, then seemed to reconsider. ‘No readers. No telepaths. There’s problem enough with leaked information.’

‘Agreed.’

‘You have a suggestion?’ the primarch asked.

‘Perhaps,’ Ranko said. ‘We’ve been decoding transmissions from the Black Ships that Echion mentioned. The same name keeps cropping up. Successive Sisters of Silence cadres have failed to capture a witchbreed called Xalmagundi on the hive world of Drusilla.’

Omegon nodded. ‘Sounds promising. Any other advice?’

‘Echion and Commander Janic are going to have that installation wrapped up tight,’ the captain insisted. ‘You’re going to need someone on the inside.’

‘I already have a candidate in mind,’ the primarch assured him.

Ranko nodded.

‘Has it really come to this? Our own Legion?’

‘With treachery in our midst, we cannot falter,’ Omegon said. ‘Traitors, wherever they are found, must be dealt with decisively. Sacrifices must be made.’

Omegon crossed the oratorium and took a pair of chalices from a tray. He offered one to Ranko. ‘Thank you for your assistance with this, old friend. There are few to whom I could turn with this.’

‘At your service, always,’ the captain said, raising the chalice for a toast. ‘To mission success, and to necessary sacrifices.’

The pair drank. Ranko pulled the rim from his lips thoughtfully. He found himself looking down into the depths of the chalice.

‘You know what that is?’ Omegon asked.

‘Yes, my lord,’ the captain answered after a moment.

‘Then you know what it is that I ask of you.’

Ranko downed the rest. ‘What you ask of us all,’ the captain said. ‘Everything.’

# BETA

Operatus Five-Hydra: Elapsed Time ?3/-734.29//CHOPhemus IV – Tharsis Heights

The planet was slowly turning itself inside out, though Phemus IV had been quietly raging for millennia. A crepuscular ball of igneous rock and soot storms, it was covered in a rash of volcanic eruptions. Cracked through with glowing fractures, it resembled a celestial bauble that had been dropped and was about to shatter.

The only creatures to make their homes in the Phemusian nightmare were migrant tribes of greenskins that routinely roamed the lava-dashed landscape in order to avoid seasonal eruptions. Sergeant Goran Setebos only knew these tribes by the banners they carried and the crude symbols painted on their corrugated hovels. Squad Sigma had ascribed names to the tribes based upon the scrawled iconography: the Spumers; the Green Devils; the Scorchers; the Magmatusks; the Fireball Clan.

For the past month, the Alpha Legionnaires had been engaged in a war by proxy. They had not killed a single greenskin or even discharged a single round from their soot-smearred bolters. They were shadowing a far more dangerous prey across the volcanic highlands, razorblade canyons and dismal basalt plains.

The V Legion.

The Khan's swift savages. The infamous White Scars.

Black rock crumbled in Setebos's grasp. If his palm hadn't been protected by the ceramite of his gauntlet, the remaining shard of glassy rock would have pierced straight through. The sergeant was clinging to a rockface, punching handholds and toe-picking his way up the midnight crag. Beneath him, the nine other members of Squad Sigma followed up through his improvised purchase points. Glooping beside them was a sluggish lava fall, a slow-moving torrent of molten rock that bathed the armoured legionnaires in the perpetual heat of a furnace.

At the top of the escarpment, Setebos unlocked his bolter from his belt and

crunched through the gravel of a volcanic crater. Magma had eaten through the rim to create the falls and Setebos chose his footing carefully around the bubbling margins. One by one, the Alpha Legionnaires made their way over to the far side of the crater, their grimy plate glinting in the fiery glow.

‘This looks good,’ he said. ‘Isidor.’

Legionnaire Isidor consulted a scuffed and scorched data-slate, turning it and his armoured form around to match their most recent relief maps with the surrounding topography. He gestured east with an outstretched gauntlet.

‘If the Fireballs haven’t started moving by now,’ he announced, ‘this should light a fire under their monstrous arses.’ He handed the slate to Vermes, who counter-checked his cartography.

‘This channel should then join with the one from this morning,’ Setebos murmured.

‘Affirmative.’

The whole squad remembered all too well the channel they had crossed with some difficulty a few hours before. Braxus had almost pitched into the hellish river of molten rock.

Behind them, Krait had started to prepare a cache of seismic charges, which the legionnaire punched into the crater wall with his gauntlet. ‘The greenskins in Quadrant Seven-Seventeen should be funnelled through to this gorge here, with little choice but to join the Magmatusks.’

‘Unless they just attack them like the last lot did,’ Braxus murmured.

‘Always a possibility with orks,’ Setebos agreed. ‘Krait, are we ready?’

‘Two more charges; ten more seconds.’

‘Legionnaires, over the edge,’ Setebos ordered.

Squad Sigma hauled themselves over the lip of the crater before skidding down through the grit and scree of the volcanic slope. The Alpha Legionnaires had

been doing this for weeks, trekking across the infernal landscape and strategically setting their demolitions. Remaining an unseen and undetected presence, various covert teams like Sigma had frustrated the White Scars' hopes of a swift xenos extermination in the local systems, by manoeuvring the greenskin warrior tribes on Phemus IV into tactically superior strategic formations. By forcing the groups together and concentrating the greenskins in larger numbers, Setebos and his squad had succeeded in bogging the Khan's warriors down in countless meat-grinding engagements. The White Scars themselves could now only dream of racing over the open plateaus, fragmenting the tribes and cutting the orks to pieces, as was their wont.

'Sergeant!' Isidor hissed across the vox-link. 'Contacts!'

Making their ungainly way down the gorge at the foot of the slope was a ragged string of orks. They bore the crude iconography of the Fireball Clan and carried an assortment of mismatched weaponry. Some were wounded, suggesting that they were only a splinter group of a larger tribe that had been caught in some kind of ambush.

'Take cover,' Setebos ordered over the vox-link, 'and do not engage. I repeat, do not engage.'

As the legionnaires scrambled into less than desirable cover on the scree slope, the orks continued their wretched stomp up the ravine. Taking positions behind crags and boulders, the thick coating of ash on their plate went some way to disguise the Space Marines from the xenos barbarians. Remaining completely still, Setebos – who was closest to the ravine floor – watched the monsters lope past, oblivious.

The rumble of distant eruptions was suddenly cut through by the high-pitched whine of engines, and looking back down the gorge, Setebos caught sight of three Imperial jetbikes rounding the volcano's flank. He had no idea how the White Scars kept their plate and vehicles so clean and white in the rain of ash and soot clouds.

The Scars tracked in on the column of orks – they had probably already been searching for them, Setebos reasoned. The Khan's hunters were not known for allowing their prey to escape. They leaned into the handlebars of their mounts

and gunned the wailing engines, tearing up the gorge, trailing a cloud of soot in their wake.

Boltfire ripped up through the greenskins at the rear of the column, bringing the rest of the monsters into sudden and savage life, their brute weapons ready. The White Scars hammered through fully half of the beasts before accelerating overhead.

One patchwork monster swung its axe at one of the oncoming vehicles. The White Scar rider simply leaned out to one side, allowing the butcher's blade to pass harmlessly over his helmet.

Setebos watched the riders rocket away around the volcano base. It was classic V Legion tactics: the greenskins – normally so formidable as a sea of crude blades and blazing gunfire – were now scattered and grunting furiously with their weapons held high. Within moments the jetbikes were back, strafing the mindless creatures with more streams of boltfire.

Their fellows dropping about them in ragged heaps, the final two brutes roared at the swarthy sky. The first jetbike passed between them at high speed, prompting both to take optimistic swings. Predictably the second and third White Scars glided in after them, curved chainswords screaming as they cut the monsters down. With one greenskin's head hanging from his body by only a thread and the other clutching its spilling innards, the White Scars' work was done.

Turning and idling back up to the site of the massacre, the Scars dismounted. Slipping their heads out of their helmets, the Khan's warriors allowed the luxurious length of their hair and moustaches to fall freely, before drawing their short curved blades and stabbing at the fallen orks to ensure the monsters were truly dead.

Only one of the three, an eagle-eyed warrior indeed, caught sight of something amiss on the volcanoside. A shape that seemed out of place, perhaps? Stepping back to his bike he slipped a pair of magnoculars from the saddlebag and brought them up to his dark, piercing eyes. The White Scar would have called out, either to the armoured Alpha Legionnaire hiding on the rubble-strewn slope or more likely to avert his own brethren, but he could do neither with Setebos's blade at his throat and the Alpha Legion sergeant holding him by his hair.

Suddenly aware that they were under attack, the two remaining White Scars made for their jetbikes. The first saw Braxus coming for him – he snatched the length of his serrated chainblade from a sheath that ran the length of the mount, and with a harsh battle cry swung it back around in a whirling arc. Braxus was forced to abandon his tackle and slide down through the grit and onto his side, but the White Scar was swift to recover. Even so, Arkan and Charmian cannoned into him, one slamming into the Space Marine with his domed pauldron while the other went for the weapon.

Isidor was nowhere near the third White Scar by the time he reached his jetbike. Instead of going for his weapon, the Scar leapt and mounted the vehicle. The manoeuvre was accomplished with the grace and confidence of one born in the saddle, and before the Alpha Legionnaires could do anything the White Scar had leaned around and banked the accelerating vehicle back up the craggy gorge.

Setebos's blade slipped through his struggling prisoner's throat with ease.

'Isidor, jam his transmissions,' the sergeant barked, pointing with the bloodied tip of the knife. Isidor skidded around the two legionnaires still wrestling with their foe on the basalt and scrambled for the jetbike's comms.

'Got it!' he called.

Setebos watched the escaping jetbike streak for freedom. Zantine brought his bolter up, but the sergeant placed his ceramite palm on the weapon's barrel. There would be no convenient but cacophonous firefights, with the distinctive sound of reciprocal bolter fire betraying the presence of another Space Marine force on Phemus IV. As always, the Alpha Legion would remain unheard, unseen and unknown.

'Krait!'

'Yes, sergeant.'

'Now.'

The detonators fired. The seismic charges set in the crater wall blasted the igneous rock into glassy splinters. Rubble crashed down the volcanoside, bouncing and shattering as it rolled its way down into the ravine. The fleeing

biker saw the danger. He tried to turn but there simply wasn't enough room. The Space Marine tucked to the side and slipped from his saddle, skidding and clattering through the volcanic shale in his armour plate. The jetbike struck the growing wall of shattered rock and tumbling debris, and became a brief nova of light, sound and twisted shrapnel.

Setebos saw the White Scar scrambling though the black gravel before getting to his feet. He ran with powered, determined steps, pulverising the grit under his boots.

The spilled magma was coming.

The explosion – designed to sound like any other violently erupting volcano – had opened the molten floodgates. A torrent of radiant death flowed down the slope towards the White Scar. The Alpha Legionnaires watched the lava swell eat up the incline and then flood the gorge, just as Krait and Isidor had intended.

The flow swamped the stricken Space Marine, knocking him from his feet and plunging him, shoulder and then face first, beneath the surface. The White Scar flailed only for a moment, his immaculate ceramite scorching, before sinking – backpack and all – beneath the slurping surface with a flare of powered discharge.

Charmian looked to his sergeant. 'Sir?'

There were three of them now, pinning the remaining White Scar face down against the ravine floor.

'Make it quick,' Setebos hissed, before directing the rest of the squad up a slightly more forgiving incline on the opposite slope.

The White Scar screamed furious insults at his captors but they did not last long; Charmian took the sides of the Space Marine's head in his powered gauntlets and twisted it violently to the side. There was a splintering crack, and the White Scar's resistance became a limp slump before the legionnaires released him.

As Squad Sigma made their way up the craggy slope, the gully behind them glowed. The disgorged river of molten destruction had replaced the site of the brief battle, scouring any evidence of the Alpha Legion's presence from the face

of the planet.

‘Hold.’

Setebos suddenly halted. The legionnaires held their positions, scanning the charred landscape for more greenskins.

‘More Scars?’ Isidor put to the sergeant, but Setebos was holding the side of his helmet with his gauntlet against the rumble of volcanic eruptions rolling across the tortured land.

After a moment, he turned to them once more.

‘We’re being recalled. Something special. I’ve been given extraction coordinates.’

Isidor nodded with approval, but the rest of them gave their sergeant only the blank optics of their helmets.

‘Let’s move. With any good fortune, we’ll be off this rock within the hour.’

Operatus Five-Hydra: Elapsed Time 3/-633.19//DRUDrusilla Hive World –  
Hive Chorona

Her mother had called her Xalmagundi. The undercaste called her Calamity, for the disasters she had brought down upon her people. The bitch off-worlders that came for her called Xalmagundi ‘soulfuel’ and ‘witchbreed’. Her unnatural gift had killed them all.

Death had driven her topside. She had left the underhive behind with the rubble and the bodies. As a young girl she had little idea how to control her deviant abilities; objects would move about her, seemingly of their own accord. Violently, if she was so disposed.

What started out as a trick to amaze the caste urchins soon carved horror into underhiver faces. Even amongst her own people in the Delve – where skin was ashen and untouched by the sun, where eyes were large and black, where the wretched eked an outcast’s existence – she was an aberration. When her teenage tantrums brought quakes to the underworld, even her cavern-kin rejected her.

They drove her out with stories of her past. They told Xalmagundi of her horrific birth, and how as a screaming newborn she had broken her mother from within, shattering bones and rupturing organs. All with the cursed power of her unreasoning, infant mind.

Driven from cavern community to cavern community, Xalmagundi was a freak among freaks. Again the tears came to quench the loneliness but with them came anger and hatred. The benighted realm about her became a quake-stricken nightmare, and it seemed then that even the darkness shook. With tremors rippling through the fragile foundations of the hive, the world above came crashing down onto the world below.

That night, the Delve – home to the undercaste for longer than anyone could remember – became just another pulverised strata in the hive's long history.

She was hunted as she migrated spireward. The hivequakes had been felt throughout the city and there were those who made it their business to know their unnatural origin. Xalmagundi learned to control her emotions and the telekinetic horror that sometimes came flooding with them. Her appearance, which many hivers found unsettling and horrid, still brought her to the attention of the authorities, but when they failed to bring her in and enough people had witnessed the devastating power of her gift, the off-worlders came.

Off-worlders with gifts of their own: a silent sisterhood, in whose mere presence Xalmagundi's more extreme abilities were nothing and under whose gaze it was agony to exist. She had heard that the Sisters had been sent by the Emperor himself, which their fine armour and weaponry indeed seemed to confirm. Xalmagundi could not conceive what the Emperor of Mankind would want with her. Having sent his mutes armed to the teeth, she could not think it was for any good reason.

The killing continued. Squad after squad of the Sisters hounded her through the hab-quarters and industri-scape of mill stacks, but all had failed to acquire their prey.

Xalmagundi stared into the fire. She watched the tongues of flame flicker and dance. Her camp had been some kind of villa once, the mansion-hab of an Imperial Army officer or palace official. The wind whistled through the

dilapidated stonework and around crumbling furniture. The psyker pulled her ragged cloak tighter – she was used to the subterranean warmth of the underhive and the furnace-heated mills. The further spireward she travelled, the more biting the cold felt upon her thin, pale skin.

She had come to Spire Pentapolis precisely because it had been long abandoned. The Chorona Hive was so named because of the five minor spires that had grown up about the primary apex like a crown, but it had been decimated by a virulent contagion hundreds of years before. Every attempt to re-colonise the spire had resulted in a resurgence of the disease, and new measures required to quarantine and cleanse Pentapolis of its plagued inhabitants. So, the ghostspire now remained as a cautionary tale on the skyline – too large to demolish, too recent in the memory to embark upon the next inevitable attempt to repopulate and appropriate the precious space.

Xalmagundi rubbed at her temple. She had a headache. Perhaps she had been staring at the fire for too long...

No. Realisation shivered through her. The pain in her head had been subtle at first but had steadily grown: it felt like a knife, slowly slipping its way into her brain. She had felt that before.

There was no time to lose.

Xalmagundi leapt over the fire and sprinted through the derelict villa. She was light and lithe, but a short lifetime of being hunted had also made her fast and strong. She was not alone in the building – she was sure of that. This was confirmed a moment later when explosive lines of daylight shot through the thin walls of the villa, bolt-rounds spraying rockcrete fragments across the room. Xalmagundi willed herself on.

Her hunters had surrounded the building, moving up behind the villa walls. It now felt as though she had six knives embedded in her brain. The pain was excruciating, and through the crippling agony she couldn't find her way to the part of herself she usually relied upon in such circumstances. The part of her mind in which fear and frustration translated seamlessly into spontaneous, telekinetic destruction. All she could think to do was put one foot in front of another. She needed to get away. Not only to escape being blasted apart by

boltfire, but also to get out of the sisters' overlapping influence.

The walls on either side of Xalmagundi erupted as two more hidden attackers unleashed their weapons at her. The villa had become a deathtrap, a nexus of criss-crossing gunfire – even as she ran, she felt the tug of stray rounds snatching at her trailing cloak.

As ruined masonry began to tumble to the floor, Xalmagundi's hunters were revealed: aurulent visions in plumed helmets, picked out in white and scarlet. They clutched their furious boltguns and chased Xalmagundi up the length of the villa.

She burst from the shadows and onto the stilted terrace beyond, and was blinded by the sudden daylight – as an underworlder, her large black eyes were hypersensitive to even Drusilla's meagre sun. She skidded to a stop, putting her slender hand out in front of her hooded face, and it dawned on her that this might have been the Sisters' plan all along. She was fast and agile but she couldn't outrun a bolt-round in the open. In the midst of battle, with masonry and gunfire searing through the air, her instinct had been to flee. Not a single projectile had managed to find her in the chaos and now she had hit the terrace, the bolter fire had ceased altogether. Xalmagundi couldn't help feeling that she had been corralled, in the same way the underhivers would beat their way through the tunnels, driving verminipedes into the waiting nets of their companions.

The sky roared above her. It was difficult to peer into the brightness-blotched heavens, but a carrier or shuttle of some kind hovered above the roof of the villa. As her vision cleared and acclimatised to the Drusillian day, she shielded her brow with the palm of one hand and saw the armed carrier bank for another pass. A silent Sister sat harnessed into an open doorway in the side of the shuttle – she wore a targeting helmet, and in her grip Xalmagundi could see the long barrel of some exotic rifle.

The psyker's lip wrinkled with fury. The Sisters of Silence would kill her if they had to, but would much rather tranquilise her like a dangerous animal, for the trip to their precious Emperor. Xalmagundi would not be bagged like some prize for a spireborn's wall.

