

NOVELLA SERIES 1

THE HORUS HERESY®

David Guymer

DREADWING



A prequel to the Siege of Terra

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THE HORUS HERESY®

David Guymer

DREADWING



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THE HORUS HERESY

It is a time of legend.

Mighty heroes battle for the right to rule the galaxy. The vast armies of the Emperor of Earth have conquered the galaxy in a Great Crusade – the myriad alien races have been smashed by the Emperor’s elite warriors and wiped from the face of history.

The dawn of a new age of supremacy for humanity beckons.

Gleaming citadels of marble and gold celebrate the many victories of the Emperor. Triumphs are raised on a million worlds to record the epic deeds of his most powerful and deadly warriors.

First and foremost amongst these are the primarchs, superheroic beings who have led the Emperor’s armies of Space Marines in victory after victory. They are unstoppable and magnificent, the pinnacle of the Emperor’s genetic experimentation. The Space Marines are the mightiest human warriors the galaxy has ever known, each capable of besting a hundred normal men or more in combat.

Organised into vast armies of tens of thousands called Legions, the Space Marines and their primarch leaders conquer the galaxy in the name of the Emperor.

Chief amongst the primarchs is Horus, called the Glorious, the Brightest Star, favourite of the Emperor, and like a son unto him. He is the Warmaster, the commander-in-chief of the Emperor’s military might, subjugator of a thousand thousand worlds and conqueror of the galaxy. He is a warrior without peer, a diplomat supreme.

As the flames of war spread through the Imperium, mankind’s champions will all be put to the ultimate test.

~ DRAMATIS PERSONAE ~

I Legion, 'Dark Angels'

LION EL' JONSON, Primarch

HOLGUIN, Deathbringer, voted-lieutenant of the Deathwing

SAMARIEL, Warrior of the Deathwing

KASTAEL, Paladin of the Deathwing

VALIEL, Warrior of the Deathwing

BREUNOR, Warrior of the Deathwing

CAROLINGUS, Voted-successor of the Deathwing

REDLOSS, Dreadbringer, voted-lieutenant of the Dreadwing

DANAEUS, Voted-successor of the Dreadwing

GAWAIN, Voted-successor of the Dreadwing

WERRIN, Warrior of the Dreadwing

MELWEN, Warrior of the Dreadwing

STENIUS, Captain of the *Invincible Reason*

MYRDUN, Librarian

ALOCERI, Ravenbringer, voted-lieutenant of the Ravenwing

CALLOSON, Stormbringer, voted-lieutenant of the Stormwing

VASTAEL, Firebringer, voted-lieutenant of the Firewing

TITUS, Ironbringer, voted-lieutenant of the Ironwing

XARIEL, Techmarine

Imperial

OZIUS VESEPIAN, Commodore of the Dark Angels fleet

VAZHETH LICINIA, Mistress of the astropathic choir, *Invincible Reason*

THERALYNE FIANA, Chief Navigator of the *Invincible Reason*, House Ne'iocene

KELLANDRA VRAY, Shipmaster of the *Vehemence*

Mechanicum

BELLONITRIX, Magos-Pretender of Thagria Forge

HEIRONYMAX VELTARAE, Magos-Prime of Thagria Forge

RYGAN INDOMITII, Coadjutor-General of Nagra Excelsor

III Legion, 'Emperor's Children'

THE NEPHILIM

ONE

Nothing happened here

'That is the judgement that awaits them. Let it come now.'

– Lion El'Jonson, addressing Roboute Guilliman

I

Darkness grew from the ironwork bocage of the partition bulkheads. It gathered in corners, watchful as crows. It filtered through the bowing of the ceiling. Starlight entered through tall, armoured casemates, vast windows glazed with diamantite and durifrost. The dim shadows it cast shrank and lengthened, tracing over forest scenes depicted in friezes and murals with the giant vessel's inertial drift. The occasional ceiling-mounted banner – thick white drapes that served doubly as portieres between cloisters – stirred in the stilted breezes of the air cyclers and the occasional tremor from the dorsal gunnery decks.

This was the *Invincible Reason*, and nothing happened here.

II

The voted-lieutenant pressed a gauntleted hand to the fascia display and identified himself.

'Holguin.'

A watery green light dappled his massive suit of artificer war-plate as scanning

lasers slid across the glossy black plate, drawing out the red Martian gold worked into the finish, as though he had stepped into a column of infrared that illuminated his veins. The electronics trilled with sequential ident confirmations. Suit transponder. Vox print. Height-weight indices. All tallied with who he claimed to be.

'Holguin. Recognised.'

The synthesised vox-blurt sounded cacophonous.

Most of the sections that the Lion had ordered sealed during his and Curze's long hunt were still deserted. The ship had scraped by without them. Now they lacked the crew to fill them properly. This had been one of those sections, though, like so much else, it had been something grander once.

'Restore lighting to this section.'

'Cannot comply. Vermillion authorisation required.'

'Who besides the primarch has vermillion-level authorisation?'

'Cannot comply. Vermillion authorisation required.'

'Does Captain Stenius?'

'Cannot comply. Vermillion—'

Holguin withdrew his gauntlet from the panel, silencing the voice and killing the light. He frowned into the darkness.

'You always had such a way with cogitators,' said Samariel from behind him. The veteran legionary's broad, bearded face creased into an unsteady grin. It did nothing to lighten Holguin's mood, and something in his lieutenant's expression wiped Samariel's smile away.

'Give me a lock with a key, brother. Or a guard with a secret word.'

'That's progress for you.'

Holguin's eyebrow lifted. *Progress.* It was what the union with Terra, the industrialisation of Caliban and the Great Crusade itself had all been for. He was not sure what the word meant anymore, nor whether it made him want to laugh out loud or draw his sword.

For here they all were, back in the dark where they had begun.

Hunting monsters.

'Progress,' he muttered.

'Your moods are black of late, brother,' said Samariel.

'The galaxy is black. My mood but bears its reflection.'

Samariel had little to offer but a nod.

Valiel and Breunor advanced cautiously past them, into the cloister. Though they moved with exaggerated caution, every step they took was accompanied by

an over-loud sound. The light from Brother-Paladin Kastael's power sword conferred a weak, ambient gloam to a distance of about three metres.

'Still dark,' muttered Holguin.

Samariel slid on his helmet. There was a click, the lenses flickering red as his various systems auto-engaged.

'Then we hunt in the dark,' he said.

III

Farith Redloss felt the tremor through the skeleton of the ship, in the tinkling of the armour displays on their pedestals. The void battle was almost over, but not quite. A human, even an experienced naval officer, might have dismissed the vibrations as aftershocks from the gunnery decks, or the mild inertial stresses of a course correction, but Redloss had a fine-honed understanding of weaponry at every scale. That had been a hull impact. He looked up. This part of the suite of chambers was striped with armoured skylights. Unblinking stars filled the view. The vast gulfs of space swallowed all sign of the apocalyptic level of hell being unleashed upon the wider system.

That told him one important thing.

It was not nearly apocalyptic enough.

'That was a shield impact,' Gawain observed.

The young legionary, one of the last to have joined the primarch's battlegroup since contact with Caliban had been severed, followed his lieutenant's example and looked up. The shafting skylight rendered his pale Calibanite features ephemeral. The skull-in-hourglass symbol of the Dreadwing shone eerily against the darkened ceramite of his pauldron. Myriad tokens of allegiance and initiation, esoteric markers to secret hierarchies that even Redloss could never be fully privy to, adorned the worn plate further still.

