

THE HORUS HERESY®

*John French*

# TALLARN: EXECUTIONER

*The battle begins*



The scattered forces of the Imperial Army strike back against the Iron Warriors

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## THE HORUS HERESY

*It is a time of legend.*

**The galaxy is in flames. The Emperor's glorious vision for humanity is in ruins. His favoured son, Horus, has turned from his father's light and embraced Chaos.**

**His armies, the mighty and redoubtable Space Marines, are locked in a brutal civil war. Once, these ultimate warriors fought side by side as brothers, protecting the galaxy and bringing mankind back into the Emperor's light. Now they are divided.**

**Some remain loyal to the Emperor, whilst others have sided with the Warmaster. Pre-eminent amongst them, the leaders of their thousands-strong Legions are the primarchs. Magnificent, superhuman beings, they are the crowning achievement of the Emperor's genetic science. Thrust into battle against one another, victory is uncertain for either side.**

**Worlds are burning. At Istvan V, Horus dealt a vicious blow and three loyal Legions were all but destroyed. War was begun, a conflict that will engulf all mankind in fire. Treachery and betrayal have usurped honour and nobility. Assassins lurk in every shadow. Armies are gathering. All must choose a side or die.**

**Horus musters his armada, Terra itself the object of his wrath. Seated upon the Golden Throne, the Emperor waits for his wayward son to return. But his true enemy is Chaos, a primordial force that seeks to enslave mankind to its capricious whims.**

**The screams of the innocent, the pleas of the righteous resound to the cruel laughter of Dark Gods. Suffering and damnation await all should the Emperor fail and the war be lost.**

**The age of knowledge and enlightenment has ended.**

**The Age of Darkness has begun.**

## ~ DRAMATIS PERSONAE ~

### *Imperial Army*

TAHIRAH, Lieutenant, First Squadron commander, Amaranth Company, Jurnian  
701st

LACHLAN, Gunner, 111 Executioner *Lantern*

MAKIS, Driver, 111 Executioner *Lantern*

VAIL, Loader, 111 Executioner *Lantern*

UDO, Sponson gunner, 111 Executioner *Lantern*

GENJI, Sponson gunner, 111 Executioner *Lantern*

HECTOR, Corporal, commander, 112 Executioner *Deathlight*

BREL, Sergeant, commander, 113 (field attachment) Vanquisher *Silence*

JALLINIKA, Gunner, 113 (field attachment) Vanquisher *Silence*

CALSURIZ, Driver, 113 (field attachment) Vanquisher *Silence*

SELQ, Loader, 113 (field attachment) Vanquisher *Silence*

RASHNE, Gunner/signaller, 114 (field attachment) scout vehicle *Talon*

### *Imperial Personae*

AKIL SULAN, Merchant prince of the Sapphire City

### *Others*

JALEN

*'War is the death of rationality. Only in retrospect do events seem driven by choice and judgement. Those who fight rarely know why they fight, and those that command them rarely see clearly enough to make any true choices besides saying "we fight them here because this is where we are".'*

– Aedolus, savant-militant to the Imperial court

*'Destruction is not obliteration. When we destroy we create. Break a sheet of glass and you create sharp edges.'*

– Aphorism of the Gobinal Blade clans, Terra  
(age unknown)

*'Speak to me of the kingdoms we made amongst the stars.  
No, we will not speak of those dead places,  
Of their coverings of night, and their quieted songs.  
Speak to me of the greatness which was ours.  
No, we will not speak of dry teeth rattling in dead mouths.  
Speak to me of the peace that will be ours again.  
No, we will not speak of the silence that will come.'*

– *Song of Lament at Fall of Night*, Tallarn  
(later era)

*The remakers of Tallarn arrived like driftwood carried on a breaking wave. A thousand ships tumbling into space from nowhere: first one, spinning end over end, then a second and then hundreds. They rolled in the starlight, ectoplasm melting from their black iron hulls. All were warships of the IV Legion, the Iron Warriors. They were not graceful galleons of war, but slab-hulled world breakers, armoured in pitted plates, their flanks and spines nests for guns and launch bays.*

*The Iron Blood arrived last, thrusters firing down the length of its hull as soon as it tasted real space. The great ship shook as it forced itself into a controlled arc of flight, its superstructure shuddering, engine vents glowing white with heat. It ploughed a path through its scattered fleet. Some of the smaller ships managed to regain enough control to move out of its path, but not all could escape.*

*The Purity of Fire spiralled into the Iron Blood's path. The great battle-barge's prow hit the torpedo destroyer like a hammer, and the smaller ship burst into ragged chunks, its plasma reactor rupturing in a sphere of blue-hot matter. The Iron Blood broke through the wreckage, its armour glowing briefly under the fire's touch. It slid to stillness and lay in the darkness, its engines dimming like the eyes of a tired man. Slowly, the scattered ships formed around it.*

*Signals began to crawl amongst the ships, orders and demands for data beginning to flow. Order returned to the fleet. Sensors rolled across the void, searching, judging.*

*In the star-pricked sphere of space one star burned brighter than all the rest. At this range the naked eye saw it as a small glowing coin. Around that star its planets waited, unknowing of their future, sleeping peacefully in the cold wrapping of space.*

*Slowly, like a great beast rising from sleep, the fleet turned its prows towards the star and a thousand ships went to murder a civilisation.*

# ONE

## **Forgotten weapons Heaven's tears Silence**

Lieutenant Tahirah – officer commanding First Squadron, Amaranth Company, Jurnian 701st Armoured – swore as the tank braked sharply. She was still swearing as she came off the empty gun mount and spun through the air. The ground hit her hard as she tried to turn her fall into a roll. She skidded across the floor in a tangle of arms and legs, hit the tarpaulin-covered crates and stopped. The air thumped from her lungs. That stopped the swearing. She felt the cool rockcrete press against her cheek. A dull pain filled her chest. Her mouth was open; she could feel her lips and tongue flapping as she tried to breathe.

*I must look like a fish,* she thought.

The rest of the crew were laughing now, the sound blending with the idle growl of the tank's engine. The Mars-pattern chassis was grumbling where it stood a few paces away. Still in its factory grey, it did not look like a battle tank. Where the turret should have been was only a greased collar, and an opening into the chassis's guts. Hull and sponson gun mounts were just empty slots. She could see the gunner girl Genji grinning out at her from where the forward hull weapon should be. Lachlan sat on the tank's right sponson, Makis and Vail on the top of the hull, legs dangling into the machine's open guts.

'Inspecting the floor, Tah?' The voice was high-pitched, almost boyish. Udo. It would be Udo. They all laughed some more. Terra, it was not even a good joke.

'Just trying... to escape... your company.'

They laughed, and she breathed quietly.

The fall was her fault really. Udo could not drive to save his life, and the top of the gun mount had been a stupid place to sit for the ride. Even so she had to try

very, very hard not to consider standing up and shooting Udo in the face. She pushed herself to her knees as a pathetic sip of air reached her lungs. She stood up, picked up her cap and jammed it back on her head. She was tall for a machine rider, but would have been short for an infantry officer. Wiry, warm-skinned and sharp-faced, she had a smile that she thought showed too many teeth, and her grey-and-greens always looked baggy, no matter their size.

She glanced away from the tank, as much to hide the fact that she had still not got her breath as to take the sight in. Behind the idling vehicle the chamber extended away, a vast rockcrete cavern lit by harsh light. Now that she was not riding on the tank she noticed how the sound of the engine had filled the space with echoes. The floor was a patina of oil stains and gouge marks from heavy tracks. A fine gritty layer of dust covered everything, and there was a cool, slightly musty smell, which betrayed that the ventilation system had not been active for some time. Somewhere above them, separated by layers of rock, plascrete and steel, was the Sapphire City, bustling with life while beneath it a warren of military shelters lay all but empty.

It was not actually empty, of course: two regiments and a few other stranded units lived in the upper sections. Then there were the stores, supplies for campaigns that had most likely ended long ago, all rusting and decaying in silence. Even in caverns like this one, there were crates stacked against the walls, and big blocky shapes under regulation green tarps. Despite that, an entire armoured regiment, perhaps two, could have vanished into the remaining space.

And there were more shelters, ten more in this complex alone, and more complexes all across Tallarn. Space enough for a star-cluster-breaking army to gather.

*Not any more*, thought Tahirah. She had never really bothered with the unoccupied parts of the underground shelter until now. Three damned years and she had never thought to look around.

The rest of them had, of course. She had the feeling that Makis and Genji knew far more about the complex than was healthy, but then what else was there to do? It was Makis who had found the chamber, and suggested taking one of the incomplete machines for a joyride. At least that was how it had seemed. Tahirah had a feeling that this was not the first time her crew had passed the time this way, just the first time they had asked her along.

Tahirah and the rest of the Jurnian 701st had been in holding condition – pre-deployment – on Tallarn for twenty-seven Solar months. After six months they had gone through every drill imaginable just to try and bleed off some of the

tension running through the unit. There had been fights, both amongst the crews of the 701st, and with the Chalcisorian 1002nd Mechanised who shared the complex. There had been floggings. It had made no difference. They were all clamped down too tight waiting for a war that seemed to have forgotten that they were waiting.

Then the news had come. The Imperium was at war with itself. Horus, Warmaster of the Great Crusade, had turned upon the Emperor and half the fighting power of the Imperium had turned with him. Some had doubted that it was true, as though the lack of immediate sound and fury denied the possibility of Horus's treachery. And still Tahirah's unit had remained without orders, without a ship to carry them to a front, without a war that wanted them.

Tahirah turned and saw Makis leaning down into the tank's open turret ring just behind the driver's position.

'Get out of the seat, Udo,' he said, his voice low and measured.

'Why? Can't I make a mistake while I learn?'

She could not see Udo but the whiny bastard's voice was more distinctive than his ratty face.

Makis scratched the grey stubble on his chin, and gave a small shake of his head. Lachlan caught her eye from where he sat on the top of the right sponson. He tilted his head and raised an eyebrow.

'Just get out,' said Makis.

Udo's head popped out of the turret collar, his spot-covered scalp gleaming in the light. He reached up for someone to give him a hand. No one did. After a second he pulled himself up, his face pinched with the effort. The kid was all pale skin and ribs under his grey-and-green fatigues.

'I didn't hit anything,' Udo protested as he stood on the upper hull.

Makis said nothing, but swung down into the driver's seat.

'Oh. You were trying to avoid hitting anything?' said Vail. 'Sorry, I thought you were being reckless. I guess incompetent is better.'

'It was funny.' Udo's thin face was pinched and red. 'You guys laughed.'

'Udo.' Vail had turned his head, a frown bunching above his black eyes. 'Shut up.'

'I didn't hit anything,' mumbled Udo again as he sat down, his legs hanging into the turret collar, and he shot a sour look at Vail. The tattooed loader closed his eyes as if he were catching up on some sleep. Udo flushed pink with anger.

Udo. She should do something about Udo. Her crew was doing what small groups of bored people that spent too much time with each other did: they found

an outlet for their frustration. She should have done something about it months ago. She had always got results from her crews without using the hard methods of other officers. It was getting to her – the waiting and not knowing. She bit her lip as she watched Udo glance again at Vail, then down into the tank where Makis settled into the driver's seat. She *really* should have done something months ago. Her skills were slipping. She ran a hand through her close-cropped hair.

She *would* do something.

Udo gave Vail another glance, then spat onto the tank's hull. The saliva drooled down the grey-sprayed metal.

Trouble was, the little tick was so easy to dislike.

'Boss?' Lachlan's voice cut through her thoughts and she blinked, realising that he had got off the tank and was standing just a couple of paces away. He wore a green vest, and his combat trousers were an ochre-and-grey tiger pattern that was not Jurnian issue. He held up an open pack of lho-sticks. Tahirah nodded and he tossed her the packet.

'Thanks,' she said as she lit up, and handed the pack back. Lachlan nodded at the tank chassis, as the engine gunned and a fresh plume of exhaust boiled towards the roof.

'You ready for another spin, boss?'

'Huh?' She looked at the tank. 'Yeah, sure, in a minute.'

She turned to the tarpaulin-covered shapes that she had rolled into when she came off the tank. The edge of one of the tarps was loose, and she could see rust-spotted metal beneath. She lifted the edge of the heavy fabric and flicked it back. The vehicles underneath were small, barely a third of the size of the Mars chassis that Udo had nearly crashed. They were stacked in threes, one on top of another, in metal frames.

'You seen this stuff?' said Tahirah, as her eyes moved across the rust blooms and stencilled numbers.

'What are they?' Lachlan stepped next to her.

'Scout cars, I guess. Never seen this pattern before.' Tahirah pointed her lho-stick at the small mount jutting from the front of one of the vehicles. 'That looks like it should take a lascannon.'

Lachlan nodded and bent down next to the bottom vehicle in the stack. He ran his hand over the projecting wheel mount. It came up black with dust-covered grease.

'Never been stripped of the manufactorum grease. They must have come in

and been stuck here before they could get to the poor bastards who were supposed to ride them.’ He ran a thumbnail across a patch of rust, and came away with a flake of brown-red metal the size of an aquila coin. ‘Don’t think they will ever make it.’

‘I know how it feels,’ she said, and let out a long breath. ‘Come on, let’s get back to the upper levels.’ She walked back to the waiting tank, swung herself up onto the upper hull and dropped herself onto the turret collar opposite Udo. Lachlan followed. The engine growled from idle, and the tank clanked around. She glanced at Udo and saw his mouth start to open.

‘No, Udo. You can’t drive.’

Akil Sulan waited in silence until Jalen’s footsteps had receded across the tiled platform. For a long moment he watched the letters scroll across the data-slate in his hand before he shut it down and slipped it into his pocket. Akil took another slow breath, tasting the smell of the Sapphire City as it settled under the failing light. The scent of dust blending with the sea wind filled his mouth and nose. He liked this time of evening: the heat of the day rubbing against the cool of lengthening shadows, the scent of water as the warm stones of the streets were washed of dust, the thin plumes of cooking smoke rising from the tangle of roofs. It was as though the city itself was breathing out.

He took another slow breath, allowing it to hold him for a second suspended between moments. The sky was a cobalt-blue vault, edged by the golden pink of the sun’s retreat. The city dropped away from the edge of the balcony in irregular tiers, and the shadow-cut valleys of streets, sliding down until it met the flat lands of the coast and delta and its stone roofs gave way to the crystal of agri-domes that extended to meet the sea. Most of the city was a tangle of flat-roofed buildings, but it was the towers that drew the eye. There were hundreds of them, some small and weathered, others seeming to scrape the sky. All were stone, but stone of a thousand textures and colours. The black tower of Asil sparkled with flecks of crystal, while the Spire of Nema looked like a spiralled horn of bone. Akil smiled for a second, as only a man who owned much of what he saw could.

The Sapphire City: a jewel amongst Tallarn’s many great cities. His city.

He leaned on the stone balustrade, and looked down at his hand. The skin looked older somehow: how had that happened? How had so much time and responsibility piled upon him?

He brought his hands up, running them across the smooth skin of his face and

then back through his greying hair. It was an old gesture, imitating splashing water across the face at the end of a day of toil. His daughters had picked up the gesture almost before they could talk. The thought of them laughing as they copied him briefly brought the smile back to his lips.

The wind rose and the smile faded.

He turned and walked away from the balustrade, tapping the data-slate in his pocket as he walked down the steps to the narrow streets below. His clothes were far poorer than those he normally wore. Those who knew him would be shocked to see him dressed in the worn black and purple robe so common amongst the toiling classes. He liked the simple clothes, though; they were comfortable and he enjoyed the frisson of anonymity when he walked through the streets of the Sapphire City as the darkness gathered in the recesses. People passed him, a few raised their hands and muttered him good fortune, but none spared him more than a glance. He seemed just another man walking home at the end of the day, with nothing but food and the promise of sleep on his mind.

He had grown up around these streets, had run across the rooftops and climbed the fruit vines that crawled over the walls of the old buildings. He had never been poor but riches were far in the future. Life had not always been pleasant then, but it had been simpler.

He missed that simplicity. He missed its clarity. He liked returning to the streets, the comforting feel of the worn stones beneath his feet, the mingled smell of cooking meat and flower tobacco softening the stench of stagnant drains. Most of all he enjoyed the difference in how people looked at him, or failed to look at him, when he was not surrounded by life wards, wound in suitably exotic fabrics and trailed by aides. He enjoyed not being Akil Sulan for a while.

*Tallarn is dying a slow death.* The thought rose in his mind as he walked through the deepening shadows. Without the supplies and troops of the Great Crusade passing through the planet it would revert back to what it had been in the time of his grandfather: a backwater planet of little consequence. It might take a hundred years but it would happen. He would be dead himself by that time, but his daughters would not be. The twin girls were few years old, all smiles and careless laughter. They needed a future.

A cry shook him from his thoughts. He stopped. The cry came again, clear and sharp. He could hear the sound of feet scrabbling on stone from around a corner a few paces ahead. Akil was moving before another thought passed through his mind. His blade was in his hand as he came around the corner. The leatherbound

hilt of the knife felt familiar and warm in his grip. He remembered his grandfather smiling as he had given it to him. Curved and double-edged, every man and woman on Tallarn carried a knife like this.

Akil turned the corner. The street beyond was narrow, the buildings to either side pressing close to pinch off the failing light. There were two of them, one a mound of flesh and muscle, the other thin and gangling. A third figure lay huddled on the ground. In the low light the men looked like blurred silhouettes, bodies and limbs. One of them lashed a kick into the figure on the ground. A cry cracked the air again.

‘Give us the coin, old man,’ said the thinner of the two. Akil was three paces away. The big man turned. Akil had the impression of a wide face and saw the glitter of an eye as it fastened onto him. The big man opened his mouth to shout, his hand moving towards his own knife.

*‘If you want to know a people’s character, look at their weapons,’* his grandfather had said, *‘and we of Tallarn are children of the knife.’*

The big man’s blade lashed out, its edge a twilight glitter. Akil ducked under the blow and his own knife flicked across the man’s thigh. The man yelled. Akil came up and sliced across his knife-arm above the elbow.

The man’s blade fell from his fingers, blood streaming black down his slack arm. He looked around for his friend but the thinner man was already running. Akil took a pace back and met his foe’s eyes. The man hesitated. Akil brought his own knife up slowly so that it caught the light. Then the man nodded and limped away, trailing a line of dark drops on the stones of the street.

Akil watched him go and wiped and sheathed his blade. He looked to the figure on the ground. A worn face looked up at him as he bent down, old, with dust worked into the creases and framed by grey hair and beard.

‘Can you stand?’ asked Akil.

The old man grimaced, shifted and nodded.

‘Thank you, honoured worthy,’ said the old man. Akil could hear the age and lack of teeth in the man’s speech, but the words almost made him smile.

‘Honoured worthy’ was a form of address already antiquated before compliance. Akil noticed the grey folded cloth of the man’s clothes, frayed and stained with sweat and dust. The man was a rustic from one of Tallarn’s less developed settlements.

‘Did they take anything?’ asked Akil as he helped him up.

‘No, honoured worthy.’ The old man steadied himself on Akil, and took a shuddering breath. ‘The stars smile on your kindness.’

‘Here.’ Akil took a handful of trade markers from his pocket and held them out.

‘No, no.’ The old man shook his head and pushed Akil’s hand away. ‘I cannot take twice from your kindness.’

Akil held his hand out again, but the man shook his head and stepped away. ‘You have given more than enough. Fortune’s gifts rain on you.’ The man began to shuffle away. Akil moved to help him but the old man shook his head again.

Akil could sense the man’s desire to be away from this silent street. He glanced around. The darkness was almost complete. He needed to be off the streets himself.

‘I know where I am going.’ The man gave a toothless smile and nodded. ‘It is not far.’

Akil nodded back and was about to say something, but the man was already shuffling around the corner.

For a second Akil did not move. Something in the exchange did not fit. He turned and took a step down the street, his hand unconsciously brushing his pocket.

He went still. The pocket was empty, the data-slate gone. Cold dread spread through him. He checked his other pockets, and then the street.

Nothing.

He began to run in the direction the old man had gone, icy panic surging in his veins. He turned the corner. The wider street extended away into the gloom, silent and empty apart from scraps of rubbish dancing in the breeze.

‘*You have given more than enough,*’ the old man had said. Akil took another step, half thinking of running through the streets looking for the old man. He stopped. He would not find the old thief. The twilight alleys of the Sapphire City could swallow someone in a few swift paces; there were a dozen different ways the man could have gone from here.

He took a deep breath and tried to steady his thoughts and pulse. He would have to—

A flash in the sky suddenly bleached the street white. Akil raised his hands to shield his eyes. For a second he could see the veins in his eyelids.

He looked up. The stars were falling, breaking apart into sprays of sparks, tumbling across the night sky.

*Fireworks,* he thought. *An unplanned celebration. A meteor shower...*

Sirens began to scream. First one in the distance, then another, then another until the blaring chorus echoed all around. He could see doors and windows

opening, people looking out. Somewhere deep inside him possibilities and fears combined. He thought of his daughters, sleeping in the manse on the other side of the city. People were filling the street now, pouring from doorways. Most froze as they emerged, their eyes locked upon the sky, their mouths moving, their words lost as the sirens wailed.

Akil started to move, a few slow steps at first. Then he began to stride, shoving people out of his way. Then he was running.

Above him the heavens wept tears of fire.

The metal was cool against Brel's forehead. He kept his eyes closed, allowing the headache to bleed out of his skin into the rim of the turret hatch. Somewhere outside the tank's hull he could hear raised voices. He ignored them. A lot of crews did not like spending more time in their vehicles than necessary, but Brel found the presence of his machine peaceful. *Silence* he had named her, long ago in the aftermath of a battle that he was not sure anyone on Tallarn actually remembered. Whether fired up, or engine cold as she was now, she was his place, his realm, where everything lined up as it should. When the headaches came, it was the only place he wanted to be.

The voices were getting louder, angry words filtering in through the open hatch above him.

*Not now*, he thought. Not while the headache was drumming through his skull. He let out a breath and tried to shut out the sound of the voices.

'You gotta pay,' said a female voice, high-pitched, spite whining at the edges. He knew the voice. It was Jallinika, of course.

'I can't,' said another voice, male, pleading, nasal. 'I just can't. Look—' The man's voice cut off with a grunt.

'There's more, lieutenant, *sir*,' said Jallinika. Brel could tell that she was enjoying what was going on. 'All the pain you want, just keep saying you can't pay.'

Another voice spoke, male, growling like the sea grinding pebbles against a cliff, too low for Brel to pick out words. It didn't matter; he did not need to understand Calsuriz to recognise his voice. The big driver would be doing the muscle work, of course.

A half-spluttered cry reached through the hatch. Broken teeth, most likely. Brel screwed his eyes more tightly shut. He just wanted them to shut up. The headache was a white ball in his forehead, pressing against the back of his eyes.

'So what are you going to say now, lieutenant, *sir*?' drawled Jallinika, and Brel

could hear her smiling.

‘I can... I—’

There was a loud sharp cry, and something hit the outside of the machine’s hull. For a second there was silence, then Calsuriz growled, and weeping mingled with wet, clotted breathing.

*Enough*, thought Brel. The pain in his head was sun bright. He opened his eyes and blinked at the blue and pink smears dancing in front of his eyes. He reached up, put his hands either side of the circular hatch, and pulled himself out in a single clean movement. They looked up at him as he jumped down to the track guard and then to the floor. Hundreds of silent tanks extended away in every direction, their hulls wrapped in dust. Every hundred metres a lumen globe diluted the gloom with urine-yellow light.

Brel looked down at the man curled on the floor. Blood had splattered the ground. The man’s mouth and nose were leaking red between his fingers. Brel noted the braided rank cords dangling from the shoulders of his Chalcisorian 1002nd uniform.

‘That’s enough,’ said Brel. His mouth felt dry, and the sun was still burning on the inside of his head. Brel knew that he must look like he had just been scraped from a machine tread. He was bare to the waist, his thin frame hunched from half a life crouched inside a Vanquisher’s turret. Dust and machine grease covered him, blurring the twists of long-healed wounds and smearing the edges of tattooed hawks and grinning skulls.