Once again she was running, her bare feet thudding into the weathered stone of

the terrace. She felt the other sisters behind her, encumbered by their armour but desperate to succeed where previous cadres had failed. The carrier had completed its turn and was bearing down on her – Xalmagundi could see the silhouette of the helmeted sniper, hanging out of the side of the shuttle. The fleeing psyker peeled off suddenly to the right, allowing several rifle shots to snap off the stone and putting the sniper on the wrong side of the carrier to take another.

Xalmagundi ran an assault course of decaying architecture; she hurdled a decorative wall, before diving through the gap left by several smashed and missing balusters. The mouldering architecture provided her with cover, but more importantly it slowed the armoured Sisters of Silence who had to clamber over the obstacles with their heavier wargear. Rolling, she pushed herself back up onto her feet and sprinted for the terrace edge.

The carrier dropped to one side, bringing it level with the stilted platform, and Xalmagundi could feel the sniper lining up her shot. She could also feel something else – the relief of knives being retracted, bit by bit and one by one from her stinging mind. She was drawing away from the Sisters. Xalmagundi didn't want to risk looking back.

Every moment counted. Every step counted. The last step counted the most.

Xalmagundi launched herself from the edge of the stilted terrace and out into the nothingness beyond. Her hood fell back and her cloak began to flap about her, and she felt the sniper's rushed shot slice past her ear. Xalmagundi's arms started to swing and her legs worked the air as the psyker's slender body hurtled downwards, past the haphazard architecture of Spire Pentapolis. Below her was the mountainous accretion of Hive Chorona, the smog-cloaked industrial powerhouse from which the crown of minor spires sprang. It was coming up fast to meet her.

Looking up, Xalmagundi watched the carrier dive after her. The Sisters stood on the precipice of the terrace, watching in silence as the psyker fell to her death. As she tumbled away from them she felt something return within her, as though an amputated limb had been restored to her in full working order.

She closed her eyes and willed disaster.

The south face of the spire trembled. The agglomerate architecture shuddered from top to bottom, blasting a shower of rockcrete, torn girders and gargoylesque masonry chunks into the open air. Like a pressure building down the shaft of the spire, the ripple of destruction vaulted debris and colossal rafts of architecture out across the sky with the force of a titanic explosion. Far above her now, the terrace buckled and fell.

Xalmagundi angled her descent and hit the first spinning chunk like a cat, only to slip from its smooth surface moments later and tumble away. Clawing her way onto another she was frustrated by a third colossal brace of rubble striking her temporary platform, smashing it into pieces beneath her and forcing Xalmagundi to shear it in two with her mind.

Snatching her way onto the warped length of a structural column, the psyker allowed herself a moment to focus on the retreating carrier and the flailing bodies of Sisters tumbling to their deaths amongst the collapsed architecture. The psyker fell with the destruction for a few moments before latching onto the busy flourishes of a passing wall section, and held on for her life. She had been fortunate – her gift gave her extraordinary telekinetic power. It did not, however, lend her any extraordinary reflexes, and any one of the crashing shards of rock and metal could crush her instantly, or cave in her fragile skull in a moment of inattention.

Below, Xalmagundi could see the havoc she had unleashed. The base of the ghostspire was being buried in the shattered remains of the collapsed south face, and a cloud of dust was billowing up to meet her. As she plummeted down through the haze, the psyker focused her mind, concentrating on slowing the runaway mass of the great object. Her face twisted into an ugly snarl as she willed the beast into a gentler descent. Other colossal blocks of stone thundered past, only to shatter against the growing rubble-mountain at the foot of the spire.

The psyker's mind ached with the effort.

Despite Xalmagundi's unnatural influence, the gigantic fragment still struck with unimaginable force, catapulting the psyker down onto the rockcrete platform protruding from the side of a dormant smokestack. Incredibly, she landed on her feet but immediately felt something give in her leg, shot through with white-hot pain.

She tumbled into a roll that took her down the platform's steps and the world became a sickening kaleidoscope. Beyond that, all she knew was the thunderous white noise of falling masonry.

The world suddenly stopped turning; a rusted metal landing had brought her to an abrupt halt. Her head was gashed in several places and her arm hung numbly at her side. All she wanted to do was stay down and die.

Looking back up the steps she saw an enormous shard of buckled rockcrete crash through the platform as though it were paper, followed by a whipping tangle of support cables that tore at the staircase. She forced herself up, but immediately slipped back onto her rump with a cry of pain – her leg was shattered, and bone was protruding from the flesh in several places. Trying her best to focus on the leg and ignore the various other agonies competing for her attention, she gritted her teeth and straightened the bones, providing a telekinetic splint for the smashed limb. Sharp fragments retracted back within the torn muscle, making it at least possible to struggle to her feet.

Half hobbling, half tumbling, she made her way downwards through the thick, choking dust as the last of the southern spireface found its way to earth. Soon she reached the murk of a manufactorum dragway, though she could see barely a metre in front of her face.

Limping horribly through the miasma, the psyker began hacking and coughing. The air was thick with powdered stone and several times Xalmagundi had to stop to choke up stringy spittle laced with grit. Her face was pasted with clots of fresh blood.

The post-catastrophic silence was suddenly broken by the rhythmic crash of rotor-cannons, and the murk swirled as something unseen passed overhead. The cannonfire hammered up the street, creating two parallel troughs of mangled rockcrete.

Xalmagundi half-fell into a littered alcove, allowing the churning gunfire to continue up the dragway towards the smokestack. The remaining Sisters were clearly no longer interested in taking her alive. She stared up through the swirling dust, searching for the armed carrier; if she could spot it then she could use her power to fling the winged menace into the ruined face of the Chorona

Spire. But the sky was just a blanket of shadow, and she saw nothing.

As the cannons ceased, Xalmagundi thought it best to change her position and hobbled out onto the ploughed-up dragway, but froze as she encountered a wall of dark silhouettes blocking her path.

She squinted and tensed, ready to bring the adjoining manufactory down upon the shadowy forms. Their outlines radiated violent intent; they were hulking and armoured, and like the sisterhood cadre they carried boltguns. They fixed on the psyker with the haunted lenses of their helmets.

An unarmed giant stepped forward from the imposing ranks.

‘Xalmagundi?’

The psyker was stunned to hear her name come from the huge warrior. As the dust began to clear between them she recognised them as a host of the Emperor’s Angels. Like everyone else on Drusilla, she had only seen such legends crafted in stone, but the plate and the weaponry were unmistakable.

The leader halted. His ceramite creaked. She knew he had sensed her influence, the loose telekinetic embrace in which she now held his armoured form. The Emperor could send who he wanted! Xalmagundi would not be taken! She would crush the legendary warriors inside their battle plate like an invisible fist around an empty rations can.

‘How do you know me?’ she spat.

‘Xalmagundi, my name is Sheed Ranko,’ the voice came again, deep and measured. ‘I assure you, we mean you no harm,’

‘Ratcrap,’ she returned, watching him for any signs of movement. She ran her gaze down the motionless line of Angels. Each held himself and his weapon casually, as if waiting for something. Not a single barrel was aimed at the psyker. Xalmagundi narrowed her grit-flecked eyes – this oddness only served to stoke her suspicions further.

‘Allow me to demonstrate,’ the giant announced. ‘Sergeant, her pursuers?’

Behind the leader, another Angel brought up his weapon's scope to further enhance his optics, and sighted into the murky sky.

'The Sisters of Silence,' the sergeant hissed. 'Brazen Sabre Cadre, out of the Black Ship Somnus. Pursuivant Gresselda Vym. Inbound.'

'Bring them down,' Ranko commanded.

Another Angel broke ranks and brought up the bulk of a missile launcher onto his armoured shoulder. He pointed the weapon up into the sky and stared through a targeter of his own.

'Acquisition?' Ranko asked. 'Do you have the shot?'

'I have it.'

'Then take it, brother.'

Xalmagundi flinched as the missile blazed up into the sky and disappeared, before the flash of an unseen explosion ripped through the obscurity like sheet lightning. Within moments the wreck of the carrier fell from the heavens, belching a trail of black smoke and falling debris. The pilot was desperately trying to regain some control but the craft was a smashed ruin – it cut through a tall metal chimney before passing over their heads and crashing into the facade of the manufactory. Its disappearance in the dust-choked distance was swiftly followed by a further explosion, and the sounds of hull shrapnel ringing off the rockcrete walls.

Xalmagundi almost faltered and had to reach out to steady herself. She brought her attention back to the Angel who called himself Sheed Ranko.

'Sergeant,' he said, not taking his glowering optics from the psyker. 'Take two legionnaires and finish off any remaining Sisters.'

The Angel left the wall of shadow with two of his hulking comrades, but Ranko addressed her again. 'Aren't you tired of being hunted?'

'I can take care of myself,' the psyker shot back, savagely.

‘Prove it,’ Ranko challenged her.

Xalmagundi’s lip curled. She turned and looked up at the pinnacle of the Chorona Spire, just beginning to emerge from the great bank of dust.

Her eyes narrowed. Her pupils became stabbing points of darkness.

The derelict spire gave a thundercrack of internal agony. The pinnacle began to shake as a deep rumble built from within the accreted nightmare of the ghostspire’s already weakened foundations, and loose chips of stone shook around their feet.

Xalmagundi’s jaw became taut with destructive desire.

The pinnacle suddenly disappeared; like an unfortunate underworlder in a sinkhole, the spire dropped down below the haze.

Every living soul within fifty kilometres would have heard the pulverising boom of successive floors and constructs falling in on themselves. The spire was collapsing straight down – like a black hole, some irresistible gravitational force was dragging an avalanche of girders, buttresses and crumbling stone downwards through the guts of the structure. As it fell inwards upon itself, the colossal city-spire sent a cloud of dust and debris into the sky. The sound was excruciating: shearing metal, ancient stone cracked asunder; the ear-bleeding roar of the spire’s sheer mass crashing down into the hive below.

Xalmagundi stood with the Emperor’s Angels as the collapsing agglomeration drove a blizzard of ancient dust and grit down the narrow dragway. Ranko asked for the magnoculars. He brought them up to survey the new mountain of scrap and rubble Xalmagundi had created from the ancient spire, just with the power of her mind.

‘My word, it seems you can take care of yourself,’ Ranko said to her, obviously impressed. ‘Can you also take care of other things for other people, I wonder?’

Operatus Five-Hydra: Elapsed Time ?2/-417.85//SSASan Sabrinus – De Sota City

Omegon was one amongst many.

The primarch stood in the hustle and bustle of common humanity. Sweaty faces leered, shoulders barged past. Strangers manhandled him in an attempt to get by on the crowded esplanade, but they could not and would not know that they were in the presence of a galactic prince – a son of the Emperor, a lord amongst Angels.

He would have cut an imposing figure on the crowded thoroughfare. Instead the citizens of De Sota City saw one of their own, a miserable specimen of unimportance: a trademonger or cartelier, presented in hololithic semblance. The amulet field generator concealed upon his person disguised the perfection of his true form, cloaking him in the vague impression of mortal mediocrity.

Casting a casual glance across the teeming esplanade, Omegon spotted several more examples of unexceptional humanity: a slavedrover here, a merchantman's purser there, and a trafficker keeping a low profile. They were all his Alpha Legionnaires, members of Effrit stealth squad in a similar disguise to his own, with others further up and down the thoroughfare.

It wasn't difficult to blend in. De Sota City was like a swarming emporium, where everything was for sale and everyone was selling something. Some, it seemed, had come to sell their souls, and it was one such individual that had brought Omegon to San Sabrinus.

The esplanade was one of many that served the crowded galleria. Dirty tapestries hung from the buildings like decorative sashes; stained sheet roofing gave the avenue the feeling of being inside a tent, while tattered drapery rippled gently in the breeze. It housed the shabby offices of various off-world brokers, including many illegal and unlicensed operations, but that did not stop hordes of street vendors from choking up the thoroughfare with their wares and constant calling. Omegon had been feigning interest in one such parasite for the last few minutes, offering the gabbling vendor a little local currency to keep him interested, despite the fact that he had no idea what the pitcher was selling – the man was draped in small cages and carried a rod and reel of some kind.

Over the vendor's bobbing shoulder and between excitable hands that thrust the tiny cages at Omegon's face for inspection, he spotted their mark – moving with self-importance up the thoroughfare was a Mechanicum artisan. His robes were broad, the deep red of the Martian priesthood, and his ample shoulders supported

a busy cogitator bank. The illuminated hood hid a fat face that was flesh-plugged with dirty lines and needles. His lips had long since been sewn together, but a vox-unit hung around his almost non-existent neck; from this he would routinely snatch a trailing microvox and place it against one of his many chins.

This was the infamous Volkern Auguramus: Artisan Empyr, and secret Alpha Legion operative.

Keeping him in sight, Omegon tracked the artisan up the esplanade. Very few vendors bothered Auguramus, since he was flanked by four demi-clawed combat servitors. Grabbing the cage vendor by the face and pushing him out of his path, the primarch slipped into the crowd. Omegon watched as two of his disguised legionnaires made a pass through the throng from the opposite direction.

Auguramus stopped outside an off-world broker's office. Omegon walked past as his quarry looked furtively about before entering, accompanied by one of his dead-eyed drones.

Taking positions a little way up the esplanade and making rotating passes, the Alpha Legionnaires waited for him to re-emerge. When he eventually did he was in an apparent hurry, his cybernetic thugs clearing a path for him through the throng.

'Effrit Seven – the broker,' Omegon said quietly into his vox-bead.

Leaving his subordinate to investigate the artisan's dealings, Omegon and the rest stuck with Auguramus through the lower galleria.

'Looks like he's heading for the starport.' That was Effrit Two. 'We're going to have to take him soon. It's all gallerias from here on in. Very public.'

'Effrit Seven,' Omegon said in a low voice. 'What have you got?'

'A consignment for twenty thousand decatonnes of stone from a dead-world quarry in the Beta Ghastri system, to be transported by talon brig to Parabellus. That's Quall sub-sector.'

'What kind of stone?' Omegon asked surreptitiously.

‘Serebite. Inert feldsparic silica. Sparse and precious, according to the consignment slate. A lot of coin must have changed hands.’

Omegon recognised the name and, by extension, its purpose.

‘Let’s take him,’ Omegon announced over an open channel.

Auguramus continued his determined march, his clawed servitors never leaving his side, always maintaining the same equidistant four-point configuration around him. Omegon’s legionnaires began to make increasingly regular passes, with the primarch himself maintaining a deliberately less than artful tail. Before long the artisan started to notice the same faces in the crowd. His gaze began to dart around as he scanned the masses for suspicious activity – he doubled as an operative for the Alpha Legion, and so understood the dynamics and principle of a tail. What Auguramus didn’t understand was that in this case his Alpha Legion tail was making its presence painfully obvious.

As the artisan hurried across the galleria, Omegon initiated the second stage of the operation: Alpha Legionnaires in their amulet-field disguises began making crossing passes at the target. Auguramus had the measure of those following him now and recognised many of their faces, but by moving across the galleria to avoid them against the flow of the multitude, his servitors soon found it difficult to clear their master’s path.

As members of Effrit approached each other in the crowd, the legionnaires brushed shoulders and exchanged their hololithic semblances. With their amulets changing hands in choreographed patterns, it would be far more difficult for the mark to keep track of his pursuers.

Auguramus stared into the crowds, probably on the lookout for assassins or grab-teams. His eyes routinely returned to Omegon, who was maintaining a steady pace and swiftly convincing the man that he was about to be intercepted.

‘We have a boulemart coming up,’ Effrit Four hissed over the open channel.

‘Move in,’ Omegon said. This time he was not careful about how he spoke, and Auguramus – who had been peering above the heads of the crowd at him – saw the stranger’s lips give the order.

Panicked, the artisan moved with his servitor guard over to the side of the galleria. Omegon watched him sidle over to the boulemarts leading off the main esplanade, and felt his prey's temptation to run building into irresistible paranoia.

Four members of Effrit closed in on Auguramus from different directions, in plain sight, but Omegon saw the surprise evident on the artisan's face as one by one his pursuers disappeared. Each one had inexplicably vanished in the crowd.

Spinning around, Auguramus's surprise was replaced by horror as he found himself alone. His servitors were no longer there to protect him.

In their place were the four strangers who had been approaching, now staring silently. Auguramus cast about for any chance of escape. He found only more faces that he had come to recognise in the crowd, and Omegon swiftly bringing up the rear. It was too much for the poor man.

'Stay away from me!' he blurted before bolting for the boulemart – a narrow arcade lined with stalls and porch bazaars. Omegon watched him blunder straight through a rag curtain and past a handful of bewildered onlookers.

The servitors stood, silently obeying their master's last command. Omegon had simply arranged for the closing legionnaires to plant their field generators on the bodyguards as they passed, before disappearing back into the multitude. Auguramus believed that they had abandoned him and had been replaced by members of a grab-team when, unwittingly, he had dismissed and mindlocked them.

Tearing aside the curtain, Omegon found two disguised Effrit squad members holding the artisan in a porchway. They stood either side of the heavysset man, their short blades nestling in his folds of neckflesh, and one also held the microvox to Auguramus's throat.

Omegon approached with predatory composure. Auguramus instantly recognised him as the shadow that had been following him through the mercantile world masses.

'You're making a big mistake,' he yelled at Omegon. 'I have influence with the

feared and the powerful. You couldn't even imagine...'

Omegon took the field generator from his belt and dialled down through the hololithic frequencies. The image of a De Sotan nobody shimmered and warped until it finally fizzled away to the reality it concealed – an armed Alpha Legionnaire, the Legion insignia upon his chest. The other two warriors did the same.

Auguramus stared wide-eyed at his sponsors. He had no words or pleas for such a turn of events.

'Oh, I think I might be able to imagine, Artisan Empyr,' Omegon said. 'I too have influence with the feared and the powerful. They trust you with their secrets: they wish to know why you are trading them with the rest of the Imperium.'

Auguramus found it difficult to catch his breath. Omegon's reveal had been shocking enough, but he struggled to speak with two blades resting at his throat like a pair of shears.

'I'm not... selling anything...' Auguramus managed.

'I know, Artisan Empyr,' Omegon told him. 'You're buying. And you're doing what you do best – you are building. Except you're not building for us. You're building for yourself.'

'Did Master Echion send you?'

'Master Echion had his suspicions, but no.'

'What do you want?' Auguramus gasped.

'I want you to restrict your talents to the wishes of your sponsors.'

'But the technology is... remarkable. Potentially even superior to the devices on Perditus.'