'No,' said Redloss.

'What makes you say that?'

Redloss could have spoken of the pitch and duration of the vibration, of metal tolerances and void shield disphasement patterns, but he did not. He glanced to Danaeus, his voted-second, who dipped his head slightly, his white face otherwise inscrutable.

'One day, brother,' Redloss said, taking Gawain by the shoulder. 'When you have progressed further along the Spiral path, you will have proven yourself ready for such knowledge.'

Gawain bowed his head. 'I understand.'

Redloss' gaze returned to the skylights. 'It was a hull impact.'

'The shields are down?' hissed Werrin.

The helmeted legionary held the point position of the five-man squad of Destroyers, covering the quiet, empty hall with a volkite serpenta aimed from the shoulder. If he was experiencing any hesitation about entering these chambers so armed, and in such company, then he masked it with the skill of the First. Horus' war had pitted brother against brother, father against son. This intrusion felt like a small betrayal in the grand scheme of things.

Most betrayals probably did, at the outset.

'Not necessarily, brother,' said Redloss. 'Most likely Stenius has sailed us into a piece of debris.'

Gawain snorted.

'Or a boarding torpedo,' said Danaeus.

Gawain, Werrin and Melwen tightened their grips on their weaponry. Redloss frowned at their over-reaction. He had trained them better than that.

'The last gasp of a rotten corpse,' he said. 'There is nothing that this system can throw at the *Invincible Reason* that Brother Stenius cannot contend with. We are the Dark Angels, brothers, we are death, and we have a quarry of our own to concern ourselves with here.'

That had the desired effect of focusing their minds.

This was not the first time that the sons of Caliban had hunted a primarch through their own ship.

Redloss had not yet been aboard at that time. But he had been there in Illyrium, when the Lion had finally put a sword through Konrad Curze.

'What is it, brother?' he asked, noticing Werrin's continued distraction.

The older warriors, former Knights of the old Order of Caliban, liked to remember themselves as great hunters. Caliban had tested them, they would say, and they had survived. They had endured its plagues, faced its beasts and its benighted forests, where every tree was poisonous and every creature, however small, was hungry, and they had survived. They had bested it at arms, honour and courage intact, and, with the coming of the Emperor, they could even claim to have been the generation that broke it. But Redloss knew that those older warriors, those former Knights, were wrong. *In Articulo Mortis*. Mankind had evolved as hunters and scavengers of the open plains. The forest was its primordial nightmare. The Knights of Caliban had not been hunters. They had been the hunted. They had been the mammal whose armour and claws had

allowed it to fend off the Great Beasts for another day, who found dark and hidden places to endure and lit no fires for fear of the night.

Their instinct for hidden perils far surpassed that of those other self-professed ‘hunters’ of the V and VI. Their predisposition to darkness was rivalled only by that of the XIX.

Werrin nodded down the tapestry-lined hall and pointed with his serpenta.
‘I heard something.’

IV

Holguin pulled aside the hanging, revealing the Reclusiam alcove beyond. His shoulders sagged, the servos in his armour giving a dispirited whine. Empty. The partition walls were wood-panelled and scented, carved with the muses and satyrs of Calibanite forestlore. None of it was exactly faithful to the spirit of the Imperial Truth, but it was a lucky iterator indeed that was admitted this far into the heart of the *Invincible Reason*, and a brave one who would challenge Lion El’Jonson on the decor of his private chambers. If there were any iterators still abroad in the Imperium, then Holguin supposed they had larger fires to put out now.

‘Clear,’ he grunted, backing out, tagging the Reclusiam on the squad auspex.

‘I wonder if Jonson still holds the Night Haunter down here,’ Kastael whispered.

Seeing the Deathwing paladin nervous was like watching a stone sweat, but not all things of the Emperor’s design were created equal.

If the Night Lords had been the living incarnation of every evil in the human psyche, then Curze was its half-mad god of depravity and murder. He was terror weaponised, an atrocity of war simply by existing, and even the winnowed psychology of a Space Marine was not wholly proof against it. Indeed, if Holguin were to point at the one thing that had shaken his faith in the Emperor of Mankind then it would not be his disregard for the powers of the warp, nor would it be his elevation of Horus to the position of Warmaster over the Lion.

It would be that the creation of a ghoulish horror like Konrad Curze had ever been considered just.

After a cat-and-mouse pursuit that had left the Thramas sector terrorised and aflame and whole sections of the *Invincible Reason* itself consigned to darkness, the Lion had finally forced a confrontation beneath the ruins of Illyrium. Jonson was the keenest hunter and most complete swordsman that Holguin had ever

seen. Having spent months in Macragge Civitas in the proximity of Guilliman and Sanguinius, none amongst the Dark Angels could make such a claim and be immune to accusations of boastfulness. And yet even *he* had chosen not to go up against the Night Haunter alone.

‘I didn’t ask,’ Holguin replied at last.

‘You’re not curious?’ said Kastael.

‘Of course I’m curious.’

But Holguin had given up on any expectation of receiving answers from the Lion. Curze was not the only dark thing that the Lion had hidden aboard the *Invincible Reason*. His thoughts drifted to Perditus, and he shuddered in his armour.

‘I heard that Sanguinius threw him into space,’ said Samariel with some relish.

‘The Angel and the Lion may well be brothers, but they are little alike. The Lion is a being of the physical. Like you and I, only more so. Sanguinius is something other. To be in his presence is like standing before a doorway to a room so bright that you cannot see inside. He is numinous, as if his appearance before you is a gift, freely given, but one that can be easily withdrawn should his favour turn. He is more akin to the Emperor in that respect.’ He sighed. There was an emptiness inside him and it seemed to be growing larger as he spoke. ‘I cannot imagine him doing such a thing.’

‘Azkaellon told me,’ said Samariel.

‘Azkaellon himself?’

Samariel nodded.

The commander of the Sanguinary Guard – perhaps then that rumour carried some truth with it. It would be the first.

‘Hold,’ came Kastael’s warning baritone. ‘Do you hear that?’

‘Hear what?’

Holguin looked up, even as a slow bleed of illumination turned the black walls a dark greenish-brown. The colossally thick crystal of the viewing portals shuddered as a dying ship sailed within a few hundred metres, the dorsal point defences of the *Invincible Reason* chewing on its misshapen carcass. In cosmic terms, the two vessels were practically cheek to cheek, but proximity on its own counted for little in the void. The vibrations in the windows were due to the surface-of-the-sun temperatures of its burning drive stacks and the explosions ripping across its underbelly as it crossed from fire-arc to fire-arc across the battle-barge’s batteries. Space conferred no objective sense of scale, but Holguin’s genhanced mental processes quickly established the other vessel as a

Triton-class aegis cruiser. The size of its drives. Its armament. The dimensions of the lascannon clusters along its spine. A second-rate. Three hundred metres from bow to stern. Despite its identifying features, the vessel appeared to have been aggressively remodelled and up-armoured in the centuries since the original template had slipped the void-docks of its parent forge world, most of the work carried out using terrestrial-grade steels or even raw, corrugated iron.

If Holguin had not known it for a human ship, he might have assumed he was looking at the product of greenskin labour.