He licked his lips, and looked up at Calsuriz. The big man dropped his eyes and rubbed his jaw. Jallinika began to say something, but Brel turned his head to look at her. She took a step back, hands low and open, placating. The crater scars across her thin face and arms looked like small studs of shadow on her pale skin. Brel looked back to the lieutenant whimpering on the floor, stepped forward and crouched down. He recognised the man now: Salamo, commander of Twelfth Squadron, Leopard Company.

‘It’s Salamo, right?’ said Brel.

Salamo looked up. Blood covered the lower half of his face. His nose was a flattened mess and he was breathing between splinters of teeth. One of his augmetic eyes had shattered. He breathed hard, nodded.

Brel gave him a smile, trying not to let the pain in his head sour the expression. ‘The issue, Lieutenant Salamo, is that you seem to not understand the nature of a debt.’ Brel paused, blinked as the pain shifted its centre in his skull. ‘I did not take your debt marker, but unfortunately it is me that you owe.’

So before we go on I want to know what you owe and if you can pay.'

Behind him Jallinika began to make a noise. Brel raised a hand. She went silent. He smiled again at Salamo. The man shifted, and sucked air through his broken teeth.

'Sixty... five,' said Salamo, heaving a wet breath between the words.

'Sixty-five?' said Brel. He was trying hard not to clamp his eyes shut against the pain in his head. It had not been this bad for a while, not since Ycanus. He looked around at Jallinika. 'You did this for sixty-five?'

'He-' She began to speak again, but Brel raised a finger. He pinched the bridge of his nose and closed his eyes.

'Can you pay?' he said to Salamo.

'No,' gulped the man.

Brel nodded, his eyes still closed. Sixty-five was not a huge debt, but most of those that came to him usually had a problem that meant that the normal scales of fortune did not apply.

Brel and his crew had been on Tallarn for almost a decade now, left behind when the rest of their regiment had moved on and left them still bleeding into bandages and muttering in fever dreams. For a decade he had waited for the war to call him back. He had watched as Tallarn's role as staging hub for the forces of the Great Crusade faded in importance. The millions that filled the shelter complexes had dwindled to a trickle. The ships that had lit the night sky with false stars had left and not returned. Still Brel and his crew had remained, forgotten warriors in a forgotten land. They found that there was a place for them on Tallarn.

Amongst the billions of rounds of ammunition and mouldering stores, there were things that soldiers would pay for: stimulants, pain suppressors, better food. Things to conjure dreams or gift forgetfulness. After a while they had enough money to supply almost anything that the soldiers could wish for. They had kept it quiet and efficient, and the war had never returned. Even when word came that the Imperium was apparently at war with itself, Brel did not worry – he and his crew would never go back, not now.

He opened his eyes. Salamo was looking up at him, waiting. Brel gave a resigned smile and nodded.

'Okay,' said Brel in a soft voice. 'Okay.' He reached out and hooked his arm gently under Salamo's, and helped him to his feet. The Chalcisorian lieutenant rubbed the back of a hand across his bloody mouth. He glanced up at Brel, the one intact augmented eye glowing green.

‘I will get you the money,’ lisped Salamo through a clot of spit and blood.  
‘And I won’t say anything.’

Brel smiled again, and the movement sent fresh lines of pain across his scalp.

‘Okay,’ he said, and patted Salamo’s shoulder. ‘Okay.’

Salamo tried to smile back but his mashed face could not manage it. He turned to walk away.

Brel broke Salamo’s neck in one quick movement, and lowered the body to the ground. He closed his eyes again when it was done and let himself slump against *Silence*’s track guard. His ears were ringing. That was new.

‘Get rid of the body. Dump it in a lower cache chamber, and make it look like he fell off a ladder or something.’

The ringing was a piercing shriek now. Jallinika and Calsuriz said nothing. Brel forced his eyes open and looked around. His driver and gunner were standing staring up at the gloom hiding the arched roof. Brel was about to say something when Jallinika turned and looked at him.

‘What *is* that?’ she shouted.

Brel blinked, then shook his head. The wailing shriek pulsed as he moved, not inside his head but all around him. Brel had seen a lot of war fronts, had heard ships scream as part of their hull was breached, and run for dugouts as the bombs fell. The sound was an alarm, but like none he had ever heard. It was no alert, no muster call; it seemed new, as though it was a scream cutting into reality from a forgotten nightmare. The pain in his head was so strong that his vision blurred.

‘I don’t know,’ he said, but the words were lost as the alarm shrieked louder.

*The first shot of the Battle of Tallarn was fired in space. It was fired from the edge of the planet's monitor range from the heavy cruiser Hammerfall. The nova shell hit the northern polar orbital defence station while its systems were still asleep. The station vanished. Harsh blue light lit the northern face of Tallarn, and for an instant it burned brighter than the sun. A fraction of a second later the shell's secondary payload activated. The graviton charge sucked in the expanding sphere of plasma and dragged the station's weapon platforms into its crushing embrace. Curtains of aurora light danced across the northern plains of Kadir as the graviton detonation warred with Tallarn's magnetic fields. In the polar capital of Ormas people crowded the upper surfaces of the city dome to see the night sky dance.*

*The orbital defence network began to wake. Auspex scans cut into space, looking for targets. They did not have to look hard. Hundreds of ships enclosed Tallarn in a shrinking sphere.*

*The planet's defences began to fire. Torpedoes slid from launch tubes. Turbo-lasers fired, running their capacitors dry as they drew networks of light across the darkness. Some shots found their mark.*

*Three torpedoes caught the macro-transporter Kraetos and burrowed through three deck layers before detonating. Turbo-lasers caught the Retribution of Thunder as its void shields hit a ring of orbital debris. The beams of energy sliced the ship's bridge from its bulk and left it drifting. But the resistance could not last.*

*Two more nova shells fired from the Iron Warriors fleet destroyed the equatorial and southern polar stations. Squadrons of destroyers slipped into high orbit and launched spreads of torpedoes. The warheads slid onto their own orbital arcs to hit the remaining weapon platforms. New constellations blinked into existence in the skies of Tallarn.*

*There were few ships to defend the system. A squadron of defence monitors, their responses dulled by years of inactivity, tried to intercept some of the enemy ships. They died for their effort. Las-fire cut their hulls into chunks, and then macro-cannon salvos hammered the remains into scraps of metal and burning*

gas.

*One ship alone tried to run. The Light of Inwit was an Imperial Fists strike vessel. She paused for a second as her communications officer tried to raise Marshal Lycus on Tallarn's surface. The only reply was static. Her shipmaster did not hesitate. Word of the attack needed to reach others. The Light of Inwit turned its prow to the blackness of the system edge and burned its engines until they were white with heat.*

*She nearly made it. Iron Warriors gunships accelerated in her wake, reaching after her with stitched lines of explosions. Clouds of debris and energy buffeted her void shields, but she kept running. More Iron Warriors ships slipped from behind Tallarn's outer moon. They had been waiting to see if any of the defenders would run, and they were ready. Ten destroyers launched a net of torpedoes. The Light of Inwit twisted, spiralling as it tried to weave a course through the web of warheads. A single torpedo clipped its upper hull and exploded. The vessel veered, its hull glowing with pinprick fires. The second torpedo hit it amidships and tore a chunk of hot metal from its flank. The Iron Warriors moved in with lazy confidence. Spinning without control, the Light of Inwit fired a single salvo as if shouting defiance. The Iron Warriors guns opened it from prow to stern.*

*In the skies above Tallarn, heavy IV Legion ships settled into orbit. Grand cruisers, battle-barges, siege barques and weapon haulers plated the heavens in dull iron. Bombardment cannons slid from their bellies and rotated towards the surface. A few turned so that their prow torpedo tubes faced down towards the target zones, hanging like daggers.*

*On the ground, Tallarn's defences began to shout defiance at the sky. Laser platforms and missile silos threw ship-cracking payloads towards the orbiting vessels. The Iron Warriors fired in return.*

*For those looking up from the night side of Tallarn the bombardment appeared as a shower of falling stars. In the clear skies of the south, the falling warheads winked like golden coins scattered in the sun. Hundreds of bombs and torpedoes fell. After their initial launch they needed no propulsion; Tallarn's own gravity drew them to it. The warheads broke apart as they descended. They shed their ceramite armour first, sloughing it off like a cocoon to reveal polished metal beneath. The next layer simply fragmented seconds later, dumping the first dose of viral agents into the upper air currents. Beneath this, hundreds of winged bomblets nestled like insect young clinging to their mother. This layer released three hundred metres above the ground. The bomblets began to tumble like*

*seeds, spraying atomised viral agents as they spun.*

*Finally, the core of each warhead hit the ground like a bullet, punching through rock and soil before exploding. Clouds of earth and debris burst into the air. Beneath the earth, the virus began to spread through the soil and into the water table.*

*The first casualties were those closest to the ground bursts. In the Crescent City, a warhead hit one of the main arterial routes through the outskirts. The road was dense with people and vehicles, scrambling to reach the entrances of the shelters beneath the city. As the explosive cloud settled people began to fall, blood running from their eyes. Within seconds the flesh of those within the initial blast had begun to fall from their bones in blood-slimed ribbons.*

*Those that were further away lived a little longer. The mist of viral agents in the air mixed with the wind as it blew across Tallarn. People began to fall. They fell trying to get to shelter. They fell in their homes as the killing air seeped through the cracks in the walls. They fell looking up at the sky. Outside the cities the virus scythed through the lush agri-belts and jungle regions. Forests became tatters of toxic slime hanging from the dead skeletons of trees. The slick bones of cattle floated in pools of black filth. Flocks of birds fell from the air in a rain of putrefying flesh and feathers.*

*Within five minutes of the first impacts the casualties in the major cities numbered almost a million. Within ten minutes they were over ten million. Within an hour the living population on the surface of Tallarn was negligible.*

*A few survived in isolated places far away from the impact sites. They would die in the following days. Within three days there was no measurable life on the surface.*

*The last person to die in the attack was a soldier attached to one of the northern tundra bases. His name was Rahim. Caught in an armoured vehicle far from the cities, he drove in search of other military personnel until his fuel ran out. His air supply failed two hours later.*

*Sealed in shelters far beneath the ground, the survivors of Tallarn waited. Many were soldiers, the remnants of regiments never shipped out to the Great Crusade. Beside them were a lucky few, civilians who had known of the shelters and reached them in time. Sipping recycled water, breathing processed air, they listened as silence settled across the surface of Tallarn like a shroud.*

# TWO

## **The hell above Machine kill Vanquisher**

‘You have to be kidding me,’ muttered Jallinika. Brel shot her a look, and she shrugged. They stood in the shelter’s primary dispersal area, just one of many clusters waiting to hear what would happen next. The officer standing on the turret top looked like he was about to be sick. His skin was pale and his eyes were wide and glassy, as though he had been staring at the world around him hoping that he was about to wake up. Brel remembered that look: it was the look of someone who had just found out what it felt like to be part of history.

‘The reconnaissance is going to be light – squadron strength.’ The officer, a Jurnian captain by his uniform, was pointedly not looking at the men and women clustered around the tracks of the tank he was standing on. He glanced down at a spool of parchment in his right hand, tried to smooth it out, failed and almost dropped it.

‘Terra,’ hissed Jallinika, and shook her head. Brel kept his eyes on the officer.

This was it: the calculation of fate, the roll of the dice. If there had been any gods left to pray to, Brel would have asked them to make sure that he remained forgotten. He had been ordered to report to this Jurnian captain – someone had actually found him and given him the order, and that could only mean bad things. Beside him, the Jurnian crews he had been lumped with shifted as they waited for the captain to find his voice. Brel glanced around the waiting circle, noticing the expressions on their faces. Some looked nervous, some numb. A few even looked excited.

Then his eyes found the others, the men and women in one-piece drab overalls without insignia or markings. They looked nothing like soldiers. They looked

like refugees scraped together and stuffed into surplus uniforms. Brel gave a tired breath; he was suddenly certain how this was going to go.

‘Atmosphere on the surface is toxic so full seal protocols are to be enforced inside your machines.’ The officer paused, and licked his lips. Jallinika rolled her eyes and shook her head again, but he did not seem to notice. Brel was not surprised that the idiot was going through the full brief, top to bottom, like the drills, ignoring the fact that any idiot knew that any vehicle going out would have to be locked down and the crew skinned in enviro-suits. It, like the rest of the briefing, was irrelevant. Everyone was just waiting for the one thing that mattered: who was going out.

*After all, thought Brel, they aren't going to answer the real question – why are we going out now?*

It had been seven weeks since the bombs fell, and after the shock had come the panic, then the numbness of reality settling into place. There had been suicides, and the demand for narcotics of any and all description had gone through the roof. Then there were the survivors, thousands of civilians from the city above who had managed to reach the complex before it was sealed. Broken people wearing stained clothes from lives that no longer existed, they clustered in the unused chambers.

For a few days the complex had simmered on the edge of insanity. Officers had clung to protocol like drowning men to fragments of a broken ship. There had been some summary executions to enforce discipline, and things had settled into a dazed rhythm after that, and the weeks had passed.

Now, something had changed.

‘Each squadron will have a scout guide attached to them.’ The captain nodded to the men and women in the drab overalls. ‘They will be in light vehicles. They are all volunteers. They know the surface and will help you navigate.’

Brel was not surprised when Jallinika stifled a laugh. They were taking some of the civilian survivors out onto whatever was left of the surface of Tallarn. It was worse than pointless, it was idiotic.

‘The purpose of the mission is to establish if there are any enemy forces on the surface and to identify them,’ said the captain, reading from his notes. ‘We have no surviving forces on the surface, so you are going to be our eyes.’

*We don't even know who we are fighting, thought Brel. A whole world dies and we are wondering who held the knife.*

‘The battle disposition is as follows,’ said the captain. Brel felt the coldness in his gut expand and squirm. ‘First Squadron, you are heading east along the

coastal road.'

A female lieutenant with a sharp face and baggy fatigues raised a hand. 'Number three machine is down in my squadron. Main armament won't light.'

The captain looked flustered, and glanced down at the parchment in his hand. Brel almost felt sorry for the guy. Almost.

'Yes,' stammered the captain. 'Yes, it's been accounted for. You have a replacement attached to your squadron.' The captain looked up. 'Sergeant Brel?'

Brel let out a breath and raised a hand. 'Sir,' he said in a flat voice.

'Your machine is attached to Lieutenant Tahirah's outfit.'

Brel nodded acknowledgement, and avoided the lieutenant's eye.

They were going out. After all this time war had found him again. Beside him Jallinika was whispering curses. Calsuriz and Selq were quiet. Brel felt nothing, as though the order had hollowed him out. The captain was still talking, but Brel was not hearing it. The world was the slow rumbling pulse of blood in his ears. The memory of Vandorus came to him again then, bubbling up, hot and vivid. Forests burning around him, the sound of rounds ringing on the hull, the bright instant the energy beam hit his machine and turned the world dark. And then all the rest came, one after another – all the battlefields, all the dead with their charred smiles. When the pain bloomed in his skull it was a relief, drowning memory in bright sensation.

'My name is Akil.'

Brel looked up. The briefing had broken up around them.

A man stood in front of him. He was lean and handsome with dark eyes and hair. The drab overalls marked him as one of the civilians pulled together and given basic machine training so they could act as guides on the surface. It was worse than ridiculous.

The man called Akil, smiled. He looked like he was used to being in charge, and used to money too. He extended his hand in greeting.

'I believe I am your scout,' said the man.

Brel looked at Akil's hand then turned away. Beside him Jallinika grunted in amusement, but Brel said nothing. Inside his head the fires of memory still danced and the dead were grinning at him in welcome.

*This is not my world. This is not real. This cannot be real.* The thoughts looped through Akil's mind as the machines crawled through the corpse of the Sapphire City. He wanted to look away but his eyes had stayed fixed on the narrow slot of armourglass since they had emerged from the shelter.

Fog hung over his view like a curtain. There was no sun, just a diffuse yellow glow that seemed to come from all directions at once. Sometimes the fog thickened and they had to halt. In those moments he found his mind forming images in the shift and swirl beyond the armourglass. He would watch and wait until he could see a few metres, then start to drive again. Occasionally the fog would peel back and show him what it hid.

Buildings still stood, but they were empty shells. Wooden balconies, doors and window frames had collapsed and dissolved to run down the stone walls. Skins of iridescent moisture clung to the fallen glass of windows. He saw the dead, too. At first he had thought that they were heaps of mud or sewage. Then he had seen half-melted teeth grinning from the slime. He had stopped looking so closely after that.

The two-man scout vehicle he was driving was a low slab of welded metal with a raked front. It apparently had a name: *Talon*. He had driven and piloted many different machines in his life, but nothing quite like *Talon*. Tracks ran across its front and up and over the top of its flanks. A sealed socket at the front waited for a weapon which had remained unfitted. When Akil had first seen it, the machine's hull had been a raw grey. Now slime mottled its surface.

Inside *Talon* the only noise was the engine and the suck and hiss of the air system. To Akil's ears it sounded like the beat of a dying man's heart. After a while he had found that he was waiting for every wheeze of air. He could not hear Rashne, but he knew that he was there, crouched in the small cargo space, hugging his knees and not looking at the armoured crystal viewports. Rashne was a soldier, a signal operator, but if it had not been for the uniform Akil would have thought him a boy. Rashne had looked outside only once. He had pressed his face against the glass as the fog rolled around them. He had seen, and stared for a minute before curling up in silence.

Both Akil and Rashne wore enviro-suits of thick rubberised material inside the vehicle, their eyes looking out of circular eyepieces, mouths connected to air bottles by tubes. *Talon* had tracks, like a battle tank, but no turret. The empty weapon socket was situated next to Akil's control rig. He was not sure if they did not trust him or simply did not have the correct weapon. The vehicle's controls were simple: two levers and two pedals. They had given him six hours' training. Now, grinding through the outskirts of the dead city, unable to see where he was going, linked to the rest of the squadron by a scratching vox, he wondered how they could ever have thought that was enough. Controlling the machine was like wrestling an iron herd beast, the controls responding either hesitantly or with a

sudden surge of raw power.

They had been driving for hours. Akil had no idea where they were. He had been heading south, using the vehicle's compass. The major arterial road to the nearest settlements ran along the coast, and before the bombardment the journey to the city's edge would have taken no more than half an hour. They had been moving for six hours and still they had found no sign of any enemy. Occasionally he saw something that he thought he recognised. A building or statue would suddenly appear out of the fog for an instant and then fade again. Each time he had tried to figure out where they were, but failed. The entire squadron would come to a halt. He had convinced himself several times that the compass was wrong and that they were heading north, or going in circles.

He tried not to think too much, not to think about why this had happened, not to think about all the people he had seen crowding the streets as the alarms sounded. Not to think about his daughters in his house, far to the south.

*They would have just been going to sleep*, he thought, and then cut the thought away as quickly as it formed. He was not sure why he had volunteered for this. Anger was part of it, anger at what had been done to his world; guilt as well, but he had an unpleasant feeling that more than anything it had been because he had wanted to look at the hell above ground and know that it was real. He knew now.

He blinked. The world outside had peeled back to show him a bare shore to the left of the road. The sea was the colour of a bruise and heaved with a thick slowness. Heaps of oozing matter lay along the tide line. It began to rain, greasy black drops spattering across the armourglass. He halted the machine, and turned to Rashne. The boy was looking back at him, eyes wide behind misted eyepieces, knees gathered to his chest. Akil nodded.

'Tell the others that we are on the eastern coast road.'

For a moment Rashne did not move. Then he unfolded and began to flick switches on the equipment that crowded the compartment. He plugged a lead from his suit's comms into the main bank, twirled a dial, depressed a switch and began to speak.

*'Lantern, this is Talon.'* A surge of static followed Rashne's voice, then a low hissing half-silence. *'Lantern, this is Talon.'* The static rose again, then faded back to a low moan. Rashne began twirling dials, saying the same phrase over again: *'Lantern, this is Talon.'* Akil could hear the boy's breath sucking at the end of each transmission.

'Rashne,' said Akil into his own vox. The boy did not answer but flicked and twirled the vox-controls, his voice now a pleading monotone. Akil turned his

head to look out of his front view slit. Thick yellow fog pressed close against the glass.

‘They aren’t there.’ Rashne’s voice was low, as though he was talking to himself. Akil turned to look at him. The boy was slumped with his head resting on the vox-panel. ‘They aren’t there.’

Then he looked up, and Akil noticed the beads of moisture smeared across the inside of the boy’s eye lenses.

‘We are alone,’ said Rashne, and Akil felt the world close around him like a cold hand.

*Silence* ground forwards through the murk, tatters of bio-sludge trailing from its tracks and the long barrels of its main gun. Slime and debris crunched and sucked under its tracks. Its exhausts coughed in the soup-thick air. *Silence* was a Vanquisher, a machine made to kill others of its kind, and it bore its purpose with the scarred arrogance of an old warrior. She had fought on Credence, and Arzentis IX, and taken damage on Fortuna. It had been that damage that had marooned her on Tallarn; her masters had moved on, leaving her to be repaired but never to rejoin them. Brel had never ridden *Silence* into battle, but he did not doubt her. They were alike, bred of the same substance and experience.

‘Where the hell have they gone?’ muttered Brel, looking at the screen of his auspex. Five minutes earlier the *Talon* had vanished from their screens, and now the whole squadron was getting static when they tried to raise them on the vox.

‘Idiot was supposed to know this city,’ said Jallinika. ‘Now he is just gone.’

‘Quiet,’ said Brel, staring at the auspex screen. Shapes and colour washed across it. They had been four – the two Executioners, his own Vanquisher, and the scout machine. The green markers of the two Executioner hulls hardened and then blurred as if sinking back into the distortion. There was no sign of the scout. The scanner had been lousy with interference ever since they had left the shelter, but this was worse.

‘*Silence, this is Lantern,*’ Lieutenant Tahirah crackled in his ear.

He blinked. The inside of his suit lenses had fogged. The distortion buzzed across the auspex. He did not bother looking out of any of the periscope blocks. There was no point. If they could not see the scout on the screen then they would not be able to see it by staring at the fog outside, even with infra-vision.

‘*Damn it, Silence – respond.*’

‘This is *Silence*, go ahead,’ said Brel, his attention not leaving the screen. Something was itching at the edge of his senses. A green blizzard briefly blew

across the auspex.

‘*Can you see anything?*’ asked Tahirah.

Brel was silent. Blood was pounding through his skull. Screams rode on the surge of his breathing. It was like it always had been. Like all the places where he had killed, and come out alive hoping never to go back. The blur of static boiled across the auspex, then dimmed. He felt like he was waiting for something.

Calmness spread through him, as soft and sudden as a light turning off.

*It’s going to start again*, he thought. *All of it, just like before*. He felt his body and mind fold over the feelings of panic, and slip into a calm rhythm. It was so familiar that it felt almost like coming home.

‘*Lantern*, this is *Silence*. I see nothing,’ he paused. He licked his lips and tapped Jallinika once on the right arm, an old command given without words. The breech of the main gun opened and swallowed a shell. Brel felt the *clunk* of it closing in his bones, another old sensation returned after so long. ‘But something is wrong, *Lantern*. Something is out there. We should light weapons.’

‘*What?*’ Tahirah’s voice was a disbelieving crackle. ‘*You can see nothing, but there is something out there?*’

‘Light your weapons. I don’t care if you have rank over me. Light your weapons.’

The pause lengthened into the squall of distortion.

‘*Lantern*, this is *Deathlight*, what are your orders?’ The voice was Hector, commander of the squadron’s number two machine. Hector was firm, but Brel could hear the tension in his question. The other crews would all be feeling what he felt – the heavy, caged sensation, and the acid taste of adrenaline. They would all be feeling it, but no one outside *Silence* would know what it meant.

Beside him, Jallinika was murmuring something to herself. A prayer muttered to an outlawed god.