'I know,' Omegon replied. 'It was I who supplied you with the specifications and the original materials.'

‘It is clearly xenos in origin. Ancient. Where did you–’

‘Where I acquire my information is my concern. Now, if you test my patience again with another ill-advised question, I’ll take your head from your shoulders and leave your fat carcass dumped in an alley.’

Auguramus restricted his response to a fearful nod.

‘You are gifted among even your kind,’ the primarch admitted. ‘That is why we came to you. That is why we took you into our trust. Do not make the mistake of thinking you were the only prospect. There are others who can still deliver what we need.’

Again, a nod of pale-faced dread.

‘Artisan Empyr,’ Omegon said, ‘why are you building a replica of the Tenebrae Pylon Array on the agri-world of Parabellus?’

‘The technology,’ Auguramus told him delicately, ‘– alien though it may be – could revolutionise the Imperium. It could secure our astrotelepathic network and the immeteorology of our trade routes.’

‘Open your eyes. The galaxy doesn’t need revolution,’ Omegon told him. ‘It suffers a little too much from that already. You’re securing the Warmaster’s Imperium before he has even won it. I don’t care if your intentions were noble – an operative of the Alpha Legion cannot expect to betray his masters and live long afterwards.’

‘D-d-don’t kill me, please...’ Auguramus begged. ‘I can still be useful...’

Omegon leant in with an ominous intimacy. ‘We are the Alpha Legion, Volkern. Whether they know it or not, we always find a use for everyone.’

# GAMMA

Operatus Five-Hydra: Elapsed Time ?2/002.68//OCTTenebrae 9-50 – Trojan Asteroid

The boarding torpedo Argolid drifted through the void of the Octiss system. Like a bullet through the black, the torpedo sliced through the frozen absence, inertial velocity maintained, course unwavering.

Octiss was like a forgotten corner of the galaxy. A debris field of rock and ice circled in the silence, begirdling the bright but bleary 66-Zeta Octiss; it was a shattered realm, a sea of cosmic offal in which pockmarked planetoids and lighter-than-air giants scudded.

Inside the Argolid, everything was a frosty darkness. Squad Sigma stood to attention in their boarding cages. Legionnaire Arkan sat strapped into the pilot's throne in front of a set of rudimentary controls. Omegon stood at the narrow strip of armoured glass that could only charitably be described as a viewport. Wiping the rime from the surface, he allowed a brighter shaft of light to cut through the gloom of the torpedo compartment. 66-Zeta Octiss was close, then. Rune banks and decking twinkled and glistened with an icy sheen.

A few hours earlier, Omegon had had Arkan shut down everything with a power signature within the torpedo – heat, gravity, life support. The legionnaires were all decked out in full plate and helmets, and had engaged the maglocks on their boots. The Argolid had fired its final burn before going dark and hurtling between the mute fury of two gas giants. The serene deep-ocean green of their smooth surfaces belied the true nature of the planets: unimaginable depth and pressure, winds thousands of kilometres in speed, eternal storms and cyclonic pits, intense radioactive fields and a comet-trap gravitational influence.

Arkan held a simple astrolabe to his helmet optics and made measurements through the cleared section. The shaft of sunlight suddenly disappeared, indicating that something of size had moved between the Argolid and the uncomfortably close Octiss star.

'Well?' Omegon looked to the legionnaire.

‘On target, my lord,’ Arkan replied. ‘As long as we don’t hit anything.’

‘We cannot afford the attention that a correctional burn might attract,’ Omegon told him, but there was little they could do about the fragments of metal and rock spinning serenely through deep space about them.

Before the reinforced nose-cone of the boarding torpedo rolled the stately magnitude of Tenebrae 9-50. Like a mountain range plummeting through the void at colossal speed, the asteroid was rugged and irregular, scarred by craters, impact sites and chasmic fractures. Arkan pointed out a deep cleavage in the asteroid rockface, a natural feature designated as the 61° 39’ Ecliptic, or colloquially to the base personnel as ‘Vacuity’s Bosom’. The deep fissure had been chosen as the Alpha Legion’s point of entry.

Omegon watched the colossal asteroid tumble towards them, rotating around its bulbous centre of gravity. The primarch was silently impressed with Arkan’s calculations. The boarding torpedo was not only closing on their target solely under the power of inertia, but it was being almost effortlessly targeted towards a jagged pit gaping in the asteroid’s midriff, all while the gargantuan rock itself slowly spun in the void.

Dropping down through the chasm, the boarding torpedo pierced the silky darkness of the asteroid’s interior. Here there was no light at all, not even the pinpricks of distant stars for company. Omegon looked to Arkan – he was monitoring a handheld chronometer.

The boarding torpedo was designed to breach the armour of enemy vessels and the amalgamate hull sections of abominate space hulks, but Omegon believed that Tenebrae 9-50 would prove more of a challenge and so had planned for alternative disembarkation protocols. Once again wiping the film of ice from the viewport, he put his faceplate to the surface. Even with his more-than-human eyesight, the primarch could see absolutely nothing.

‘Legionnaire—’ he cautioned, but Arkan’s chronometer completed its countdown with a single click.

‘Launching counterhook,’ Arkan announced, pulling on a pair of pneumatic paddles set in the runebank above. A loud pressure snap reverberated through the

torpedo as a harpoon launched from the rear of the craft, trailing an adamantium alloy line. Satisfied that the harpoon had embedded itself deep within the bedrock, Arkan reported: 'Firing grapnels; engaging resistance.'

Rather than tearing the rear out of the torpedo with a dead stop, the legionnaire brought the craft to a disciplined halt through the increasing drag offered by a heavy-duty gear assembly. Omegon could feel the hull trembling, and the assembly began to emit an grinding screech. He put out his arms to steady himself. The boarding torpedo was clearly decelerating but it was difficult to tell in the absolute darkness of the rocky trench whether or not it would be fast enough.

The Argolid suddenly lurched; the counterhook had run its line. The legionnaires were secure in their boarding cages, while Arkan was strapped into the pilot's throne. Omegon was thrown forward, but with his powered gauntlets fixed around the rail the primarch didn't travel far. Yanked back a little on its tether, the torpedo proceeded to float through the darkness, scraping against the irregular wall of the shaft before bumping to rest against the cold rock. Omegon nodded, to the legionnaires and to himself.

'Squad disembark. Vox silence until we reach the airlock.'

Firing the starboard bulkhead, Sergeant Setebos kicked off into the lightless gap. The asteroid had next to no natural gravity and the legionnaire drifted through the blackness, bolter clutched in one gauntlet. He activated his suit lamps with the other.

The halo of light around the sergeant glinted off the bottom of the shaft, showing the Alpha Legionnaires just how close they had come to a terminal impact. Floating one by one in the gloom, Squad Sigma joined him by a narrow cave entrance.

Lead on, sergeant, Omegon signed, prompting Setebos in turn to put Zantine on point. The Legion's battle-signals were a fluid exchange of deft hand movements, delivered and received with ease born from decades of use.

Flipping their own suit lamps on, the squad leapt across the open space in a disciplined column. Snagging outcrops and pillars of rock with ceramite

fingertips, the legionnaires pushed off using their legs and coasted across to each new foothold. Zantine held his bolter out in front of him, stabbing the barrel at the receding darkness of branching tunnels and hollows. It was a labyrinth of labyrinths – dark, with zagging passages leading off in every direction, including shafts thrusting both up and down into the depths. It was universally rough, rocky and thoroughly unrecognisable.

Zantine swiftly established a general heading and despite deviations demanded by serpentine crawlways, choke points and bottlenecks, he kept Squad Sigma moving with purpose through the asteroid's fractured innards. Legionnaire Vermes brought up the rear, routinely sweeping the muzzle of his bolter across the inky blackness which followed in their wake.

Vaulting across the deep darkness of a crevasse, the Alpha Legionnaires soon found themselves confronted by a sheer wall of rock. Climbing up the precipice, their armoured legs dangling behind them, they gathered about Zantine. The Space Marine was hanging next to the narrow aperture of a tunnel entrance. Omegon watched as Sergeant Setebos wordlessly assisted the legionnaire in disconnecting his power cables and stabilisers, and stripping the pack from Zantine's back.

Passing it through the narrow gap, Setebos helped Zantine in the deadweight of his ceramite suit through the opening. Squad Sigma repeated this procedure until each legionnaire had negotiated the entrance and silently re-established power, life support and sensory feeds to their battle plate.

A long crawl awaited the legionnaires on the other side. Punting their armoured forms along with their gauntlets, they increasingly encountered shattered rock and regolith hanging in the tapering space. The grit and stones tip-tapped against the legionnaires' helmets and pauldrons, and Omegon found himself pushing clusters of small rocks ahead of him so that he did not get wedged against the low roof.

The tunnel emptied out into a larger cavern and Omegon had opportunity to scatter the floating rubble out of his path, though Zantine seemed to have found a collection of much larger boulders and zero-gravity erratics, great shards of rock hung in the dark, gently bumping each other with crushing force in the crowded space.

A sudden hand signal from Zantine swiftly brought the Alpha Legionnaires to halt. Like the thunder of a closing storm, a dull rumble swept through the rocky chamber. The cavern walls began to shudder and shake, while grit and regolith that had been dislodged by the quake drifted before the Space Marines and started to clot the darkness. The great stones began to clash with the walls and each other, smashing and splintering.

Auguramus had warned Omegon and the squad about the tidal quakes. The installation itself benefited from its own gravity and structural dampeners, but the rumble of powerful tidal tectonics was still an occasional hazard, especially where the Pylon Array was concerned. The conflicting gravitational forces of the Octissian gas giants pulling at the asteroid provided them with a fractured internal structure through which to infiltrate, but it also presented a serious danger to the squad as long as they remained within it.

Grasping a trembling ledge, Isidor reached inside the tunnel opening. Legionnaires were still exiting the tight confines of the crawlspace. It was clear from the clashing crags in the cavern that rock was moving against rock – without gravity the movements were unpredictable. The crawlspace was collapsing from below, and bedrock was rising against the legionnaires' chestplates, seemingly intent on crushing them against the rough ceiling.

Kicking away and swimming through the throbbing gloom, Omegon joined Isidor in grabbing his brothers and hauling them out into the cavern. Assisted in this way, Tarquiss and Krait scrambled clear, but Vermes was struggling – already, fragments of rubble were packing the legionnaire into a crawlspace grave. The closing rock drove chisel-tipped crags and spurs at the Space Marine's body that scored lines into the indigo of his plate.

Omegon reached back into the closing tunnel. He gestured for the legionnaire to take his gauntlet but the only response he received was a few grunts of exertion over the vox.

Setebos was suddenly beside him, and he jammed the length of his bolter between the closing sides of the shuddering outlet. The weapon immediately began to bend and buckle and the sergeant instead thrust his grasping hand towards Vermes as well.

They all heard the legionnaire growl in frustration before his gauntlet gripped the primarch's own. Omegon heaved at the legionnaire, bracing himself against the rockface. Isidor and Setebos reached further in, looking for purchase on Vermes's pack and plate. Between them, Omegon and the legionnaires pulled with all of their powered might, but the asteroid had Vermes firmly in its rocky jaws. They hauled at the doomed warrior for as long as they could before the collapse threatened to claim them too.

Vermes's vox-link crackled to a deathly static, then went silent.

Squad Sigma held there for a moment, in the cold and the dark. The legionnaires stared at the press of compacted rock – a stone cold reminder that the galaxy still had surprises in store for them, and that even with the Legion's meticulous planning, they could not always be anticipated or avoided.

Keep moving, Setebos signed, slapping the pauldron of the legionnaire floating next to him. Drawing his bolt pistol and screwing the squat barrel of a silencer in place, the sergeant urged the squad on through the crowded chamber of butting rocks.

They scrambled up, around and over the smashing obstacles, with shards and fragments raining in all directions, several of them suffering scrapes and dents in their plate. As one boulder drifted at Omegon with the threat of pasting him into the cavern wall, the primarch braced himself hard against the rock face. With his gauntlets held out in front of him, he tried to slow the hefty progress of the object, before shoving back and sending it drifting away through the crowded cavern in a tumble of smaller debris.

As Squad Sigma climbed up through a twisted shaft in the cavern's roof, the craggy walls shivered to stillness once more. The legionnaires held their position for a moment, with Sergeant Setebos swimming up between different members of the team and checking for injuries.

The price we pay for unannounced entry, Omegon told him. Setebos nodded in agreement, and directed Zantine to continue, prompting the legionnaire to drag himself further up the corkscrewing passage.

Within moments he had returned. Light ahead, he announced.

The Alpha Legion fell to priming their weapons, while Omegon and Setebos joined the point-legionnaire in his climb. As they twisted up the shaft, the primarch saw that Zantine was right – the tunnels opened out into a much larger chamber ahead, the rocky ceiling of which was airbrushed in a brazen light.

Go dark, Omegon ordered, and the three of them killed their suits' illumination.

Setebos propelled himself up off a jagged ledge and floated up past Zantine and the primarch with his silenced bolt pistol leading the way. He stopped at the rim of the opening, his plate highlighted in the metallic glow. He looked down at Omegon, questioningly.

Proceed, sergeant.

Operatus Five-Hydra: Elapsed Time ?1/-216.82//XXUXX Legion Strike Cruiser Upsilon

The planning chamber was a sea of copper faces. The large obsidian table at its centre was round, and as such none had any claim to status – all who were seated there were equal. There were no strategems handed down from on high. No rituals or protocols. Only problems, and the keen minds that together would provide solutions. A Legion's wisdom.

Omegon rested his elbow on the arm of his throne, and his chin upon his fist. Sitting there, amongst solidarity in skin and bone, Omegon might have been peering at himself through a prism. Around the table sat a full squad, crafted in their twin primarchs' image, each gene-blessed with Alpharius-Omegon's many gifts and each surgically sanctified with the tautness of a noble jaw and eyes of glacial depth – eyes that burned blue with intensity, intelligence and acceptance. In turn, the obsidian surface reflected back twice their silent number in shadow.

This unanimity of the flesh made the other members of the gathering, dwarfed by their Alpha Legion comrades, seem somewhat out of place, though the psyker Xalmagundi needed little help with that. Her pallid skin and dark lips marked her out as an underworlder, though she was at least out of the rags in which Squad Sigma had found her. Her big, black eyes were partially hidden behind tinted goggles and a lho-stick drooped absently from the corner of her mouth, its sweet smoke curling into the air. Her arm was in a foil sling and bore the signs of

recent surgery.

Around her neck hung a thick metal collar, an inhibitor that checked the witchbreed's devastating telekinetic talents. Xalmagundi had objected at first, but Sheed Ranko had insisted on the precaution while the psyker was on board the Upsilon. Rather than finding it painful, like the presence of the silent Sisters, Xalmagundi had admitted that the dampener was in fact quite soothing and imposed upon her a state of not unpleasant calm and docility. This was a feature Omegon himself had insisted upon. He had seen no reason to torture his guest unnecessarily, and Volkern Auguramus had made the adjustment himself.

The Artisan Empyr meanwhile sat busying himself with the continual exchange of needles and feedlines between the flesh-sockets in his face: Omegon assumed it was a nervous tic. Auguramus had taken every opportunity to prove his usefulness and renewed loyalty, from constructing Xalmagundi's collar to enhancing the received Tenebrae security schemata with his own more technical details. The artisan turned his illuminated hood to one side as his internal logic engine updated itself.

'There seems little point in introductions,' Omegon said. 'We all know who we are.'

Auguramus seemed vaguely amused. 'I thought you all called yourselves "Alpharius",' he said, his microvox held to his throat.

'Times change,' Omegon replied coldly. No one made any further comment.

'Tenebrae 9-50,' he continued, depressing a stud on his throne to conjure a hololithic representation of the asteroid. 'Class-C planetesimal housing the Tenebrae installation. Tenebrae is an Alpha Legion base, clearance level Vermillion, and Tenebrae is our target. Does anyone need a moment to consider that implication?'

Setebos and the other members of his squad took their icy gaze off the hololithic asteroid. If they were going to object to the nature their target, now was the time. Setebos gave a slight shake of his shaven head.

'Intelligence leads us to believe that Tenebrae and the Vermillion-clearance

projects developed there have been compromised,' the primarch continued. 'A confirmed leak.'

'An operative?' Isidor asked, looking to the Artisan Empyr.

'A member of the Legion,' Omegon replied. He observed with interest the ripple of surprise that passed through the gathering, and the immediate efforts that all made to mask it.

'Recipient?' Setebos asked.

'It could be anyone,' Omegon told them gravely. 'The Emperor's spies, the Warmaster's dogs of war, xenos infiltrators. It's unimportant now. This matter must be handled decisively. The Tenebrae installation cannot fall into the hands of an enemy. We are to scratch the base, scratch the technologies operating there and scratch all base personnel.'

Omegon let the order sink in. This time the legionnaires didn't flinch.

'Why not destroy it directly, using the Beta?' Krait ventured.

'The Beta is deployed elsewhere,' Omegon replied. 'Besides, I have the morale of the Legion to consider. This would be better handled in secret.'

'Personnel compliment of the base?' asked Setebos.

'Tenebrae houses a garrison of fifty legionnaires,' Omegon told them.

'Fifty?'

'Clearance Vermillion,' Isidor reminded him.

'And an Imperial Army sentry force, a one-quarter battalion of the Geno Seven-Sixty Spartocid,' the primarch added.

'The Seven-Sixty are a well drilled regiment,' Legionnaire Braxus offered. 'I had opportunity to observe them during the compliance of the Ferinus Worlds. They won't easily spook.'

‘They’ve never had to face the Alpha Legion,’ Setebos grinned.

‘The Spartocid will keep,’ Omegon assured the squad. ‘Our first problem is gaining entry to an installation garrisoned by our own Legion.’

‘If their training and experience are a given, then it’s reasonable to expect that they will anticipate whatever we propose here, now,’ Volion muttered.

‘Why not stage an inspection?’ Charmian suggested, settling back into his seat.

‘That leaves an astropathic trail,’ Omegon reminded him. ‘Our arrival would need to be reported and verified.’

‘Plus a Vermillion-clearance inspection will need setting up, which in turn leaves its own trail,’ Isidor said.

‘I need this station to go out like a light, as if it were never there,’ the primarch said. ‘If our enemies come looking, I don’t want them to find even a grain of dust. I want them to question the validity of all the previously leaked information.’

‘What about the installation’s imports?’ Tarquiss asked. ‘Cargo crates. Ammunition drums. I got aboard the III Legion’s flagship in a bombardment shell case before Isstvan.’