The sound of flapping feet from within the corridor drew his attention from the portals towards the ranks of armour that stood against the inner bulkhead. A shadow slipped behind the nearest. Holguin felt his mind buzz as he looked at it.

The armour was the dark, brutal green of Caliban's forests, the plates fashioned with great care and cunning so as to give the appearance of their wearer's limbs and torso being enfolded by rolled leaves. The suit was a relic, from before the Lion's unification of the martial orders of Caliban. Holguin could not name the order to which it had once belonged. It had been years before his time, and records of the period were surprisingly thin on the ground.

Ice crept over the curve of the plates, although his auspex alerted him to no sudden drop in temperature.

Without thinking about it, he reached for his pistol.

'*Go back,*' the voice behind the armour said.

V

The Destroyers all recognised that sound. The percussive *bang-bang* caused by the firing of an Umbra-pattern bolt pistol, followed in split-second succession by the self-ignition of the shell's rocket propellant. Redloss waited for the third explosion. It thundered out of the gloom half a second after the initial blasts.

'Gunfire,' announced Gawain.

'You think?' said Melwen.

'Boarders,' said Danaeus with grim satisfaction.

Redloss shook his head. If it was a hostile boarding party, then why just one shot? A single squeeze on the trigger of an Umbra could deliver four in under a second, and unless ammunition was low, even against an unarmoured baseline human target a warrior would want to be sure. Redloss would have been sure. He offered up no answers, however. It was not his place to provide them.

He was already running towards the sound.

VI

The Calibanite relic plate exploded.

From the original entry wound in the middle of the plastron, the ornate cuirass petalled outwards, the rerebrace and cuisse that had been fixed in position with pins and wire blowing out towards the four corners of the hall. The last piece to land was the helmet. It struck the ceiling, denting the elaborate bowring, and then came back down, clattering and rolling before bumping to a stop against an oak pilaster.

Holguin lowered his pistol.

He was breathing as though he had just fought a close duel and lost. His secondary heart hammered against his breast.

‘As the forests are green,’ he murmured.

The veteran warriors regarded him, aghast.

‘The Lion will be furious,’ said Samariel flatly, looking at the ruined armour.

Holguin, however, was not looking at the armour.

With the slow departure of the light cast by the burning voidwreck, the shadows cast by the armour displays, the tapestries and the Dark Angels themselves stretched, wheeling across the far wall. All except one. It was small, no larger than a mortal child, swaddled in blackness in the same way that an aspirant to the Legion wore his robes. Holguin knew – without knowing how – that it stared right back at him. He had a sense of rustling leaves, creaking bowers, the rumble of something malignant stalking between the tall, crowding trunks of shadow, and again Holguin felt a chill that his armour’s systems gave no credence to. The dissonance made him shiver.

It looked like...

But it couldn’t be. They had never appeared to him before. And what would they be doing here?

‘Sir?’

‘Watcher...’ he murmured.

‘Are you alright, sir?’

‘I thought... I thought I saw...’

Samariel took him firmly by the pauldron. ‘There have been no reports of boarders anywhere near this section.’

‘What did you see?’ said Valiel.

Holguin blinked. He shook his head to stop it ringing. His armoured boot crunched on a pin. ‘It was nothing, brother,’ he managed to say.

‘But—’

‘The voted-lieutenant has told you that it was nothing,’ grunted Kastael. The paladin gave no indication that he had personally seen or sensed anything untoward. He spoke in defence of his voted-lieutenant simply out of habitual reticence.

‘I am wound up tight, that is all,’ Holguin elaborated. ‘My humours are unbalanced. It is no secret that this is not the war I would have us fighting, but I would still rather be on the bridge or in a boarding tube *fighting it* than down here. I allowed the shadows to trick me into a glimpse of an enemy. That is all.’

‘Tricked by the shadows,’ Samariel echoed slowly, releasing him. ‘Yes, sir.’

It did not matter whether they believed the lie or not, only that they accepted it as though it were the truth.

‘Eyes open.’ Holguin took a deep breath, injecting his voice with vigour and firmness. ‘We have half the deck to search yet.’

‘Sir.’ Somehow, Samariel managed to freight a simple confirmation with a whole train of anxieties and doubts. ‘If he didn’t know we were here before, then as sure as beasts lurk in the woods he knows now. I don’t think we’re going to find him if he chooses to be hidden.’

‘I will make that decision, brother. I will make it *after* we have searched.’

Samariel dipped his helmeted head. His mouth grille made a rough noise, as though he had been about to add something but thought better of it, when a heraldic portiere on the far side of the hall was ripped aside.

The Deathwing reacted with speed powered by extreme tension.

Actuated servos whined, boltguns and pistols rattling as Samariel, Valiel, Breunor and Holguin brought weapons to bear. Kastael drew his sword into a ‘fool’ guard, lowering the humming point to the ground and dragging one foot back.

Farith Redloss raised his hands to the array of I Legion guns.

‘Lion’s teeth, brother.’

VII

‘I think we want to take him alive, brother, don’t you?’ Redloss stepped through the portiere, hand still up, toeing aside the ornate Order helmet that lay on the deck as his own Knights followed through and fanned out behind him.

Nobody on either side seemed immediately inclined towards lowering their weapons.

‘Kastael,’ greeted Danaeus, his paired bolt pistols aimed at the paladin’s chest.

‘Danaeus.’ The old paladin offered a slight dip of the head, as though welcoming a promising squire to the tourney.

‘Is that your ugly face under that helmet, Samariel?’ said Gawain.

‘I earned this ugliness in service to the Emperor,’ Samariel retorted cheerfully, belying the deep, grinding modulation of his helm’s augmitter.

‘With weapons drawn,’ said Redloss. ‘In the primarch’s own sanctum, no less.’

‘Pistols and swords,’ Holguin snapped. His words, usually so measured, were unexpectedly short. There was hoarseness to their delivery as well, as though he had been shriving himself, depriving his body even of water. ‘We are in the middle of a void battle, as you should well know. This is precautionary.’ He nodded towards the Dreadwing Destroyers. ‘You look as though you are out to subjugate a small world.’

‘We are hunting a primarch, brother. I would counter that this is what precautionary looks like.’

‘He has not been the same since Chemos,’ muttered Gawain.

‘Since Davin,’ Danaeus corrected him.

‘We all heard what happened to Brother-Redemptor Nemiel,’ Redloss added. ‘For the crime of possessing principles and standing to them, the primarch took his head. I would not want to come across him in such a mood unprepared.’

Holguin laughed. ‘I see now.’ Redloss sensed a kind of despairing mania in him, as if he might almost welcome his brothers’ fire. Holding one hand up, he carefully lowered the other to holster his pistol. ‘Were you hoping to press your case with him alone? Did you fear that he would react poorly to your arguments?’

‘I did not come here to argue anything,’ said Redloss, lowering his voice, speaking as one would to a spooked hound or a madman with a gun. He glanced pointedly to Danaeus and Werrin, and the legionaries reluctantly lowered their weapons. Kastael and Samariel lowered theirs in turn. ‘The primarch and I are in accord. As *you* should well know. I came only to fetch him for the strategium council, as did you.’

‘Opinions can change when circumstances force change on them,’ Holguin hissed. ‘They must.’

‘I think I understand,’ said Redloss.