‘*All call signs.*’ Tahirah paused. ‘*Light your weapons.*’

The glass trembled against the side of Akil’s head. The engine was still running, of course. They needed it to power the air system. He shifted his head slightly. Behind him the vox-unit was still breathing static into the cabin. It sounded reassuring, like rain pattering on the roof at night. Rashne was weeping, the sound of the boy’s sobs cutting into and out of the internal vox. Akil listened but said nothing. They were lost. They were alone, and it was now just a matter of time until the engine ran out of fuel and the air stopped. He wondered if he

would take off his suit and open the hatch before that point. At least that would be the end of everything, and an end he deserved. He thought of his daughters and whether they had survived.

The glass trembled against his skull again. He raised his head and put his hand to the glass. A low bass vibration met his touch, its note out of sync with the rumble of the vehicle's engine, the sound of heavy tracks shaking the ground.

'I hear something,' said Akil quietly. Rashne sobbed again.

Akil keyed the internal vox and spoke more loudly. 'Rash, I hear something.' He looked around and saw that the boy had looked up at him, eyes wide behind misted glass. Akil nodded. 'Can't you hear it? They are out there, they are close.' He paused. 'Try the vox again.'

Rashne turned and began to flick switches.

*'Any call sign, respond if you can hear this. This is scout unit four, First Squadron, Amaranth Company, Seven Hundred and First.'*

Akil shook his head, as if trying to shake the smile off. Relief and exhaustion flooded through him.

*We are not alone.*

He slumped forward, head resting on the armourglass he had been staring through for hours. His eyes flicked to the forward viewing slit. The fog had smothered them again, hiding the landscape behind yellow silt veils. He was about to turn to Rashne when he saw something move in the fog.

'Rash,' he said carefully, trying to keep his voice steady. 'Are you getting anything coming through?'

'No,' said Rashne. Akil could almost see the boy grinning and shrugging. 'But they are close, right?'

Akil kept his eyes steady on the view beyond the smeared glass. He felt very cold.

*We are not alone.* The thought rose in his mind, like a chilling echo of a misunderstood revelation.

'That's weird,' said Rashne. Akil heard him flicking more switches. 'There is something coming over the vox. Listen.'

Rashne raised the volume. After a second Akil heard what he meant: a low growl of noise rising and falling behind the wall of static. He listened more closely. The sound came and went, almost like the breaking of slow waves on a shore, or the beating of a heart.

'Rash—' he began to say, but then he saw it again. It surfaced from the fog, like a sea creature breaking the surface to breathe before diving out of sight. He had

an impression of hard angles and dull, unpolished steel. It had been close as well, within a hundred metres.

He could hear the frame of the vehicle vibrating now.

‘Rash, shut the vox down,’ he said, panic rising in his voice.

‘What?’ said Rashne.

‘Shut it down.’

‘Why?’

Akil was not listening. He was thinking of when he had watched a sabre cat stalking prey in the equatorial forests, of the way it moved its head as it sniffed the air. He reached out slowly and flicked the engines off.

‘What are you doing?’ called Rashne.

‘Shut the v—’

They both heard it.

‘An engine,’ breathed Rashne. ‘It’s them, they’re here.’ The boy was reaching for the vox.

The tank broke from the fog in front of Akil’s eyes. Its hull was a raked slab of dull metal topped with a domed turret. Slime scattered in its wake as it ground forwards. Threads of red light reached through the fog, scattering as they swept and converged. The turret rotated as he watched, fixing him with the blank gaze of its weapon barrel. He felt with numb certainty that his next breath would be the last.

‘I am sorry,’ he whispered to himself.

The world vanished behind a sheet of white light.

‘Kill!’ shouted Lachlan. Tahirah winced as his voice roared from her headset. She felt sweat rolling down her skin. The temperature inside *Lantern* had spiked an instant after the weapon had fired. Inside her enviro-suit the hairs rose across her skin as the plasma destroyer began to recharge. The hull was shaking and bucking as it accelerated into the engagement. Engine noise vibrated through her head.

Crammed into the turret next to Lachlan, it felt like she was riding a boat in a stormy sea. All of the crew wore sealed suits of rubber and treated fabric. Breathing air through a mask plugged into the tank’s air supply, it felt as if she was drowning in the heat and the brain-numbing snarl of *Lantern*’s engine. She could barely see anything that was not directly in front of her eyepieces, and moisture from her breath was already beading on the circles of glass. The only reason she could talk to the rest of the crew was because of the internal vox.

Outside on the hull a sheet of burning vapour vented from the cone of the cannon. The slime clinging to its hull ignited. Flames crawled across *Lantern*, scorching the Amaranth stripes from its turret. Black liquid splattered up in its wake, as it dragged a cloak of guttering flame.

For Tahirah everything had started to move very fast from the moment she had targeted the enemy vehicle and Lachlan had fired. She had trained in war machines for half a decade, been through live fire drills and logged over a hundred machine hours. But this was like nothing she had ever felt. Information and sensations washed over her. Dozens of thoughts, fears and possibilities formed and fled in a second. It was like trying to catch hold of a storm. It was the gap, she realised, the gap between training and reality, the gap she had always wanted to cross.

Plumes of heat and gas blurred her view out of the periscope. Red icons painted the point where the enemy machine had been. It was not moving. Good enough.

‘Kill confirmed,’ said Tahirah. The auspex was screeching. A shape had emerged from the green pixel fog. ‘Enemy, left flank, sixty degrees, engage when you see them.’

‘I can’t see them,’ shouted Genji.

‘Traversing,’ said Lachlan next to her, and the turret began to turn in its collar.

‘*I can’t see anything.*’

*Genji*, thought Tahirah. Terra, she wished the girl would stop shouting. Tahirah did not answer; she had no idea what was going on. The enemy had vanished off the auspex. Flashes of amber, green and red danced across the black screen. She tried to focus on the auspex screen, flicking glances out of the periscope blocks. She could not see a damned thing either.

She turned her view to the green icons of *Silence* and *Deathlight* on the auspex screen. Together they formed a wedge with *Lantern* at the tip. The first kill had been straight ahead and even then they had only been able to see it because of the heat bloom. Now they could not pinpoint the rest of the enemy force. She knew that there was a very real chance of the squadron falling apart, of doing something fatally stupid and hitting each other as they tried to kill the enemy. She pushed the right-hand cup of her headphones over her ear and clicked to transmit.

‘All call signs, this is *Lantern*, engage only with visual confirmation.’

Hector and Brel acknowledged the command, their voices almost lost in the rising jumble of sound around her.

‘Where the hell have they gone?’ said Lachlan. His face was pressed against the rubber eyepieces of the Executioner’s main weapon targeter.

‘I’ve got one,’ came another shout. It was Udo, in the right sponson. She glanced at the auspex and saw the angular red return of metal and heat to their right. A target.

*Sharp-eyed little rat*, she thought.

‘Turn, right, right, right. Target, right flank, eighty degrees narrowing, visual confirm to engage.’ The tone of the engine changed and the turret began to turn.

‘I’ve got it,’ shouted Udo.

‘Confirm enemy,’ said Tahirah, but the right sponson’s firing light was already glowing amber on her control panel. She opened her mouth to shout.

‘Firing.’

‘Udo! Confirm, damn you.’

The lightning-crack of the lascannon echoed through the compartment.

‘Hit,’ whooped Udo.

Tahirah pressed her eyes against one of the periscope viewers. She could barely see ten metres. Ochre clouds swirled in front of her eyes like silt in churned water. She switched to infra-sight and the world became a haze of grey. The heat of the las discharge was a fading line through the fog.

‘*Lantern, this is Deathlight.*’ Hector’s voice spat from her headset. ‘*I have las flare to my front. Almost hit us. What’s going on?*’

‘Udo!’ shouted Tahirah.

‘It was them, I saw,’ called Udo. She could almost see his face twist with denial, as if shooting the front off a friendly was just another understandable mistake.

‘Shut up,’ she snarled. Icons were dancing across the auspex now, fading from red to amber, overlaying and contradicting. It was like trying to punch someone you could only hear in the middle of a rain storm. The enemy were there, they were right—

Red blossomed across the auspex. The *Lantern* rocked. White light flashed from the eyepieces of her periscopes. Lachlan swore. She glanced at him. His hands were pressed against his eyes. Genji and Makis were shouting. The auspex cleared. She stared.

*Deathlight*’s green icon had vanished. A white smudge of heat rolled where it had been. *Lantern* kept driving forwards, its turret traversing so that it faced back towards Hector’s last position. Tahirah’s fingers slipped as she thumbed the comm-stud.

‘*Deathlight*, this is *Lantern*,’ she began.

‘It’s gone,’ shouted Lachlan. She did not want to look at him. She could hear enough in his voice.

‘*Deathlight*, respond.’

‘It’s gone.’

Her skin suddenly felt very cold. Sounds seemed to be louder and further away.

Genji’s voice cut through her. ‘Target. Firing.’

‘Wait,’ said Tahirah, but the word was lost as the left sponson fired.

Akil closed his eyes against the glare as the fog outside lit up. Rashne was screaming into the vox. The world was all vibration and sudden noise. For a second when the oncoming tank had vanished in a ball of fire he had thought it was them – that they had been hit, and that he was trapped in his last second of awareness.

Then the light had turned red, and black smoke had stained the firelit fog.

More sound and light, and teeth-aching tremors spun around him as he pressed his eyelids shut and Rashne screamed on and on.

‘Stop,’ said Brel calmly. The rest of the crew said nothing, but he felt the engine disengage and the tone of the noise drop in the compartment. Jallinika was looking back at him, waiting for him to tell her if there was a target worth trying to see; they both knew that if she had her eye to gunsight without reason she would start firing at ghosts, or her own side.

*Old ways, and old tricks*, thought Brel. *And here we all are again. Home, like we never left.*

The fight had begun just how they always had, with a roar of death and then the hurtling descent into anarchy. He had felt *Silence* rock when *Deathlight* had gone up, and had heard Tahirah calling for a response. Tahirah’s machine had no idea what was going on, but they were still moving and firing anyway, at an enemy of unknown strength and unknown nature. All they had were the blips on their screens and the images skidding across their sights. They might get another kill, but they were dangerous to stay close to.

Brel watched the auspex display. The *Lantern* had one confirmed kill, and the enemy had fired back and killed the *Deathlight* in reply. That meant a minimum of one enemy machine still out there, as well as the lost scout machine. The enemy were good. They must have broken formation as soon as they were ready

to engage, and they were using the fog and auspex interference to hide themselves.

*Or they were jamming our scanners and comms, he thought, reducing both to unreliable junk. Very good indeed.*

‘Jal,’ he said into the intra-crew vox. ‘Strength of an elite hunter unit in these conditions?’

‘Three.’ She shrugged. ‘No more than four.’

‘Two?’

She laughed. ‘Only if you had no choice.’

Brel nodded, and let out a long breath.

‘Yeah. I was worried you would agree.’

He thought for a moment longer, and then gave one order.

‘Shut down the engine. Keep the load in the main gun. Keep comms, air, sights and auspex up, but close down the transponder.’

There was the barest moment of hesitation. The transponder sent out a constant signal telling all other friendly units set to the same frequency where they were and that they were not something to fire at. Without it the *Silence* would appear as an unknown return on friendly auspex screens, and in a battle like this they would be a target to everyone.

‘Now,’ said Brel, and a second later the *Silence* became an inert slab of cooling armour.

‘Hit,’ called Genji. Tahirah shook her head, tried to focus, tried to grasp the passing threads of events.

‘Kill confirmed,’ said Lachlan. ‘I see fire.’

Tahirah pressed her eyes to the periscope’s eyepieces. Flames lit the fog, spreading through it in an angry red glow as if the air itself was burning. She blinked moisture from her eyes. The fog thinned and she saw the enemy machine. She had not seen the first target clearly – none of them had, not even Lachlan as he pulled the trigger. The wreck had a low hull with raked frontal armour, and two weapon booms jutting from its flanks. One of the booms was gone, severed to a blackened stump. Its turret was a carbuncular dome, bearing the ribbed barrel of a conversion beamer. A skull grinned from the front plate in black wrought iron. She knew the class and she knew the emblem from a thousand remembrancer captured images of the Imperial conquest.

*Predator class, she thought. Iron Warriors Legion.* And it was not dead, not even close.

‘Oh, *illumination*,’ she whispered.

‘What?’ said Lachlan.

The Predator was moving, thrusting towards them, its turret traversing to point back at her.

‘Kill not confirmed!’ yelled Tahirah. ‘Kill it, Lach! Kill it now!’

‘I see it,’ called Lachlan as the turret traversed. He went still, his finger on the firing trigger. ‘Oh, skies of Terra,’ he breathed.

‘Fire!’ Tahirah cried. The Predator was slowing, the muzzle of its turret gun settling on her like a dead stare.

‘I—’

‘*Now!*’ she shouted.

Lachlan squeezed the trigger, and the destroyer cannon screamed. The blast hit the Predator’s turret collar and blew it off in a shower of half-melted armour. The destroyer kept firing, streaming plasma into the target, raking it with a sun’s fury.

Heat warning lights bloomed around Tahirah, and suddenly the inside of *Lantern* was soaked in red. She reached across and knocked Lachlan’s hand from the gun’s trigger. Gas vented into the turret. Vail was swearing, scrambling for the coolant release lever at the rear of his pit beneath the main gun. He yanked it down and Tahirah heard the coolant lines ring with sudden pressure. The red lights turned amber a second later.

She breathed out. Vail had released the auxiliary lines just in time. Another second and the gun would have vented searing hot vapour into the turret; now it would off-line while it cooled properly. Lachlan was looking at her, his eyes wide behind the circles of his suit’s eyepieces.

‘Main weapon down,’ she announced calmly, and thanked the suit for hiding the tears she could feel on her cheeks.

‘Boss...’ Lachlan’s voice was low.

She turned away, taking in the auspex at a glance and speaking into the vox. She shook her head, focused on the auspex, on the red markers showing the two machine kills, and the eerie white where *Deathlight* had died. A yellow marker flickered on the edge of the screen highlighting an unidentified contact.

‘Target left – there is something else out there,’ she said, and heard her words echo across the vox.

‘Boss, I saw them before I fired,’ said Lachlan as if he had not heard her.

She squinted at the static-laden display. The yellow marker of the unidentified machine was dimming, ringed with fading heat.

‘As if it were a cooling wreck,’ she muttered to herself. ‘Or as if it cut its engine.’

‘I saw the enemy crew trying to get out of the wreck,’ said Lachlan.

‘Target is live,’ she called. ‘Say again, target is live. Bastard is trying to hide.’

‘They were legionaries,’ said Lachlan, and snorted as if he had said something ridiculous. ‘The enemy out there are Space Marines.’

Tahirah heard the words, and thought of the iron skull on the hull of the Predator. *Space Marines*, the thought rang in her head. *Our enemies are Iron Warriors.*

‘I have visual!’ shouted Genji in the left sponson.

Tahirah looked out of the periscope. The target was there, a low angular shape, half exposed by a billow in the fog. She opened her mouth to give the kill order.

‘Fir—’

‘*Can you hear us?*’ the voice burst into her ears, filled with panic and static. Human. Tahirah felt her mind turn over, her mouth and body frozen. ‘*Please,*’ came the voice again. ‘*Please say you can hear us.*’

‘Tah, I have the target,’ called Genji.

‘Hold!’ shouted Tahirah. She was suddenly aware of fresh sweat prickling over her skin inside the enviro-suit.

‘This is *Lantern*. We hear and see you. Identify yourself.’

For a second there was nothing, and then the voice came back.

‘*Rashne, my name is Rashne.*’ She could hear the tremble in the words.

*It’s them,* she thought. *It’s the scout and I almost ordered them dead.*

She glanced back at the auspex, the heat markers of the dead flickering in the green swell of static. No sign of *Silence*. Perhaps the seals had failed on their machine. Perhaps they were somewhere out there beyond auspex range. Perhaps the fog...

She shut off the train of thought.

Two enemies dead – maybe – for the loss of half her squadron. Somehow, she had never thought her first engagement would come down to such a cold equation.

But it did not matter. Not now. It was a long way back to the shelter complex, and what remained of her squadron needed to be far away and fading in the fog before more Iron Warriors came for them. She thumbed the external transmission button.

‘Rashne,’ she said into the vox. She noticed that her voice was still calm and steady. It did not feel like it belonged to her. ‘We are coming to you. Move to

flank us when you see us, and stay so close that you can see the serial numbers on the hull.'

'*All right,*' said Rashne. '*All right.*'

'Good. And use your call sign. Out.' She switched to the internal vox. 'Mak, get us moving. Left, forty degrees.'

Makis called in acknowledgement, and she felt *Lantern's* engine gun to full life as they came about.

*We have slain angels and lived,* she thought, and began to let out a long breath.

The Predator cannon round hit *Lantern* as it was turning, and blew the left sponson off in a shriek of shearing metal.

'There you are,' said Brel, his eyes steady on the auspex as the enemy flared red with heat. 'Jallinika, target is right flank, twenty degrees and coming closer. Take the shot as soon as you can see its back. Cal, power us up and take us straight forward, on my word.' He paused. Around him his machine and crew were waiting: Jallinika with her eyes pressed to the firing sight, Calsuriz with his hand on the ignition, Selq holding the next round for the main gun.

*So still,* he thought. *All of them so still.*

The enemy was accelerating forward from where it had folded itself into a pocket of interference. He could try and take it now, but the angle was not optimal, not for a machine kill. That and he had to be sure that it was alone. The *Lantern* was taking fire. He could hear the boom and smack of the enemy Predator's cannon. The *Lantern* was slewing around as it tried to turn its frontal armour to meet the enemy.

'Smart move,' Brel muttered to himself. A flattened *boom* rang through the stillness. The enemy had fired again. The *Lantern* was trying to turn, but the Predator was faster and would be behind her again in a few seconds.

Tahirah tried to breathe. Alarms were fighting with the howl of the engine. Udo was screaming into the vox. Dozens of thoughts crowded her mind.

*Where did they come from? They have us cold. Nothing we can do. Where were they? Has the hull lost integrity? We are going to die now. They were trying to get behind us. We have to turn. We have to return fire. We have to—*

Something hit the front armour with the force of a Titan's kick, and *Lantern* rang like a gong. Tahirah's head slammed into the cannon mount. Blackness bloomed at the edge of her vision. Then the machine slewed and the force whipped her backwards like a ragdoll. There was blood on the inside of her

eyepieces. Her ears were ringing, her skull filling with darkness.

‘No!’ she shouted, but the *Lantern* was pulsing with wild alarm light, and all she could hear was Udo screaming that he could see something.

*Please*, she thought, though she did not know to whom she was pleading. *Not here. Not now.*

‘Now,’ called Brel. The *Silence* roared as it came to life. Stillness became the bone-rattling scream of metal moving against metal, of engines breathing fumes and power. They ground forwards, slow at first then faster. The turret traversed, with a hiss of motors and bearings. The enemy had seen them and was slowing, turning to meet this new threat.

‘Got you,’ said Jallinika, and Brel could hear the smile in the words. ‘Firing.’

The Vanquisher shell hit the Predator on its rear plating and lodged inside in the blink of an eye.

The Predator detonated. A fire cloud expanded through the fog, scattering chunks of armour. The turret lifted from its back like a leaf in a gust of wind. For a second, the fog was smeared the colour of blood and molten iron. Then the fire curdled to black smoke over the tank’s carcass.

Brel blinked and nodded to himself.

‘Come into formation with the others.’

After a second he flicked the external vox live.

‘*Lantern*, this is *Silence*,’ he said.

A burst of curses filled his ears. For some reason it made him smile. After a few seconds a lull came. He clicked the vox open again.

‘*Lantern*, this is *Silence*. You are very welcome.’

*The Iron Warriors had thought the battle done. In the long weeks since the virus bombardment their forces on Tallarn's surface had seen no sign of any survivors. Their first battle losses corrected that understanding. Their response was to pour more forces onto the planet's surface. Dark-hulled macro-landers sank into Tallarn's atmosphere to dump armoured vehicles onto the sludge-covered plains.*

*Typhon siege tanks, Sabre Hunters, Land Raiders, Predators and Fellblades rolled from the landing grounds, gouging trenches in the sludge. These were the vehicles of the Legiones Astartes, crewed by Iron Warriors sealed in atmosphere-hardened armour. Beside them came detachments of Mechanicum war engines, Legio Cybernetica maniples and the war machines of half a dozen human cohorts bonded to the IV Legion. Tens of thousands of vehicles spread out from a dozen dropsites across Tallarn's two main continents.*

*It was a force that had broken enemies of many times their number, but in truth it was only a fraction of the Iron Warriors might. Much remained aboard their ships, but there was no error in the Iron Warriors calculations: they would end what upstart life remained on Tallarn. That was beyond doubt.*

*Iron Warriors signals ran across the surface, scratching on the dead wind, blowing and clicking across ruined cities and sludge plains. The signals rose from the block-sided landing craft of the invaders, and scattered to the sky and the ships that waited above. Buried in their shelters the survivors listened. Arrays trawled the air, catching rattling snatches of code, and taking them beneath the earth to where men and women sat hunched in the half-darkness, listening to the signals scratch and whine. They did not know what the Iron Warriors were saying, but they knew that it meant that the enemy had come in strength.*

*The defenders' own signals, carried on buried cables beneath the cities and under mountains, went unheard by the invaders. A few amongst the leaders of the scattered shelters spoke of waiting, of surviving beneath the earth in silence. The survivors were alone, they argued. They had no way of calling for help, even if there was help that could come to them. Better to be still, to hope that the enemy would pass on and leave the dead world they had made. But more were*

*the voices that said that the invaders must bleed no matter the cost.*

# THREE

## Contamination Sides Guilt

The klaxons stopped screaming. A second later, the light in the decontamination chamber turned a cold blue.

*Like water under the sun,* thought Akil.

‘Come on,’ he said to Rashne, forgetting that the boy could not hear him. The scout machine was powered down, the internal and external vox dead. He moved to where Rashne sat and tapped him on the arm. Rashne’s head came up slowly, and Akil noticed that the eyes behind the lenses took a moment to focus. Akil raised a thumb, and pointed to the machine’s rear hatch. Rashne turned his head to look, and then scrambled towards it. Akil followed, reaching for the release handle.

He paused, waiting for the double siren blare that would mean it was safe to unseal the tank. Rashne started slapping the metal of the hatch and rocking backwards and forwards.

The signal sounded and Akil pulled the handle. The hatch hissed as it opened and blue light spilled in. Rashne pushed the door wide and shot out, trailing his air bottle behind him on its rubber tube. Akil stepped out.

The chamber beyond was a vast cylinder, its walls ribbed with concentric metal rings wide enough to encircle three tanks abreast. Nozzles studded the walls, still dripping cleansing fluid. Metal grates covered a void that extended beneath the floor, and behind them great blast doors shut out the world above. In front, more blast doors waited.

On either side of the scout vehicle, the crews of *Lantern* and *Silence* pulled themselves out of their machines. *Lantern*’s left sponson was a twisted mess of

metal, its gun ripped away, the empty gunner's alcove exposed.

*Someone died there*, Akil realised. He stared for a moment, then looked away quickly.

Thick, colourless liquid dripped from the tracks and hulls of the three tanks. High-pressure hoses and rad-beams had washed over them, stripping everything toxic from their hulls and killing anything organic. The tanks were now clean enough that the crews could come out from their sealed guts, but there was still a risk; the tanks would need another decontamination cycle before they could be allowed back into the shelter itself. The crews would leave the chamber, and the rotating ring-collars would blast the tanks again, this time with a stronger dose of rad and chem. Nothing could survive that.

At least, that was the theory. This was the first of the doors back into the underworld from the hell above, but it was not the last. They had to pass through another set before they could remove their suits. Then they would be treated to the same decontamination process as the machines. After that they could be declared fit to breathe the same air as the rest of the shelter complex.

Akil began to move towards the small accessway to the side of the blast doors.

The cry of alarm was muffled, but he still heard it. He turned. Beside him the crews of the other two tanks had gone very still. Rashne was on the ground, his hand around the back of his head. For a second he thought the boy was having a seizure. Then he saw what whoever had cried out had seen.

Rashne was not having a seizure – he was pulling the hood of his enviro-suit off.