‘Commander Janic is responsible for base security,’ Omegon replied. ‘I suspect he has more rigorous protocols and procedures than Fulgrim’s... distracted disciples.’

Auguramus brought the microvox to his throat again. ‘Triple checks. Different officers. It’s impossible to get anything in or out of the installation without rune certification from Janic himself. Everything and everyone is searched, documented and augur-scanned for good measure. Believe me, I’ve tried.’

‘Let’s not waste time trying to second guess Janic,’ Setebos suggested. ‘He’s Alpha Legion: he’s going to have secured the installation as well as any of us. We need something outside of his jurisdiction, and therefore outside of his control.’

‘What about the asteroid itself?’ Arkan offered. Omegon found himself nodding. Once again he turned to the Artisan Empyr.

‘Why was Tenebrae 9-50 selected for the array?’

‘Alpharius entrusted Master Echion with the actual selection,’ Auguramus said. ‘My calculations merely specified the Octiss system and the surrounding regions as counterclonically related, in terms of its dynamic immeteorology, to Chondax.’

‘Speak plainly, Volkern,’ Omegon said. ‘Tell us about the rock.’

‘That’s the genius of it really,’ Auguramus went on, unperturbed. The Artisan Empyr’s admiration came through loud and clear. ‘Tenebrae 9-50 is the site of existing clandestine operations, unknown to the rest of the Imperium.’

‘Xenos?’ Isidor enquired.

‘Indeed. The demiurg are a spacefaring race that rarely enters Imperium territory.’

‘That at least explains why I have never heard of them,’ Setebos murmured. ‘Hostile?’

‘They are technologically advanced but seem to enjoy cordial relationships with other xenos cultures, several of which were eradicated during the Great Crusade,’ the artisan told them. ‘Principally they are miners and traders.’

‘The demiurg are mining the asteroid,’ said Omegon.

‘Yes. The interior cave systems and caverns of the asteroid house a small host of automated mining machines, harvesting rare and precious metals.’

‘What about the demiurg themselves?’ Isidor asked.

‘Initial surveys showed that Tenebrae 9-50 has no established orbit,’ Auguramus replied. ‘The demiurg operate a hidden “shunt network” across our space. They use unmanned electromagnetic conveyer stations to propel resource-rich asteroids from prospecting fields to their xenos clients’ homeworlds. It takes

hundreds of years, but by the time the asteroid arrives in-system, the automated mining machines have excavated and processed the arranged shipment.'

'And no one has yet detected this?' Volion put to him. 'Throughout the two hundred years that we stormed across the galaxy?'

'We may be the first,' Auguramus confirmed. 'Imperial forces can't investigate every chunk of rock floating through the void between star systems.'

'This could work for us,' Omegon said, bringing up the hololithic network of known shafts, hollows and excavations in the asteroid. 'The xenos explorations do run close to the installation foundations in sectors Seventeen through Twenty-two.'

Zantine pointed to the surface. 'What about long-range auspectra and listening nodes?'

'The base has considerable coverage,' Auguramus said with some regret. 'Approach by gunship or Stormbird will be detected.'

'Captain Ranko will oversee our extraction by Thunderhawk upon completion of our mission, and bring us back to the waiting Upsilon,' Omegon informed them. 'Our entrance, however, will be less straightforward than our exit.'

Arkan stood, sighting down his arm through the hololith. 'What about a torpedo shot? Powered down and launched out of auspex range, obviously.'

Omegon smiled. They were trying to impress him.

'No propulsion, no flight control, no course corrections,' the primarch said. 'That would be one hell of a shot, legionnaire.'

'Yes, my lord,' Arkan assured him with a grin. 'It would be.'

Omegon considered the plan, as it was taking shape. 'Volkern, tell me: will these automated abominations provide any resistance?'

'I cannot know the alien intentions of such technologies,' the Artisan Empyr cautioned, 'but my impression is that they are armed only to defend their xenos

masters' prospecting rites. If attacked, I have no doubt they would assume their shipment was in danger and respond in kind. They strike me as having a territorial logic. They present no danger to the Tenebrae installation because the base isn't built on anything the automated machines want, or need to defend.'

'Let us hope you're right,' the primarch said.

Operatus Five-Hydra: Elapsed Time 2/003.53//TENTenebrae 9-50 – Trojan Asteroid

Omegon clawed his way across the ceiling of the cavern. The sergeant and Zantine had led the way out of the shaft. Squad Sigma followed in a column, hauling themselves up on crags and rocky ledges, their armoured legs drifting behind. Setebos had taken them all the way to the roof, and as Omegon pulled himself along, he allowed his gaze to fall upon the reason for their circuitous route.

Below them, giant machines were tearing into the rocky bowels of the asteroid in the silence of the void. Bulbous and brazen, they reminded Omegon of pregnant arachnids, stabbing into the cave floor with the stiletto points of their many legs. Set in their bellies were rotating maws of pulverising metal teeth that bored into the rock like a drill, and from their tapering abdomens dribbled a thread of molten, metallic ore which was carried away along an electromagnetically guided path. It was this web of glowing issue seeping from the monster machines that lit the cavern, though every few moments the bronze shimmer was overwhelmed by the flash of a fat beam of light; it was with these cutting beams that the automatons were taking the cavern apart.

Beams that could cut a careless Space Marine clean in half.

As Squad Sigma moved through the network of caves, it became apparent what a large scale operation the automated mineworks were. The giant mechanical mites were the backbone of the endeavour, tearing away tirelessly at the guts of the asteroid, shredding regolith and ion-bleeding source elements. But they were not the only automated machines to haunt the caves: an array of smaller, clinker-shell drones seemed to hover methodically from one mining monster to the other, monitoring production lines and administering continuous maintenance.

After a while the Alpha Legionnaires were forced to return to the cave floor, since the wall and ceiling of the chamber were dominated by the crawling lith-consuming automatons. With bolters trained upon their thick brazen armour, Squad Sigma waited as – at Setebos’s command – Krait proceeded to plant seismic demolition charges. Cave by cave, chamber by chamber this continued, with Krait wiring the caverns in sequence and the rest of them silently ducking drones and giving the larger xenos creations a wide berth.

Following a growing number of molten streams, Setebos took the squad into what appeared to be some kind of storage chamber. Being careful not to disrupt the fields guiding the liquid metal, and with his pistol held upright, the sergeant grabbed at the rough wall and brought himself to a halt. Omegon joined him at the cavern entrance.

Before them was a floating lake. Streams of liquid ore had been guided to a containment vessel: a reservoir of molten metal, hanging in the weightlessness of the great cavern and held in check by crackling brassy orbs which drifted lazily around it. It was remarkable – no trace of the heat or energy field showed up on any sensor sweep, even at close range. Little wonder, then, that the demiurg shunt-network had remained hidden from the Imperium for so long. Omegon could well imagine chambers like this throughout the asteroid, where the extracted ore of rare and precious metals was stored ready for trade, once the asteroid reached its distant destination.

Giving orders not to interfere with the pooled metal reservoir, Omegon directed Setebos and Zantine to lead the squad around the chamber. Auguramus had informed the Alpha Legion that any interference with the mining operation would likely be interpreted by the xenos machines as a hostile action. As they crawled below the drifting lake, the primarch ordered Krait to plant a double cache of hidden charges at the heart of the cavern.

Activating their suit lamps once more the Alpha Legionnaires pushed on through the darkness beyond into a tight labyrinth of smaller tunnels, with their weapons at the ready. Zantine in particular didn’t want to run into a mechanical beast in the confines of the passage without the means to defend himself.

As Omegon and Setebos extracted themselves from the disorientating network of passages, they found Charmian scrambling up and across the wall of a natural

dead end cave – a chamber seemingly untouched by the xenos mining machines. Slipping an auspex from his belt, he began to sweep the wall.

What do you have? Omegon signed. Zantine brought the auspex up to his faceplate and double-checked his measurements.

The base, Zantine responded. Through that wall.

Operatus Five-Hydra: Elapsed Time ?1/-215.65//XXUXX Legion Strike Cruiser Upsilon

‘I think that a cluster of meltabombs should handle it,’ Krait told Omegon and the gathered Alpha Legionnaires. ‘We want to burn an access way in, not bring the base foundations down on top of our helmets with a seismic charge.’

‘That still doesn’t solve a whole host of other problems,’ Setebos interjected. He turned to Omegon. ‘My lord, as soon as we breach the base perimeter then their atmospheric pressure will drop and vent into the vacuum. Life support will seal the affected section and lock off the bulkheads, leaving us stuck outside.’

‘The sergeant’s right,’ Isidor agreed. ‘Even if there weren’t alarms – which there will be – everyone on the base will know the perimeter has been penetrated. The atmospheres of their own sections will go rushing by them.’

Omegon rested his elbows on the arms of his throne. Bringing his palms together he made a pyramid from his fingers.

‘Artisan Empyr,’ the primarch said after a moment. ‘How deep do the foundations of the Pylon Array – and therefore, those of the base as well – sink into the rock?’

Auguramus nestled his microvox and narrowed his eyes.

‘As deep as you need them to go,’ the Artisan Empyr replied, with a hint of mirth. ‘They could probably benefit from being deeper, if you take my meaning. Especially with the greater frequency of quakes, caused by the proximity of the gas giants. As soon as I return, I shall set engineering crews to blasting out chambers for new seismic dampeners. Janic will not oppose me.’

‘Those crews’ll need an airlock, of course,’ Isidor joined in, chuckling. ‘To facilitate the movement of workers between the base and the excavation, as it were.’

‘Of course,’ Auguramus nodded.

Omegon allowed himself a smile. Focusing past the hololithic representation of the asteroid and onto the base itself, he zeroed in on the foundations of a tall, square structure around which the many floors of the installation were constructed.

Like a stake thrust through the heart of the base, the Pylon Array dominated the schemata.

‘What’s this here?’ the primarch asked, indicating a section just above the foundations.

‘The generatorum,’ Auguramus replied. ‘Power for basic operations: light, heat, life support and artificial gravity.’

‘What about the Pylon Array?’ asked Vermes.

‘It uses an alternative source of energy,’ the Artisan Empyr told the legionnaire. ‘The generatorum will mostly be my people: engineers, servitors and the like. Do with them as you will. There are, of course, Imperial Army sentry posts and pict-surveillance.’

‘The sentries and engineers, leave to us,’ Omegon said, ‘but we’ll need you to knock out surveillance and the gun positions though. Not a problem for one of the Mechanicum, I presume.’

‘Of course not, my lord,’ Auguramus said. ‘But won’t shutting down the pict feeds alert the sentries in the security nexus?’

‘They won’t be in the security nexus,’ Omegon told him. Auguramus looked relieved.

‘And why not?’

‘Because, artisan,’ the primarch replied, ‘you will be in the security nexus, monitoring our progress through the base and advising us of incoming threats.’

‘But the sentries...’

‘Time to get your hands dirty,’ Setebos said, slapping him on the back.

‘Don’t worry, I’m not expecting you to personally tangle with a pair of officers from the Geno Seven-Sixty Spartocid,’ Omegon said.

‘Poison,’ Braxus suggested. ‘Or electrocution.’

‘Be creative,’ Omegon finished.

Auguramus nodded slowly, wobbling his chins.

‘Sir,’ Isidor said, turning to Omegon. ‘The Geno troops aside, sooner or later we are going to have to exchange fire with our Alpha Legion brothers. They outnumber us five to one.’

‘Just because we are facing our own kind,’ Omegon replied, ‘doesn’t mean that we should abandon the principles of the Hydra – they have served our Legion well, and will continue to do so in future.’

‘So, we need to hit Janic and his garrison from all sides,’ Setebos agreed.

‘They won’t fall apart like the Night Lords did at Ceti-Quorum,’ Charmian warned.

‘Or the Angels at the Thunderhead,’ Braxus added.

‘Which in itself is predictable,’ Omegon said. ‘When we deal with our own we deal in the known unknowns. We need distractions for our brother legionnaires. Equalisers to level the field.’

‘Your plan, my lord?’ Setebos asked.

The primarch leaned in on the hololithic display. He considered their options.

‘The Artisan Empyr’s own skitarii forces could be brought into play,’ Omegon

said, nodding at Auguramus. He then pointed out a secured block on the schemata. ‘The psi-penitorium offers possibilities too. Also, our route of entry could be wired with detonators, so as to rattle our xenos neighbours into action at an appropriate time.’

Krait nodded in appreciation.

‘What about Master Echion?’ Auguramus put to the primarch. ‘He’s formerly of your Librarius—’

‘What do you know of such matters?’ Omegon shot back.

The Artisan Empyr put up a hand defensively. ‘My lord, he has an intimate understanding of the immaterium. An obvious choice for this installation’s purpose. Is he the leak?’

‘It’s possible,’ Omegon nodded.

‘Is he... powerful?’

‘Why? Do you yearn to bleed him on your unholy edifice?’

‘My point is that he’s going to be more than a match for your young lady here,’ Auguramus replied, nodding towards Xalmagundi. She was almost asleep at the table, the collar lulling her into a blissful slumber.

‘Don’t underestimate our guest,’ the primarch told him. ‘She has a crucial role to play. A conflict avoided is a conflict won without loss.’

Through the slits of her eyes, Xalmagundi looked at Omegon and then back into the deep, reflective darkness of the table.

Operatus Five-Hydra: Elapsed Time ?2/004.21//TENTenebrae Installation

The optics on Omegon’s helmet compensated for the searing flash of the melta bombs. The rock around the flash glowed before starting to bubble and spit, and dribbling away in slurps of magma before cooling into spirals of blackened rock. As it sloughed away, shafts of light began to stream through from the cavern beyond, illuminated by construction lamps. Led by Sergeant Setebos, one by one

the squad crawled through the rapidly cooling opening.

They were now within the peripheral influence of the installation's artificial gravity – their plate no longer drifted across open spaces, and the weight of the ceramite brought them down to the floor and kept their feet firmly rooted there. Omegon enjoyed the reassuring crunch of grit under his armoured boots.

Their movements became swift and certain. No longer hampered by the asteroid's internal disorientation, Squad Sigma fell into a long-practiced and familiar two-by-two stealth pattern. One of the advantages of being a beast with ten heads was having twenty eyes, constantly alert for potential ambushes and the chance of discovery. Moving up through the silent drilling equipment and unspent demolitions, the Space Marines moved between dangling cables and toppled construction lamps. Using every crag and outcrop for cover and tracking their partners as they went, the column of legionnaires swept up the freshly-bored tunnel.

Omegon fell into place opposite the lumbering Braxus – the primarch required no special treatment. He was not a dignitary to be escorted, or an officer leading the way.

He was one of many, who in turn were legion.

As Setebos reached a recently installed airlock at the end of the tunnel, the squad scattered into the nooks and crevices along the roughly excavated walls. The sergeant held up three fingers to Volion, prompting the legionnaire to back up beside the bulkhead.

Two fingers. One.

The sergeant cranked the lock and opened the thick door. Volion's bolter immediately pushed its way into the widening gap, with the legionnaire's shoulder close behind it. With his optic sighting down the length of the weapon, Volion went in, scanning the pressurisation chamber for threats.

Clear.

Squad Sigma fell in swiftly behind him. Tarquiss pulled the heavy door closed, and Isidor fell to working the lock controls, repressurising the chamber with a

breathable atmosphere.

The inner portal opened, and Volion's bolter thrust out once more. His weapon sight darted from a low bench, to another bench, to an empty void-suit, to a battered tool locker.

Setebos's voice seemed deafeningly loud over the vox, after what had seemed like hours of enforced silence. 'Let's move.'

Dropping down onto the mesh flooring, the legionnaire led the way with Setebos close behind. Filing down the narrow locker berth in pairs, their weapons tracking the pair in front in synchronised sweeps, Squad Sigma stalked through the storage area.

At a corner, Volion fell to a crouch and held up his closed fist.

The squad froze. They could hear voices.

Resting the curve of his pauldron against the wall, Volion rounded the corner – his bolter found two transmechanics changing out of their robes and into void-suits. As the first saw Volion's weapon on him, he dropped his bulbous helmet in surprise. Sergeant Setebos and Charmian moved up past Volion and strode towards them.

'My lords?' the second transmechanic asked, assuming the Alpha Legionnaires to belong to the base but clearly unnerved by their presented weaponry.

Holding his bolter under the breech, Charmian enveloped the Mechanicum underling's entire face in his gauntlet. The little man's hands clawed at the ceramite as Charmian crushed his skull, and his companion's protest died on his lips.

With a sudden glint, Setebos's gauntlet came up. The sergeant's combat blade slashed across the other transmechanic's throat, and he crashed to the floor.

Volion padded forward between the bodies, leading the way once again with his bolter, and with Setebos and Charmian falling back into position behind him.

Changing vox frequencies and checking his belt chronometer, Omegon hissed.

‘Auguramus, you miserable sack of bolts – where are you?’

A few moments later, the artisan’s voice chirped across the connection.

‘A thousand apologies, my lord. I had a few problems with the Geno officers in the security nexus. There’s blood... There’s a lot of blood... on the... uhh...’

‘Volkern, I need you to focus,’ Omegon said, calmly. ‘We’re about to enter the generatorum. Monitor the vox-channels and pict feeds for security patrols.’

‘Yes, my lord.’

Squad Sigma left the rough chambers of the base foundations and moved up through a set of maintenance stairwells. Before them stood a pressure-sealed bulkhead.

‘Auguramus,’ Omegon called. ‘We’re at M72c.’

The locking mechanism clunked, and with a gust of air the bulkhead chugged aside.

The generatorum was swathed in dirty steam. Thick cabling covered the decking like a carpet of serpents, and draped from ports in the ceiling. Thermo-crystal magnareactors boomed their supercharged energy output and occasional arcs of lightning seared between them, roasting the air. The silhouettes of grimy servitors stood obediently at their posts, while engineers prowled the machinery, monitoring and administering sacred oils.

One such hooded priest was shocked from his catechism by the sudden appearance of the legionnaires. Volion pressed on impassively with his bolter up. Before the engineer could quiz the legionnaires about their presence in the generatorum, Setebos stepped out from behind a heat exchanger, placed the muzzle of his silenced bolt pistol to the priest’s plated temple, and pushed his hood against the burning metal of the reactor vent as the squad moved silently past. The priest went to gabble his apologies but Setebos put a muffled bolt-round through his skull. Prodding the fallen body with the toe of his boot, the sergeant rejoined the rear of the column.