‘Speak your meaning plainly, brother. If you have one.’

‘You would ask that of me with a gun aimed at my chest?’

Holguin looked at the Umbra-pattern bolt pistol in his hand as though surprised

by it. He transferred it to his left hand and then presented the grip to Samariel. The veteran took it. ‘Speak, then.’

‘The Lion has chosen a course other than Terra,’ said Redloss. ‘It is time for you to accept it.’

Holguin was silent a moment.

‘Honour demands that I cannot,’ he said finally.

‘Will you tell me, then, that you are not here to do exactly as you would accuse me of attempting? You spent too many weeks on Macragge, brother. So noble of theoretical. So clandestine of practical. The Avenging Son would have been proud to call you one of his own.’

‘Insult me thus again,’ Holguin warned. His hand rested upon the grip of the giant executioner’s broadsword that was sheathed across his shoulders. ‘Only do it with the weapon of a Knight in your hands.’

‘It is no insult I give you. It is a reminder of your duty.’

‘I will hear no more. Samariel!’

‘Sir?’

The enormous length of forest-green steel emerged from its sheath on Holguin’s back with a long, drawn-out scrape that was almost a challenge in and of itself. ‘You will be my second. Watch these curs for perfidy as I give my brother a lesson in *honour*.’

‘In the Emperor’s name,’ swore Danaeus, stepping between the two voted-lieutenants. ‘The wrecks in the void are not yet cold and you would draw steel on Farith, here?’ As if to make his point, another light shield strike to the forward voids – if Redloss judged correctly – caused the chamber’s armour displays to tinkle on their podia. The voted-second glanced pointedly over the shattered pieces of armour that lay strewn across the floor. ‘Must I be the one to ask instead what happened here?’

Holguin’s body language turned suddenly cold, as if a sheet of armourglass had just gone up. He sheathed his sword. Behind him, the legionaries of the Deathwing closed ranks.

‘Nothing happened here.’

VIII

Stenius was in a good mood, not that it showed. The smoked silver of his augmented optics roiled like a storm cloud, returning the flashes and booms as they appeared in the *Invincible Reason*’s colossal oculus screen. The cortex

region that still controlled his smile reflex sent a thin trickle of drool running down his chin.

Grey-brown hunks of planet tumbled and crashed through space.

The debris still occupied a basically spheroid shape, but that was slowly being dispersed, mountainous slabs of crust slamming together, crumbling apart, more massive pieces already feeling the drag of the system star on their orbits. The caustic atmosphere that had once made this world notorious was now the seeding element of a very small, very temporaneous gas cloud, one that Stenius looked forward to watching dissipate at his leisure as the world's gravitational pull became increasingly fragmented over the next few hours. Naval duels continued to flicker and flare as I Legion attack frigates and fighter-bombers hunted down the clapped-out Skylance gunships and refurbished Destroyers that the Dark Angels had not already obliterated, but next to the act of cosmic annihilation that was their backdrop, every trifling explosion was an inconsequential, almost petty act.

Weird radiative effects – electromagnetic leftovers from the cyclonic warhead that had cracked the planet's solid core – flickered through the cloud. Coruscating gyres of plasma. Ambient pulses of exoplanetary lightning. Out of a kind of morbid interest, Stenius had ordered ship vox to be opened to all incoming frequencies, and the shrieks and whines of the planet's final emissions squealed through the bridge's augmitter systems like steel claws running down the oculus screen. On the fore-station deck beneath him, the bridge crew plugged into their various stations worked in clenched-jawed silence.

'Barbarus,' he announced, with just the faint hint of a lisp. 'You die well for a traitor world.'

Raising a trembling finger, muscle-embedded motor assists growling, he pointed towards a glacially spinning fragment that still bore a resemblance to one of the more recognisable continental plates. It had been described fairly prominently in the records that Stenius had dug out of the archives for analysis over the course of the long voyage from Luth Tyre. It had been, to all obvious intents, the only location of note on the feral world. The site of the Wall of Memory, where the name of every Death Guard slain during the Great Crusade had been carved *in memoriam*. Stenius felt gratified to have been allowed to see it for himself, if only to make his next task easier. Cued to his every gesture, the viewer placed a hovering green bracket exactly where Stenius had been pointing, isolating the immense fragment and dragging it onto a subscreen. The viewer systems enlarged the object, and Stenius could almost visualise the buildings still

dotting the pulverised vista. Villages. Fortresses. Even a road.

‘Gunnery.’

‘Yes, captain.’

‘Anything above a million cubic metres is to be made into rubble. “No stone left standing atop another”,’ he finished, quoting back the Lion’s last command.

‘That piece must be twenty times that.’

‘Confirmed, captain. Targeting.’

‘Coordinate with your counterparts aboard the *Silent Kill*, the *Lady Densenoor* and the *Last Beast*.’

‘Yes, captain. Firing now.’

Stenius watched with something more than professional satisfaction as the intersecting tracers of macro-fire slowly smashed the stubborn planetoid to pieces. It still massed several thousand times the tonnage of the *Invincible Reason*, but it was eggshell brittle, its cohesion stressed beyond all natural endurance by the cyclonic forces unleashed against its mantle and core, and conventional ordnance was more than adequate to the task now. It was ready to die.

The rock shattered, filling its sub-display with blizzarding pieces of siliceous crust and navigational hazard markers.

‘Hah!’

Stenius brought his hands together in a single, dully metallic clap that had the ratings in the crew pit immediately below the command dais looking up over the rail in surprise.

Unexpected outbursts of joy were hardly what he was best known for.

But he was in a good mood.

This made what they had done to the Shield Worlds look like a slap on the wrist. He wiped the thread of drool from his chin on his finger, remembering the moment, years past, when an exploding console and a freak nerve injury had ended his crusade. The Gordian League had declared for Horus almost as soon as the Dark Angels ships had broken orbit of their worlds. Stenius did not blame them for that. He would have spat on the turned backs of his conquerors in exactly the same way in their place. But that understanding did not equate to forgiveness.

If the Lion sought further targets before turning his great fleet towards Colchis or Cthonia or even the Throneworld itself, then Stenius could oblige him.

He would say this for the Dark Angels – they remembered.

With a magnetic whine the polarity clamps on the bridge doors behind him

disengaged. Stenius turned with difficulty, the monolithic blast doors still sliding into the receiving blocks as Redloss, Holguin and two squads of armoured legionary warriors strode through, staggering the plate-wire of the ascent ramp with their tread.

At first glance, the two groups of warriors were similarly outfitted and attired. The complicated hierarchy of symbols on their armour, with obtuse and often contingent meanings that could be interpreted only by the initiated, made actual squad designations difficult to define. Even for an officer of Stenius' powers of observation and experience – most of that admittedly as an officer of a pre-Calibanite Legion – the best marker of differentiation was the weapons at their hips. Those trailing Holguin came with an assortment of pistols and knives. Those strung out behind Redloss boasted more of an arsenal: volkite and flamer weaponry, and even a missile launcher (strapped across the back of young Gawain), on naked display. Stenius gave the inappropriate weapon a hard frown, but Redloss and Gawain simply strode past him as though he were part of the furniture of the bridge, deck plates and weaponry rattling as the rest of the squad followed their lead.

No. Forget that. The best marker of differentiation was the obvious antagonism they shared.