Akil had taken two steps towards the boy when the rubber collar came loose. He went still. Rashne knelt on the floor, gasping as he breathed the free air once more. His thatch-blond hair was matted and sweat beaded his forehead.

Akil watched, his own breath still in his mouth as Rashne sucked down great lungfuls. The boy looked up, his eyes blue and bright. He smiled, and took another breath. Nothing happened. Rashne began to stand unsteadily.

Sirens howled. Red lights flashed, staining the wet vehicles crimson. Rashne yelped and half fell, his hand flying out to the hull of the scout vehicle to catch himself. Akil stepped forward, reaching to grab the boy, but Rashne pushed himself back up. His gloved hand came away from the surface of the machine. Akil could see the sheen of moisture on the fingers. The boy was not looking at him – Rashne brought his hand up and wiped the sweat from his eyes. It was a gesture as unconscious as the beating of a heart.

Akil's hand closed on Rashne's arm. The boy turned to look at him. Rashne's

mouth opened.

Blood poured from his eyes. Pustules bloomed across his face, burst and grew, eating into his flesh in widening craters. Dark tendrils spread across his skin as blood clotted to black slime. Akil felt the boy's arm go soft under his grip. His hand opened and Rashne fell to the ground like a bag of offal.

Akil felt himself fall, and the vomit rise in his throat. The sensation was oddly distant, as if he was observing it in someone else, as if his mind had retreated to a place where the present no longer belonged to him. He heard himself trying to scream. He saw himself hit the ground, and felt arms wrap around him and drag him across the floor towards the small door in the side of the chamber.

Behind him, the dissolving body of Rashne lay in the pulsing red light.

'This might go better if you give us the room,' said Brel to the rest of them. Jallinika and Calsuriz were already standing, their muscles tense as though they were about to snap. 'That means you all get out,' he clarified.

He brought his hands up to rub his eyes as the bunk room emptied around him. He waited until the sounds of scraping boots and muttering faded, and the door clicked shut. He looked up.

Tahirah stood, her eyes bright and hard, arms loose by her sides as if she was keeping them deliberately under control. Fury radiated off her. Brel looked away and let out a long breath. He had only been out of decontamination for an hour and he could already feel the pain soaking into his head again. His tongue and saliva tasted of tin, and the buzz of the lumen strips in the cramped bunk room made him want to close his eyes. He wanted very much to not have to talk, to just be able to sit quietly and listen to his crew bicker around him. He did not want this.

'Lieutenant,' he said carefully.

'Stand up,' she said quietly, and Brel heard the tremble of anger in her voice. He stood, blowing out another breath.

'Salute,' she said. He saluted, carefully, without show. 'Again,' she said. He saluted again. She took a step forward. Brel knew it was coming.

*I should just ride it, he thought. Take the licks and move on, roll with the current and feed off the bottom.*

Tahirah took a breath.

'If you ever—'

'I don't care,' he said in a blank voice.

He looked up. Tahirah had frozen, her mouth open as if he had punched her in

the gut and she couldn't breathe. He watched the shock and rage flow across her face.

'I-' she began again.

'I don't care what you are going to say about what I did out there. I don't care that you are my squadron's commanding officer – I don't care about what happened. I'm sorry that you do, but you will have to settle for that.'

He turned and sat back down on the edge of his bunk. Tahirah looked as if she was trying to climb back up the mountain of her anger. Brel sighed.

'Trust me, I can understand. One machine, one gunner and one kid too stretched out inside to keep his hood on in primary decontamination. That's quite a load for someone to take, and so I understand that in your head coming to chew me out was about the only thing that you feel you can control.' He paused and nodded, half to himself and half to her. 'But I don't care. My crew doesn't care, and if you want the truth, no one else cares. All they care about is if they are going to come out of this alive or not.'

Tahirah's jaw was working, as though she was struggling to form what she wanted to say. Her skin had gone very white, the blood drained away. Her pupils were black pinpricks.

*Her hands are shaking too, thought Brel. She must be half my age and here she is probably a twitch away from hitting me.* He shook his head, and reached under the bunk. Tahirah tensed on the edge of his sight. He brought the bottle out slowly, shook it once so that the clear liquid within sloshed against the glass.

'Truth,' he said, producing a pair of tin cups and pouring a measure into each. He held one out to Tahirah. 'It always tastes bitter.'

Tahirah took the cup but did not drink. Brel took a swig from his own, and felt the liquor roll like fire down his throat. Tahirah looked at her cup for a long moment, and then raised it to her mouth. A second later her eyes began to water and she tried to suppress a cough. Brel almost laughed.

Tahirah snorted, and stepped back to sit on a pressed metal chair.

'I read your records,' she said, and took another sip. Brel raised an eyebrow.

'They actually still have records here? Thought they would have lost them by now.'

'Medical mainly, but there was a service list attached.'

Brel rolled his cup between his hands and avoided her eye.

'By my reckoning this would be what, your twelfth war?'

'Thirteenth, actually,' Brel replied, still not looking at her. 'They didn't count the Halo Margins. No one likes to remember a farce followed by a defeat. Not in

the *Great Crusade*.’ The grafted skin around the back of his head and down his arms was starting to itch again; it always did when he thought about the past. ‘Because it’s not your own,’ Fastinex had joked when Brel had told the loader about his flesh grafts itching. His mouth twitched for a second. *Twenty years since that fat bastard caught a ricochet*, he thought, *and still his dumb face makes me smile*.

‘I found a list of decorations and citations too. Even a couple of recommendations for promotion. Then you wind up here, and... nothing. Not even a record of reprimand.’

‘Forgotten, that’s what we are. You must have noticed.’

‘Not any more,’ she said. Brel remained silent. ‘They are raising more units. Command has put the order out – every piece of machinery is going to be armed, and every person that can breathe recycled air is going to fight. Not just volunteers, anyone who is fit enough to ride a machine is going to be trained. They want us to strike back.’

Brel laughed before he could stop himself.

‘Is that funny?’ Tahirah asked.

‘Yes,’ nodded Brel. ‘In a way, it is the most hilarious thing I have heard in years.’ He put the cup down and poured another thick measure into the bottom. ‘No one cared about this place, not even when the rest of the Imperium started busting itself apart. Now one side has decided to reduce it to slime, and we are putting men and women in war machines who will die in seconds.’ He smiled. ‘Yeah, funny.’

‘It’s their home.’

‘*Was* their home. I doubt they would want to live there now.’ He took another gulp and rolled his neck to release the tension in his muscles. He looked up at Tahirah, his face an impassive mask to her glassy-eyed anger.

‘You cold bastard.’

‘Tastes bitter, like I said.’

‘We need to fight with everything we have. The traitors—’

‘What?’ he said, and grinned again without humour. ‘You think that the higher-ups here on Tallarn are pulling together because they believe in one ideology over the other? All they care is that the one side is trying to kill us and the other is not. Which side are we on, anyway?’

Tahirah stood. The quivering anger was back. She drew the laspistol slightly clumsily, but he noticed that the barrel did not shake as she levelled it at his face.

‘That’s sedition,’ she said quietly.

‘Go ahead,’ he said. ‘One more tank commander gone and the enemy didn’t even need to fire a shot. Maybe *they* will give you a medal.’

He brought his cup slowly to his mouth, took a sip and looked back up into the barrel of her gun. After a second she let the pistol drop to her side. Brel nodded his thanks.

‘I am going to do you a favour now, for free, because it is still early enough for you. Stop thinking of us as people. Me, my crew, that hawk-eyed civilian, or any of the rest that get hooked up to you. They *are* the machines they ride, and they do it well or they do it badly. That is all you care about, because that is all that matters to getting through this.’

Slowly and carefully, Tahirah put her cup down on the empty chair and took a step towards the door. Brel let out a long tired breath, but Tahirah spun faster than he could react and punched him hard across the jaw. Very hard.

He fell to the floor, his head buzzing. Lying there, he heard Tahirah pick up the half-empty bottle and walk away. He was tempted to laugh, but the door had already shut behind her.

Akil sat on the floor, alone and silent, his eyes staring at water dripping down the plascrete wall. For a second he wondered if the water had seeped in from outside the bunker, then he laughed at his own thought.

*If it was from outside I would be dead already,* he thought, and remembered the rotting pits opening in Rashne’s face.

He shifted his legs up so that they were huddled against his chest. The overalls they had given him felt rough and stiff against his skin. His own clothes had been burned once he was past the first stage of decontamination. He was not sure why, but he could see the fear in the soldiers’ eyes, and so he had stripped off another layer of his life and seen it dumped into a furnace without question.

Adrenaline had drained from him once he was inside the shelter. It had been like the tide receding after a storm to reveal the wreckage of its passing. People walked by, all in uniforms, all moving with apparent purpose. Some looked at him, but he was careful not to meet their gaze. He did not want to talk to anyone. He did not want to see himself in their eyes. He had walked down long grey corridors without knowing where he was going, until he just stopped. In the end he had just sat down with his back against the wall and waited for something to make sense. He was fairly sure that that had been several hours ago. He blinked and shook his head. He felt tired and empty.

*There is nothing left to me that is not buried or hidden. My world lives on only*

*in sealed graves now.* He cupped his hands, staring at the lines of his palms. *What am I doing? I am no warrior. I never was, and what is there to fight for now anyway?* Clustered in the deep chambers, he had heard the other refugees talk of striking back, and striking back until the enemy poured blood into the dead soil of Tallarn.

*Tallarn.* Every time he thought or heard the word he felt the guilt rise from the pit of his thoughts. The dead skulls of buildings, and the look on Rashne's face in the instant before his eyes dissolved, blossomed once again in his mind's eye.

'Thinking too hard can kill you, you know,' said a voice from above him.

He looked up. A woman with a sharp face, cropped dark hair and baggy fatigues was looking down at him. She smiled, and Akil saw the tiredness in the gesture.

'Lieutenant,' he said, and started to get to his feet. She waved him back and dropped down next to him. He had not met her before joining the squadron, and had spoken all of ten words to her before they had gone up to the world above.

'Tahirah, please,' she said, and he smelled the alcohol on her breath. She reached into a thigh pouch and pulled out a bottle. Clear liquid sloshed in the bottom. She opened it and took a swig, then offered the bottle to him. 'But Tah will do.'

He looked up at her, then at the bottle. Tahirah gave a small shrug. He took it from her.

The alcohol was surprisingly smooth in his mouth, but he coughed when it hit his throat. Tahirah laughed.

'Thanks,' said Akil, as numb warmth spread through him.

'Yeah, that stuff is pretty to the point.'

He spread the fingers of his left hand, his eyes tracing the folds and lines of the skin. He took another swig. This time he felt his throat numb at the alcohol's touch, and did not cough.

'I am sorry,' he said.

'For getting lost?' she asked. She held out a hand for the bottle and he handed it back. 'Yeah, that was pretty stupid, but you drive a machine well enough, and you seem like you don't make a habit of stupidity. So...' She trailed away, and he saw that her eyes were unfocused, as if she were looking at a memory. Then she shook her head and frowned. 'Not your fault really. We lost you as much as you got lost.' She took a gulp from the bottle. 'Did you see them?'

'Who? The enemy?'

Tahirah nodded.

‘No, I just saw the... machines. But your gunner, Lachlan, he said he saw them.’ He paused and glanced at Tahirah. ‘He said they were Space Marines.’

‘Iron Warriors,’ she said with a nod. ‘And a lot of them. That is what command are saying. The soup above is singing with their signals.’

Akil frowned. He had heard of the Legiones Astartes, of course. He had even seen one of their number at a distance once, when he was a boy. His father had been invited to a ceremony to mark the outset of some campaign – or the successful completion of one, Akil had never been sure. All the other great merchant princes had been there. The air had glittered with gold, and coiled with scent, and the Space Marine had stood beside the Governor-Militant like a dusk leopard amongst butterflies.

*Iron Warriors.* He had only dimly known the name before, and now it was the name of the slayers of his world.

‘They can die, just like us,’ said Akil, hearing the edge in his own voice.

Tahirah glanced at him, and raised an eyebrow. He took another swig from the bottle but did not speak. She shrugged.

‘They also say that there might be infiltrators in here with us, spies and traitors working for the other side, though I don’t see how.’ She gave a snort of laughter. ‘Paranoia is the only thing that is easy to find at the moment.’

Akil gave a short shake of his head, and then turned his gaze back to Tahirah.

‘Is it true what they say? That we are alone, that word never got out?’

‘Seems that way,’ she said, and shrugged. ‘But I don’t know. Perhaps command found a living astropath out there somewhere, or perhaps a ship in orbit made it out of the system. Perhaps the full might of the Imperium is coming to our aid.’

He gave a snort of laughter.

‘They never did before.’

Tahirah cocked her head, looking at him more closely.

‘You are from here, aren’t you?’

‘Yes.’ He nodded and looked at his hands. ‘Yes, this is my world.’

‘Family?’

He thought of his daughters. Had they been asleep when the bombs fell? Had they reached a shelter?

‘Yes. I mean, I think... I hope so.’

‘Seems like a lot of people made it to shelters.’ Tahirah looked at him steadily. ‘Your family might be here or in one that is connected to the communications network. I know some people in the command cadre. Your family’s name might

be on a list of known survivors.'

For a second he just stared back at her, then he felt the prickle in his eyes, and blinked.

'Thank you. Thank you, Tahirah,' he said, and felt the smile spread over his face. She smiled back, but he caught a glitter in her eye and saw that the smile was in pity and not joy.

'I came to find you, anyway,' she said, after a moment.

'What? Why?'

Tahirah stood, took a final gulp from the bottle, and looked down at him.

'Because we are going back out. And you are coming with us.'

Ithak-ja. *At first the military commanders and soldiers had thought it was a greeting. Then they had presumed it was a curse. Then they realised that it was neither.*

*The phrase ran from mouth to ear amongst the civilians in the shelters. Men and women would whisper the word to each other when they met. Parents would speak it to their children as though it were a cure for their fear. Old friends would clasp hands and speak it before parting. None of the soldiers asked the survivors what it meant, and those that did were met with dark looks and shaking heads, as if they had asked why one needed to breathe.*

*Then, just when the curiosity of the soldiers was running thin, the volunteers came forward. First a few, a ragged clutch of the bold. Then more – old and young, men and women, clustered together into the corridors outside the shelter's command levels. When officers emerged, the ragged civilians would say that they had come to volunteer, that they would fill the ranks of those that died amongst the soldiers, that they would crew any war machine, and follow any order.*

*At first the scattered defence command refused, but with every raid against the Iron Warriors the loss of crews and machines increased. They could replace machines: unused materiel littered the forgotten corners of the shelters and staging bunkers. Most of the equipment was either old and damaged, or new and incomplete, but damage could be repaired and replacement components found. What could not be replaced were the bodies that steered the machines, manned the guns and pulled the triggers. So, at last, the terrible arithmetic of war gave the last citizens of Tallarn what they wished for – they would raid across the land they had lost and kill those who had taken it from them.*

*The old, the weak and the very young were sent away. Those that remained were shown how to control an armoured machine, how to load, how to zero and fire a weapon, and how to use a vox-unit. As training it was too quick and not enough; the soldiers knew it and so did the volunteers. Most also knew that the world above would teach them or kill them, but no one said as much. What would be the point of speaking that truth out loud?*

*Once their few hours of training had passed, the volunteers were spread amongst units that had suffered losses. A few, those with aptitude and skill, were given control of machines. Only then, once they knew that they would live or die together, did the soldiers ask their new brothers and sisters in war what 'ithak-ja' meant.*

*It was an old phrase, the Tallarn explained, spoken in a time which none could remember outside of stories. It had many meanings, but here and now it only had one meaning that mattered.*

*'Vengeance,' they said. 'It means vengeance.'*

# FOUR

**Kill-zone**  
**We are all war machines**  
**Death rattle**

‘Three targets confirmed.’ Akil waited while the vox hissed in his ears.

‘*Just three?*’ the dry voice asked.

Brel, of course it was Brel. Akil had never heard the man say a word outside of the squadron vox: not in the hours spent going through decontamination, not in the shelter, not in all of the past weeks of war. Only out here, in the world of the dead, did they connect.

The cold bastard had a point though. Akil had seen seven Iron Warriors patrol groups, and all had been six strong. He put his eye to the sight again, zoomed out and panned from left to right and back. The fog was thinning, pulling back to show splintered buildings ringing the open flats like broken teeth around a rotten tongue. The enemy had bombarded this place more than once, flattening it with creeping barrages, trying to flush the raiders out. They had failed.

He switched his sight to infra-red and the fog, ground and ruins became a dull curtain of ambient heat. The fog was thin enough here that you could see a hundred metres without infra-sight, but there was no point. Heat vision was the daylight of this war.

The engine bloom of the three Iron Warriors machines stood out in bright green as they moved across the flats. Spots of yellow showed where components were running hot or a track was grinding out heat as it scraped past the hull. Cooling fumes trailed from their exhausts, and their engine blocks were blotches of near-white. He squinted and tweaked his zoom, trying to see if there were more machines running behind those that he could see.

No, there were just three: a huge slab-sided machine crawling between two of

the smaller kind he had learned to call ‘Predators’. The bigger one looked more like a block of raw iron than a fighting vehicle. Clusters of lascannons hung from its flanks and its tracks looked thicker than his own machine’s armour.

‘Three enemy confirmed – two Predator, one of unknown class. Large, upward-sloped front, two quad las-clusters on the sides.’

‘*Spartan,*’ cut in Tahirah’s voice. ‘*Land Raider-class hull.*’

Akil nodded, even though there was almost no one to see. ‘All of them should be in the centre of the engagement zone in one-two-zero seconds.’

‘*Understood,*’ said Tahirah. ‘*All units, fire and converge at Talon’s signal.*’

The vox went silent, and Akil felt sweat tickle his brow. Without thinking, he raised his hand to rub the rubber of his suit above his eyes. For a second the image of Rashne raising his hand to wipe his bare face ghosted across his mind’s eye...

He blanked the memory out with a slow breath, and looked through the eyepiece above the steering levers. The infra-sight was new, like the lascannon fitted into the socket beside the drive controls, and the smeared grey-and-green disruption pattern on the outside hull. To Akil, the sight already had the familiar feel of something used again and again.

‘Sol’s light, look at that thing,’ said Udo. He crouched next to Akil, hugging the gunsight of the mounted lascannon. The internal vox somehow stretched the whining tone of Udo’s voice. ‘We could hit that Spartan square, and on the inside they would just think we were knocking to come in.’

‘It can be killed,’ said Akil, and knew it was a mistake as soon as he opened his mouth.

‘Yeah? How long have you been riding machines, old man?’

Akil shrugged, looking at the exposed links rattling over the slab-machine’s hull. A good shot could sever the links and leave the machine like a beached leviathan. Long weeks on the surface, sucking air from pressure bottles, watching the enemy, hiding from them, running from them and killing them had changed the way that he saw the world.

*I am not the man I was,* he thought. He felt his left hand flex as if from remembered pain.

After a long moment of silence Udo snorted. Akil remained silent this time; he had learned that it was advisable not to respond to most of what Udo said. The gunner was not happy about being assigned to the scout machine, but Akil had a feeling that even left in paradise Udo would have found something to whine about.

‘They are entering the bracket,’ said Akil quietly.

‘Gun live,’ replied Udo.

Akil watched the lead Predator grind over a rise in the terrain, its main gun flexing to stay level. Behind it the Spartan ground forwards.

‘Target the front vehicle,’ said Akil.

‘I have it.’

‘Take the tracks this time.’

‘I know, I know. Would you shut up, old man? Just remember your part.’

Akil shifted his grip on the lever that would start the machine’s engine. He could hear Udo breathing over the vox. The Iron Warriors tanks grew larger in his view, the two Predators guarding the Spartan to its front and rear. He heard Udo take a single slow breath.

‘Firing,’ whispered Udo from beside Akil.

Akil’s free hand thumbed the external vox.

‘*Vengeance!*’ he shouted.

A whip-crack of thunder filled his ears. He closed his eyes as the bolt of energy flashed through the air from the lascannon, and the sight blanked to white. The las-blast struck the Predator low, burning through track skirting and melting a drive wheel. For an instant the Predator’s tracks kept moving, rattling through the broken cycle in a spray of molten metal. Then the tank slewed, its unbroken track pushing it in a skidding half-circle.

Inside the scout, Akil heard the thump and explosive crack of *Silence*’s shell hitting its target. The Predator vanished in an expanding cloud of black-streaked flame. Behind it the Spartan came on, scattering the flaming wreckage of its kin aside. The second Predator swerved to the flank, its turret traversing as it came.

Akil opened his eyes. Flame light was pouring through the scout’s vision slits, and the view through the infra-sight danced with heat. Udo was whooping, his hands slapping the top of the gunsight. Akil pulled the ignition lever and *Talon*’s engine started. He slammed it into reverse gear and the scout pushed back from the low rise.

Akil could no longer feel anything, really; some part of him was moving the scout’s controls, but all he was aware of was a high-pitched whine in his ears. This was the moment of survival or death. The Iron Warriors would know where they were now. They would have seen the beam of the lascannon shot like a finger pointing back to them. If the squadron had made an error in planning the ambush, or if they were too slow moving back, then they would die out here.

*Talon* accelerated backwards.

*Thirty yards, then turn.* The routine dominated Akil's thoughts as he felt the machine judder and buck in his hands. Beside him Udo was still cursing the enemy and cheering with glee at the kill.

'*Talon, the Spartan is coming after you,*' came Brel's voice, as flat and emotionless as a machine.

'Shoot it,' snarled Akil.

'*Waiting for a shot,*' said Brel.

The kill was a well-worn routine for Brel. They found a patrol, found an ambush site, then waited. The scout always picked the target, but it was Brel who laid the ambushes out. Tahirah had stopped questioning his suggestions and now just accepted them. Layout and angles were crucial. Once the scout hit the first target, *Silence* had to be in the right place to hit the target straight away and blow it to pieces.

Then came the messy part, the scrabbling to outrun the remaining enemy. They would hit targets of opportunity, but once they fired the first shots the objective was simply to survive. The scout was the most exposed in these moments, but that was just one of those facts that did not bother Brel. Tahirah and *Lantern* stayed back until the ambush was sprung; the Executioner's energy and heat signatures were just too bright for it to be part of the first strike, and its weaponry too unreliable against anything larger than a medium-grade tank. Backup, insurance, a slayer of opportunity. *Lantern* might bear the title of Executioner, but *Silence* was the squadron's true killer.

Hit once, hit hard, and run. It was a system that had kept them alive and killed eight Iron Warriors machines.

Brel watched as the Spartan closed in on the scout. *Silence* was almost a kilometre back from the kill site, and he was relying on infra-vision and auspex feeds to follow the battle. The Spartan was a glowing block, trailing streams of fire from the burning wreckage of the dead Predator. The surviving Predator was sweeping wide, its turret turning again to cover the Spartan's rear. They were good, of course – no hesitation and no panic. They had gone straight from being ambushed, into cover and counter attack.

Brel felt his mouth twitch and almost shook his head at his own thought.

Of course they were good. They were the Legiones Astartes.

'But out here, we are all war machines,' he muttered to himself.

'I have a clear shot to the Spartan's drive wheel,' said Jallinika. 'We might not kill it but we can cripple it.'

Brel felt something itch at the back of his thoughts. Something was just not right about this ambush: a factor or possibility he had overlooked. He paused, listening to his own breathing, watching the colours shift and smudge on the auspex.

‘Boss?’ said Jallinika.

‘Take the shot,’ said Brel softly. In his head, the itch of uncertainty grew.

Tahirah waited. It had been twenty-six seconds since the engagement began. Before that they had been waiting for seventy-two minutes. She knew this; like counting, like breathing, like not moving in order to hide her shakes. This was all just part of how she did things now.

‘Do we go active, Tah?’ asked Makis.

‘Nope,’ she said without moving. It felt quiet in *Lantern*, even with the distant growl of ordnance and engines.

‘They must be ready to pull back by now.’

‘Light up early, we get seen, we die.’ She paused, clicked the vox off, and then thumbed it live again. ‘I think we would be slightly less useful dead than we are alive.’