Moving like phantoms through the swirling clouds of oily steam and coolant,

Squad Sigma ended all who had observed their entrance. Under the stagnant gaze of their servitors, seven more engineers and the three lex-mechanics manning the generatorum runebanks died with economic efficiency. Building a murderous momentum through the rows of reactor vents, it didn't take the Alpha Legionnaires long to work up to the sentry post at the engineering section blast door.

Five soldiers of the Geno Seven-Sixty Spartocid stood at their post, beneath the surveillance pict-mounted barrel of a multi-laser sentry gun that hung silently on its ceiling rail.

The Spartocid were muscular but humourless warriors. Their helmets covered their faces – bar two grim slits for their eyes – and each sported a miserable crest, the length of which being some indicator of rank. Threadbare cloaks hung from the carapace of their shoulders, their armour being a collection of mismatched plates patched with inferior metals. They carried stubby broad-burn lascarbines with fat barrels and chunky powerpacks.

The Seven-Sixty had an illustrious history but the Great Crusade had eventually run the Geno regiment into the ground. A long forgotten and inglorious war with the abhumans on Dycenae plunged the proud warriors into obscurity. Cut off, poorly supplied and never reinforced – the Alpha Legion had found them surprisingly easy converts, promising greater glories in the war to come.

‘Auguramus,’ Omegon hissed down the vox-link.

‘I’m tracking your progress through the generatorum, lord,’ the artisan replied.

‘Jam vox-communications on the engineering level,’ Omegon told him. ‘Then take control of the generatorum sentry gun and run it down to the reactors.’

At the sudden awakening of the sentry gun, the Spartocid warriors stared up at the ceiling. They heard the whir of the multi-laser’s movement, but more importantly the charging whine of the weapon’s bulky power pack. As the weapon left them and trundled along its rail towards the steam-swathed heat exchangers, the soldiers broke into two groups – three of the warriors marched under the itinerant gun, their own carbines snug at their shoulders, while two remained on the door.

Within the oily clouds of steam, amongst the crackling reactors, Squad Sigma waited. As one of the Spartocid passed a copse of dangling cables, his helmet came in line with the silenced muzzle of Sergeant Setebos's pistol. A muffled bark sent him sprawling into his blood-splattered comrades, and they turned and brought their carbines to bear on the nest of pipes and powerlines. Arkan and Braxus stepped from the shadows and grabbed the distracted soldiers from behind, slipping plated arms around their necks and twisting their heads clean off.

As the sentry gun returned to the blast door, without the accompanying soldiers, the remaining Spartocid watched it with nervous anticipation. The post officer went for the wall-mounted vox-bank, in the hope of making contact with his missing sentries, and neither he nor his comrade noticed the wall of shadow appear and intensify in the steam bank.

The shadow became a silhouette, and the silhouette resolved into a transhuman nightmare.

Taking long, unstoppable strides, Omegon approached the blast door. He was halfway towards the Spartocid by the time they understood what was happening.

'Identify yourself,' the officer called out in his thick accent.

Omegon did not answer.

'Legionnaire!' the Geno officer insisted. 'Observe security protocols.'

As the broad muzzle of the soldier's carbine met the primarch's chestplate, Omegon snatched the barrel away in a flash and grabbed the Geno officer's throat with his other hand. As the Spartocid officer swatted uselessly at the ceramite of the primarch's forearm, Omegon slowly crushed the bones in his neck.

The soldier went for a ceremonial blade, but Omegon backhanded it from his grasp and launched him upwards, smashing his helmet into the bulky frame of the sentry gun. Something snagged, and the dead man hung suspended from it like a marionette.

Stepping over the officer, Omegon activated the blast door. As the thick

bulkhead slid aside, Squad Sigma emerged from the shadows of the generatorum. With the sentry gun and its grim puppet humming along the rail ahead of them, the legionnaires moved on.

‘Across the antechamber,’ Auguramus advised them over the vox-link, ‘you’ll find the auxiliary stairwell leading to the upper levels of the installation.’

‘Auxiliary?’ Omegon questioned.

‘Most of the tech-adepts and sentries use the lifters,’ the artisan explained. ‘The stairwell less so. It winds around the base of the Pylon Array. Some of the Imperial Army garrison are uncomfortable around the artefact.’

Passing the doors of the bulk lifter, Volion led the squad across an antechamber towards the stairwell access. Without warning, the doors of the lifter began to part, and Zantine and Tarquiss parted and slammed their backs into the wall either side of the bulk elevator. The rest of the squad moved towards the wall and out of sight.

Within, the legionnaires could hear a pair of engineers moving heavy equipment. The mesh gate rose, and Zantine and Tarquiss were suddenly there in front of them, the butts of their bolters aimed at the priests’ hooded faces. With an awful crack of bone and spray of blood, Zantine’s went down immediately. The second was thicker set and had a metallic mask of a face, and so the impact from Tarquiss’s bolter stunned but failed to drop him. Stumbling back against a load-lift servitor, he barely had time to recover before a Space Marine combat blade was plunged into his chest.

Grabbing the legs of the bodies, the legionnaires dragged them across the gateway, preventing the lifter from closing and bringing anyone else down from the upper levels.

‘Auguramus,’ Omegon called out. ‘Lock off all accessways to the stairwell.’

‘Affirmative, my lord. The psi-penitiorium is two floors up from you,’ the Artisan Empyr told him. ‘I have already authorised the prisoner transfer under my coding, as you requested. My skitarii will be expecting you, although there are twenty more stationed on the same level for emergencies.’

‘Like the one we are about to create?’

‘Yes, my lord.’

‘Send a personal vox-message to Master Echion, informing him you have a situation in the penitoria and require his immediate assistance,’ Omegon said.

‘But—’

‘Do it now, then lock off the vox-channels on the whole level.’

The legionnaires bounded up the stairwell, tightly hugging the wall as they rounded each successive corner with their bolters always trained up the next flight of stairs.

Beyond them lay the breadth of the Pylon Array.

Through the mesh of the inside wall, the Alpha Legionnaires could see the glossy black stone of the constructed xenos artefact, and feel the low hum of aethereal energies. The stone Pylon thrust up through the base’s superstructure, with entire installation floors and sections built around it.

Sidling along the mesh-covered stone, Volion signalled. Footsteps.

‘Auguramus?’ Omegon growled.

‘Only a tech-priest, lord,’ he replied. ‘Ahh, it’s my assistant and her bodyguard.’

Squad Sigma held their positions, each legionnaire silent and ready. Volion slid along the wall on his pauldron and held there on a small landing. An aged female Mechanicum priest appeared around the corner – around her head, keeping sparse lengths of straggled grey hair in check, was a metal band. A third cybernetic eye was set in the band, and the tech-priest was using it to read a data-slate, while carrying several others in her free arm.

Grabbing the priest in his vice-like grip, Volion pulled the woman past him and hurled her off the landing and down the flight of stairs. Her servitor bodyguard reacted immediately, bringing a chainblade arm attachment to roaring life and swinging it at Volion, but the legionnaire batted the drone back. He followed up

with a sudden charge, crushing the servitor into the wall with his armoured shoulder.

The chainblade bleated to a stuttering stop and the legionnaire pulled back, allowing the guard's broken body to slump to the floor.

Omegon watched Arkan check the crumpled body of the priest. It had been a long fall. She was dead; her neck was broken.

‘Auguramus. Open accessway DT367b.’

In answer, the clunk of a locking mechanism cleared and Setebos looked through the gap between the auxiliary opening and the wall. Joining him on the penititorium level landing, Omegon peered through the crack as well.

The accessway opened out onto a broad deck serviced by the locked lifter, and several passages and stairwells ran off the deck, leading to other sections of the installation. Opposite was the formidable black gate of the psi-penititorium. Two skitarii sentinels stood either side of the bulkhead in their rust-coloured robes, each bearing a bionic weapon replacement instead of a right arm. Their faces were ghoulish rebreather masks with clicking telescopic opti-sockets.

The gate opened and Omegon could hear the screams of madness and the moans of distress echoing down the wide passageway beyond. Two further skitarii gaolers pushed a tall cage on rails down the passage and out through the gate. The black metal of the cage sizzled with energy; within was an emaciated woman, naked and pale. She was curled up foetus-like in the cage bottom, rocking and groaning in pain. One of the skitarii slashed the side of the cage with the length of his electro-flail, drawing a yelp of agony from the psyker prisoner.

‘Sergeant,’ Omegon said. ‘Take your men up the lifter shaft. Master Echion is about to call for support from the Legion dormitories. Ensure it never reaches him.’

Setebos nodded his understanding and had Braxus remove the port cover of a devotional maintenance duct. One by one the Alpha Legionnaires disappeared into the wall.

‘Volion. Charmian. You're with me,’ Omegon said.

He took Charmian's bolter and fell into step with Volion behind him, as they left the stairwell and made their way across the broad deck. As they approached the psi-penitiorium gate, the two impassive skitarii guards stepped forward to bar their way.

Charmian played his part well. Not slowing, and with Omegon and Volion flanking him like an officer escort, the legionnaire walked straight at them.

'Prisoner inspection,' Charmian told them. 'You already have your clearance from the Artisan Empyr. Don't waste my time.'

After a moment's hesitation, the Mechanicum warriors parted and the gate rumbled open. Charmian didn't break his stride. With Omegon and Volion, the legionnaire marched down the wide, dismal passage beyond, being careful not to stumble on the floor rails. After passing through two more gates and between two more pairs of sentinels, the Alpha Legionnaires entered the main penitiorium.

At the centre of a runebank hub the trio encountered a crew of lex-mechanics, skitarii guards and a heavily augmented skitarii tribune, who sat wired directly into an observation throne with a spread of optics and motion-tracking matrices sprouting from his grisly head. Around the hub chamber, a series of railed passages led off into darkness. Each echoed with the collective moans of imprisoned psyker slaves.

'Where is my prisoner?' Charmian demanded as he entered. The tribune gave the approaching legionnaires a gaze of blank confusion. 'Not prepped. Not caged?' Charmian growled. 'I was assured full cooperation by the Artisan Empyr.'

A skitarii sentinel with a flamer for an arm stepped out from one of the adjoining passages. Staring at Charmian with his whirring mask optics, he silently indicated that the Space Marines should follow him.

With the pilot flame from the skitarii warrior's weapon lighting the way like a flickering candle, Omegon marched past the dreadful cries of tormented witch-kin in the psi-shielded cells. The black shielding of the cells sapped the witchbreeds of their potency, and afflicted them with a soul-draining agony.

At the bottom of the passage, the skitarii came to a halt. Two of his fellow sentinels were standing outside an open cell. They had positioned one of their rail cages at the entrance, and were manipulating a set of controls mounted on the wall. They increased the energy flow running through the psi-shielding and the prisoner threw herself from the cell and into the cage with a pained screech.

Like an animal, Omegon thought.

Out of the unbearable field, the psyker was clearly relieved. She collapsed in a heap, breathing heavily. Stripped naked by her captors, Omegon could see her ribs and the bumps of her spine through her pallid skin. The crackling cage, although made of the same draining material and visiting a similar form of debilitation on the prisoner, couldn't deliver the same intensity as the cell. This gave each prisoner a moment or two of respite and a motive to transfer voluntarily from one to the other – it was a smooth operation and, although sickened by what he saw, Omegon was impressed by the system's economy.

Sealing the cage, the skitarii began pushing it along the rail towards the hub. The Alpha Legionnaires remained close to the sentinels and their cybernetic guide, until they crossed the third intersection.

Stepping up behind the guide, Volion silently slipped the tip of his combat blade under the skitarii's forearm fuel line. With the weapon's promethium supply cut off, the legionnaire seized the sentinel in an arm lock and plunged the full length of his blade through the rustred hood and down into the warrior's brain. However, Charmian wasn't as delicate or precise as his brother legionnaire; grabbing one of the two gaolers from behind, he hefted the flailing deadweight of flesh and machinery into the air and slammed it down on the passage floor, expecting the cybernetic warrior's neck to snap across the rail.

But it did not. Surprised but fully functional, the sentinel brought its stubby volkite arm attachment up to meet the hulking Space Marine standing over it. Charmian's helmet – opened up by the shot – dashed the ceiling with broken ceramite and fragments of skull.

Volion cursed and brought his boot down savagely on the sentinel's mask, and this time its reinforced alloy neck gave a satisfying snap over the rail and the weapon slumped back to the floor.

Omegon wasted no time in dispatching the third warrior. Thrusting his gauntlet forward, the primarch plunged his armoured fingertips through the sentinel's flesh and augmented organs, and allowed the dying wretch to sink to the floor.

With her gaolers dead about the cage, the prisoner hauled her weakened body up the crackling bars. She rested her forehead against the dark metal and gave Omegon her big, underworlder eyes.

'Xalmagundi. You look unwell.'

'Get me out... of this bloody cage...' she hissed.

Smashing the lock mechanism with his bloodied ceramite fist, Omegon freed the psyker and helped her from the draining influence of its confinement.

Down the passage, they heard the grumble of the hub security gate opening. Peering up through the gloom, the primarch could make out the unmistakable forms of Alpha Legionnaires stood before the skitarii tribune and his runebanks.

It was Ursinus Echion, and a two-man escort.

The Librarian seemed to be berating the tribune, Omegon guessed, for being summoned to the penitentiary unnecessarily. Then, in mid-sentence, he stopped. Turning slowly, he peered down the dark passage. The Librarian had clearly sensed something: in all likelihood, Xalmagundi's presence – raw, potent and unchecked. He took several cautious steps towards the passage opening. His copper face creased with fury.

Omegon and the psyker melted into the shadows, followed swiftly by Volion.

'Summon the rest of your skitarii,' Echion called back at the tribune. 'You have an escaped prisoner. Sound the alarm!' As deep klaxons rang through the hub, Echion turned to his Alpha Legion escorts.

'Call a squad down here. Now.'

# DELTA

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Unslipping his bolt pistol from its belt holster, Echion strode up the passage. The tribune had hit the general alarm and the hub became a wash of bloodshot light and ear-splitting noise. The psyker slaves screamed and shrieked in their cells, banging on the thick, black metal of the doors and howling like agitated animals.

As he and his escort reached the bodies of Legionnaire Charmian and the skitarri surrounding the breached cage, Echion scanned the gloom with his pistol. The cell door at the bottom of the passage was wide open...

Moments passed. The Librarian seemed unsure.

‘Where’s that squad-’

Before he could finish, the Space Marine nearest to him dropped his bolter and began clawing at his own battle helm. Echion grabbed his arm to steady him, but the ceramite began to crumple under his gauntlets. Some terrible force was crushing the legionnaire inside his armour like a great invisible vice, his pauldrons and chestplate buckling with a metallic groan.

Echion turned to find his other escort pinned against the wall, gurgling and choking.

Both of the stricken warriors screamed, and then fell slackly to the floor in a crushed, bloody heap. Echion whirled around, his pistol ready.

‘Show yourself!’

Echion was suddenly struck by an incredible force, with such ferocity that his armour caved in across the plastron. He crashed through the cage and became entangled in the crackling bars, which proceeded to creak and contort around him. Another invisible blow sent him spinning boots-over-shoulders through the darkness.

He cracked off a succession of blind shots from the floor, but the dreadful unseen force smashed into him again and again, hurling both him and the misshapen cage down the passage and cracking them against the ceiling.

A final burst of automatic boltfire ran the pistol dry, but before the Librarian could reload the weapon he was torn from the wreckage of the cage by an impact that split his already crumpled chestplate. The invisible blow sent him through the air and into the deep darkness offered by the open cell door.

‘I’m here, Alpha.’ A slender silhouette presented itself in front of the opening, before willing the cell door to slam shut with a metallic boom.

Ursinus Echion pushed himself painfully to his feet.

‘Janic, respond,’ the Librarian coughed into his vox-link before spitting blood at the filthy cell floor. ‘Code Crimson. Repeat, Code Crimson.’ He changed channels. ‘Strategarch Mandroclidas, respond.’

No answer came. He switched again. ‘Artisan Empyr? Does anyone read me?’

He glanced about in the absolute darkness of the cell, sweat beginning to bead his brow. He shuffled over to the door. Closing his gauntleted fist, he began to pound on the dark metal. The psi-shielding was crippling the Librarian. There was no response to his vox-calls. He was alone in the dark.

Or at least, he thought he was.

Omegon had seen enough. Given time, he was sure that the psyker would find a way out of even this prison...

‘It seems my concerns were warranted, Master Echion.’

The primarch watched the Librarian’s face change rapidly from the shock of realising that he was not alone in the cell, to alarm as he recognised the voice addressing him. Through his helmet’s augmented vision Omegon observed the psyker’s shift in demeanour.

Echion put his back against the withering wall of the cell. Without the advantage of his own helmet optics he could not make out the primarch in the nullifying

darkness.

‘My lord,’ Echion said, trying to remain calm and keep the anger and frustration out of his voice. ‘I do not understand. A dangerous psyker is loose. The Pylon Array is under threat, exactly as you predicted.’

‘Not our finest hour, is it Echion?’ Omegon told him honestly. ‘The only consolation you might take from this is that you were infiltrated by your own.’

‘Infiltrated...’ the Librarian repeated, ‘by the Alpha Legion?’

‘Yes, Echion. By the Legion.’

‘Is the base compromised, then?’ Echion asked, his eyes darting in the blackness.

‘In every way imaginable.’

Echion’s shoulders sagged. The Librarian was beginning to understand.

‘I’m deeply sorry if I failed you in this, my lord,’ Echion said. ‘Our enemies-’

‘Our enemies are no longer your concern,’ Omegon interrupted him. ‘No one will ever find a single shred of evidence that this installation ever existed.’

‘You’re going to scratch the base?’

‘The base, the xenos technology, and all who could speak of its existence. Many will suffer the ultimate price for this failure.’

The Librarian nodded. ‘I understand. Might I ask-’

The darkness lit up with the bark of bolter fire.

The bolts tore into Ursinus Echion, spraying blood and ceramite fragments across the walls. Only when the Librarian’s body hit the floor did the fusillade cease, leaving Omegon and Volion in the darkness of the cell, the crash of automatic fire still ringing in the enclosed space.

‘Xalmagundi,’ Omegon called. ‘Get us out of this bloody cell.’

The cell door gave a tormented creak before being ripped from its hinges and spinning off down the passageway towards the chaos of the penitoria hub, where Omegon could make out ranks of alarm-rallied skitarii attempting to secure the block. He stepped out of the cell, flanked by Volion.

Emerging from a side passage, the naked Xalmagundi – all pallid skin and bone – joined them. As an underworlder she seemed quite at home in the darkness. She gestured up the corridor towards the waiting tech guard.

‘You wish me to destroy them?’