There was something feral about the Destroyers of the Dark Angels. With their helmets off, they looked drawn, almost animalistic, like something that had pulled itself upright and walked out of the Death World forests they called home before anyone had had the chance to interrogate them too closely. Not that they would ever hear such an opinion advanced by Captain Stenius. Holguin's Knights, on the other hand, thick of muscle and grey of beard, were almost as old as Stenius, a striking contrast in martial bearing and pride.

Not that *they* would ever hear such an opinion advanced by Captain Stenius either.

'You made no mention of the fact that Redloss was hunting the Lion as well, brother,' Holguin murmured, drawing up onto the dais to watch the Dreadbringer depart.

Redloss was already halfway towards the strategium suite that annexed the bridge's medial tier on its starboard side. Its reinforced hatches were nothing like as tough as the main bridge doors, but they were still as thick as the glacis plate of a Predator tank, enough to take a hit from a multi-melta and still function afterwards. To the credit of the bridge crew, most of them Stenius' own hand picks, no one looked up as the lieutenant and his entourage stomped along the

servitor aisles between them. Transhuman dread, the awe felt by the unaugmented human psyche at the presence of something indefinably altered and *other*, was a very real physiological phenomenon, one that the Legion's Apothecaries had gone to great lengths to understand, and one that Stenius had gone to equal extremes to root out of his senior officers.

He looked up to Holguin.

The Deathwing lieutenant was huge. Encased in his artificed war-plate, he stood half a metre taller than Stenius and considerably broader. His face was pale. His eyes were haunted. His bare head stood out of all proportion to his enormously armoured body, as though it had been placed on top of too massive a frame. Garbed only in dark green carapace and a white surplice, a ceremonial carryover from the old Calibanite orders, Stenius could have been forgiven for experiencing a little transhuman dread himself.

He wiped another line of drool from his chin.

'I didn't tell him that you were looking either, brother.'

Holguin grunted. He looked distant.

'Is there something else?' said Stenius.

The muscles around the Deathbringer's jaw tightened. Everyone had secrets, but nobody kept them like a Dark Angel. Regardless of how heavy they grew.

'One of these days you will have to pick a side,' Holguin said, moving after Redloss. 'Everyone else has.'

TWO

For Terra

'I see you perfectly well from here, in my darkness. Can you say the same from over there in the light?'

– attributed to Konrad Curze, addressing Lion El'Jonson

The conference annexe was a miniature iteration of the bridge decks to which it was conjoined, with manual, technical and command activities differentiated across three tiers in the same design. It had a dedicated staff of over two hundred strategos, logos, lexographers, rubricators, aexactors and intelligentseae whose collective purpose was to transform what was argued in these chambers into full-scale Legion war. The material difficulties brought about by half a decade of steady attrition were immediately apparent. The difficulties faced by the Administratum colonels in staffing a complete shift may have been less visible than those of Legion commanders putting together a full cohort division, but it was a symptom of the same tribulations.

Sarosh. The Shield Worlds. Diamat. Thramas. Perditus.

Of the twenty thousand Dark Angels who had made orbit of Macragge, fewer than half remained, the rest lost to the Night Haunter, the Shadow Crusade, the daemon fleets of Davin and the perils of the Ruinstorm. The Ruinstorm had been broken, and yet the promise of reinforcement from fair, benighted Caliban had come no closer to realisation. The fleet scholam of Port Hera, the martial pride

of Ultramar, had replenished the officer classes aboard ship (more to the resentment of the situated Calibanite and Terran staffers than their relief), but for their Legion masters it was not so simple a matter as proffering the hand and suffering Guilliman's largesse. Even so, the warren of ante-rooms was uncommonly quiet. Those officers present, tapping desultorily at consoles, looked desperately strung out, at the tail end of a death spiral between the last stimulant wake-up and a barbiturate-induced five-to-six-hour come-down before the commencement of the next shift.

It could fill no one with reassurance as to the standard of their labours.

The upper tier hosted the audience chamber of the Lion.

Compared to the drab functionality – the modernity, even – of the preceding tiers, it was a large, solemn space, poorly illuminated with dribbling candles. Its floors were flagged in dark Calibanite stone. Its walls were lost in dark Calibanite shadow. A huge wooden throne, plaited and engraved, had been installed in the centre of the chamber, beneath a high, shadowed dome, faced off by six smaller chairs arranged in an arc, one for each voted-lieutenant of the Hexagrammaton. The darkness of the room enveloped the ring of chairs. The banners of the Six Wings were barely visible for the gloom. They flapped occasionally, the white cloth whispering with the currents of the ventilation system.

Following the return of Grand Master Luther to Caliban in the wake of the Sarosh compliance, the Lion had gone several years without a recognised seneschal before the appointment of Corswain. By the same token had the majority of these chairs gone as many years unfilled. Some contended that this was deliberation on the Lion's part, others that it demonstrated his hope that the scattered Wings of the Dark Angels could yet be reunited. There were those, however – older legionaries of noble Calibanite houses – who whispered that the Lion had never approved of dissenting counsel, and that the hollowing of the Wings was proof, if more were needed, of his authoritarian tendencies.

If the Lion heard these voices, and reason suggested that he must, then he offered succour to neither side.

Now, however, times had changed.

The war to determine the fate of humanity had entered its definitive phase, and the Lion had ruled that every Wing of the Dark Angels must be heard.

As the only voted-lieutenants of their respective Wings to have made it through the Ruinstorm alive, Redloss and Holguin had both devoted an unreasonable sum of energy into the appointment of aides, confidants and protégés to the

vacant seats. It was far from a straightforward exercise. The Six Wings had rules of primogeniture that were each a canon unto their own. The Emperor Himself could not have commended a candidate who was not already initiated to the mysteries of that particular order, but, as in any secret plebiscite, there were levers to be pulled.

This was no base game of politics they played. They sought neither personal advancement nor favour for themselves, only victory of the Dark Angels above all else. It was in deciding who needed to lose, and how hard, that the politics took place.

Beneath the sword-and-wing banner of the Ravenwing sat Aloceri. He was tall, even by the standards of the *Legiones Astartes*, but rangy as a Northwilder hircus with the steady, ruminant temperament to match, dark-haired and pinch-faced. He was, indisputably, master of the jetbike and the attack speeder, as well as the strike fighter and the Interceptor and the traditional arts of horsemanship that the Ravenwing still demanded of initiates to its outer circles. Although the Six Wings of the Dark Angels owed their existence to the old formations of Terra, which pre-existed even the *Principia Belicosa* and the amalgamation of the Six Hosts of Angels, the Ravenwing had its roots firmly embedded in Calibanite soil. It did things its way. Austere and unsmiling, Aloceri was a definite pick of Holguin's. The rumour was that they had been aspirants together, both favourites of the esteemed Master Ramiel. The old master would doubtless have been proud to see two of his chosen pupils raised so high within the Legion.

In the chairs of the Firewing and the Stormwing sat Redloss' preferences.

Beneath the flame-in-a-winged-chalice heraldry of his Wing, Vastael sat in a permanent state of discomfort. It was as though some implanted gland had hypercharged his transhuman physiology, producing such a surfeit of energy that he could not sit idle for thirty seconds at a time. As a young legionary attached to the Devastators of the Third Order, he had benefitted from Redloss' mentorship, flirting with the outer circles of both the Dreadwing and the Firewing before finally speaking his vows in secret ceremony to the latter. Redloss had taken no offence; such was the manner in which the Dark Angels moved, in shadows and behind locked doors, and Vastael and he had been cut very much from the same cloth.