‘All right,’ said Makis, his tone saying that it was anything but all right in his opinion. Vail and the left and right gunners said nothing. They probably agreed with Makis, but quite honestly she did not care. She had got them into and back from six missions and nine separate engagements. That meant that, in her considered opinion, she did not care what they thought.

*I should learn the new gunners’ real names, she thought. Was the left one Forn, or was that Vantine?* She mentally shrugged, it did not matter. Neither was that good a shot, and she was not convinced about the repair to the sponson anyway; whichever of them was in there would probably be pasted sooner rather than later. Simpler not to worry about their names.

Beside her, Lachlan shifted in his seat, his silence sullen and complete. He hardly spoke now, not on mission, not back in the shelter. It had bothered her for a while, but then she had her own problems. They all had enough of those.

‘You should have a look, Tah,’ he said. She heard the edge in his voice and her head snapped up to look at him.

‘Why?’

‘Because this is about to go to hell.’

The left side of *Talon* hit something hard, and the chassis skidded around. Akil

hit the brakes and the scout slammed to a halt. His head whipped forward and the top of his face slammed into the infra-sight. He tasted wet iron in his mouth and throat as he gasped for breath.

Udo had stopped cheering. Akil blinked, his eyes watering and blood flecking the inside of his eyepieces.

‘No, no...’ he gasped, and grabbed at the controls. ‘Please...’

The power plant snarled and *Talon* rocked in place, stuck firm on whatever it had hit. A sudden cold void had opened inside him, spreading ice through his body and brain.

‘No, please, not now...’

They had all seen it over the last few weeks, and heard stories of it again and again. Worse than a clean hit from the enemy, worse even than a seal failure, was to be stranded in the hell above. Thrown tracks, burned-out power plants, mired hulls: all were a slow death for the crew inside the tank. Unable to get out to repair or free themselves, they had to wait in their armoured coffin for the air supply to hiss to nothing.

Beside him, Udo had his eyepiece pressed to the gunsight, gazing at the fire and smoke-polluted fog outside. Akil nudged the scout forwards, and then slammed it into reverse. Straining gears and tracks screeched over the rising growl of the power plant. They did not move.

‘It’s coming,’ shouted Udo.

Akil looked up at the glowing image in the infra-sight. The Spartan loomed, heat washing from its power plant. He pushed more power into the reverse gear and *Talon* lurched again. It was coming straight at them. Akil released the power, felt the scout slump a little, and then rammed it back again. Something gave, and *Talon*’s tracks scabbled on the slime-covered rubble.

The Spartan’s lascannon clusters opened fire. Converging beams of lightning hit the rise of broken masonry just in front of *Talon*. The scout rang as chunks of white-hot plascrete struck its hull.

‘Brel!’ he shouted into the vox, but the word was lost in the sound of detonating metal.

The Vanquisher shell hit the Spartan’s rear armour. Smoke and flames exploded outwards, and the massive chassis bucked like an angry beast. Its rear slammed back down in a cloud of smoke, lascannon clusters twitching.

‘Got you,’ whispered Brel. The huge tank was still alive but it was going nowhere. He clicked the vox open. ‘Get moving, *Talon*.’ The Spartan’s weapons

could come back online at any moment, and the remaining Predator was coming about hard and firing. Heavy rounds danced impact flashes across the ruins around the scout's position. Brel glanced away from the view.

'Get us moving, Cal,' he said, and the big driver grunted an affirmative.

Beside him, Jallinika cursed. He looked around at her, his ears filling with a stream of expletives.

'What?' he shouted.

She stopped cursing. 'Look,' she said.

He did.

'Oh.'

The front of the Spartan pistoned open in front of Akil's eyes. He saw something move in the space within, something that glinted dully in the fire. For a second Akil wondered if the tank had simply come apart from the damage it had suffered, but the burning figures broke from the Spartan's mouth at a run.

There were ten of them, ten nightmares cast in dull iron and brushed steel. Hammers, axes and claw blades wept lightning in their hands. Curved layers of armour hunched their shoulders, moving like iron-slab muscles as they ran. At first Akil just stared at them, his gaze locked upon the eyes shining in their black metal faces. He felt his mouth work soundlessly in his face, speaking a word he had heard once but now realised that he had never truly understood.

*Terminators.*

A bolt of energy streaked across the closing gap – Akil blinked a second too late, and the outline of an armoured figure burned across his retinas. He was screaming, screaming without being able to stop. Explosions rang against the hull. The lascannon fired again and again.

'I killed one,' gasped Udo. 'I think I killed one.'

Akil forced his eyes open. The Terminators were forty metres away, firing as they came, the ground churning around their feet. Explosions and muzzle flare smeared his view. He yanked the control levers back. Metal screamed as the scout rocked in place, held for a second, and then jerked free. The controls juddered in his grip as power ran into the tracks and clawed them backwards.

The Terminators kept coming. He could see the polished iron skulls on their chests now, and the shell casings falling from their combi-bolters. Udo fired again but the shot burned wide.

Akil hit the brake on the left track. The scout twisted, skidding as the right track pulled it around. Akil rammed both levers forwards and *Talon* shot ahead.

He could not see the Iron Warriors any more; the sight in front of him was a blur of cold rubble and ruins. They hit a wall and exploded through it. Udo was out of his seat, scrambling to the rear vision slits.

‘Where are they?’ shouted Akil.

‘I can’t see them.’

Akil half-twisted in his seat, instinctively looking behind. He snatched his gaze back around in time to see the remains of a fallen pillar just before they hit it.

*Talon* burst through the fractured plascrete, rode up and crashed down. Akil slammed forward. For a second, everything was ringing silence and the sound of his own breathing. Then he realised that they had stopped moving.

His hands went to the controls as his mouth opened. ‘Can you see th—’

The impact rang through the scout like a shattering gong. Roof plating buckled inwards. Akil could hear armour grinding on armour. Udo had curled into a ball behind his seat. Akil thought of the lightning clinging to the Terminators’ weapons.

‘Come on!’ shouted Tahirah. *Lantern* was still cold, its engine whining in protest at the speed Makis was demanding of it. Slime and mud sprayed from its tracks as it gouged a path towards the scout. Its gears screamed as it built up speed. They needed to be much, much closer for them to stand a chance of making a shot. Tahirah had ordered them on the fastest, most direct route to give it to them: straight across the sludge pan, straight towards the stranded scout and straight across the surviving Predator’s kill-zone.

*Stupid, so damned stupid*, Tahirah cursed inside her skull. ‘Lachlan, do you have a shot?’

‘Not a clear one.’

‘How long until you do?’

The rising growl of the engine and the rattle and ring of the *Lantern* filled the pause.

‘Five seconds, or maybe not at all.’

Tahirah looked at the auspex. On their left flank the Iron Warriors Predator had tagged them and was coming around in a wide arc, trailing its veil of heat and sensor baffling. In a few seconds it would be behind them. *Kill shot*, she thought.

‘Left gunner, fire at will.’ She waited, but heard no reply. ‘Do you hear that, whoever the hell you are? You see a target, you fire.’

‘Understood,’ came a trembling reply a second later.

‘Good,’ she snarled, and then switched the channel. ‘*Silence*, this is *Lantern*.’ Static boiled in her ears. ‘Brel, you hear me?’

The Iron Warriors Predator almost had a shot on them. If Brel did not take care of it, they would die. She laughed to herself. It was far too late for such thoughts. There was no choice now, none at all. ‘Lachlan, take the shot.’

The first Terminator reached *Talon* and pulled itself onto its roof. The Iron Warrior straightened with a clicking hiss of oiled joints and servos. No man could stand on the surface of Tallarn and hope to live, but this iron-clad creature was not a man – he was a Space Marine, and the armour that encased his flesh was made to walk through the fire of war and the cold of the void. The head of the Iron Warrior’s hammer glowed with a blue light in the thick air. The legionary looked down for a second, electric green eyes taking in the scout’s armour plating. He raised his hammer.

The plasma stream hit the Terminator from the side and pitched him from his feet. He twisted as he fell, his armour holding its shape for a second before melting. Chips of ceramite exploded with heat, burning the air as they fell. Inside the cage of his armour the Iron Warrior’s flesh became smoke and steam.

The plasma swept on through the air, peeling paint from *Talon*’s hull in black bubbles. The Iron Warriors nearest the scout vanished as their armour crumpled under the stream and became nothing more than expanding spheres of gas and heat. Some of them remained alive long enough to turn and try to lumber out of the plasma storm, their shapes slowly deforming as they went.

Light poured through the *Talon*’s vision slits, hot white and harsh blue. The roof plating began to glow red. Akil heard the scream and rush of plasma-fuelled explosions. Static boiled and spat in his ears as the light grew brighter, shifting hue from white to orange. His hands went back to the controls and fired the scout’s engines. It accelerated away over the rubble, the plasma fires burning in its wake.

Akil heard distant voices over the vox as he turned *Talon* south, away from the kill-zone.

‘Put us in the kill-zone, Cal,’ said Brel. There had been a pause, and Brel had not needed to see the driver’s face to know that it had creased with confusion. ‘Do it, Cal, put us right in the middle of it. As close to the live Predator as possible.’

As soon as Brel had seen *Lantern* move, he had realised what Tahirah was going to do, and what she was gambling on him doing. He had cursed, and for a

second had thought of not giving the order. A long breath later he had shaken his head, half in anger and half in admiration.

‘Yes, boss,’ said Calsuriz, after a long pause.

*Silence* clattered into motion, its tracks rolling slowly, then faster and faster as it bumped onto the flat pan of the kill-zone. Brel glued his eyepieces to the periscope, flicking between infra-vision and the basic sight of the human eyeball. The fog here was thin enough that he could see the Iron Warriors tank cutting through the vapour like a shark through sand-clouded water.

‘There you are,’ he whispered. ‘Jal, make them notice us.’

The Vanquisher cannon spat fire, and a shower of mud and smoke hid the Predator for a second. When Brel saw it again it had changed course, turning hard with its dome turret traversing and its sponsons swivelling in their mounts. Damn, it was close – so close that its streaked metal hull almost filled his sight. He could see targeting lasers scatter red lines through the murk as they reached for him and the more distant *Lantern*. The Predator could do it; one machine could kill both *Lantern* and *Silence*, if it was not killed first. Tahirah had known that, had known that by roaring across the sludge pan she was opening herself up as a target, and that the only way she would live was if Brel brought the *Silence* in to split the Predator’s attention. It was a move of total courage and utter stupidity.

The Predator’s turret was rotating around to Brel. Jallinika’s curses filled his ears again as she tried to get the main gun steady for a shot. The breech slammed open next to him, and the smoking case fell from its throat. Selq was already rising, ramming another shell into position. The Vanquisher’s firing block closed on the brass-cased shell with a ring like a struck anvil.

Brel kept his eyes on the Predator. Both machines were close, far too close. This was not an engagement; it was a nose-to-nose brawl with fists of high explosive and iron. In such a fight there could be only one winner.

The diffused red line of light from the Predator’s targeter became a dot in Brel’s sight, and he knew that behind the Predator’s gun a pair of legionary eyes was looking right back at him.

‘Okay,’ whispered Brel.

*Silence* fired an instant after the Predator, the boom of the shot and the ring of impact overlapping in a metal-throated roar. The Predator vanished before Brel’s eyes. A second later the shards of its hull rang on *Silence*’s outer skin like the striking of a thousand hammers. Jallinika whooped, slapping the breech block. Brel stayed silent, watching the fire and smoke rising from the blasted bones of

the Predator, listening.

*Clatter-clunk, clatter-clatter, clatter-clunk.*

‘They hit us,’ he said.

They all heard it then: a grinding whir of half-sheared metal, like the drumming of broken iron fingers upon the hull.

‘Full halt,’ said Brel, but Calsuriz had already disengaged the power from the tracks. *Silence* lurched to a stop, and the metallic clatter-clunk sound ceased. For a second none of them said anything. They all knew what had just happened. Brel took a slow breath of sterilised air.

It was Selq that broke the silence.

‘The track isn’t broken,’ he said. Brel could hear the control in the loader’s soft lilt. ‘It would have spun out or jammed if it was a straight break.’

‘It’s half broke,’ added Calsuriz, his voice casual, as though he might be talking about the chance of winning a hand of cards. ‘You can hear it scrape the skirt, and it’s not just the track. Left drive wheel is shot as well, or I’m the new Regent of Terra.’

Jallinika barked a laugh, then went quiet.

Brel let out a slow breath. There was no point asking the question that was running through all their thoughts: *Can we still move, or will we go a few metres and then be stranded?*

‘*Brel, you got it, you beautiful, beautiful bastard,*’ Tahirah’s voice breathed over the vox, and he could hear the delight at still being alive in her words. He closed his eyes and leaned his head back.

‘You’re welcome,’ he said. *So this is how it happens,* he thought. *After all this time I am going to suffocate on the surface of a dead planet because a stray shell clipped a track.* He shook his head.

‘*Brel?*’ Tahirah’s voice crackled in his ear again, a sudden tension in her voice. ‘*We should be moving, why have you stopped?*’

He ignored the question, and flicked the vox to the internal channel only.

‘Cal, engage drive power slowly. Let’s see if we can move.’ *Or if we are dead and just haven’t stopped breathing,* he added to himself.

‘*Brel?*’ Tahirah’s voice grated in his ear again, and again he ignored it. He listened as the noise of the engine changed in pitch and the gears engaged with a *clunk*. His chest was aching, and he realised that he was holding his breath.

There was a rattling thud, and *Silence* lurched forwards. The engine noise dipped as Calsuriz notched the power down, and then there was the familiar rumble of movement. They were moving, slower than a man could walk, but

moving nonetheless, and that meant they were alive.

*The first ship came alone. Tearing from the warp at the edge of the system, it sliced towards Tallarn. At first the Iron Warriors pickets presumed it was a trader or a bulk transporter unaware of the war raging at its destination. Three Iron Warriors destroyers moved to intercept it. They would board it, cripple it if they had to, and strip it of anything of value.*

*Only when they were within gun range did they realise they had miscalculated. The ship was no bulk carrier or lost trader. It was a warship.*

*The Lesson of Ages was a brawler of a vessel, made to take damage in exchange for the destruction of its enemies. An ugly block of fire-scored armour studded by weapon barrels; it had served the Emperor since the Great Crusade had first gone beyond the light of the Solar System. Every one of its previous commanders had died in action, and the ship had been on the threshold of destruction over a dozen times. But it had never faltered, and its dedication-oaths to the Emperor remained unbroken. In reply to the Iron Warriors hails, the shipmaster sent a single message looped through all frequencies.*

*'Traitor-death, traitor-death, traitor-death,' it chanted as it drove forwards.*

*The Iron Warriors destroyers fired, spreading torpedoes into the Lesson of Ages's path. But she kept coming. Warheads slammed into her decks, burning through armour in gouts of plasma and drooling molten metal into the void. Still she kept coming. Further in-system, larger ships detached from Tallarn's orbit and began the long burn to intercept this lone enemy. In the guts of the Iron Warriors vessels, ratings and servitors hauled fresh torpedoes into launch tubes. They fired again, the ordnance burning fast as it ate up the distance to the target. Fire blistered across the Lesson of Ages's prow and back. Explosions shook her cracked skin. Still she kept coming.*

*The Iron Warriors destroyers began to turn out of the burning ship's path. The Lesson of Ages fired. The destroyers' shields vanished under the deluge of macro-shells an instant before their hulls melted and their reactors burst.*

*Its outer hull still burning, the Lesson of Ages roared towards Tallarn. Two hours later the second and third ships arrived – the Lament of Caliban and Beastlayer had followed the same distress call as the Lesson of Ages. The*

*message had rippled through the warp from Tallarn, its meaning clear even through the fracturing of the storms.*

*'The Iron Warriors are here. This is the anvil upon which we will break them.'*

*More would come. They came for hatred, they came for glory, but most of all they came to see the back of a traitor Legion broken.*

*Tallarn stood alone no longer.*

# FIVE

## **The land that will be God-walk Wounded**

*‘Do you see that?’*

The words reached into the black water of Akil’s dream and pulled him to the surface. His eyelids flickered open. He had been asleep with his head resting against the vibrating hull of the scout. A sky of weeping fire filled the dreamscape through which a tattooed man walked, his multi-coloured skin crawling like a nest of snakes.

Akil had let Udo drive after he had nearly driven them into a ditch, and Udo had taken his place without a word of complaint. As soon as Akil was out of the driver’s seat the tiredness had come in a single silent wave, dragging him down into soft half-dreams. He thought he remembered trying to apologise, but he had just mumbled something incoherent and the dreams had kept coming. Now he was awake, his skin clammy against the inside of his suit, his senses trying to rebuild the world around him.

‘What?’ he said thickly, and then remembered that he needed to key his vox. ‘What did you say?’ he asked again.

He blinked. *Talon* was still, its engine silent. Udo was in the driver’s seat, leaning forward so that his eyepieces pressed against the smeared glass of the forward view slit.

‘What’s going on, why have we stopped?’

Udo did not turn away from the view.

‘We stopped an hour ago. The boss wanted to re-plot our route. Something about enemy activity between us and the shelter. The other two are just next to us.’ He turned his head, looking at Akil with eyes that caught the moonlight

streaming through the vision slit.

*Something is wrong*, thought Akil, *something added or taken away from the way things should be*. Something that he could not place...

Udo nodded and keyed the vox. 'Sorry to wake you, but you have to see this.'

Akil realised what was different, then.

*Moonlight*.

Moonlight glinted off the scratches on the gun block and drive controls. Akil scrambled forward, reaching towards the silver light as though he could touch it, as though it were falling water. Udo moved out of the way, and Akil pushed his face against the glass and looked up. The murk was still there, hanging like a grubby veil, but he could see the moon and stars shining down on him with cold, beautiful light. He let out a long breath, closed his eyes and opened them again. He felt the smile spread across his face without being able to stop it.

'The fog seems to be thinning in places,' said Udo. 'This is some plateau north-west of the shelter. We crossed into it twenty kilometres ago. Not seen a wreck or ruin since.'

Akil felt his smile stiffen, then drain away.

'Fruit,' he said to himself.

'What?'

'They grew fruit here. Kilometres and kilometres of trees and bushes. The Scented Flats, we called them, because when the blossom came the air used to be so thick with scented pollen that you could smell it all the way to the coast.' Akil went quiet. He had brought his daughters here for the Blossom Festival just last year...

His eyes drifted down from the moon to the land laid out under its light. With the cloak of fog lifting, the sludge that had covered the ground was drying. Cracks snaked across the ground, and he saw a curl of dust rise on what must have been a gust of wind.

*This is the beginning*, thought Akil as the dust danced in the silver light. *No matter what happens here, no matter who wins, my world will never return. It lives only in dreams now. This drying corpse is the future. I am looking at the land that will be.*

Behind him Udo shifted, but said nothing. Akil was about to look away when he saw the first flash. He stared at the sky, blinking. For an instant he was sure he had seen...

Another flash, low on the hazed horizon, swallowed by the distant banks of fog. Then another, and another. As he looked up, fresh stars were blazing and

blinking out, strobing and burning for the length of a heartbeat. The hazy sky danced with light and falling embers of fire. Akil began to speak, but the words came out as a gasp. Udo's head came up.

*'Are you seeing this?'* Tahirah's voice crackled in his ear.

*'Yes,'* came Brel's voice without pause.

*'What—'* began Akil, but Brel cut through him.

*'Orbital engagement, a big one, and it looks like a drop as well. They are hammering the hell out of each other up there to reach the surface.'*

Akil watched as a star formed and flickered from white to red.

*'But I thought we were alone,'* he said. *'That it was just the Iron Warriors up there.'*

*'Looks like that might have changed,'* said Brel dryly.

Akil felt something shift in his chest. It was a warm feeling, a feeling that the universe had opened an unexpected door in front of him, and that sunlight was shining through.

*'Doesn't mean they are coming to help us,'* said Brel, as if he had heard the hope in Akil's silence. *'Have you heard anything from command, lieutenant?'*

*'No comms since we came out,'* replied Tahirah, then she paused. *'We have to get back to the shelter. All units warm up. We move in five minutes.'*

They limped across the desiccating plain, a loose triangle of machines under the cold moonlight. They were moving at walking pace, dust rising in their wake. In front of them, looming nearer by slow paces, a bank of thick ochre fog waited like a wall separating the moonlit night from another realm.

Shut away from the moonlight, within the rattling dark of *Lantern*, Tahirah let her eyes close for a moment. They stung and ached from staring at the world through small strips of glass and targeting sights. Every now and again she would angle one of the sight blocks upwards to look at the night sky. The false stars, comets and fire lines of the space battle still fizzed across the black dome. Brel was right – whoever was up there, they were pounding the hell out of each other.

What did it mean? Reinforcements? Rescue? Withdrawal? She had heard the hope in Akil's words when they had first seen the flashes in the sky, but as much as she wanted to believe that her first war was over, she had a feeling that Brel was closer to the mark: new stars in the sky might be ill omens as much as signs of hope.

*'We'll be in the fog again in a few minutes,'* said Makis. *'Did you say thirty'*

kilometres to the shelter?’

‘Something like that.’ Tahirah shrugged even though Makis could not see her. ‘Difficult to be sure where we are. The maps are a little out of date.’

Makis did not reply. The low grumble of the machine surrounded Tahirah again, rocking her in its clattering embrace.

The fog swallowed them a few minutes later as Makis had promised. One minute it was a cliff of bulging vapour looming above them, and the next it was all around them, streaking past the glass of their periscopes, billowing like sediment stirred at the bottom of a river. Tahirah had to suppress a clench of fear in her guts. For a moment it felt as though they had plunged into deep, polluted water. She focused on the auspex to calm herself, watching the blue markers of *Talon* and *Silence* draw closer to either side of her machine. They would normally have spread out, relying on auspex and vox to stay connected, but with *Silence* hobbling on a half-broken track they stayed as close as they could.

They kept on moving for four hours. They passed along roads littered with the carcasses of vehicles, through the rusted metal ribs of buildings and past pools of congealing slime. The clatter of their tracks and the breath of their exhausts vanished in the pus-thick vapour. No one said anything, not inside the machines and not across the vox. The only noise was the sound of the engines turning the tracks and the hiss of the air pumping into breath masks.

‘*Have to stop,*’ said Brel, and the sound of his voice made Tahirah jump.

‘Problem?’ she said. The vox crackled for a second, and then Brel’s voice came back.

‘*Track rattle has changed pitch,*’ he said, his voice thick with exhaustion.

*Terra, do we all sound like that?* wondered Tahirah.

‘*Might be the metal is weakening. Don’t want to push it.*’

‘Yeah,’ she said, swallowing a wave of her own tiredness. Her mouth was gritty and an ache pulsed behind her eyes. ‘Fine. Sure.’ She blinked and shook her head, trying to bring everything back into focus. *Much longer out here and we might not be able to make it back.* She thumbed the squadron-wide vox. ‘All machines, halt fifteen minutes. Cool the engines down. Keep vox and auspex live.’

Akil and Brel acknowledged, but she only half heard them. She felt herself start to sag forwards, caught herself and jerked back into her seat. She had to stay awake somehow. She tried to figure out where they were for a moment, running calculations and comparing the grim sights they had passed against the luminous maps on her command console. It did not work. She found her eyes

fluttering after the second distance calculation. At least with the engine off, *Lantern* was still and quiet.

She had to stay awake...

She had...

Tahirah's eyes opened wide and her head snapped up so fast that it slammed into the hatch above. Sharp pain burned away the after-image of a dream. Her head was pulsing with pain that was not just from hitting it. She swallowed, trying to clear a taste of bile from her mouth.

*Lantern* trembled.

Tahirah went still. Had that been real? It had not felt like one of the tremors which ran through the machine when it was moving. No, it felt like the ground beneath them had shaken. Slowly she turned her head to look at Lachlan. The gunner was slumped sideways, asleep, the hood of his suit riding up so that the eyepieces were pressed against his forehead. Perhaps it had not been real; perhaps it was just an echo from her dream that had yet to fade. Her head felt like someone had hammered a nail into the centre of her forehead. Carefully she thumbed the internal vox.