‘Of course,’ Omegon said, rolling a dead sentinel out of its tattered robe. ‘But first, put some clothes on.’

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‘And then we fire the detonators,’ Krait said with confidence across the midnight sheen of the table.

‘No,’ the primarch corrected him. He tapped a series of studs on the arm of his throne, and the obsidian surface blinked to become a document of glyphs and symbols flashing by. Letter by letter, numeral by numeral, the document was being decrypted.

‘Don’t underestimate Janic. Echion’s specialisation gives him primary responsibility for the array, but he’ll leave security to Arvas Janic.’

The gathered legionnaires examined the commander’s service chronicles as they spooled past.

‘Know the mission, know the man,’ Omegon instructed. ‘And he’s led a host of them himself. As you can see, this was always the history of a legionnaire destined for captaincy: several awards from previous commanding officers, including Thias Herzog and Ving Neriton; commendations for both innovation and constancy under fire. Veteran’s crux. The Ouroboron. Victories at Ignatorium and Five-Twenty Nine. Had some bad luck with the K’nib at Selator Secundus, but didn’t we all, and lost three legionnaires during the eradication of the Thorium Abominiplex – which is unsurprising given how many troops were

lost by Lord Mortarion. Still, these are the service annals of a ruthlessly efficient and inventive commander. A record of which the Legion is justifiably proud. It's almost a shame we are going to have to ruin it.'

'Only three of these were garrison duties, though,' Isidor indicated, running his finger across the glassy surface. 'A submerged "halting site" – whatever that is – on the ocean world of Bythos...'

'Tactical outpost 'Epsilon/Loco', masquerading as a giga-container, routinely exchanged between bulk lifters over Isstvan IV,' Setebos interjected.

'And a Class-3 listening post in the ruined Gardens of Ptolemy on Prandium,' Isidor continued.

'None of which were compromised,' Omegon reminded them. 'His security logs for Tenebrae confirm a mix of sentry points and alternating patrols that he has implemented for the Geno troops at his disposal. He will not trust these alone, however, and will have a contingency strategy established between his own legionnaires for a perimeter breach – he will not rely upon allies or operatives, if things get out of hand. With his own squads he favours staged fallbacks, tactical demolitions, promethium cleansing, gauntlet approaches, mined cut-routes, wired bulkheads and blackouts.'

'As soon as Janic knows the base is under attack,' Setebos extrapolated, 'his legionnaires will likely be drilled to lock it down and restrict the penetrating force to non-essential sections.'

'Aye,' the primarch admitted. 'He'll trap us, and send for Legion support. There'll be an arranged protocol.'

'Probably our intercept annex on the Belis-Aquarii Telepathica relay,' Isidor suggested.

'The Phi, possibly even the Gamma,' Arkan added. 'Neither vessel is stationed far off.'

'Either way, we've got to hit both the astropathic choir in the chantry and everything in the surface hangar,' Omegon told them, 'before Janic enforces his lock down. There is some good news, however. The logs show a heavy reliance

on strategic simulation and statistical estimations run through the base cogitators. Both of which we have.'

'What do the numbers say?' Isidor asked.

'That an attack on the Tenebrae installation would be largely futile. It does not factor in, however, detailed previous knowledge of the base, familiarity with Alpha Legion tactics or possession of the simulation data itself.'

'Meaning, unsurprisingly, Janic has never considered infiltration by his own Legion,' Setebos said, raising his brow. 'You have re-run the cogitations, my lord?'

'Yes,' Omegon told them. 'Tenebrae is no different from any other target. Standard Legion tactics apply. Probabilities of success increase in line with multiple approaches and avenues of attack. We have to hit Janic's garrison from every angle – keep our brethren busy while we complete the operation.'

'Sir, if I may,' Isidor said. 'It is likely that there are operational elements that Commander Janic has withheld from the logs. Definitely from operational personnel, like the Artisan Empyr, and possibly even from his own legionnaires. He's Alpha legion, my lord. He will have some surprises waiting for us. Something we haven't anticipated.'

'Indeed,' the primarch agreed, nodding his head thoughtfully.

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'Sergeant Setebos reports heavy resistance on the dormitory level,' Volion reported from his vox-link. 'Tarquiss is down.'

Omegon was about to reply but the order stuck in his throat.

There was something wrong. Something out of place.

Striding up the penitorium passageway towards the hub with Xalmagundi and Volion, the primarch's focus was on the skitarii forces sealing off their exit. But as they passed a side passage it became apparent that they were not alone in the corridor – he caught the briefest impression of movement and the dull glint of

ceramite.

Time seemed to slow. The flash of muzzles lit up the dungeon gloom. The crash of boltfire was everywhere, like thunder rolling up the passageway.

‘Suppressing fire!’ Omegon ordered as he grabbed Xalmagundi and tore her out of the crossfire. Volion responded with a withering hail from his bolter, directed down the side passage – Alpha Legionnaires were moving up towards them, using the recessed cell doorways for cover.

Emerging low, the primarch gunned down the nearest three legionnaires before disappearing back around the corner. Almost immediately, Volion’s suppression fire resumed, giving Omegon precious moments to think. He adjusted the channel on his vox-link.

‘Sergeant,’ he called. ‘Report!’

Across the vox he could hear the incessant bark of exchanged boltfire.

‘We’ve been outmanoeuvred on the dormitory level, sir,’ Setebos admitted. ‘Taking casualties. Exits blocked.’ The sergeant was drowned out by his own pistol for a moment. ‘The dormitories don’t exist on this level. The schemata misled us. We walked straight into a firefight.’

Omegon felt his lips curl into an involuntary snarl.

Also missing from the base schemata had been the secret entrance to the psi-penitiorium through a dummy cell at the bottom of the side passage. Presumably to facilitate the retaking of the level in the event of a containment breach, garrison legionnaires had used the hidden portal to answer Ursinus Echion’s initial calls for reinforcement in the penitoria hub. Now the ambush Omegon had planned for the requested legionnaires had been thwarted by a counter-ambush – mixed in with feelings of anger and frustration, the primarch couldn’t help but feel a sting of pride at Janic’s tactical prowess.

Explosive bolts tore up the walls and floor around Omegon and Xalmagundi. The skitarii forces flooding the hub had started working their way down the main passage, leading the way with optimistic blasts from their weapon-limbs. Once again, the primarch had to pull the delicate psyker out of harm’s way,

shielding her with his ceramite bulk.

‘Reload!’ Volion called. Instead of offering covering fire with his bolt pistol, Omegon unclipped a pair of grenades from his belt and tossed them down the side passage.

The twin blasts rocked the corridor, killing two more garrison legionnaires outright and knocking several more from cover and into Volion’s deadly sights.

This could not continue. With Space Marines closing on the junction from one direction and skitarri sentinels from the other, the only fallback position was Xalmagundi’s open cell, but Omegon had no intention of returning to the soul-sapping darkness. He was battling his own Legion: surprises were to be expected. It was time, however, to wrestle back the advantage.

‘Xalmagundi!’ he shouted, loosing a flurry of bolts. ‘Time to rattle some cages!’

The psyker understood.

Lowering her head and closing her big, black eyes, Xalmagundi concentrated on her immediate environment. A new sound joined the din of gunfire: the shriek of metal contorting; locks shredding and hinges warping.

A thick cell door close to the junction blasted out of its reinforced frame and struck the opposite wall with crushing, unstoppable force, followed by another, and another. It was as though pressure was building in each successive cell down the passage, reaching an explosive crescendo which burst the psi-plate shielding from the walls. As the booming force worked its way through the penitentiary, ripping doors from containment cells on both sides of the corridor, the advancing troops halted. The doorways that had provided them with much-needed cover were now like horrible pressurised deathtraps.

Garrison legionnaires were crushed against the walls, or knocked from their feet by the impacts. Those fortunate enough to be between doorways were now caught out in the open, and more fell to Volion and Omegon’s renewed fire.

As the final cell door smashed into the wall, they worked their way up through the carnage, stepping over the armoured bodies of crushed legionnaires. Where their brethren had survived the explosive telekinetic assault, Volion and the

primarch kicked weapons out of reach and put their blades through smashed helmets with deadly precision.

In the cells, the prisoners began to stir.

The building insanity of the tormented echoed in the darkness of ruptured doorways. Witchbreeds were hissing, cackling, sobbing and speaking to themselves in dark tongues. They knew they were free, but seemed suspicious of their sudden freedom.

Omegon saw emaciated men, women and mutants emerging from the supposed safety of the shadows. Ducking into the only cell whose door was open rather than missing, he almost trampled a waif of a young girl, who had a grotesquely enlarged skull and misty eyes.

‘Go!’ Xalmagundi urged him, motioning the primarch past the child-witch and into the open cell. At first Omegon thought she was going to embrace the child out of some kind of maternal instinct or mutant solidarity, but instead Xalmagundi threw her out and slammed the cell door shut, and put her back against the draining black metal.

Volion activated his suit lamps and made for the caged ladder that led both up through the ceiling and down through the floor of the dummy cell. The primarch shook his head in irritation – the shaft seemed to run through all levels of the Tenebrae base, but hadn’t been part of the original schemata. Infiltration would have been a great deal easier with knowledge of that, he mused.

As Volion pointed his bolter up the ladder and began to ascend, they heard the sound of gunfire beyond the cell door. The skitarii sentinels had evidently worked their way down to the abandoned junction and opened fire on the emerging witch-kin. However, the sound of tech-guard weaponry was soon replaced with the harrowing shrieks of deviant psykers unleashing their fury and myriad talents upon their attackers.

Omegon couldn’t even imagine what the witchbreeds were doing; the various ways in which their terrible vengeance might manifest. Something particularly vile was happening right outside the door, he was certain of that. It sounded like bones breaking... or stretching.

‘Sergeant, are you still with me?’ Omegon called across the vox as he and Xalmagundi climbed up after Volion.

Setebos crackled back through the din of combat at his end. ‘Receiving you.’

‘Status, sergeant?’

‘We’re another legionnaire down, my lord,’ Setebos reported. ‘Janic misrepresented the schemata. There was no dormitory, only a Legion ambush.’ Again the sergeant’s voice was drowned out. ‘Krait has used the last of his melta bombs to break through the walls to the assimularum and the refectory. This level is flooded with garrison troops. Janic is throwing everything he has at us.’

Omegon listened grimly to the sergeant’s report. Arvas Janic had been more than equal to the task of securing the base. The commander had withheld information even from his closest allies. He had had dummy tactical objectives constructed and had organised reactionary gauntlets and ambushes, in order to stall any attempt to conquer the Tenebrae installation.

The game wasn’t over, however. The primarch had not played his trump card.

‘Sergeant,’ Omegon returned down the fragmenting vox-link. ‘I appreciate your difficulties. Rest assured that we have encountered a few of our own. Your orders are to extricate your squad by any means necessary and return to the lifter shaft. Make your way to the surface. We’ll meet you there. Commander Janic might be throwing everything he has at us. We, however, have barely begun.’

‘Yes, my lord,’ Setebos replied with cold assurance.

‘And, sergeant – tell Krait it’s time to fire the detonators.’

‘Received. He’ll be pleased about that, at least.’

As they climbed, Omegon felt a string of deep, shuddering vibrations in the rungs of the ladder. Beyond the shaft he could hear the havoc that they had unleashed throughout the base: Space Marines were engaged in desperate firefights, using the base like a giant tactical training ground, Alpha Legionnaire against Alpha Legionnaire. The corridors and stairwells echoed with the footfalls of the Geno Seven-Sixty, bolstering sentries and creating hold points.

Witchbreeds were out of their cells and tearing through the penitoria, using the full extent of their devastating powers upon their Mechanicum gaolers.

The installation superstructure itself was trembling.

He switched vox frequencies.

‘Artisan Empyr...’

‘My lord, thank the Omnissiah,’ Auguramus replied over the channel. ‘You must assist me. I’ve been discovered.’

‘You are not the only one, Volkern,’ Omegon replied coldly.

‘The Seven-Sixty are trying to gain entry to the security nexus,’ Auguramus babbled.

‘Are you secure?’

‘For now. I see from the pict feeds that they are bringing in cutting equipment for the bulkhead.’

‘Listen to me carefully, Auguramus,’ Omegon said.

‘I’m trapped in-’

‘Artisan!’ the primarch roared. ‘We are working our way to you. I need you to stay focused.’

‘Yes, lord,’ Auguramus replied miserably.

‘Re-route all sentry guns on the dormitory level to support Squad Sigma,’ Omegon told him.

‘I don’t know if I can do that from here,’ Auguramus told him, panic creeping back into his voice. ‘I fear that they have locked out some of the-’

‘You will find a way, Artisan Empyr,’ Omegon assured him as he climbed.

‘The penitoria hub reports being overrun.’

‘And I want that chaos to spread. Contact Strategarch Mandroclidas and your senior skitarii tribune, and inform them that the witchbreeds have escaped containment and used their powers to enslave the Alpha Legion.’

‘They won’t believe that.’

‘Auguramus,’ Omegon told him with an adamantium edge to his voice. ‘You will make them believe it. There is little the unknowing won’t believe about the unnatural. Play on their prejudice and fear. Besides, the base is in danger and the Legioness Astartes have been compromised. You are the ranking operative. The commanders will, of course, check in with each other – the skitarii will independently confirm the containment breach. Strategarch Mandroclidas will report Alpha Legionnaire hostilities.’

‘Yes, my lord.’ Omegon could almost hear the artisan’s mind working through the possibilities.

‘Do this, Auguramus. We will be with you directly. Omegon out.’

Above him, Volion stopped climbing without warning.

‘What is it?’ the primarch enquired.

‘High-tier operations level,’ the legionnaire said. ‘Security nexus, base command, and the Astropath chantry.’

‘If the schemata are to be trusted,’ Omegon cautioned.

Turning a pressure wheel in the wall of the shaft, the primarch opened a duct hatch and peered through. The corridor onto which it opened was empty.

‘Legionnaire, take this ladder straight to the surface hangar. The mission continues according to plan. It is imperative that no legionnaire escapes Tenebrae 9-50 to tell of our intervention here. Take out the hangar sentries, and provide covering fire for Xalmagundi – she can use her gift on the Stormbirds, shuttles and Mechanicum lighters.’ He turned down to the psyker. ‘I mean it, Xalmagundi. Take no chances. When I get up there I want to find nothing but scrap.’

‘You can count on it,’ she assured him.

Omegon checked his chronometer. ‘How soon could you start working on velocity and trajectory?’

‘As soon as I can see what I’m manipulating and where it’s going,’ the psyker reminded him.

‘Both will be hard to miss once you’re up there,’ the primarch said.

‘I told you, I’ve never handled anything of this size before.’

‘I have faith in you, Xalmagundi,’ Omegon said. ‘Now go, both of you. Time is against us.’

‘What about you, my lord?’ Volion asked.

‘The chantry falls to me.’

‘That was Vermes’s responsibility.’

‘Aye, it was,’ Omegon replied.

‘Let me accompany you, my lord,’ the legionnaire insisted.

The primarch climbed up and out of the portal. ‘No. Get Xalmagundi to the surface. Only she can complete the mission. You have your orders, legionnaire.’

Closing the hatch on the Space Marine’s impassive optics and Xalmagundi’s underworlder eyes, the primarch slipped back into the Tenebrae base.

Operatus Five-Hydra: Elapsed Time ?1/-214.12//XXUXX Legion Strike Cruiser  
Upsilon

‘So Xalmagundi wrecks the hangar and Vermes’s blade silences the choir of Astropaths,’ Sergeant Setebos confirmed.

Omegon nodded. ‘The Tenebrae installation must disappear like the light from a snuffed candle. We cannot risk survivors. We cannot risk craft fleeing the base. We cannot risk astrotelepathic reports of our operation.’

‘With any luck, the garrison won’t know what to report,’ Arkan offered, ‘and they’ll certainly think twice before reporting that the base is being hit by their own Legion.’

‘We can hope,’ the primarch said.

‘Assuming we can infiltrate the installation and confound the garrison,’ Isidor put to him through the spectral shimmer of the hololithic display, ‘how do we actually scratch the base?’

‘Demolitions,’ Krait volunteered immediately. ‘Clean. Simple.’

‘Or we could overload the generatorum magnareactors,’ Tarquiss offered. ‘That worked well enough aboard the Carnassial.’

‘Or, instead of confounding the garrison,’ said Volion, ‘we could slit their throats one by one and then destroy the installation at our leisure.’

‘I think you underestimate what you’re dealing with,’ Auguramus suddenly piped up, his voice a metallic echo through the microvox.

‘Explain,’ Setebos hissed.

The Artisan Empyr looked to Omegon, who nodded slowly.

‘You talk of detonations and overloads,’ Auguramus went on. ‘This isn’t a rockcrete bunker or ammunition dump. The Pylon Array is a colossal artefact of ancient xenos design, built to exact specifications and using materials the properties of which we are only now just beginning to appreciate-’

‘What was this abomination constructed to achieve?’ Isidor interrupted.

Omegon adjusted the focus of the hololithic display. Pulling out, Squad Sigma was treated to a phantasmal representation of the asteroid, which the primarch turned about its ungainly axis. The rock was a pockmarked vision, dominated on one side by a deep and well defined crater, the result of some ancient collision in which Tenebrae 9-50 had come off as the victor. Closing in, Omegon revealed phase field generators constructed about the hollow’s circumference, and the

sheen of an energy barrier cutting off the space within the crater from the void. Within the crater wall, a surface hangar had been excavated, and the rocky regolith of the crater floor was dominated by smaller security structures.

These were centred around the colossal reach of the Pylon Array.

It was like a great needle or obelisk, reaching for the stars but blacker than the void itself. The broader base of the abominate construction was fussy with scaffolding, but its tall, tapering pinnacle pierced the environmental containment field and reached out from the crater like an antenna sprouting from a parabolic reception dish.

‘Imagine, for a moment that you understood anything about empyreal immetereology,’ the Artisan Empyr continued. ‘We consider the warp a reality alternate to our own and consisting wholly of raw energy. An ocean immeasurable. Powerful. Unpredictable. Deadly.’ Auguramus cast his gaze down the line of identical faces. ‘But also, useful. Mankind has sought to brave the dangers of the warp in order to build an empire and embark upon a crusade of galactic conquest.’

‘You remind us of a history of which we are a part,’ warned Braxus.

‘A crusade mounted and an Imperium held together by the promise of communication and cooperation. Our thoughts and our vessels traverse this tumultuous realm. When storms wrack the warp, then the immetereology becomes unstable – both destructive and obstructive. Astrotelepathic communication and navigation become impossible.’