They saw Horus' war and the crusade that had preceded it for what they were – exercises in destruction.

Beside him sat Calloson, new voted-lieutenant of the Stormwing. He was stockily made, the body beneath his homespun surplice a rough topography of

scars, muscle grafts and superior augmetics that whirred and breathed even as he sat in repose. He had lost an eye to a boarding action over Kalippa Major, an arm on Creusias, a hand to a rigged blast door aboard the VIII Legion cruiser *Vulturine*, and both legs to a plasma mine on Strichnus. Twice he had been declared dead during the corridor-to-corridor fighting with the nephilia en route to Perditus, and a third time on the apothecarion tables afterwards. His trenchant will to be the first to face any enemy and chivalric disdain for the great leveller, death, endeared him to all arms of the Legion in a way that belied his obvious deficiencies in character.

The sixth and final chair, that of the Ironwing, had not been filled.

Not exactly.

Venerable Titus stood before it, encased in the slabbed adamantium plates and orthogonal planes of a Castraferrum-pattern Dreadnought. The jet-black chassis was decorated with Hexagrammic emblems, as well as a multitude of signature motifs alluding to orders and brotherhoods that long predated the assimilation of Caliban into the Imperium of Man. A plain white surplice fluttered from the mighty engine's pelvic joints. Titus' original contemptor chassis had been sacrificed on the battlefield, but the sarcophagus containing his mortal remains had been safely interred within one of the Diamat Ordinatus engines. It had been removed and returned to the *Invincible Reason* prior to the handover of those machines to Perturabo – an oversight of trust that had gnawed at the conscience of the Lion ever since. After many long years of somnolence and ritual observance by the Legion's Techmarines, the Venerable had finally stirred on the very day that the Ruinstorm had been broken. Many took his return as an omen, of good or ill.

Titus had been neither Redloss' nor Holguin's selection.

He had simply been the outstanding candidate.

In addition to the six Wing commanders, the chamber was crowded with figures of towering transhuman stature as well as mortals of augmented, mutant and baseline biologies.

The seconds of the voted-lieutenants hovered, hawk-like, around their commanders' chairs. Theirs was not a formal or permanent role, but a holdover from the ritualised combat traditions of the Calibanite orders, when a warrior could expect to find men he could trust at his back. Gawain stood at Redloss' side, and Carolingus, voted-second of the Deathwing, his unusual golden helm buckled at his hip, stood at Holguin's. A similar assortment of hardened, hooded faces watched all others from over Aloceri, Vastael and Calloson's shoulders. All

except Titus, who had been Terran in life, and who felt no need either for a second or the observance of the custom.

Myrdun of the Librarians, the most senior of their number remaining with the continuing, and unexplained, exile of Chief Librarian Israfael to Caliban, stalked the perimeter of the Hexagrammaton as though tracing out a psychic ward. Even garbed in the ceremonial blue robes and nano-circuitry hood of his order, his bald head and unshaven features made him look more like a bruiser than a vizier on matters esoteric.

There was Theralyne Fiana, the frail Chief Navigator, surrounded and supported by her brothers, sisters and cousins of House Ne'iocene. Vazheth Licinia and her acolytes from the astropathic chantry. Commodore Ozius Vespian in his naval dress greens, complete with black gloves, peaked hat and ribbon bars. He was Stenius' legate-designate in these chambers. Ostensibly, the captain was occupied on the bridge, but it was a widely known (though seldom spoken) secret that the Lion had not enjoyed full faith in the captain since Perditus, some failure of disclosure involving Stenius and Lady Fiana. Better and dearer brothers than Stenius could attest that the trust of the Lion was, once lost, not an easy thing to reclaim. The captains of the *Vehemence* and the *Errant*, the *Angel Tor* and the *Sar Amadis*, battleships and barges, first-rate line ships of the primarch's fleet, gathered around their commodore like frigates around an attack carrier.

It was an assembly such as this chamber had not witnessed in many a year, and yet more than half of the space available was left unfilled.

The lords and retainers, petitioners and squires, all huddled towards the column of illumination around the arc of chairs, like war refugees huddled around a drum fire, and none dared sit in the one chair that stood empty.

Redloss studied every face, or at least those with a voice of consequence, mentally allocating each to one side of the forthcoming arguments or the other.

In some cases, it was straightforward. Vastael. Holguin. Others were less easily predicted. Aloceri might have been Holguin's favourite, but he was no man's catspaw, and if that could be said of the Ravenbringer then it could be said thrice over of Calloson. Titus was old Legion through to the adamantium housing of his annioesis tank. The venerable would bend for no man. Stenius, meanwhile, through his proxy, had made a virtue of turning with the wind.

'No one will need me to point it out for them that the Lion is not here,' he said after a time.

The murmuring of the officers, less of a sound and more of an expectant

vibration, was stilled.

‘Where is he?’ asked Commodore Vesebian, looking around as though the primarch might be present in the shadows.

‘The primarch considers,’ said Redloss.

‘He broods,’ Holguin corrected, without lifting his gaze from the floor.

The statement did not bring the gasps of disavowal that it might have just six months earlier, but Vastael glowered at him for speaking aloud that which they all suspected.

‘He has not graced the bridge since the fall of Chemos,’ said Vesebian, drawing boldness from Holguin’s unguarded remark.

‘I sought him in his sanctum,’ said Holguin.

‘And I,’ Redloss added. The two voted-lieutenants shared a look. Their chairs were at opposite ends of the arc of six. Redloss gave a nod and, after a moment that none could have failed to mark, Holguin returned it. The ancient rules of parley applied here. It would be unseemly for the primarch’s most senior officers to be seen to be at odds. ‘We didn’t find him.’

‘And nor would you.’ Aloceri’s voice was like sinew stretched over a grindstone. ‘Not if he did not wish to be found.’

‘Why would he not wish to be found?’ asked Vesebian. ‘Why would he not want to see the traitors’ worlds burn?’

‘Because we do not burn them out of retribution,’ Holguin barked. He took a deep breath, marshalling himself before continuing in a more even tone. ‘We are not some petty Nostraman gang lord, lashing out in repayment of a slight. There is no glory in what we do here and the primarch knows it. It is a means to an end, an end that looks increasingly distant with every world we destroy. The very ease with which we obliterate the traitors’ worlds is evidence to our failure.’

Redloss scowled. He saw it mirrored on the face of Vastael, and several amongst the mortal contingent who had invested blood and endeavour into this course.

‘Let us not have this argument *before* the primarch joins us,’ he said.

‘He won’t be joining us,’ Calloson muttered.

They were the first words that the Stormbringer had uttered since sitting down. The other Wing commanders looked at him to elaborate. He shrugged, and did not oblige.

‘Do we begin without him?’ said Myrdun. The echoes of his footfalls rang still through the high chamber as he paced.

‘We must,’ said Titus, and in the manner of an earthquake stilling a conflict

over contested land, all in proximity to the Dreadnought bowed their heads.

‘Agreed,’ said Aloceri.

‘Agreed,’ added Vastael.

Calloson nodded.