'Anyone else feel that?' No reply came. She clicked transmit again.

The tremor came again. Lachlan shifted in his sleep but did not wake.

Tahirah had already flicked on her active sight, and had her eyes pressed against the viewfinder. The world outside was as it had been: a swirling bank of fog painted in the washed-out green-white of infra-sight. Clefts opened in the murk and then closed again, like corridors glimpsed beyond briefly opened doors.

Somewhere in the distance a spot of light and heat bloomed, spreading its illumination through the fog before shrinking to nothing. A second later she heard the rumble of a detonation. She switched to normal vision. A heartbeat later an orange glow formed, strobing with secondary detonations.

Tahirah bit her lip. The explosions were distant, but they were in the direction they would have to go to get to the shelter. Orbital strikes, perhaps? Long-range artillery or macro-rocket fire? But the metal of her machine was still; something else had shaken the ground. The tremor came again, and then again, as though in answer to her thoughts. Something in the slow rhythm of it made her think of being alone in a dark forest with the sound of unseen horrors circling at the edge of sight.

'*Lieutenant.*' Brel's voice sounded tired and cold, but for some reason she had never been so pleased to hear any other. '*Did you feel that?*'

‘Yes,’ she said. ‘There are explosions to the south-east.’

‘*Could be,*’ he said. Was that a note of hope in his voice?

‘But the vibrations and the explosions are not synchronised.’

‘*Maybe the shockwave takes longer to go through rock and earth.*’

‘Maybe.’ She heard the lack of conviction in her own voice. ‘I think we should go cold. Full power down, sights off. No comms.’

‘*What?*’ said Brel, but she was already clicking another key on the vox.

‘Akil, do you hear me?’ She waited for a second then thumbed transmit again. ‘Akil.’

‘*I hear you, lieutenant.*’ His voice sounded as if he was struggling to wake up.

‘Good.’ She keyed the squadron-wide vox again. ‘All units, we are going cold and silent. Shut everything down apart from the air. I mean *everything*. Do not move, do not use anything that gives heat or uses power. Wake the vox up again in thirty, three–zero, minutes.’

She looked into her sight one last time, her hand going to the power stud.

The ground shook, and shook again.

‘*Wait a second–*’ Brel began, but never got to finish his protest.

The Titan strode out of the fog in front of Tahirah’s eyes as if stepping from behind a curtain. Curved plates of metres-thick armour covered its shoulders, and its back seemed bent under the weight of racked missiles. Pitted orange paint lacquered its metal skin. Its arms were long-barrelled weapons. The oily skins of void shields sparkled in the fog, and electric green light burned in its eyes. Beams of scanners swept in front of it, while pistons the width of tree trunks hissed as it took another step.

It was a god of war, an apex war machine. It was a Battle Titan, and the world shook beneath its tread.

‘*Back!*’ Tahirah felt the scream rip from her throat. Makis was shouting too, *Lantern*’s engine was roaring into full life, and the vox was crackling with the shouts of the rest of the crew. The Titan came on in unhurried strides. Fire leapt from its right arm overhead, chugging and coughing as the weapon barrels turned.

*Talon* screamed in protest as Akil engaged full power to its cold gears. It jumped back, tracks gouging into the ground.

‘I can’t see it!’ shouted Udo. The kid was hugging the lascannon sight, his hand on the firing lever. The ground around them erupted. The scout rose into the air and slammed back down. Yellow and red firelight flashed through the

view slits, and the hull rang with the kiss of shrapnel. Akil whipped forward as *Talon* hit the ground. Pain detonated in his skull. A high-pitched buzz seemed to surround him, and warm liquid trickled down his forehead into his left eye. He reached for the control sticks, feeling their shape through his gloves even as his vision clogged and blurred. *Talon* was still moving, its tracks skidding and turning it as soon as it hit the ground. Akil rammed the right track forwards and the machine lurched around.

Outside the hull the Titan's gun roared again, and the world quaked as though shaken by one of the old gods. He slammed *Talon* onwards, the gears screaming as they meshed at full speed.

They had seconds at best. He had heard stories of Titans, even seen a few remembrancer pict-captures of them in action. They carried enough firepower to turn a city to rubble and heat-cracked glass. *Talon* was still alive only because the god-machine had only extended a fraction of its power to kill them.

Through his blurred view he could see blue-white light strobing beyond the view slits, and hear the scream of plasma cutting through the fog. The *Lantern's* plasma destroyer was firing up at the advancing machine. The beam of plasma hit the Titan's first void shield and crumpled it in a wash of static. The Titan bellowed in reply, its war-horns howling above the sound of its footsteps. Its left weapon arm began to glow, lightning gathering in ribbed focusing coils. Steam began to vent along the weapon's length.

The barrels of its right arm started to turn.

'How long until we can fire again?' shouted Tahirah. *Lantern* was jolting as it moved, slewing from side to side as Makis tried to make them as hard to hit as possible.

Heat fumed from the main gun. Sweat was running down the inside of Tahirah's suit in rivulets, stinging her eyes as she tried to focus. They had taken one of the Titan's shields down, maybe two, but they had not even touched the Titan itself.

'Sponsons fire!' Tahirah shouted, wishing she had learned the gunners' damned names.

Both sponsons fired. White bolts of energy whipped out, burning the air, spilling across the Titan's shields in rings of light. Another void shield trembled, fizzed and collapsed. The lascannons kept firing, punching into the next layer. She watched the Titan's gatling weapon building ponderous speed as it turned, while the plasma weapon on its other arm was breathing heat and sparks into the

fog as its power built.

‘Fire main gun!’

‘Not yet.’

‘Now, or we won’t get a chance.’

Lachlan cursed, and pushed the firing stud. The beam of plasma shrieked from the gun’s throat even as it overheated. Scalding gas vented from the breech block next to Lachlan, spilling over the shielding plates in terrifying, neon clouds. Lachlan screamed as the gas enveloped him, his enviro-suit melting to his skin, his lungs blistering in the heat. Alarms wailed.

Tahirah kept her eyes on the Titan as emergency coolant frosted the inside of the turret. The plasma stream hit the Titan’s shields and blew them out one after another. Exotic energy discharged in a peal of false thunder and a sheet of lightning.

Then the flash faded and the image of the Titan returned, standing still, stripped of its cloak of shields. For a second the god in iron stood naked under her gaze.

‘Sponsons fire,’ she said, but she knew it was too late. The Titan strode towards her, closing the distance with steps that cratered the ground. The angry light around the god-machine’s plasma destructor was a forged-steel red. She could almost hear the power in the weapon roaring to be free.

The Titan’s weapon fired at the exact moment the shell hit it from the side.

A jagged star of light formed where the left arm had been, and then shattered. The fog flashed white. The Titan staggered. Blast shields blinked shut over its eye ports. Fire spilled up its body from the remains of its arm, and debris rained to the ground. Its armour rippled with heat, shedding burnt flakes of paint. The god-machine’s great flat head dipped, and then shook like a fighter recovering from a heavy punch. Burning oil and sparks bled from cracks in its armour, and pain growled from half-melted war-horns. Then the head rose, and the Titan straightened with a shriek of heat-warped gears.

It opened fire. Shells tore from its remaining arm, churning the ground in front of it and filling the air with the thunder of its rage.

*Lantern* shook like a matchbox dancing in a hailstorm.

‘Go,’ said Brel in Tahirah’s ear. For a second she felt that it was a cool breath of calm cutting through the fury. ‘*You hear me. Take your machines and run.*’

Her entire world was vibration and noise.

‘You—’ she began, but the shouted words vanished into the roar of explosions.

‘*Our track’s broken, Tahirah,*’ said Brel, as if he were pointing out an obvious

but easily overlooked fact of life. *'Broken properly. That Titan will kill anything that remains here. There is no coming out of this. Not for us.'*

Even wrapped in the oven heat of her tank, the words sent a shiver over Tahirah's skin when she realised Brel had never used her proper name before.

*'Run,'* he said again, and the vox cut out.

For a second Tahirah said nothing. She felt her heart beat once and the shells shake the ground in answer.

*'Ready?'* said Brel. He did not look at the rest of his crew. Not at Jallinika, crammed close to him in the turret. Not at Selq, crouching in the space beneath his feet. Not at Calsuriz, who had pulled his bulk out of the driving seat and was crouched next to the frontal lascannon.

He did not need to look at them to know that they would be where they needed to be. They had all heard what he had said to Tahirah; he had opened the transmission to the internal vox. None of them had said anything when he told the lie. The inside of *Silence* was ringing with the noise of explosions. The sound seemed to fade until it was the slow deep surge of the sea on the world he had left long ago, the only world he had called home.

*'No way we could have run with a broken track anyway,'* said Jallinika. Brel glanced at her, and then away. He nodded once.

*So this is how it really does end,* he thought. *This is what I was trying to dodge and outrun all this time. I really am a fool.*

*'Okay,'* he said, and nodded again. He did not need to look into the sight again to know where the enemy was. The grinding crash of its wounded steps rang through the hull.

A red light lit on his command console. A scanning array had touched them; the Titan had seen them.

*'Fire!'* he shouted.

*Silence* spoke for the last time, and the god it had wounded answered in kind.

*Anarchy. No other word could sum up the first loyalist reinforcement of Tallarn. The ships that had swarmed to Tallarn's aid brought remnants of Legion strike forces, Imperial Army grand cohorts, Titan battle groups and countless other divisions.*

*But they brought no single commander to marshal their efforts. In the void, hundreds of ships fought to reach the planet. Landing craft died and fell through Tallarn's deadly air. On the surface, dozens of fractured commands contested against each other even as they fought the enemy. Who had authority over whom? What was the plan? What should they do? No single command had brought them to Tallarn, so there was no single answer.*

*In the end it was their numbers that saved the loyalists from disaster. Through chance they had approached Tallarn from every segment of the system sphere, and at broken intervals. Most of all, they arrived in huge numbers – lone ships, squadrons and ragged fleets, they came like carrion feeders to a corpse. With no unified plan of attack, they all did the simplest thing that they could: they fought to pour troops onto Tallarn's surface.*

*Many died, but the Iron Warriors could not stop them all.*

*The light of battle ringed Tallarn. Ships spun and hammered one another, jostling to reach low orbit or firing upon those who had already begun to dump troops and materiel onto the surface. Some had not realised that the planet's atmosphere was lethal; the first transports to crash into the sludge oceans filled with the liquefied corpses of their crew taught a swift lesson to the rest. At Tallarn's northern polar region, the ships under Admiral Phoroc established geostationary orbit above the Cobalack shelter, and began to shuttle materiel down to the mountain plateau. On the plains of Khedive, the transports of the Legio Gryphonicus landed upon the black crusted earth. Above them, visible through the gaps their descent had cut in the fog, ships fired and bled and burned. Around the Sapphire City, landers homed in on signals from the shelter beneath, and dumped hundreds of fresh war machines to link up with the survivors.*

*In response, the Iron Warriors began to pour more of their own forces onto*

*Tallarn.*

# SIX

## **The might of ages Marks Execution**

‘This is not real,’ said Tahirah. Beside her Akil shook his head but said nothing. The cavern chamber extended away from them, its limits lost in a haze of engine heat and exhaust fumes. She took a slow breath, and the smell of metal, fuel and hot engines filled her throat. She coughed, feeling her eyes sting and water. She blinked to clear her sight, and for a moment she wondered if she would open her eyes and find herself back inside the metal cocoon of her machine.

Tanks. Hundreds – no, *thousands* – of tanks filled the chamber. She recognised the turrets of Punishers, the long barrels of Vanquishers, and the wedge-shaped hulls of Malcadors beside dozens more she could not name. The dappled colours of a hundred regiments covered their hulls, and the men and women that worked on each machine wore uniforms that spoke of worlds spread far beyond Tallarn. The sound of engines, shouted orders and the ring of metal upon metal filled her ears in a grinding tide.

It was not just an army: it was a host readying for war. And it was not alone; this scene was being repeated in every cavern beneath the Sapphire City.

What remained of Tahirah’s squadron had reached the shelter two hours earlier. The last few kilometres had been less a dash and more of a slither. *Lantern* and *Talon* had inched past half-glimpsed shapes in the fog, winding their course around the light of distant explosions. Tahirah had realised then what the lights in the sky had meant. The Iron Warriors had descended to Tallarn’s surface in a strength she had never dreamed that they might possess.

She had glimpsed a clutch of landing craft briefly through a break in the fog. The might of ages had poured onto Tallarn: walking war machines, mobile

artillery platforms and slab-hulled tanks. Even the half-living creatures of the Cybernetica stalked from the ships, like statues cast in clockwork and steel. Tahirah had watched the enemy until they passed out of her sight, and wondered if she would find the Sapphire City shelters already cracked open and dead.

She had not. Instead she had found them ringed with armour and filled with weapons of war.

Almost unable to walk, their eyes bloodshot and their skin raw from days in their suits, Tahirah's remaining crew had passed through decontamination to find the shelter filled with a whirl of activity. Tens of thousands of men and women moved through the chambers and corridors. It had been too much for some. Vail had just slumped to the floor, his back against the wall, and shaken his head. Udo had begun to grin and babble. Tahirah herself had not said a word, but had just stood for a full five minutes watching the flow of people. Then she had started to walk. Akil had followed her, silent and wide-eyed.

They had slipped down the bustling corridors, drawing looks as they failed to salute. At last they had reached the cavern where, all those months ago, she and her crew had skidded the tank across the bare plascrete.

And there she had seen why the Iron Warriors had come to the surface for them now. It was not just because Tallarn had been reinforced. It was because from that moment on, this war would no longer be weighted in the Legion's favour.

'Space Marines,' said Akil in a low voice, and Tahirah followed his gaze to where half a dozen figures stood beside three enclosed speeders. Their armour was white, but chipped and scarred so that the grey ceramite showed beneath the paint. Jagged crimson patterns were splashed across their greaves, pauldrons and helmets, and hanks of black horsehair woven with bones swung from their belts as they moved.

And how they moved. Tahirah found she was thinking of how snakes glided over the ground – fluid and unhurried, yet ready to strike. One of them had his head bared, and turned to face her. Eyes the blue of cold skies met Tahirah's stare.

In that second she wanted to run, to bury herself behind plasteel and rockcrete. She jerked her gaze away from the Space Marine's.

'What happens now?' asked Akil from beside her.

She did not reply, but reached into the pocket of her fatigues and pulled out a lho-stick. Carefully she put it between her lips and clicked an igniter until it produced a blue cone of flame. Her hair was plastered to her scalp, the locks

sheened with grease. Dirt had gathered in the creases of her face. A raw mark from her collar seal ran around her neck like the imprint of a shackle. She noticed that her hands were steady, but the glowing tip of the lho-stick trembled as it burned. She met her own eyes in the fingerprint-smear mirror of the igniter's case. Hardness and tiredness looked back at her. She thought of Brel.

*Light of Terra. I look like him, now.*

She closed her eyes, and inhaled the smoke.

'Tahirah?' said Akil.

She felt the moisture on her cheeks.

*What is going on?* she thought. She opened her eyes.

Tears were rolling down her face, smearing the grime into streaks. They did not feel like they belonged to her.

Her throat tightened. She felt the tremors begin to run through her, and she clamped down on the memories that were bubbling up inside. She breathed deeply until the tears stopped. Akil said nothing, and she did not look at him. She did not want to, just in case she saw tears in his eyes too. In her still blurred vision, the gathered rows of machines looked like frozen waves in an ugly iron sea. A metre from her, a soldier in blue fatigues was feeding chains of rounds into an ammo hopper. Further away, a girl – no, not a girl, a soldier – was laughing as she swung down from the turret of a Vanquisher.

'Lachlan died when we were almost here.'

'I know,' said Akil gently. 'I saw you take him out of the machine.'

She was really shaking now. The world beyond her eyes was a smudged blur.

Akil's voice came again, low and measured. 'Tahirah, it's not your fault.'

'It was my fault. I ordered him to fire. I knew what might happen, that the gun might overheat.' She paused and blinked. 'He moaned for hours. I just wanted him to be quiet. His suit was breached, you see, so we could hear. Part of me kept wanting him to be quiet. But he kept moaning. I thought he was trying to say someone's name. Then he was quiet, and...' She felt a bitter laugh come from behind her teeth. 'And I was relieved. For a moment, I was relieved.'

Akil said nothing, and when she looked at him he was looking down at his left hand as though he did not want to meet her eye. She was suddenly aware of how old he must be – he had daughters, he had said. She wondered how old they had been.

The memory of Akil's question drifted into her mind. *What happens now?* Slowly she got control of herself, composure forming like armour. She stopped shaking, feeling the ball of memories and emotions scratching against the inside

of the door she had just closed on them.

‘Now, Akil,’ she began, as if he had only just asked the question. She forced dead calm and control into each word. Akil looked up at her, and she caught a flash of something in his eyes as she spoke. ‘Now it happens all over again.’

Akil let the flow of bodies carry him through the shelter. They pressed close to him, jostling him, shoving past on their way to wherever they were going. None of them looked at him, except perhaps with a glance that asked who this unwashed and bearded man was who was blocking their way. He did not mind, in fact he liked it: just walking, not deciding where to go, letting his mind drift with his feet. Occasionally he even felt as though he was walking through the tangled streets of his youth, hearing the cries of the sellers and the raised voices as they argued a price.

He smiled. An officer in an azure field cap caught the expression and must have thought he was mocking him, because Akil saw the man’s forehead crease and his mouth open. Akil saluted, bobbing his head respectfully, and passed on. He did not know where he was going, but that was all right. For now it was the best he could hope for.

‘Akil Sulan.’

He only half heard the voice the first time, and did not bother to look around. Akil Sulan was no one now – just another raider, another body for the battle of Tallarn. The world where that name had meant something was gone. No, the voice calling his name had been just a trick of his hearing, a half-familiar sound spat out of the noise of dozens of voices and hurrying feet.

‘You are Akil Sulan.’

The voice was just behind him this time, and he felt a hand upon his shoulder. His own hand moved to where he still carried his dagger.

‘No, no, my friend,’ said the voice, now just beside his ear. It was a soft voice that purred with the accents of Tallarn’s southernmost city state. He felt a blade point as it pricked the skin above his right kidney. ‘I mean you no harm, honoured worthy, but you must come with me.’

Akil felt a hollow void open in the base of his thoughts.

*Honoured worthy.* No one had called him that since the night the bombardment had started.

‘Who are you?’ he managed to say. Around him the crowd of soldiers, acolytes and servitors moved on, unseeing and uncaring.

‘A servant of a friend, honoured worthy. He wishes to see you again.’ Akil felt

the pressure behind the knife tip shift to the space under his left arm as the grip on his shoulder loosened. A man stepped from behind him, so that he was close by Akil's left side. A hand draped around Akil's shoulders as if they were old comrades. The knife would be invisible to anyone who looked at them. Akil could not hide the shock on his face as he looked at the man.

He wore a deep red uniform crossed with black frogging, and pinned with silver rank bars. A broad, clean-shaven face smiled at Akil from beneath a peaked cap.

'Forgive the blade, but my service to our mutual friend means that I cannot allow you to refuse this request.' The man's accent had suddenly changed: it was hard and crisp, all traces of the southern accent gone. Akil could smell a touch of liqueur and rich smoke on the man's breath, as if he might have just come from an officers' card table.

Akil's mind was whirling, his fatigue and shock blending and blurring. The months in the shelter, or inside the hull of *Talon*, seeing the world above, killing and trying to forget... it all fell into the growing dark within him. In his memory, he saw Jalen standing on the balcony beside him as night fell for the last time over the Sapphire City.

*'Things will change, honoured Sulan,'* Jalen had said, and the emerald lizards tattooed across his face had seem to squirm. *'You need to accept that before you take another step.'*

*'I understand,'* Akil had said, and turned to look the man in the eye. *'What do you require of me?'*

The memory faded, but the tattooed face lingered as he looked at the man in the red officer's uniform.

'Jalen,' he said.

The man who looked like an officer smiled and nodded. 'He is close. Come with me.'

The room was small, no more than a box of bare plascrete hidden behind a small door at the end of a quiet passage, as if it had been made to be forgotten. Harsh light filled the space from a single lumen orb that hung from a chain in the ceiling. A trio of plasteel crates rested upon the floor, their edges scuffed and their tops covered in a thick layer of dust. The room smelled of dust too – dust and stale air. Akil took in everything with a glance and turned back to the man in the red officer's uniform.

'Wait here,' said the man, and pulled the bare metal door shut.

Akil let out a breath, and pressed his fingers against his eyes. His hands trembled against his eyelids. He tried to steady his thoughts, to decide what he was going to do.

‘Hello, my friend.’

Akil’s eyes snapped open.

The man who stood inside the closed door gave a friendly smile and a small bow. He was tall, and looked to be well into middle age, but the green eyes still spoke of years lived that did not show on his face. The oil-stained overalls of a low-level menial hung from the man’s lean frame, the sleeves rolled up to show thin but muscular arms. His hairless head gleamed in the light. The smile still clung to the man’s lips as he took a step forward.

‘Jalen,’ said Akil.

‘It is good to see you,’ said Jalen. His voice was rich, calm and unhurried. ‘I am sorry. It must be something of a shock. I apologise. I have been... here for a while, but I thought it best that our paths did not cross. After all, things have changed since we last met.’

Akil just stared at Jalen. He thought of the two of them looking out over the Sapphire City, of the last light of the sun catching the sides of the buildings and turning the distant sea to the blue of midnight. Jalen nodded as if he were remembering the same moment.

‘Much has changed, but we two still remain,’ said Jalen, and as he spoke, coloured patterns appeared on his skin, spreading and growing like ivy choking a sunlit wall. Emerald lizards crawled over his neck and face, their bodies, tail and legs interlocking without a gap. Turquoise feathers enfolded his forearms, as delicate spirals in red and black unfolded over his palms and wound up his fingers. Jalen’s smile cracked the tattooed jungle of his face.

Akil felt pain in his chest. He sucked down a breath, and the rage filled him, hot and acidic. His hands came up, and suddenly the smooth skin of Jalen’s neck was in his hands, and he was ramming the tattooed man back against the wall, and squeezing, and squeezing.

Then his hands were empty, and he was spinning and falling, and he could not breathe. He hit the floor, and felt what little breath was in his lungs burst from his mouth. He rolled and gasped. Jalen was standing over him, looking down, hands loose by his sides.

‘You should have tried the blade,’ said Jalen, and lifted a hand to show a knife held in his left hand. Subtle waves ran through the polished curve of the blade, and the dark wooden hilt glinted with inlaid silver. It was Akil’s knife, the knife

his grandfather had given him, the knife he carried even when inside his machine. Jalen held the blade up, his eyes flickering down its length until they met Akil's stare. 'If you mean to kill someone, do it with one blow. Is that not what they say here?'

Akil fought against the pain in his chest. The rage was still there, binding with the pain until they were almost one. He rolled to his knees and sucked a ragged gulp of air.

'You killed my world,' he gasped and tried to stand.

'No.' Jalen shook his head as he sat on one of the metal crates. He leaned forward, elbows resting on his knees, hands held together loosely. Akil's knife had vanished. 'No, we did not.'

Akil felt his heart hammering in his chest. He thought of going for the door, of screaming that an enemy infiltrator was inside the shelter. Then he thought of the man in the red officer's uniform, the man whose voice had changed so smoothly.

He looked up now at the man who had promised to save Tallarn from its slow death. Jalen looked back – calm, impassive, waiting.

Akil turned his head away, remembering the slow dread building inside him as he had watched Tallarn fade from prosperity, its sheen of wealth sustained by habit and the dwindling fat of past fortune. The Imperium had raised them up, and then had turned its face away, uncaring of what the future held for those who had served it.

Then the war between Horus and the Emperor had begun, but it had not touched Tallarn. The future of his world, of his daughters' world, had seemed just as bleak as before. Then, just when Akil could see nothing ahead but the cold blackness of despair, Jalen had found him and offered some hope.

Akil turned and looked up at the off-worlder's green eyes. He sucked in a deep breath and spat. Jalen shook his head slowly.