‘Get to the point.’

‘Within an ordinary meteorological system,’ Auguramus went on, ‘like an atmospheric weather system, there are areas of high and low pressure. Storms form in response to the extreme pressure differences in these areas.’

‘And?’ Charmian prompted, refusing to get caught up in the artisan’s growing excitement.

‘The immetereology of the warp is not dissimilar. The unfathomable workings of the Pylon Array produce an area of unprecedented calm within the warp. The

range of astropathic communication is extended.'

'But this creates storm fronts and immetereological disturbances in the regions beyond,' Isidor said.

'Exactly!' Auguramus almost shrieked. 'An unintentional consequence of the xenos technology's operation. Far more useful than anything possessed by the other Legions.'

'A consequence that Alpharius has used to further the Warmaster's aims,' Omegon informed the gathering. 'Upon building this technology in the Octiss System, and charging it with immaterial energies sapped from the Mechanicum's psyker slave-stock, we have succeeded in enveloping bordering regions in a communications blackout: Draconi, Tiamath, Chondax and the Scellis-Trevelya straits. We have not only restricted the White Scars Legion to the Chondax system, which was Alpharius's promise to Horus, but we have kept Jaghatai Khan veiled in ignorance. He is blind to the atrocities of civil war and deaf to Dorn's commands to return. Without the Scars and the Great Khan at the Emperor's side, the Warmaster's victory will be assured.'

A murmur ran through the group. Omegon waited a moment before continuing.

'The loyalists have also been denied reinforcement from the Regnault Thorns, the Seventh-Suckle Parthenari Shieldmaidens, and the Uzurian Sabreteurs: seventy-two thousand fighting souls, all delayed at Draconi. The Legio Cybernetica Maniple Theta-Iota and the Legio Gigantes Titan Legion were also lost, presumed destroyed, while in transit through Scellis-Trevelya.'

'A powerful weapon indeed, my lord,' Isidor said.

'You see then, that this technology cannot be allowed to fall into the hands of the enemy,' Omegon insisted. 'That is why, powerful as it is, it must be destroyed. Utterly.'

'Seismic charges and super-critical magnareactors cannot provide the kind of assurance we need,' Auguramus added. 'The very material from which the Pylon Array is constructed – remaining in certain configurations – is likely to maintain a residual immaterial presence. My calculations show that a blanket orbital

bombardment could provide the coverage required, but even with the Beta at your disposal, or one of the Mechanicum vessels, Tenebrae 9-50 would simply disintegrate and spread recoverable evidence of the Pylon Array's existence all over the system.'

'There has to be a way,' Setebos said, to which several Squad Sigma legionnaires nodded in agreement.

'There is,' the primarch told them. 'We need to destroy the entire asteroid.'

Isidor frowned. 'I thought we just agreed that was unwise.'

'The demiurg shunt these asteroids inertially between conveyer stations,' Omegon said, 'but if another force could be applied to the rock mid-voyage, a small deviation would soon make a large difference. Especially if the asteroid's velocity could be increased.'

The primarch and the Alpha Legionnaires turned their heads in unison to look at the dozing psyker.

'Enough force to change the rock's trajectory and put it – base, Pylon Array and all – into a nearby star.'

Too numbed by the psi-dampening collar to mount any objection, Xalmagundi gave them all a lazy, cynical glance through the ghostly representation of the asteroid.

'I've never... manipulated... anything... that size... before,' she mumbled.

'Then the true extent of your powers has never been tested, but from what I've heard already, I'm impressed. And that was working against gravity and atmospheric friction.'

'What is our exit strategy?' Setebos put to Omegon.

'Yes,' Vermes agreed. 'Rolling the asteroid into 66-Zeta Octiss does seem an elegant solution to our problem, but that means we need a tightly scheduled evacuation.'

‘The Upsilon will be stationed just out of sensor range,’ the primarch said. ‘I’ve put Captain Ranko personally in charge of our extraction. He will leave with the finest from his Lernaean squad as soon as our mission is underway, and evacuate us from the Tenebrae surface in the Thunderhawk Chimerica.’

Isidor nodded before looking over at his sergeant. They both seemed satisfied.

Omegon checked his chronometer and stood. As the gathered Alpha Legionnaires and operatives did likewise, the hololith flickered and evaporated.

‘We have preparations to make and little time to make them,’ he said. ‘Before we go, let me say this: I understand the conflict in your hearts, how one may beat for duty while the other bleeds for your Legion brothers who will be sacrificed. But this is civil war. It is a time of confusion, and realigned loyalty. We have many heads but we act as one – one Legion with a single will. We are a union of the alike and the like-minded. We will not tolerate treachery. We will not allow our compact to fracture. We will not suffer the short-sightedness of our brother Legions, nor the averted gaze of the wider Imperium. We are Alpha Legion and we take the long view.’

The assembled legionnaires thumped their fists on the table in salute.

‘As Alpha Legion, however, you are expected to think for yourselves. If anyone here today wishes to absolve himself of this responsibility; if he finds that under these most unique of circumstances he cannot imitate the action of the hydra; if he chooses not to be the whetstone upon which his Legion is sharpened, then he shall suffer no censure or judgement. He can walk away knowing that there are others who would be his brother’s keeper, and he can wait out this mission in the brig of the Upsilon before returning to duty.’

Omegon looked down the line of identical faces, searching for any seed of doubt or misgiving. He saw only cold-blooded determination in their arctic eyes.

‘Brothers. Hydra Dominatus.’

‘Hydra Dominatus,’ Setebos returned, followed by the rest of the squad.

‘Then let our enemies see the fallen fruit, sitting warm and inviting in the afternoon sun,’ the primarch said. ‘And let us be the serpent beneath, hidden and

waiting to strike.'

Operatus Five-Hydra: Elapsed Time ?2/005.17//TENTenebrae Installation

Omegon moved like a ghost through the unfolding catastrophe. Leading with his bolt pistol, but clutching his combat blade at his side like a hooked talon, he slipped through unnoticed.

The installation passageways, sections and stairwells were bathed in the bloody light of warning lamps, and the spinning emergency beacons that added a sickly amber urgency to the base's interior. The primarch's movements were swift and his footfalls light, and lost beneath the insistent wail of klaxons. This had meant that those who had been unfortunate enough find themselves in his path had not heard Omegon's caving of skulls, breaking of necks and slashing of throats as he approached.

Near the armoury, a three-quarter squad of Spartocid soldiers rounded a corner ahead of Omegon. They were clutching their lascarbines to their chests and running with their faded cloaks rippling behind them, and a Geno subalterix clutched a vox-unit to the side of his plumed helmet, trying to get clarification over gunfire crowded channels. Upon sighting Omegon, in his Legion plate, the group slowed and angled the broad-burn muzzles of their stubby weapons at him. They had clearly heard the equally unbelievable reports either of Alpha Legion infiltrators compromising the base, or warp-possessed garrison legionnaires running amok on the penitorium level.

He had to think fast. Aiming his bolt pistol down the adjacent empty corridor, Omegon repeatedly squeezed the trigger, emptying the magazine at some unseen target. The primarch then feigned alarm and began furiously reloading.

'Get down here!' he roared at the hesitant Spartocid.

More a conditioned response than a strategic assessment of the situation, the subaltrix and his men rushed on, their carbines presented and ready. As they burst around the junction corner they opened fire, slashing the empty darkness beyond, scanning for an enemy but blinded by the blurred flash of their own weaponry.

Omegon allowed them to take a few more steps before he moved. Bringing up his freshly loaded pistol he blew gaping holes through the backs of their skulls. Even as the squad began to drop around him, the subaltrix urged his soldiers to keep firing in the mistaken belief that they were still being engaged from the corridor.

Moving on from the massacre, Omegon reached the thick doors of the lifter shaft – through the metal he could hear the exchange of gunfire. Stabbing the tip of his combat blade between the edges and twisting it, he managed to prise the doors open and claw the mesh gate upwards. Omegon peered down the shaft and then up into its gloomy heights.

Aside from the cacophony of battle on multiple levels, the most distinctive sound rising up from the installation depths was the haunting madness of liberated witchbreeds, shrieking and howling in the darkness. They were unleashing hell throughout the base and indiscriminately venting their fury and unnatural powers upon skitarri sentinels, genic Spartocids and Legion forces alike. A sudden eruption of directed soulfire ripped through the lifter doors several floors below, lighting up the darkness and blasting a garrison legionnaire into the shaft wall opposite. Omegon watched him fall, writhing in spectral flame, before smashing straight through the roof of the lifter car.

The primarch felt a tremor through his gauntlets. Moving across to the rocky passageway wall, he put the side of his helmet to the stone. A series of grinding rumbles came from the base superstructure.

He was running out of time.

Reloading his bolt pistol with the last magazine, the primarch set off once again through the installation's ear-splitting, labyrinthine murk.

The chantry was a small block cut off from the rest of the operations level by bulkheads and a series of sombre archways. Each displayed the symbol of the Adeptus Astra Telepathica, a single eye looking down upon Omegon as he slipped past.

Pushing the muzzle of his pistol through the green velvet drapes, the primarch found the Astropaths within the sanctuary. There were tarot wafers spread on the

polished floor of the chamber.

They were on their knees before him. All men. All hooded. All terrified. They looked pleadingly up at him with their grisly, empty eye sockets. At first this confused Omegon, until he realised – looking down at the abandoned wafers – that they had already seen what was to happen next. They bowed their heads and pulled back their hoods.

Omegon was not one to prolong suffering unless it served a purpose. He fell to doing what was necessary: hovering his bolt pistol at the back of the Astropath's heads, he executed each in turn, quickly and efficiently.

Turning to withdraw through the blood speckled velvet, Omegon stopped. There were three Astropaths, and yet there were four sub-sanctuaries leading from the chamber. Only one of the chambers had its drapes drawn.

Storming forward, he swept the drapes aside and came face to face with the chief chorister – a lean, elderly Astropath – standing before a lectern. The floor about her was of polished metal into which hexagrammatic wardings and seals of safeguarding had been carved. She was clutching a thick staff bearing the icon of the all-seeing-eye, and mumbling the encryption rites of astrotelecommunication.

‘Desist,’ Omegon growled at her, bringing the pistol up.

Suddenly there were arms everywhere, thick and armoured in heavy plate.

Two garrison legionnaires lunged from hiding, inside the sub-sanctuary entrance. They reached for the primarch's pistol with grasping hands, hauling it off to one side as the weapon spat a trio of rounds that narrowly missed the mediating Astropath and mauled the lectern. Two more legionnaires cannoned into him from behind, sending the wrestling throng crashing into the sub-sanctuary wall. Another shot went into the panelling before the pistol was out of his grip.

‘Remember,’ the sibilant voice of an officer cut through the violence, ‘I want him alive.’

This was all Omegon needed to hear. Reaching for the legionnaires' sheathed combat blades hanging at their belts, Omegon spun and buried the first blade in

its owner's neck. He knew there was a weak spot between the gorget casing and the helmet seals: he knew this because his own Alpha Legion plate sported the same weakness. He stabbed at two more of his assailants with the second blade, and pierced through the eye lens of the last.

Momentarily shrugging off the attentions of the wounded Space Marines, the primarch threw the knife point-over-pommel down the length of the sub-sanctuary. The weighty blade thudded into the side of the Astropath's hood, and the chorister collapsed against the lectern before tumbling to the ward-inscribed floor.

With her message silenced, Omegon heaved himself and his assailants into the other wall, running the huddle of power armoured legionnaires one into another. Slamming an articulated elbow joint into a faceplate before following with a gauntleted fist to another, Omegon took a shoulderplate in the gut. Slammed into the far wall and cracking the panelling, he brought his knee up savagely, again and again, buckling the warrior's ceramite. Pushing him away, Omegon readied himself as another legionnaire came at him with his fists, and the pair of them dissolved into a graceful blur of half-parried pummelling and powerful counter strikes.

As the legionnaire lunged, Omegon stepped aside. Allowing the Space Marine follow his path of momentum, the primarch got his gauntlets around and under his backpack. He fingered the release clasps and tore the apparatus from the legionnaire's suit before smashing him down into the floor with the dead weight of it.

He turned just in time to smack aside an oncoming combat knife – the legionnaire wielding it had been the one Omegon had first stabbed, and the Space Marine's gorget and plastron were slick with blood where he had extracted the blade. Omegon smashed the pack across the legionnaire's helmet before planting it in the midriff cabling of another, bending him double.

The graceless brawl continued and the sub-sanctuary rang with the crash of armour plate. Fibre bundles crackled and contracted. Ceramite buckled beneath superhuman blows. The primarch moved from opponent to opponent, checking the lethality of oncoming attacks and following up with as much lethality as he himself could spare before being forced to engage the next.

The bloodied knife was back. It slashed and thrust, and he snatched the wrist and gauntlet of the wielder in an attempt to wrest it back again. Omegon wrenched the offending arm towards the ceiling and turned beneath it, hearing the seals crack and cabling snap. With one fluid movement he twisted the legionnaire's arm to breaking, before ramming his helmet first into the wall panelling with a crunch of vertebrae. The combat knife, Omegon had pried from the grip of the Space Marine's broken hand and kept for himself.

Clutched like a dagger, Omegon brought it around in a searing arc and drove the blade tip through the half-blinded warrior's intact optic and into his brain. With a sickening squeal of tortured ceramite, the primarch tore the weapon free again and allowed him to drop to the floor.

Only one of his four opponents was still on his feet – the legionnaire struck down with one outstretched gauntlet and knocked the slippery blade from the primarch's grip. Omegon shoved him up against the wall panelling, and brought his ceramite knuckles in again and again, each economic strike followed swiftly and pneumatically by the next.

The faceplate crunched. An optic cracked.

Again the legionnaire's grasping gauntlets reached for Omegon, but again the primarch beat them back, and grabbed the dazed warrior by both sides of his ruined helmet. He fired the pressure seals and ripped it from the Space Marine's head.

He looked down upon copper skin and harsh blue eyes that were like unto his own. That didn't stop him clutching the helmet by its piping and smashing the crest and bonding studs savagely into the legionnaire's unprotected face over and over until he dropped to the metal floor.

Heaving with exertion, he stood with his back to the curtained doorway. 'Commander Janic, I presume,' he muttered between breaths. He turned, the bloody helmet still in his hand. 'I have to commend you on-'

Janic's bolter barked. Omegon felt the mass-reactive shells punch into his armour, and detonate within his flesh. White hot agony flared, though his superhuman body fought to resist it.

Omegon's legs went out from under him.

Dropping the legionnaire's ruined helmet, he stumbled and crashed back into the wall. With his pack sliding down the panelling, the primarch slipped down onto the metal floor, his spilled blood beginning to flood the hexagrammatic carvings.

He saw Arvas Janic standing over him in the sub-sanctuary doorway, amongst the green velvet drapes. The commander's face was a taut mask of bitter intent, his helmet maglocked to his belt.

'You were saying?' the commander said, venturing forward.

Omegon reached down his armour and found three fat, ragged punctures in the lower cuirass. He explored each opening with a fingertip and checked the position of each wound. To the side of the navel. Above the hip. Omegon nodded to himself. They had all missed the spine. He knew his body had gone into overdrive, with different organs, suprahormones and engineered processes interacting to reduce the severity of the wounds.

Placing his gauntlets and boots flat on the floor, Omegon pushed his backpack a little farther up the wall. Through the superstructure he felt a distinctive rumble. Something more than a distant quake.

'You were saying?' Janic repeated.

'Warning shots?' Omegon asked.

The commander nodded.

Omegon coughed blood inside his visor. 'I was saying that you should be commended for the first class security and counter measures employed on this base.'

'Don't patronise me,' Janic warned with a snarl. 'If it were truly first class, you wouldn't be here.'

'I see your point,' Omegon told him. 'Yet particular highlights were your ambushes here and on the dormitory level. You knew we'd try and silence the chantry – a priority target – and you even left the dummy dormitory on the

schemata. Very clever.'

'Enough of this,' Arvas Janic said. 'Remove your helmet. You will identify yourself and your designs on this installation. You will reveal how you came to know of its location. You will admit to your true Legion and deliver the name of the commanding officer foolish enough to despatch you here on a suicide mission.'

'You sound confident of that, commander,' Omegon muttered with grim humour.

'Now. Later. It matters not,' Janic promised. 'We are renowned for our patience, and our methods of persuasion. While my legionnaires comb this base for evidence, my superiors will hunt your sponsors back along the trail you have undoubtedly left in coming here. Meanwhile, I'll have my Apothecary take you apart, piece by piece – starting with your feet and working up – harvesting your organs one by one until you feel like volunteering the information I wish to know.'

'I don't suppose you would believe that I am an Alpha Legion officer and that this base is under inspection?' Omegon asked the commander.

'No,' Janic returned with a sneer.

'Or that this is a simulation designed to test your suitability for promotion?'

'No, sir, I would not. As I'm sure you're aware, this is a Vermillion-clearance operation. Our orders here come directly from the very highest authority: the primarch himself. So too would authorisation for the inspection or simulation to which you allude. A lot of my men are dead. What kind of an inspection involves brother legionnaires spilling each other's blood?'

'A very serious one, commander,' Omegon said, wedging his backpack into the gap between the lectern and the wall. 'Now, let me tell you what I really know, and why I agree with you that it matters not.'

Below them both the base superstructure trembled again, more fiercely this time. Omegon motioned the commander in closer. Bringing the bolter up between them, Janic leaned in.

‘Hydra Dominatus, brother,’ the primarch whispered.

Janic’s brow furrowed. He straightened. His face screwed up in fury and frustration.

‘What?’

He backed away, and then his eyes fell upon the helmet clasped in Omegon’s hand.

His helmet, unlocked from his belt.

The sub-sanctuary suddenly became a maelstrom of howling, wind churned debris. Escaping air screamed through the wide vents in the wall above Omegon’s head, and every loose object in the chamber was dragged towards the open bulkheads outside. Drapes, discarded weapons, and the bodies that littered the chamber all whipped past the primarch in a few seconds of shrieking turbulence, dragged through the narrow doorway by the irresistible expulsion of artificial atmosphere. One moment Arvas Janic was before the primarch with his bolter in hand, and the next he was being smashed through the doorways and corridors of the section and whipped along a roaring path of least resistance to the yawning lifter shaft beyond.

Alone in the evacuating sub-sanctuary, Omegon’s backpack held him wedged in place against the wall, and he was further anchored by the maglocks of his boots, freshly activated at the rumble of the demiurg mining machines cutting up through the foundations of the base.