True silence fell upon the assembly. Not a begrudging lull forced upon them by the power of Titus’ voice, or Redloss’, but a genuine, hallowed appreciation of the weight of the decisions that they must make. Decisions of a kind that belonged in the hands of demigods and immortals, for what was debated here would determine the fate of the Legion, and of the Imperium itself.

‘Then a decision will have to be made,’ Holguin announced. ‘To continue onwards, or to turn and make for Terra.’

Ozius Vespian cleared his throat nervously.

Redloss knew the commodore by name and by face. His rapid ascent through the ranks had undoubtedly owed as much to dead men’s boots and the faint glow of old Calibanite nobility in his bloodline as to any startling qualities of his own. Through their minimal dealings, Redloss had marked him as workmanlike with a diligent, understated style of command, but he was forced to concede that standing before such a rare and potent assembly of lords must have taken some nerve.

But as ‘host’ of this meet, this was his duty and his right.

The commodore walked forwards, setting himself down on one knee and bowing his head to the primarch’s empty throne. There was a rustle of cloth as all those not seated, human and transhuman alike, joined him in bending the knee. Those that had been permitted to bear arms, the seconds of the voted-lieutenants, drew them in a scrape of steel, setting their points to the deck and lowering their foreheads to the crosspieces. Conclaves of this sort, the muster of a grand master’s senior Knights before a great battle, had once been commonplace, but had become rare of late. The Lion had never been comfortable in high company. He preferred to compartmentalise, to treat with his commanders a few at a time, or preferably one to one.

‘Lords, ladies, captains of the fleet.’ Vespian paused, head bowed before the Lion’s throne as if in prayer for courage, before rising and turning. As he did so, every kneeling warrior in the chamber simultaneously rose. Those with drawn steel sheathed it. ‘As of zero-seven-fifty-six, fleet time, Barbarus, birth planet of the Fourteenth Legion, was no more.’

The mortal staff officers clapped dutifully. There were a few ‘hear, hears’. Vastael rapped his knuckles on the wooden rest of his chair. Gawain thumped the

pommel of his sheathed sword against the girdle banding of his ceremonial breastplate. It was all a far cry from the cheer that had greeted the destruction of Luth Tyre eight weeks prior, or the raw ebullience that had broken out across the fleet in the wake of Chemos' annihilation three weeks before that. Crewmen had rushed to the viewing ports to witness the home world of the Emperor's Children die. Otherwise staid and taciturn Dark Angels legionaries had embraced and proclaimed victory, relishing the righteous taste of revenge.

It was different now.

The end goal had become murky, like a pool that had been clear before the hunter disturbed the silt hidden at its bottom with his presence. The Lion's objective had been to split the Legion forces bound for Terra by openly, and brazenly, moving against their home worlds. If but a handful of ships and a few hundred legionaries could be drawn from Terra, he had reasoned, then that would aid his brothers' cause. Redloss had considered it sound.

He would have set phosphex to the galaxy, to the Throneworld itself, before allowing such harm to befall Caliban. The Lion himself had trusted no one but his own second-in-command and adoptive father to its protection. Were the Death Guard and the Emperor's Children really so far gone that they no longer bore any affection for the world that had birthed them?

Could the Lion have misjudged his fallen brothers so badly?

'What was the strength of the Barbaran fleet?' asked Holguin as the duteous cheer ran its course.

The fleet captains shared a look between them. Vesebian nodded to them to stay quiet.

'Six capital ships, lord,' he said.

'Six?' asked Holguin.

The Lion's fleet, even after the devastation of the Ruinstorm, numbered twice that. His flagship, the Gloriana-class battleship *Invincible Reason*, carried firepower equivalent to an entire fleet.

'Yes, lord.'

'Of what class?'

'Lord?'

'I don't want specifics. Just an idea of the strength that opposed us.'

'A mix of light and medium cruisers, lord, commanded by a battlecruiser of the retired Cronus class. All of them in a state of some disrepair. It... it would be my judgement that none of them were completely void-worthy.'

Vesebian's answer trailed off into silence.

Holguin let him stew there a moment.

The Deathbringer was a masterful rhetorician. Had he been born on Terra he might have been chosen as an iterator. Instead, he had been blessed with the not inconsiderable combination of an orator's skill, a demigod's imposition and a Knight's tarnished sense of honour. The Lion was not generally adept at assessing the strengths and weaknesses of others, or their moods, but he had chosen well in attaching Holguin to the protection of the Triumverate of the now-defunct Imperium Secundus.

'And losses on our side?' asked Holguin.

'None, lord.'

'So... no real resistance of any kind.'

'No, lord.'

'What of the boarding torpedoes that hit the ship aft?' Myrdun interrupted.

'They carried human soldiers, lord. They never made it out of the corridor.'

The Librarian frowned. 'Given what we know of the traitors' embrace of warpcraft, the Librarian was monitoring the warp during the battle and we detected an unusually powerful psykana event somewhere in that section.'

Redloss glanced to Holguin. The Deathbringer's expression was stone.

'I saw nothing,' said Redloss carefully.

'Nor I,' said Holguin.

The Librarian pursed his lips and nodded.

Holguin turned back to Vesebian. 'The boarders were just Barbaran fighters?'

'Yes, lord.'

'Not Legiones Astartes? So, as far as we can tell, there has not been a single ship or legionary drawn from the traitor forces bound for Terra.'

'No, lord.'

'Not *yet*,' Vastael snapped, thumping his fist on his armrest, unable to restrain himself a moment more.

Holguin threw up a hand and turned away as if to forestall argument. It was all highly theatrical. The effect was to make it clear, without diminishing the point with mere words, that Redloss and Vastael had made this argument after Luth Tyre, and after Chemos.

Where then, it said, were the traitor warships that had been promised?

'We bleed them,' said Redloss. 'That is our part in the war for Terra, as the Lion promised to his brothers over the rubble of Davin.'

'We do bleed them, lords.'

Vazheth Licinia, the principal voice for the astropathic choir, shuffled forwards.

Her eyes, replaced by petalled plug sockets, gave no reaction as she entered the tepid pool of light that lay between the Lion's throne and the six chairs.

'With the dissipation of the Ruinstorm my chantry hears more than our minds can process, more than we have needed to translate in many years. Guilliman's fleets wage war across a hundred systems, burning everything they touch in their fury. The Iron Warriors and the Sons of Horus fall in rout before their avenging wrath.' Several men, and even a few legionaries, gave grunts of satisfaction at that good news. 'Sanguinius, meanwhile, is a bloody spear, cast at the Throneworld itself.' The astropath paused in her report while one of her adepts passed her a glass of water. 'However, there have been scattered reports that, if viewed in the context of one another, paint a darker picture – Beta-Garmon has fallen to the Warmaster.'

In the darkness around the chamber, warriors growled and shook their heads. Arguments broke out in places. Holguin leant towards Aloceri to confer in sharp whispers, while Carolingus and Vastael's second squared up to one another over the Firebringer's attempts to overhear.

Beta-Garmon was the gateway to Segmentum Solar. To Terra itself. Situated at the confluence of a string of stable warp corridors and reliably fair currents, it was an outpost from which a fleet large enough to lay siege to the house of Rogal Dorn and the Emperor could pass.

'Let her speak her news,' Redloss shouted out.