'I never lied to you. The things we talked of, the plans we made – all were true. We wanted to restore Tallarn, to save it from the gradual decline you knew was coming. We wanted to give it back its future.'

Akil pushed his hands down, trying to get more air, trying to rise, trying to get up and take Jalen's neck. He would kill him, here and now. He began to rise, limbs shaking.

'Listen to me, Akil,' said Jalen, raising his hands, palms open. 'Listen to me. This was not our doing.'

Cramped pain flared across Akil's torso as he tried to straighten, failed and dropped back to one knee. Air panted between his bared teeth. He squeezed his

eyes shut, his forehead beaded with sweat. Slowly he felt the pain in his chest unlock, but still he did not move.

‘*Why?*’

The word formed on his lips before he could bite it back, and he realised that it was the question he had been asking without hope of answer ever since the Iron Warriors had murdered his world.

‘Why, Jalen? We were close. Another few months and the Governor would have fallen. You said that there would be no war, that the Warmaster wanted Tallarn whole again. I believed that. Every coin I spent to buy the ear of the other cities, every name I passed you, everything was because I believed it. I believed the Warmaster would save us.’

Jalen shook his head, sorrow creasing the tattoos around his eyes.

‘Akil—’

‘There is nothing left!’ roared Akil. He gulped a breath, and felt the tears on his face. ‘There is nothing left.’

‘You will not believe me, I can see that, but I tell you truly that we had no hand in what was done here. Others acted in a way that we had not anticipated. But you are still here, and so are we, and there is something that you can do to save Tallarn’s future, Akil.’ He paused and Akil looked up to see that the sorrow had faded from Jalen’s eyes. ‘There is *something* left.’

Akil shook his head, but coldness had spread through him at Jalen’s words.

‘What could you possibly—’

‘Your daughters, Akil. Both of them alive and well, and hoping that you are too.’

Akil said nothing. He could say nothing. Voices spiralled through his thoughts.

*Let it be true. Please let it be true. No, it cannot be. Oh Terra, where are they...? Can they be alive? Is it a trick, a lie? How is this possible?*

Jalen tilted his head, as though he were listening. Then he reached into a thigh pocket and pulled out a battered data-slate, and keyed it to wakefulness. The screen was cracked and smeared with fingerprints, but the images that moved across its surface held Akil still: two small faces framed by curls of black hair, dark eyes wide and wary. As Akil looked, one glanced at the other as if for reassurance.

*Mina*, he thought. *It is all right, it will be all right.* He felt his eyes sting and his throat lock.

‘You see,’ said Jalen softly. In the screen a tattoo-covered hand extended into the image, palm up as if asking for something. Akil watched as Emerita nodded

to her sister, and Mina placed a small strip of woven fabric in the tattooed palm. The hand withdrew and the image cut out.

Akil looked up at Jalen. The tattooed man was holding out an open hand. The red, orange and blue threads were worn, and the edges frayed, but the colours were still as bright as the day he had last seen it flicking around at the end of Mina's braid. He reached out and took the small piece of fabric, and stared at it for a long moment. When he looked up, he could feel the coldness spreading under his skin once more. It took him a second to speak.

‘What do you want from me?’

Jalen nodded without smiling, his face without expression.

‘In seventeen minutes, all units in this shelter will be called to deploy in the world above. They will join those already ringing the entrances. The Iron Warriors and their allies have come in force. They mean to break the armies that have come to your aid, then to break open this shelter and make it their own – their first fortress from which to fight the rest of this battle.’

‘The rest of the battle?’

‘Yes. The forces that now fill your shelter, and war in the skies above, are just the beginning. More will come, and more still to aid the Iron Warriors. More and more flesh and iron poured onto this world, until it is choked and both sides have nothing more to give and no more blood left to spill.’

Akil snorted and shook his head. ‘Is that what you want to happen, or what you fear?’

‘Very good, very good,’ said Jalen. A sudden smile sent the lizards squirming over his cheeks. ‘I should have remembered the reasons we came to you. You always were clever, Akil, but now you must listen.’

Jalen's face was no longer smiling – his expression was hard, his eyes unblinking. Akil felt as though he could not look away from the face that suddenly seemed something very far from friendly.

‘In the battle to come, you will receive a signal with a single word. When you hear that word you must let the forces that are approaching you at that time pass. No harm will come to you, but they must pass.’

‘Pass... and reach the shelter?’ Akil paused, and Jalen inclined his head. ‘What will happen then?’

‘You will run, and live again, and so will your daughters.’

‘How could they find me in the middle of a battle?’

Jalen's eyes seemed to sparkle. ‘They will find you.’

Akil let out a breath. He wanted to close his eyes, to fall back into the soft

world of sleep and dreams, in which the path in front of him did not exist – a world where this choice was not his to make. The woven threads brushed his skin as he moved his hand.

*A choice*, said a voice from the cold core of his mind. *There never was a choice.*

‘What will the word in the signal be?’

‘Salvation.’

Jalen stood, handed Akil back his knife, and raised the palm of his left hand. The swirls and patterns of the tattoos caught the hazy glow of the light. Akil had a momentary impression of feathers and scales, and then a new pattern spread across Jalen’s palm in luminous green: two lines joined to form a triangle without a base. Reptilian heads and serpentine necks coiled around the symbol, their eyes and scales shimmering with cold light.

Akil hesitated, then raised his left hand and felt his own palm tingle as the electoo lit for only the second time in his life. Jalen closed his palm and gave a small bow. The tattooed patterns drained from his skin as he turned and stepped towards the door.

‘Do not worry, my friend,’ said Jalen, his hand on the door latch. ‘You are on the right side.’

Sound filled the cavern. It billowed into the air from ten thousand engines, and rattled with hatches locking shut. It grew like the waking growl of a vast beast made of metal and turning gears.

Tahirah ran through the growing swell of sound. She dodged loading servitors, and ran down the fume-filled corridors between tanks. She had been asleep when the deployment order had begun blaring from the vox-system. The contents of a bottle had been helping her not to dream; they had not done a good job. She had awoken thinking that it was happening again, that the bombs were falling and that the killing fog would fill the shelter. Then she had recognised the full alert signal and laughed to herself.

It *was* happening all over again, just in a different way.

A Malcador heavy tank began to grind backwards as she ran past it, almost catching her under its tracks. She swore at its metal back and kept moving. She was tired, so damned tired – tired enough to just stop and let whatever would happen be. But she ran anyway, pulling the seals on her enviro-suit shut, looking for the *Lantern* amongst the ranks of machines.

Every tank that could turn a track or wheel was scrambling to deploy. There

were to be no exceptions, and if she was not there then *Lantern* would roll into the world above without her. She would not let that happen. No matter how tired she felt, no matter how much she thought that most of the machines here would end up as coffins for their crews, still she would not leave her machine and crew to go to war without her.

‘Tahirah!’

She twisted, looking for a familiar face. Udo stood half out of *Lantern*’s turret hatch, the hood and mask of his enviro-suit hanging down his chest like flayed skin. A grin spread across his unshaven face.

‘Why on Terra are you smiling?’

Udo looked puzzled for a moment, and the grin faltered. ‘Sorry, boss,’ he muttered. She had a feeling she knew why he was with *Lantern* rather than with Akil and *Talon*. She shook her head – her eyes felt gritty with incomplete sleep and going too far down the bottle to get there. ‘Just good to know you’re coming out with us,’ he said.

She ignored the remark, and clambered onto the top of her machine. Its camouflage scheme was long gone, stripped by decontamination and the air of the world above. A patina of dull colours and chips now covered *Lantern*’s hull like stains on a butcher’s apron. The main gun was cool and silent, the length of its outer cowling scorched black from the weapon’s own heat.

‘Out of the turret,’ she said to Udo, with a jerk of her head. He opened his mouth and took a breath to speak. She really did not want this, not now. Not ever, in fact.

‘You... you need a new gunner.’

‘One of the sponson gunners will take the main gun.’

‘They haven’t got a clue, Tah.’

‘It’s *Lieutenant Tahirah*,’ she spat. ‘And before you point out more of the blindingly obvious – yes, I know that it will leave me with one sponson down, but you seem keen to leave Akil with no gunner at all, so get out of my machine and get to your own.’

‘He’s not here, Tah– *lieutenant*.’

‘What?’

Udo shrugged. ‘Akil. I haven’t seen him for hours.’

Tahirah just looked at him for a second. *What the hell was she supposed to do now? A squadron of one? Great, just great.* High above her a muster horn sounded into the cavern. The lights began to pulse, turning everything to a strobing yellow twilight. Hatches clattered shut across a field of tanks.

‘Lieutenant.’

She looked around. Akil was standing next to *Lantern*’s left flank. He was panting, sweat beading his forehead. His enviro-suit looked as if he had rushed to pull it on as he ran. That almost made her laugh. Udo’s shoulders slumped.

‘Both of you, get to your machine, and get ready to move.’

Udo did not argue.

She swung up onto *Lantern*’s turret and dropped inside. The rest of the crew were already there, compulsively checking equipment. She reached up to pull the hatch down, then paused. For a second she saw the cavern laid out before her: the blunt shapes of war machines waiting under the pulsing light and the blare of the horns. The machines nearest the doors started their engines, and the rumble of them rose in a chorus. Fumes belched from exhausts. For a long moment Tahirah just watched, waiting until the warning lights around the outer doors turned to green. Then she pulled the hatch shut and *Lantern* was her entire world once again.

The Iron Warriors burned the remains of the Sapphire City before their assault. Fire fell from the sky, salted from the ships in orbit high above. Flames rolled through the skeletons of buildings, gathering small cyclones of heat around themselves as they fed. Phosphex flowed down streets, eating through stone and iron with a crackling hunger. Hammer blows of ordnance reduced buildings to rubble even as they burned. The light of the flames turned the smoke and fog into sheets of blood-red and pus-yellow.

The ships stopped firing, and for a moment the corpse of the Sapphire City was allowed simply to burn. Then the long-range guns took up the beat, and the dead city shook again as the Iron Warriors advanced from the coastal plain.

Mountains rose to the north of the advancing host, their tops lost in the fog. On their southern flank, the sludge-clotted ocean sat like a black mirror. The Iron Warriors came in clusters and waves, a grinding tide of iron thirty kilometres wide and a hundred deep.

The siege engines were the first to enter the dead city. Block-hulled machines, with skirts of riveted ceramite, ground the rubble to powder under their tracks. Wide-mouthed guns jutted from their hulls and turrets, and armoured dozer blades shunted rubble aside as though it were freshly fallen snow. They crossed into the maze of rubble-choked roads and shattered buildings, auspex sifting the ruins for their enemy. Splinters of stone pattered on their hulls as the dust of the bombardment settled. The crews of these behemoths were not the Iron Warriors,

though they bore the marks of service to Perturabo and his sons. They pressed forward for ten metres, a hundred metres, two hundred metres... and still nothing. Signals flickered between the advancing machines: had anyone seen anything? Why were there no wrecks? Perhaps the bombardment had already destroyed the enemy?

The 17th Company of the 81st Galibed Oathsworn had served beside the Iron Warriors for two decades. It had been their machines that had advanced into the fury of the Lacomil Gap on Tarnic IV, and Perturabo himself had ordered the company reborn after its death on Necibis. Now they advanced at the tip of the first wave – thirty Malcador, Demolisher and Thunderer siege tanks in coal-black. The Oathsworn had passed through five kilometres of silent cityscape when they became the first true casualties of the battle.

On a gully floor that had once been the city's widest road, a line of green light flicked out from ruins to the side of the Oathsworn column. The luminous beam touched the hull of a Demolisher tank and burrowed into its heart. The tank vanished, its hull exploding outwards in a ragged cloud. The two machines to either side of it flipped over like tossed playing cards. The beam of green light disappeared, and then flicked out again. Another tank vanished.

Inside the advancing Oathsworn vehicles, auspex screens began to light with heat and energy blooms. The siege tanks began to fire, coughing fat shells into the ground in front of them. More fire came from amongst the ruins as the hidden tanks of the defenders came to life and fired.

Across the width of the city, from north to south, the defenders emerged from their prepared ambush sites. Hundreds of tanks died in moments, their hulls punctured or split by explosions. More defenders emerged from the maze of ruins to kill and kill again. To the south, in the water-choked ruins along the coast, walking machines of the Mechanicum pulled themselves from drowned tunnels. Twice the height of men but without flesh or faces, they stalked through the ruins, lightning reaching from their weapon arms to crawl across tank hulls and cook the crews inside.

For a moment, the invaders' advance faltered. Then a second wave of attackers broke over the first.

The defenders who had survived the bombardment died then. They died in fire, their hulls holed through, their bodies blown into rags of skin and meat. They died in the gaps between heartbeats, their ears ringing with the bellow of shell impacts. They died thinking a thousand thoughts of home, and faces they would never see again.

Akil felt the shaking blows of falling shells as *Talon* crested the ramp's edge. To either side of him, more machines poured out from the protection of the earth. Fragments of light and colour flashed through the view slits: columns of fire illuminating the fog, lighting up the black bones of buildings. Everything was shaking. His mouth was paper dry, the rubber smell of the suit thick in his throat.

'Watch out!' screamed Udo, and Akil just had time to yank *Talon* to one side before it rammed into the machine in front.

He cursed. Tanks were pouring from the shelter entrance so close together that it was like a herd of cattle jostling at a field gate. Shells exploded amongst them, flipping their hulls over and leaving wide craters in the ground. Akil pushed *Talon* forwards, keeping the shape of *Lantern* in his view. He could barely see where he was going, and the general vox was a wall of incoherent noise.

*This is not a battle, he thought. It is a riot.* He keyed the squadron frequency.

'Where the hell are we going?' he shouted into the vox.

'Two kilometres out, then halt,' came Tahirah's voice. '*We are forming a line to the south-east to meet the enemy before they can reach the central shelter entrances. The same is happening to shield the northern and southern entrances.*'

'That's it?'

'*That's all the commanders could agree between them, so that's the plan. That's what the hidden units on the surface bought us – time to get out and form a line across the city.*'

Akil shook his head. 'How many enemy are there?'

'*I don't know. Ten thousand? Fifty?*'

'And we are just going out to meet them?'

'*What choice do we have? If they reach the entrances, they will burn through, and then we have no hope.*' Her voice cracked, and he could hear the exhaustion through the vox-distortion. '*Winning is the only way we have to live.*'

Akil said nothing, and after a moment keyed the vox off.

The Iron Warriors hit the defenders around the northern shelter entrance in a wedge of three hundred machines. At its tip, seven Fellblades punched into the still forming lines of defenders like a mailed fist into flak board. A few defenders had tried to stand before the super-heavy tanks, their guns firing at the huge machines. Accelerator cannons answered, punching shells through buildings and armour. Black clouds of smoke thumped into the air, flattening and splitting to show the red fire within.

The lesser Iron Warriors machines followed, killing the half-dead and the crippled. Vindicators and mortar carriers lobbed shells in front of the column's advance, the overlapping explosions unfolding like scattered flowers.

The loyalist line buckled. Machines still exiting the northern shelter entrance met machines pulling back from the Iron Warriors advance. A tangle of machines formed for a kilometre around the entrance.

In the south of the city, the Titans advanced with the Iron Warriors forces: two battle groups clad in black iron and scorch-streaked orange, striding through the murk, their void shields shimmering with the rain patter of fire. Every few moments all the Titans would seem to pause, and then they would fire as one: lines of white-hot energy cracked the ground, and torrents of shells and missiles fell like rain at the edge of a storm cloud. Their advance had been resisted, but they had obliterated all who stood against them. As the dust of their latest salvo settled, the Titans bellowed their mechanical war cries across the burning ruins.

Then the first of the towering machines broke from the pack.

*Sunderer* loped down the shore line, its splayed toes sinking into the sludge and slime. It was a Warhound, the smallest of its breed, but no less a god of destruction for that. A hundred metres behind, its twin followed, head and weapons swaying with its accelerating strides. They had already taken their first kills: a maniple of Cyberneticae, and a squadron of dirty-hulled battle tanks. They had been easy prey, nothing of note to machines of their kind.

Within *Sunderer*'s head, the crew listened to the signals boil out of the city. Thousands of the reinforcement vehicles had gathered in the Sapphire City to defend a shelter hidden beneath the ruins. It did not matter; victory was simply a matter of time.

Without warning, a stuttering line of fire rose from amongst the ruins and struck *Sunderer*. The Warhound's void shields burst and explosive shells hammered into its head. The Titan shook its skull like a dog trying to shake a swarm of fire-wasps from its fur and, half blinded, fired back. Plasma and bolt-shells spat from its weapons and churned the ruins around it to dust and glowing vapour.

*Sunderer*'s attackers fired again, just once. The volcano cannon beam punched through its lupine skull in a shriek of vaporised metal.

The Warhound fell with a roar of shearing metal and unwinding gears.

The last transmission sent by its princeps was a warning to its kin.

'*Shadowwords!*' the signal screamed, but by then another god of metal was already falling.

Tahirah felt her eyelids start to drift shut. Nothing moved in the plaza. Edged by the mounds of rubble, the paving stones had been cracked and blackened by shell fire, but it still felt like a circle of calm in the chaos that boiled around them. Here, they were the line, the defence that stood against the enemy advance, but if it had not been for the din of the vox and the explosions lighting the fog in the distance she would have thought that they were alone. Adrenaline had faded soon after they had reached their assigned position, leaving fatigue to hang heavily upon her.

*Terra, I just want to sleep*, she thought. Beside her, Vail tried to stretch in the unfamiliar main gunner's seat. A few minutes earlier, a mortar shell had fallen into the plaza. The dull crack had startled them all, but nothing had followed the shell.

Somewhere to the north, the Iron Warriors were pushing hard. The south was holding, and the centre seemed almost forgotten. At least that was what she could tell from the vox. The war was definitely out there, though – the fog fizzed with its light, and its fury trembled through her flesh, but it was all far from here. Looking out at the still plaza, she felt as if she were an insect caught beneath an upturned glass.

'*Anything?*' Akil's voice clicked over the vox.

'Nope,' she replied. She was looking at the plaza through a sight block on top of the turret. The view was unaugmented, but that did not matter; there was nothing to see. *Lantern* and *Talon* were hull-down behind the rubble of a building at the plaza's western edge, just the two of them to cover the plaza and hold the half kilometre to either side. There had been other tanks covering the area at first, but they had pulled north.

The worst part was that she did not care. She was fairly sure that the others on this section of the line had moved off without orders. They were fresh, newly dropped, and they wanted to see the battle, to get their hands dirty, to claim some kills. It almost made her laugh to think about it. She had to stay, and she only had half a functional squadron. She knew that she should have been annoyed by it, but she found that she really, really did not care. If it stayed quiet, then that was fine by–

The Land Speeder roared across the plaza. A pressure wave split the fog as it banked hard, the air beneath it shimmering with anti-grav disruption. Tahirah caught an impression of hard lines and deep blue armour before the skimmer cut back into the ruins and vanished. The echo of its passing faded slowly.

'What the hell was that?' shouted Vail. Tahirah thumbed the squadron vox.

‘Full alert, fire at any target.’

‘What the—’ Vail began.

‘A scout, a Land Speeder. Looks like it’s our turn at last.’

Vail went silent.

‘You sure it was an enemy, Tah?’

‘No.’ She paused. No, she really was not sure about much at the moment. The skimmer had been blue – she was certain of that, but what did that mean? ‘Right now I am working on a rule that anything coming from in front of us means us harm.’

Vail turned his head towards her, and she could tell that he was about to say something.

A burst of noise ripped from her headset, filling her head with screeching static. She pressed her hands to her head, scrabbling at the suit hood. The static screamed higher and higher, and then dissolved into a clicking rush like the burbling of a broken machine. She heard someone yell, and wondered if it had been her. The sound vanished, leaving a faint ringing in her ears.

‘Now what—’

‘I see something.’ It was Vantine from the right sponson.

*Sharp eyes, that girl,* thought Tahirah.

‘Confirm,’ she called.

‘I have them,’ called Vail, his face pressed against the gunsight. ‘Incoming.’

Tahirah was already looking into her own sight. Something moved on the opposite side of the plaza. She flicked to infra-vision, and there they were: low, hard-edged shapes, hulls hot and exhaust fumes trailing cooling plumes behind them. She recognised the angles, and the shape of the weapons jutting from their turrets.

Executioners and Vanquishers?

*Why wasn’t Vail firing?* The question flashed across her mind. She opened her mouth to order the shot.

Her eyes flicked to the auspex. The targets were there, but each one was pulsing between red and blue, between friendly and hostile. She remembered the first mission into the world above; the moment she had thought that they had hit one of their own machines. She bit her lip behind her breath mask.

‘How the hell did they end up in front of the line?’ said Vail. Tahirah did not reply, but cursed and thumbed the vox.

‘Hold fire,’ she shouted. ‘They could be friendlies. All units, only fire on my command.’

The machines kept coming through the ruins.

*They must be able to see us, she thought. Just like we can see them, but they are not firing either.* She thumbed the vox to wide broadcast.

‘Unknown units, code phrase confirm – “Vengeance”,’ she said, and waited for the one word that would confirm that the machines coming at them were not enemies.

*Raider.*

A simple word that would mean that this was not the start of another battle. A fresh surge of vox-static and the rising beat of her heart filled the waiting silence.

Akil heard Tahirah’s challenge across the vox, and his gaze remained fixed on *Lantern*. He felt as if he could see each of the rivets and marks on the armour plates. Power trembled through its bulk – held back, poised. Its main gun was primed to fire, heat fuming from the barrel. The lascannon in the unmanned left sponson hung loose, like the arm of a dead man. Blood was hammering through his skull.

‘*Identify yourselves,*’ came Tahirah’s voice again. ‘*Code phrase confirm – “Vengeance”.*’

‘What’s going on?’ said Udo. Akil didn’t answer. ‘Why aren’t we firing? Let me hear the squadron vox.’

Akil licked his lips. The vehicles approaching from the other side of the plaza had still not answered. He felt the moment stretch. He could feel every seam of his enviro-suit against his skin; the air sucking from the breath mask; the shape of the knife in the pouch on his thigh.

The vox crackled again, then produced an unfamiliar voice.

‘*Unknown unit, this is Captain Sildar of Olarian 56th. Please reciprocate identification.*’

Akil let out a breath he did not know he had been holding. They were friendly, a unit lost out beyond the holding line. This was not the moment – he did not have to choose yet. The approaching machines would just pass by, or perhaps they would join them on the line. Everything would be all right. He did not have to choose. Perhaps he never would.

But the silence lengthened. He could almost see Tahirah staring at the blue icons on her auspex screen, weighing up possibilities. Choosing.

‘*Negative,*’ said Tahirah. ‘*Please confirm code phrase.*’

‘*Salvation,*’ the other voice replied.

‘Fire!’ shouted Tahirah, and closed her eyes as las-blasts bleached the sight view. The twin cracks of the lascannons firing echoed through the hull. Her teeth began to ache as the capacitors dragged power for the next shot, then her eye was back at the sight. The lead enemy vehicle had slewed to the side, ploughing into a half-collapsed wall. Heat dribbled from its wounded hull. Behind it the other machines were trying to move out of the firing line.

*What if I was wrong?* she thought, hearing the plasma destroyer begin to whine as it focused. *What if the code phrases had got mixed up...?* But there was no room for doubt. This was not a war of human fallibility.

It was a war of machines.

The Executioner fired, and *Lantern*’s compartment filled with furnace heat. The plasma hit the leading enemy on its barrel – the shell in its weapon breech exploded and tore the turret from the hull. Tahirah was already looking past the wreck at the other enemy machines. There were four at least. They would need to kill or cripple two more before they returned fire.

*Why had they not returned fire?* The thought rose and snagged in her mind even as she watched an Executioner that was the mirror of *Lantern* grind backwards on its tracks at the opposite side of the plaza. *If they are the enemy, why did they not have their guns loaded and ready?*

*Lantern*’s plasma destroyer was building power again, sucking plasma from the storage flasks with a high-pitched whine. The lascannons fired again, one bolt of energy punching through a broken wall in a shower of super-heated dust. The second drew a molten line across the armour of a Vanquisher.