As they had done so – jarred into action by Krait’s territory-threatening trail of planted demolitions – the xenos monstrosities had smashed up through the same pressurised system of locks that Squad Sigma had been careful to use upon infiltrating the installation. The mining machines’ entrance had been less discrete, however, and as a result of the automatons cutting and tearing their way in, the base had been depressurised, breached and had lost its artificial atmosphere to the void.

Suddenly there was silence.

As predicted, the cogitator banks governing the installation’s environmental

controls had sealed off the breached lower levels. It had all been over in moments.

Deactivating the maglocks, Omegon hauled himself up and scrambled for the exit. With one gauntlet over his wounded stomach, the primarch threw himself around corners and through the crooked layout of the operations level.

Half running, half stumbling through the command section, he found the chambers devoid of Alpha Legion officers or the Geno Seven-Sixty Strategarch. Only servitors wired into their thrones remained – sitting there with their jaundiced, lidless eyeballs and rot-retracted lips. A large runescreen flashed through a sequence of levels, with most blocks and sections blinking crimson. It wouldn't take long for the demiurg mining machines to crash through an emergency bulkhead, or to cut their way up and through to the upper levels.

Stomping past the vox listening posts and long range auspex stations, Omegon came across a security bulkhead that had a rough hole burned through the thick metal. He recognised it immediately: the security nexus.

Clutching his abdomen, the primarch risked a moment to peer through the plasma-torched opening. Inside, the chamber was dark and lit only by banks of pict-screens. Strapped into an observation throne that moved between the rows of screens on a rotating gimbal, Omegon found the fat carcass of Volkern Auguramus. The Artisan Empyr had indeed been discovered by Spartocid soldiers, and his robed body was riddled with merciless las-fire. The screens told of more murderous desolation across the base.

Omegon saw Alpha Legionnaires exchanging fire with skitarii sentinels and rallied contingents of the Spartocid. The screens glowed ghoulishly with flash of lascarbines, flamers and boltguns. Witchbreeds in all their wretched variety pounced on their victims, tearing them apart with supernatural strength, or vomiting forth warp-flame and arcs of green lightning. One of the witches – a gangling, twisted creature – had dislocated her jaw like some kind of snake and was screeching at soldiers and sentinels with deadly effect.

The garrison legionnaires had been faring better in the lower levels with their well-practiced formations and tactics, but the appearance of great brazen xenos machines bursting up through the decking had proved more of a challenge. The

bulbous, arachnoid monstrosities buzzed through the Alpha Legionnaires' armour with their heavy cutting lasers.

The confusion and carnage had a terrible beauty to it. An admirable chaos, that was a true reflection of the doctrine of the hydra – its multiple heads striking in disparate but coordinated devastation.

Leaving behind the corpse of the Artisan Empyr, Omegon ducked back out of the nexus and stumbled down the adjoining passage. The lumen strips overhead fizzed and went out, only for the darkness to be abruptly interrupted by the searing flash of intense cutter beams searing up through the metal decking. He skidded to a stop to avoid a pair of the beams, sizzling with alien energy and slicing their way across his path, before ducking through a mangled bulkhead.

Beyond a decimated scriptorium and around an agonising succession of corners, Omegon found his way to the lifter shaft. The lifter doors and mesh gate remained open, though the lifter car was lost to the vacuum ravaged depths. Heaving himself onto a maintenance ladder with some difficulty, he began the torturous climb to the surface.

Each rung was a new and singular torment. His abdomen felt as though burning stakes were being hammered through it. Blood slicked his grip, and dripped from his wounds down into the yawning shaft below.

He was approaching the top when he realised that he wasn't the only one climbing the shaft – the gloom echoed with the approaching clatter of a many-legged colossus. Looking down, Omegon could see the brassy glint of a xenos machine making its way unimpeded up the sheer vertical; the stabbing motion of its legs chewed up the metal walls and propelled the monster with ease.

The ladder lurched from its mountings and then began to rock back and forth as the abomination started to chew, its rotating maw of pulverising teeth grinding at the metal. As the ladder twisted, buckled and came away from the shaft wall entirely, Omegon made a desperate leap across the shaft for the hangar level doorway.

With a single gauntlet he managed to reach the ledge, hooking onto it like a grapnel and ignoring the agony in his belly. Reaching up with his other hand too,

he hauled himself upwards only to find that the doors were still closed.

Chewed up within the rotating maw of the demiurg machine, the ladder whipped about the open space, slicing through the blackness and thrashing against the walls. The primarch let go of the ledge with one hand and hammered on the closed doors before letting the arm fall again. His gaze fell to the xenos arachnoid looming up beneath his flailing legs. The rotating maw of metal teeth roared its mechanised intention to devour him alive.

Sparks suddenly lit up the gloom as boltfire rippled off the machine's thick brazen armour and interlocking teeth. The mining machine continued unperturbed, the grinding mouth still gaping open, but two braces of Legiones Astartes grenades clunked down from above and disappeared into the belly of the beast.

Many pairs of gauntlets grabbed at his arm and backpack, and heaved him up into the light. The cacophonous din of the grenades detonating within the brazen belly of the beast was suddenly silenced by the forced closing of the lifter doors.

As Omegon was dragged away he could see nothing but blotchy brightness – his plate's autosenses had been momentarily overloaded. As they re-calibrated from the darkness of the shaft to the relative light of the asteroid surface, he could hear legionnaires about him calling for Sergeant Setebos. Gunfire still rattled in the distance.

'He's wounded,' came Isidor's unmistakeable voice.

'I'm fine,' Omegon grunted. 'Status report.'

Goran Setebos appeared, and helped him to his feet.

'But my lor-'

'There's no time, sergeant,' the primarch warned.

The hangar deck was a vision of telekinetic destruction. Omegon could make out a wrecked Thunderhawk, and a mountain of scrap that might once have been a flight of Mechanicum lighters, humpshuttles and Imperial Army transports. Xalmagundi had been thorough, as instructed.

The deck was also littered with bodies: Spartocid sentries, whose responsibility it had been to guard the hangar.

‘Stay down, sir,’ Isidor said as a las-bolt round seared the air above their heads. Falling to a pained crouch behind the shattered remains of an engine column, the primarch surveyed the scene. The hangar opened out onto the crater that Squad Sigma had observed in hololithic representation. At its centre, thrusting out of the crater like an accusatory finger was the black shaft of the Pylon Array.

‘We lost Zantine,’ Setebos reported, indicating the armoured body laid out nearby. The legionnaire had a neat bolt hole in the side of his helmet.

‘Janic has at least two squads of legionnaire snipers stationed in hides about the crater wall. Those positions weren’t on the plans either.’

‘What about Xalmagundi?’ Omegon asked.

‘She’s with Volion and Braxus,’ Krait told him. ‘Out in the crater.’

‘There’s something else, my lord,’ Isidor announced.

‘Speak,’ Omegon said.

‘Captain Ranko and the Chimerica are overdue. Long overdue. No vox contact, either.’

‘Take me to Xalmagundi,’ the primarch ordered.

Leading the way with his blade drawn, Setebos stepped between the larger rocks and regolithic rubble. Omegon followed nearby, still holding a gauntlet across his bolt-chewed abdomen, with Krait and Isidor offering suppression fire close by.

Overhead, Omegon saw the reason that his autosenses had struggled to adjust outside of the lifter shaft: above the crater, there was not a scrap of void. The raging surface of the Octiss star reigned above them, filling the firmament with an overwhelming, golden radiance. The phase field generators were the only shield standing between Squad Sigma and the intense radiation of the star.

Two more las-bolts rocketed past Omegon, and he gave silent thanks for the star's blinding glare, without which Janic's sniper legionnaires would have had a far easier job of picking them off.

Dropping down into a hollow, Omegon and the legionnaires found Xalmagundi. Volion crouched near the psyker with his boltgun aimed over her shoulder, whilst Braxus complained to himself behind a boulder that was receiving more than its fair share of attention from the legionnaire snipers.

Xalmagundi was knelt in the regolith, with her outstretched fingers in the deep grit and dust. She had been given back her tinted goggles, through which she stared up into the blinding heavens. Her pale skin was streaked with sweat, from her ongoing efforts to shift the trajectory of the great asteroid and send Tenebrae 9-50 into the embrace of 66-Zeta Octiss.

The witchbreed did not look well at all. Black tears rolled down the sides of her face from her large, underworlder eyes.

'Volion?' Omegon said as he skidded down into the boltfire-molested hollow. 'Projection?'

'Both trajectory and velocity are good, my lord,' the legionnaire reported. 'Tenebrae 9-50 and the Pylon Array are destined for the surface of that star.'

'Omegon?' Xalmagundi croaked. 'Is that you?'

The primarch crossed the hollow and knelt down beside the psyker.

'It's me.'

'I can't see a damn thing,' the underworlder told him. Her words were accompanied by a further cascade of midnight tears down her porcelain cheeks. 'I'm blinded.'

'You have done well, Xalmagundi,' the primarch told her. 'Very well.'

'Can your people fix me?' the psyker asked. 'Can they fix my eyes?'

Omegon held out a hand towards Setebos. The sergeant glared at him for a

moment before turning over his bolt pistol.

‘They can fix you, Xalmagundi,’ Omegon promised.

The shot echoed around the crater. The psyker’s fragile body fell across the grit and rubble. What was left of Squad Sigma stared at Omegon.

‘Permission to speak freely, my lord,’ Setebos said.

Omegon settled down in the hollow, his armoured knees deep in the dust.

‘Granted, sergeant.’

‘That strikes me as a waste,’ Setebos told him. ‘She could have been of further use to the Legion.’

‘That strikes me as sentimental,’ Omegon replied. ‘Which truly is a waste. That’s not your reputation, sergeant. It was my impression that there is little you wouldn’t do for your Legion. Little you wouldn’t sacrifice for victory.’

‘And nothing in my conduct on this mission suggests otherwise,’ the sergeant returned. ‘It’s just there seemed no reason to execute the girl.’

‘She was expendable, sergeant,’ Omegon told him. ‘As are we all. Regicide pawns in a greater game.’

‘Where is the Chimerica?’ Isidor asked warily. ‘Where’s Captain Ranko?’

After a pause, Omegon reached for the clasps on his helmet. The seals disengaged and he tossed it into the dust.

Sheed Ranko regarded Setebos and Squad Sigma with his own eyes. The legionnaires stared at the captain in mute disbelief.

‘A greater game,’ Ranko repeated.

The captain could still taste his primarch’s blood. Omegon had mixed a little of his shed vitality with the wine the pair had taken on the Upsilon – an offering of the primarch’s thanks, and much more. He had tasted remembrance and come to

know the secrets of his gene-sire: early days spent by the twins on their distant homeworld, scheming their way to supremacy; the paradoxical horror of the alien Acuity; the gradual realisation of what would be required of each of them in the years still to come...

Ranko had borne the burden of this offering and had done what his primarch had asked of him a thousand times before. He had taken his place. He had acted like, spoken like, all thought like his primarch.

He had been Omegon.

Braxus scrambled down from his position and through the grit of the hollow.

‘What’s happening?’ the legionnaire rumbled.

‘Some details of the mission have been withheld from us,’ Setebos explained without taking his gaze off Ranko. ‘The captain is going to explain them to us now.’

Ranko gazed back at Setebos. Then allowed his eyes to wander among the gathered legionnaires.

‘What does your primarch ask of you?’ he put to them.

‘The Chimerica isn’t coming, is it sir?’ Isidor asked. When Ranko didn’t answer, the legionnaire said, ‘There is no Thunderhawk extraction. Lord Omegon isn’t coming for us.’

‘No,’ the captain said finally.

‘Options?’ Setebos said, turning to the squad.

‘The garrison Stormbird and other craft have been destroyed,’ Krait told him.

‘There is only one way off this rock,’ Volion told them. ‘The boarding torpedo. We have to return to the Argolid.’

Setebos grunted. There was little time to discuss alternatives.

‘Fastest route?’ he asked.

‘Temperature’s too hot on the unshielded surface,’ the legionnaire replied. ‘Even in our plate. We have to go back through the base and the mineworks.’

‘There’s not much chance of that,’ Braxus said, checking the ammunition left in his bolter’s magazine.

‘Better than the chance we have against that,’ Isidor countered, thrusting a ceramite thumb up at the raging heavens.

‘Then we’re decided,’ Setebos said, rising to his feet.

‘You won’t make it,’ Ranko told them. ‘You don’t have even one tenth of the time you’d need to make that return journey, even without hostilities.’

‘You would ask us to just sit here on this rock and die?’ Setebos spat back.

‘I ask nothing of you,’ Ranko told them honestly. Then he repeated, ‘What does your primarch ask of you?’

Setebos and the legionnaires looked at one another. The sergeant nodded.

‘Everything.’

# EPSILON

Operatus Five-Hydra: Elapsed Time ?1/138.11//XXBXX Legion Battle-barge Beta

The command deck of the Beta was quiet. Officers and retainers went about their business calmly and professionally. There was little indication that the Alpha Legion battle-barge had just launched a massive orbital bombardment and that a crater-dashed mountain range on the planet below was about to be levelled.

Alpharius stood in his ceremonial plate to one side of the bridge, gazing out through the great viewports at the unfolding apocalypse. The agri-moon of Parabellus was an unremarkable planetoid – a red dustball streaked with dark ranges of crop-yielding ziggurat mountains. Even from orbit, the angular terraces were visible, giving the moon the appearance of an abstract map complete with lines and contours.

The primarch watched the largest of the black smears disappear beneath the flare of the first cataclysmic detonation. Down on the surface, entire mountains were collapsing and terrace-farming communities were being annihilated by the heaven-dropped fires of armageddon.

On the other side of the command deck and clad in an identical plate, his twin primarch Omegon regarded the growing armada of Alpha Legion vessels following in the Beta's ponderous wake.

'Something vexes you, brother,' Alpharius called out across the deck.

'No,' Omegon replied.

'It was not a question.'

Omegon turned and crossed the bridge, finding his twin enjoying the spectacle of the moon's destruction. 'If you must know, I was thinking about trust.'

'A valuable commodity,' Alpharius replied, 'that can be both bought and misplaced.'

‘It was misplaced in Volkern Auguramus, certainly,’ Omegon said. Now millions of people have to die as a result.’

‘It is most precious – and strongest – when it occurs naturally. Like between brothers,’ Alpharius said.

‘Tell that to Horus,’ Omegon muttered.

Alpharius turned from the destruction and narrowed his eyes at his twin.

‘Fair point,’ he conceded. ‘Trust can be hard to come by, even amongst the closest of kin.’ Alpharius let the point hang between them before moving on. ‘Volkern Auguramus was a gifted artisan. An operative in whom we placed great trust. He took the gift the Cabal had bequeathed us to aid the Warmaster, and perverted it for his own gain. That is why this unfinished Pylon Array on Parabellus must be destroyed, why the Parabellan farmers must now die with their crops in a nuclear winter. It is also why you left one of the galaxy’s foremost Artisan Empyrs gutted like a common thief, in a back alley on San Sabrinus, I presume.’

A legionnaire approached them from the rear of the command deck.

‘My lords,’ he interrupted, ‘the captain wishes you to know that the strike cruisers Lambda and Zeta are inbound, as well as the Alpha.’

‘Very good,’ Alpharius nodded.

‘At least that’s the end of the matter, then,’ Omegon said, returning to their conversation.

‘Perhaps,’ Alpharius replied. ‘You believe the Tenebrae installation to be in jeopardy?’

‘I’m still trying to confirm that.’

‘We shall have to do better than that, brother,’ Alpharius insisted.

‘I interrogated Auguramus myself.’

‘No leaks?’ Alpharius raised an eyebrow. ‘No sponsors? No collaborators? He didn’t even sell the designs for the Pylon Array.’

‘Parabellus was a personal project, it seems,’ Omegon maintained. ‘The trail is dead. There are no leads taking us anywhere else. I told you, I handled this myself.’

Alpharius turned to the waiting legionnaire. ‘Tell the captain that as soon as the Alpha has joined us, to set a secondary course for the Chondax system.’

‘Chondax?’ Omegon asked, a little surprised. ‘The Khan? But what of the original plan?’

‘Somebody’s interested in Tenebrae, I’m sure of that,’ Alpharius muttered. ‘Our Navigators tell us the immetereology in that region is calming; our Astropaths believe that messages might get through once more. Our operatives report that the White Scars Expeditionary Fleet has almost completed its compliance and that the Khan could soon make preparations for warp transit.’

‘We don’t know—’

‘We do,’ Alpharius said. ‘Perhaps it’s Malcador, or the Angels of Caliban – somebody has gotten to the Tenebrae installation. We must accept that and move on. We must read the moves ahead of time, and position the fleet to the greatest advantage. Dorn will recall the White Scars, and the Khan’s loyalty is still firm. If the Warmaster is to succeed then we cannot allow the V Legion to reach Terra. Are we in agreement, brother?’

‘Of course,’ said Omegon, nodding slowly. ‘Aren’t we always?’

# OMEGA

Operatus Five-Hydra: Elapsed Time ?1/138.28//XXBXX Legion Battle-barge  
Beta

Omegon stepped inside the confines of his chamber. Like his brother, he did not keep stately rooms or quarters of rank distinction and significance. His dormitory cell was small and sparse, and apart from its temporary nature it was no different from that of any Alpha Legionnaire.

He stood there in the darkness, his ceremonial plate resting against the cell door, and breathed deeply. Whenever he closed his eyes he found the horror of inevitability waiting for him – the scalding truths that the Acuity had presented to him and Alpharius.

The Third Paradox...

He rubbed his eyes with a finger and thumb; his mind ached with responsibility. He thought on the tortuous network of contacts and relationships, secrets and lies, betrayals and bought allegiances. They were spread out across the galaxy and closing like a net. Omegon saw himself at the knotted heart of the entanglement. He would tug on various threads and exert his influence however he might, but he also felt drawn between the increasing demand of their concerns.

The primarch activated the chamber's floating lumen orbs. His arming cabinet was open, and his operational plate – a suit indistinguishable from that of any other Alpha Legionnaire – sat on its reinforced frame. His boltgun, blade and pistol were displayed also, as well as his helmet, which seemed to fix him with the dead gaze of its blank optics.

Beside it, covered by a loose shroud, was his other suit of armour.

To the casual eye, it was plain and unadorned.

'Let him see the fallen fruit, sitting warm and inviting in the afternoon sun,' Omegon whispered to the empty battle plate. 'And let me be the serpent beneath.'

Hidden and waiting to strike.'