*Two shots. Just two shots in a squadron with three working lascannons...*  
She thumbed the vox. ‘Akil, get Udo to fire! Curse you. Fire!’

Akil pulled the knife out. For a second he looked at it, its curve shining like a waning moon. He had possessed it all his life. He had used it, of course – he had been taught how to use it – but it had never taken a life until now. The blood slid down the blade’s edge, already seeming to clot. Around him the air sang with the muffled sounds of battle. He looked at Udo. The boy was slumped forward over his gun mount. The puncture in his suit was a red-edged smile under his ribs.

*Salvation.*

The word rang around him, blurring with memories: Jalen’s face, his daughters staring back from the screen of a data-slate, the fire falling from Tallarn’s sky.

‘I am...’ The words formed, and then caught on his lips. ‘I am so sorry.’

He pulled Udo’s body back from the gun mount. Blood sloshed inside the suit,

and ran from the gash. He dropped the knife, not looking where it fell.

The lascannon felt unfamiliar to his touch. The light of the gunsight filled his eyepiece. He traversed the lascannon. *Lantern's* rear armour filled the sight with red blooms of heat. The trigger was stiff against his finger.

'*Akil,*' came Tahirah's voice, angry and concerned. '*Akil, speak. If you can hear me, get that gun firing now.*'

*But what if Jalen lied?* The question came again, as it had with every breath for the last few hours. Akil closed his eyes. The world was hissing and roaring with weapons fire. *But what if he had not?*

Tahirah's voice was in his ear, telling him to fire, asking what was wrong. His hands felt numb.

'*Akil—*'

*The Sapphire City fell.*

*In the north the two sides ground against each other in a ragged border of dead iron and flames. Hundreds of defenders poured against the Iron Warriors' advance, paying the price in lives to hold them back. Machines choked gullies that had once been streets. Clouds of smoke reached up through the fog to touch the sky, like black banners over the ruins below.*

*To the south, where the ruins met the coast, the Shadowswords and Stormlord tridents held until the enemy came from the ocean. Great block-bodied assault vehicles, which had driven across the seabed for kilometres, broke the surface like huge shell-backed beasts returning to land. Fire pattered against their wet hulls as they ground up the shore, but it was not enough. Terminators emerged from the assault craft, wading through the half-sunken streets to kill the super-heavy tanks with lightning-wrapped hammers and fists.*

*In the centre, the defences cracked as multiple enemy formations appeared behind the loyalists' front line. The enemy rolled down the length of the cordon before they could even turn their machines. None amongst the fractured defence's command knew how it could have happened.*

# EPILOGUE

## The Hydra's Dream

+Did it work?+ asked the first voice. It was not a true voice, but in this place nothing was really true. As both the speaker and the listeners knew, the truth was what you made it.

+The result was adequate.+

+An unnecessary risk – to put the matter in the hands of untested assets.+

+True, but they are tested now.+

+How many followed the order?+

+Nine.+

+And the rest?+

+Fell in battle.+

+The remaining assets know nothing of each other?+

+Nothing. Just as before.+

+You still believe they have value?+

+Our masters do. What other factor should I consider?+

+What of the other matter?+

+It proceeds.+

+It is certain that Horus will send an emissary?+

+He already has.+

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**John French** has written several Horus Heresy stories including the novellas *Tallarn: Executioner* and *The Crimson Fist*, and the audio dramas *Templar* and *Warmaster*. He is the author of the Ahriman series, which includes the novels *Ahriman: Exile* and *Ahriman: Sorcerer*, plus short stories including 'The Dead Oracle' and 'Hand of Dust'. Additionally for the Warhammer 40,000 universe he has written the Space Marine Battles novella 'Fateweaver', plus a number of short stories. He lives and works in Nottingham, UK.

*An extract from **The Crimson Fist.***



My scream woke me from the dream.

My eyes snapped open. For a moment I thought I was blind, that I was still on Inwit and that the cold had stolen my sight. Then the chill touch of my armour cut the long-distant past from the present. I was not blind, and my brother had fallen from my hand long ago. I felt cold, as if the dream had reached into reality to wrap me in a memory of Inwit's chill. Ice covered my helmet's eye lenses, turning the view into a frosted haze of slowly shifting light. The ice was pink, the colour of snow melted to slush by blood. Warning runes pulsed at the corner of my eyes, slow, dim red.

*Hard vacuum warning...*

*Armour integrity warning...*

*Gravity condition zero...*

*Injury assessment...*

*Armour power low...*

I could not remember where I had been, or how I had come to be freezing while my armour died around me. I blinked, tried to focus my thoughts. Sensations began to creep across my body: a numbed echo of pain from my right leg, a black absence of all feeling from my left hand, a metallic taste on my tongue. *I am alive*, I thought, *and that is enough for now*. I tried to move my right arm, but the armour resisted no matter how hard I strained. I tried to close my left hand. Nothing. I could not even feel my fingers.

I looked back to the weakening pulse of the warning runes. The armour had cycled down to minimum power, turning it into little more than a lifeless shell of metal. It was keeping me alive, but it must have taken severe damage.

I closed my eyes, steadied my pulse. I knew where I was. I was floating free in the vacuum of space. The armour was keeping my body warm, but it was failing. Its power would fade, and I would begin to bleed more heat into the void. My enhanced flesh would last for longer than that of an ordinary human, but the cold would eventually reach my hearts and still their twin beats to silence. It was only a matter of time.

For a second my control almost broke. I wanted to scream, to thrash against

the iron embrace of the armour. It was the instinct of a creature trapped beneath the water, its last breath burning in its lungs, the blackness of inevitability closing around its life. I let out a slow breath, forcing the instinct to stillness. I was alive, and while I lived I had a choice.

‘Re-power all systems,’ I said. A pulse of electric sensation ran through my body as the armour obeyed.

Almost as soon as the armour powered up it began to scream. Sympathetic pain stabbed into my spine. Overlapping warning chimes filled my ears. Angry runes pulsed across my helmet display. I blinked the warnings away and the chimes faded. There were at most a few minutes of power left before the armour became a tomb. I brought my right hand up and scraped the melting ice from the helmet lenses.

Light poured into my eyes, raw and white-edged. I was floating in a vast chamber lit by sunlight that came from a source somewhere behind me. A layer of pink frost covered everything, glittering in the stark light like a sugar glaze on a sweet cake. Small crystals floated all around me, turning slowly with the last of their fading momentum. Irregular shapes coated in rose-coloured rime hung in mid-air across the chamber.

I blink-clicked a faint marker on my helmet display. The vox system activated with a moan of static. I set it to a full spectrum broadcast.

‘This is Alexis Polux of the Seventh Legion.’ My voice sounded hollow inside my helmet, and only more static answered me. I set the broadcast to a looped cycle that would last until the power faded. *Perhaps someone will hear. Perhaps there is someone that can hear.*

Something bumped against my shoulder and spun lazily into view: a frozen lump a little wider than my hand. It spun lazily end-over-end. I reached out to knock it away, and it turned over and looked at me with lifeless eyes.

Memory flashed through me: *the hull splitting with an iron roar as the ship spilled from the warp storm’s grasp, blood arcing across the deck as debris sliced through the air; a human officer shouting, his eyes wide with terror.* I had been on a ship. I remembered the deck shaking under my feet and the screams of the storm outside the hull.

I jerked my hand back from the severed head, and the sudden movement sent me spinning through the frozen blood spray. The chamber rotated around me. I saw the ice-clogged servitor niches, and mangled banks of instruments. A tiered auspex dais pointed down at me from the floor, its screens and holo-projectors looking like the branches of a tree under winter snow. I tried to steady my

momentum but I just continued spinning. Warnings began to shriek in my ears.

*Power failing...*

*Power failing...*

*Power failing...*

Sights flicked past me, suffused in the warning rune's ruddy light. There were bodies fused to the walls by layers of blood ice. Sections of splintered yellow armour drifted amongst limbs and shattered bone. Severed bundles of cabling hung from the walls like strings of intestine. Streamers of data-parchment floated beside the foetal shapes of frozen servitors. I spun on and saw the source of the light: a bright white sun shining through a wide tear in the hull. I could see the glittering blue sphere of a planet hung against the star-dotted darkness. Between me and that starlight was a sight that made me stare as my view turned over.

Dead warships lay spread across the void. There were hundreds of them, their golden hulls chewed and split like worried carcasses. Vast strips of armour had peeled back from cold metal guts to show the lattice of chambers and passages within. Mountain-sized hulls had been portioned into ragged chunks. It was like looking at the jumbled remains of a slaughterhouse.

*All my brothers are gone*, I thought, and felt colder than I had for decades. I remembered Helias, my true brother, my twin, falling into darkness from the end of my fingertips.

*Power failing...* the warning runes chimed.

Final memories clicked into place. I knew where we had been going: where all of us had been going. I stared at the graveyard and knew one more thing with certainty.

*Power failing...*

'We have failed,' I said to the silence.

'...respond...' The mechanical voice filled my helmet, broken and raw with static. It took me a heartbeat to reply.

'This is Captain Polux of the Seventh Legion,' I said as my helmet display dimmed. Bursts of static filled my ears. I could feel the armour stiffening around me, its power finally drained. A quiet numbness began to spread across my body. The helmet display faded to black. I felt something bump into my chest and then fasten around me with a grind of metal. In the prison of my dying armour I could feel myself falling into darkness, falling beyond sight and pain, falling like my brothers. *I am alone in the darkness and cold, and I always will be.*

'We have you, brother,' said a voice that was a machine whisper. It seemed to carry out of a night filled with dreams of the ice and dead ships glittering in

starlight.

I knew it would fall to me. I knew the protocol of our Legion as well as any other, but that did not stop me wishing it was otherwise. The remembrancers and iterators speak of the Legiones Astartes and say that we are without fear, that nothing fills our hearts and minds but resolve and fury. Of the Imperial Fists they say more: that we have souls of stone, that emotion is silent inside our flesh. The truth, as ever, is something that words cannot touch. If we felt nothing we would have failed in the thousands of wars we have fought on the Emperor's behalf. Without doubt to temper boldness our enemies would have slaughtered us many times over. Without rage we would have never have reached the heights of glory. I do not feel fear, but inside me something of it remains, mutilated and withered, its strings tuned to different notes. Where a human would feel fear I feel the tug of another emotion, one layered and spliced into my psyche by the process that made me. Sometimes it is rage, caution, or cool calculation. And sometimes it is dread, a ragged echo of fear that is lost to me. And it was dread that I felt as the leadership of the fleet gathered on the *Tribune*.

They passed me as they filed into the granite and bronze chamber. A hundred war leaders arrayed for battle. Intricate silver patterns wove across the golden yellow surface of each suit of armour, and the emblem of the clenched fist worked in jet gleamed from chests and pauldrons. Some were old, their faces lined and scarred; others seemed young, though they were not. There was Pertinax, watching me with green machine eyes. Beside him walked Cazzimus, who had held the towers of Velga for six months. There Iago, who had fought in the first pacification of Luna. Beside them were marshals, siegemasters and Legion seneschals. Between them they carried half a millennium of waging war.

Once they had all passed I followed, walking down to the centre of the chamber. The machine adepts were repairing my armour so I wore a saffron robe knotted at the waist with a blood-red cord. I stand taller than all my brothers, and even without my armour I still dwarfed every warrior in the room. The chamber was silent and my steps echoed as I limped between my peers. I could feel their eyes on me, watching, waiting. My left arm was stiff at my side, the old scars of teeth and the newer wounds hidden by my robe's wide sleeve. The healing flesh shot traces of pain up my nerves. None of it showed on my face.

The chamber was deep in the hull of the *Tribune*, now the flagship of the Retribution Fleet, or what was left of it. Polished bronze lined the walls and its floor descended in tiers of black granite. Firelight from braziers filled the

chamber with a red glow, and a ghost-green projection of a star and planets revolved above the open space at its centre.

Tyr had told me what must happen. He had come to see me as I recovered under the eyes of the Apothecaries.

‘It falls to you, Polux,’ he had said, looking down at me, his eyes dark in his axe-sharp face. The medical servitors had been bonding flesh to the left side of my body or I would have risen to reply. As it was I had to remain on the steel slab as the razor lasers and cauterising torches worked to rebuild my mashed and frozen muscle.

‘There are others more worthy,’ I had said, without breaking his stare. The edge of a sneer twitched at the edge of Tyr’s mouth. Control is one of the first qualities required of an Imperial Fist, and I had no doubt that Tyr’s hint of derision was no slip. Maybe he thought my words a sign of weakness, a betrayal of a flaw not yet discovered in my decades of service. Perhaps he simply did not like me. We are brothers, bonded together by oaths and the blood of our primarch, but brotherhood does not require friendship. In truth I do not know what he thought. I have always been apart, unable to read the signs of my Legion brothers’ thoughts. They are blank to me, and perhaps me to them.

Tyr had shaken his head, the hunched shoulders of his Terminator armour shifting with the small movement.

‘No, brother. You are Yonnad’s pupil, the heir to this command. The primarch and Sigismund passed it to him. Now it is yours, but it is not yours to refuse.’

I had looked into Tyr’s eyes that were so like our primarch’s. I had not spoken from false modesty; there *were* others more worthy to lead a force that was still a fifth of our Legion’s full strength. Better men had survived the wreck of the fleet: commanders with more campaign experience, higher in the rolls of honour, and more skilled at arms. Tyr was one such leader.

I am no hero, no champion of the Legion. I know how to defend and attack, how to stand and not to yield. I have nothing else. It is all I have. But we are Imperial Fists and form and order is not something we set aside easily. Yonnad had designated me as his successor. That command might fall to me so soon was a possibility I doubt he contemplated. But they had pulled me alive from a frozen wreck, and the storm had taken my mentor. Tyr was right; I could not refuse. It was my duty, and that duty led me in limping steps to the centre of a circle of my peers.

I stopped at the chamber’s centre, under the turning display, and looked up at the faces lining the raked tiers. A hundred pairs of eyes glittered at me from the

shadows. I felt deeply honoured and completely alone. The truth was that I did not fear the command. Yonnad was the Legion's finest fleet master and I was his best pupil; I had commanded expeditionary fleets and campaigns of conquest. With Yonnad dead in the storm I was his heir. It was an honour the Legion had tutored and trained me for, but it was an honour I did not want.

Our fleet was the primarch's first answer to his brother's treachery. Five hundred and sixty-one ships and three hundred companies had left the *Phalanx*. First Captain Sigismund had been given command but the primarch had taken him back to Terra, and so we had jumped towards Isstvan under Yonnad's command. The storm had seized us as we entered the warp and it had not let go. The Navigators could not find the beacon light of the Astronomican, and every course took us deeper into the tempest. We were lost, drifting on the currents of a malign sea. After what seemed like many weeks the Navigators perceived a break in the storms, a single point of stillness. We had fled towards it, and the storm's fury had followed.

The fleet had translated into reality on the edge of a star system. The power of the storm in those last moments was like nothing I had ever felt. Geller fields failed, hulls sheared into fragments and burned in the fires of their own reactors. Some ships had reached safety, but many had died, their corpses spat out of the warp to freeze in the void. Two hundred warships lost, their remains left spinning in the light of a forgotten star. They had found me in the remains of one of those broken wrecks. I was one of the few.

Ten thousand Imperial Fists gone. I could not grasp that loss.

Three hundred and sixty-three warships remained. The fates of over twenty thousand of my brother Imperial Fists were now in my hands. It was a weight that I had never carried before. *I must*, I thought. *Even if it is more than I can bear, I must.*

I nodded once to the assembled chamber.

Silence. Then a hundred fists slammed into chest plates in unison.

I gestured across the slowly rotating projection of the system we found ourselves in. Its name was Phall, a system so minor and un-noted that it existed only as an obscure footnote in navigational records. The projection spun, the orbiting planets disappearing as a section of the image grew to show the surviving Imperial Fists vessels. I let it rotate for a moment. There was a question that all those present needed to consider.

'Five hundred vessels aimed at the heart of the greatest betrayal ever committed. Two hundred lost as they fled to the one point of calm amidst the

storm. Two planets, once inhabited, now empty.’ I looked at where shifting purple clouds represented the relative warp conditions around the system. ‘Here we sit, surrounded by the storms that drove us here. Cut off from communication. Contained. Trapped.’ I looked up at the watching faces; some were nodding as if seeing where I was going. Perhaps they had already seen the same elements of our situation and made the same judgement. I knew how to construct a trap, had used them in dozens of wars, and I knew what it was to kill a weakened and surprised enemy. Looking at the projection of our fleet floating in the Phall system I saw a trap. How anything could create such a thing was beyond me, but I knew what every instinct was telling me.

‘And if we have been trapped here,’ I said, and my voice carried through the silent chamber, ‘who is coming for us?’

### **The Imperial Palace, Terra**

His father waited for him at the summit of the oldest stronghold on Terra. The Bhab Bastion was an irregular cylinder of rock that rose to the roof of the world like a finger pointing to the heavens. In the long millennia of Old Night warlords, kings and tyrants had made it their refuge, and even they had called it old. Now it was an ugly relic surviving amongst the growing sprawl of the Imperial Palace, a blunt reminder of barbarity fused into a monument to illumination and unity. Sigismund wondered whether now the barbarity of the old fastness would triumph over the palace that had tried to tame it. *The old ways and necessities are come again, he thought, as they always do.* War had been the only constant of existence since mankind first walked under the rays of this sun, and it would last long after that same sun burnt to a cold ember. Of that he was certain.

The wind that blew across the bastion top was cold and scented by spices carried from the work camp on the distant mountain slopes. Above him clouds scudded through a brightening blue sky and a chill dawn light fell across the bare skin of his face. It was a face that might have been handsome, but war and genecraft had carved it to a different end. Noble features were spread across a blunt face, the skin pitted and the flesh under the right eye chewed by a scar that ran down the cheek to the jaw. But it was the eyes most people noted: bright sapphire-blue and lit by hard intensity. Clad in burnished gold battle plate, swathed in a white surcoat crossed in black, he bore the marks and honours of a

hundred wars like a second skin. In battles across the stars he had never been defeated. From the gladiatorial pits of the World Eaters to the conquest of star clusters he had demonstrated what it was to be a warrior of the Imperium. In another time he would have been the greatest warrior of his age, but in these times he was merely the strongest son of the being who waited for him by the tower's parapet.

Rogal Dorn glimmered in the brightening light. Standing head and shoulders taller than Sigismund, the primarch of the Imperial Fists was a demigod clad in adamantine and gold. Beside Dorn stood an astropath, a hunger-thin woman whose bent spine showed clearly under the green silk of her robe. Neither said anything but Sigismund could feel that a conversation had just ended, the severed tension still hanging in the air. He knelt, the wind stirring his tabard against his armour.

'My thanks, mistress.' Dorn nodded to the withered astropath, who bowed and walked away. 'Rise, my son,' he added.

Sigismund rose slowly and looked up at his father. Dark eyes glittered at him from a face of hard lines and unreadable stillness. Dorn smiled grimly. Sigismund knew what that meant; it meant the same as it had every day since they had returned to Terra.

'There is no word, my lord?' asked Sigismund.

'None.'

'The warp storms occluding the—'

'Would make communication unlikely, yes.' Dorn turned away. Out beyond the battlement an eagle turned against the cold blue sky, skimming the edge of a plume of drifting smoke. Dorn's eyes followed it, tracing the spiral of its flight as it rose on a column of warm air.

It had been many weeks since Dorn had heard and seen the evidence of his brother's treachery. Sigismund remembered the rage in his father's eyes. It was still there, he knew, wrapped in will and buried beneath layers of control. He knew it because it burned in him, a bright echo of his father's cold fury. Dorn had wanted to go and confront Horus himself, to hear the traitor's confession and bring retribution with his own hands. But duty had held him back: duty to the Emperor and the Imperium that Horus now sought to destroy. They had returned to Terra, but Dorn had sent his sons as emissaries of his anger. He had named it a Retribution Fleet. Thirty thousand Imperial Fists and over five hundred warships had struck out towards Isstvan, a force great enough to subdue a hundred worlds, bearing a brother's wrath. Now a second force from many Legions gathered to

strike at Isstvan, but no word had come from the Retribution Fleet.

‘Word will come, my lord. The galaxy does not simply swallow a third of a Legion.’

‘Does it not?’ Dorn turned his dark eyes on Sigismund. ‘War amongst the Legions. Horus a traitor. The ground under our feet becomes the sky. Can we be sure that we know anything for certain?’

‘You have been listening too much to the worries of the council, my lord,’ said Sigismund in a level voice. *Fear surrounds us*, he thought. It ran through the halls of Terra like a cold wind. It ran through the hive sumps of Nord Merica, and through the whisper colonnades of Europa. It spread in glances, rumour and in the silence of fears left unsaid. It was everywhere and it was growing. Horus’s treachery had shaken all assumptions of loyalty and truth in the Imperium. In a single moment everything had become unsure. Who else had sided with Horus? Who could be trusted? What would happen? The questions went on without answer. As he looked into his father’s eyes Sigismund reflected that knowing some of the answers gave little comfort.

‘The fleet will arrive at Isstvan, and whatever happens to them they will endure. They are your sons.’

‘Do you now regret returning here?’ asked Dorn.

‘No. My place is here,’ he said, looking back into his father’s face. Command of the Imperial Fists sent to Isstvan had been Sigismund’s, but it was a duty that he had not taken. He had asked instead to return to Terra. Dorn had trusted his son and acceded to his plea without question.

He had kept the real reason to himself, sensing that his father would not understand. Sigismund barely understood it himself, but he had made his decision. That deception had weighed on Sigismund like penitent chains ever since.

Dorn smiled.

‘So certain, so little doubt,’ he said.

‘Doubt is the greatest weakness.’ Sigismund frowned.

Dorn raised an eyebrow. ‘Quoting my own words is unsubtle flattery, or a very subtle rebuke.’

‘The truth is a many-edged blade,’ quoted Sigismund in a flat voice. Dorn’s laughter blew across the platform like brief thunder.

‘Now you really are trying to provoke me,’ growled Dorn, but the words still held a note of laughter. He gripped Sigismund’s shoulder. ‘Thank you, my son,’ he said, his voice grave again. ‘I am glad you are here.’ For a moment Sigismund

thought of telling him the truth, of telling him why he had returned to Terra. Then his father looked away and the feeling passed.

‘And there is more for you here than keeping me from melancholy.’ Dorn’s eyes had gone to the stars glittering on the horizon’s edge, his gaze fixed on where a red spark flickered like a cooling cinder. ‘It has reached us,’ he said. ‘The treachery is at our threshold.’

‘The reports are true, then? Mars is falling?’

‘Yes.’

Sigismund felt anger coil through him at the thought of an enemy so close to the heart of the Imperium. The hate built within him, running through his limbs in a hot wave, feeding on lesser emotions until it was a focused line of barely shackled fire. It was this inner fire that had made him a warrior without peer beneath the Emperor and the primarch whose flesh he shared. For a moment he felt as he had before the encounter on the *Phalanx*, before everything had changed.

He let out a long breath. ‘I will grind the Martian traitors to dust.’

Dorn shook his head. ‘There is no time. For now we must secure what we need for the defence of Terra: the armour from Mondus Occulum and Mondus Gamma.’ Sigismund nodded. If they had no allies remaining amongst the Martian adepts it would be a punishing task; punishing, but straightforward.

‘My resources?’

‘You have four companies, and Camba-Diaz will go with you.’

‘To shackle my temper,’ snarled Sigismund, seeing the wisdom in his father’s order even as it pulled at his pride.

‘All of us need others to balance us.’ Dorn inclined his head slightly. ‘Is that not so, my son?’ Sigismund thought of the flicker of uncertainty he had seen in his father’s eyes and of the real reason he had asked to return to Terra. *He stands at the centre of a storm of fear and betrayal*, he thought, *and I must stand with him no matter what is to come.*

‘It will be done, my lord,’ he said, and knelt at his father’s feet.

‘Of that I am certain,’ said Rogal Dorn.

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