'Agreed,' said Holguin, straightening in his chair. 'Mistress Licinia has been given the floor and with it the right to be heard. Any who defies it may answer to me.' Carolingus let his hand rest warningly over the pommel of his sword as he scanned the room.

'And to me,' grunted Calloson.

Licinia waited patiently while the audience quietened down.

'The fall of Beta-Garmon is cause for dismay, yes, but for optimism as well, of a kind. The Warmaster's forces are being summoned to one place, and for the first time, with the dissipation of the Ruinstorm, we are in a position to hear their calls. The chantry has heard the cries sent out to the forges of Thagria and Darsis and Capra Allegra. And to Luth Tyre. A call that has gone unanswered.'

Vastael's entire palm thumped the armrest of his chair.

'Ha! You see. We bleed them.'

'Pinpricks,' said Holguin. 'The Warmaster must command the fealty of a dozen forge worlds greater than Luth Tyre.'

'Then we bleed them again,' said Redloss. 'And again, and again. We bleed

them until they are forced to turn to face us, or find themselves too weak to stand before the might of our brothers.’

‘Not a plan without merit,’ said Aloceri. He turned his long face towards Holguin and gave a shrug. ‘A single insect bite will not bring down a destrier, but enough will cause it discomfort, enough to make it miss a step or throw a rider.’

‘The siege of Terra will be neither simple nor quick,’ rumbled Titus. ‘Not even for the might of nine full Legions. Eliminating the Warmaster’s capacity to resupply and rearm his forces will hurt his efforts in the long run.’

‘I cannot believe I am hearing this.’ Holguin looked around as if expecting to see capering fools around his chair. ‘After all we have heard. All we have seen. The enemy musters his strength for an all-or-nothing assault on the walls and you would still deny us battle.’

Vesepian coughed nervously. ‘If I may, lords. There is another matter of consequence that Stenius would have me raise with you, one that is germane to this decision.’

‘Spit it out then,’ Holguin said, exasperated.

‘We are low on munitions. Drive plasma is running routinely at less than thirty per cent of capacity. The reserve tanks are already expended. And personnel...’ He bit his lip and shook his head. ‘Frankly, my lords, we have only been able to keep the ship functioning for as long as we have because half of it has been locked down since before Macragge. We *could* strike at another world, but we deployed our last cyclonic device in the destruction of Barbarus. We would need to bombard it with conventional orbit-to-surface ordnance, which would take time and munitions we do not have, or do it with ground forces, which will cost lives.’

‘A cost we will always be prepared to shoulder,’ said Redloss.

‘If it is demanded of us,’ Holguin countered.

‘I offer a third option, lords.’ The commodore waited until he was sure he had the full attention of his audience. He was, Redloss was beginning to appreciate, in his quiet, soft-spoken way, as effective an orator as Holguin. ‘Caliban.’

Redloss sat back in his chair as though pushed.

Caliban.

It was a world he thought of often, dreamt of always, and although he knew that the bulldozed forests and bulk arcologies would bear little resemblance to the world he remembered from his youth, it was one he did yet yearn to see again. These had been dark years for the I Legion, scattered by galactic geography and

war. Not for them the honourable toll of blood and ground that the other loyalist Legions had paid out freely. No. The exacting upon the I Legion had been heavier than that. Unity. Identity. That was what the Dark Angels had surrendered, piece by piece, to Horus' war. Redloss was of Caliban. There had been times when the Lion had seemed of similar mind, but there had always been something, some immediate crisis that had drawn his attention from the dark green orb of home to the galactic stage.

Curze. Imperium Secundus. Terra.

Now this.

'Caliban?' Holguin's voice wavered before he could bring it back under control. Redloss watched his counterpart with narrowed eyes.

'The Warmaster is not alone in his need for supply, lord,' said Vesebian. 'Is that not why the Lion ordered Grand Master Luther to Caliban? There should be an army waiting for us there.' Mumbles of agreement broke out amongst the gathering. 'With the lifting of the Ruinstorm, contact with our world should again be possible.' He turned to Licinia. 'Has there been no word? Is that not reason enough to warrant a return? And what of Corswain's Ninth Order?'

'What of them?' said Titus.

At first Redloss thought that Titus was being unduly dismissive of the captain-paladin, but then he recalled that the ancient had slumbered in an amniotic tank throughout the entire Thramas Crusade and genuinely did not know what Vesebian was talking about.

'There... have been rumours,' said Myrdun slowly.

'Rumours?' said Redloss.

'From Chemosian captives, mostly. But also a few astropathic intercepts.' The Librarian glanced at Licinia who, in spite of her blindness, saw and nodded. 'They say that the Ninth Order was caught between Calas Typhon and the fleet of his primarch, Mortarion, and destroyed.' Shouts of denial rose up against his words, but the Librarian merely glowered and continued. 'If there is any truth to these stories then the Death Guard have already landed on Caliban, and besiege the rock of Aldurukh as we speak.'

'If these stories are true,' Holguin snapped, 'Mortarion will be bound for Terra. Guilliman drives Horus back at every front. The Warmaster *knows* that if the Avenging Son and the Angel reach Terra before he can break its walls then he is finished. He will demand all his forces at his side.'

'It is time for us to go home!' Vesebian yelled.

That a mortal would raise his voice in conclave was shocking. Members of the

Hexagrammaton stared back at him, open-mouthed. ‘The Lion has kept us too long.’ His voice cracked and he was quickly shouted down, those arguing in favour of his position soon shouting it on his behalf.

‘Order!’ Holguin rose from his chair to little effect beyond bidding Aloceri and Vastael to rise and begin shouting with him. ‘I will have order here.’

‘I have heard enough.’

The voice that spoke was barely greater than a whisper, and yet it communicated authority. It was a cold wind blowing down the collective neck, the grind of a storm brewing above the screening trees. Silence fell in its wake. Veseopian turned white. Not metaphorically. The blood physically drained from his face as he fell to one knee, head bowed and trembling. The rest of the audience chamber did likewise, drawing swords and descending to their knees to pledge silent fealty to the throne. If it lacked the ritual good order of their earlier observance, then that was forgivable.

Redloss looked up.

The throne had been empty. He would have sworn it to his dying day, and yet there before them in the fullness of his glory sat the Lion.

He was clad for war, cased in the intricately crafted suit of void-black power armour that had been gifted to him by the Emperor Himself. Elaborate scrollwork had been worked into the curved ceramite plates, detailing forest scenes from a Caliban that existed no longer except in ceramite, script and the memories of those here gathered. Red lions sculpted from Martian gold-dust bared their claws from the breast-plate and greaves. He was unhelmed, a long mane of unruly golden hair falling over his ornate pauldrons, kept back from his unshaven face only by a plain circlet of silver. As with the sudden manner of his appearance, there was nothing ostentatious or dramatic about this trinket; it was a small thing by which the Knight-King of a noble house of old would have been known.

The scabbard of his sword jutted from the seat of his throne at an awkward angle. It was large, very large. The *Wolf Blade* was an ancient chainsword of unknown provenance, lost to the vaults of Aldurukh before the Lion had found and reclaimed it. It lacked the artistry and the finesse of the *Lion Sword*, the power sword that had been crafted for him by the Emperor’s own artificers, only to be broken by Guilliman in anger, but it was a dark and bloody weapon befitting of a dark and bloody age. He had ended the renegade Knights of Lupus with it, slain the last of the Great Beasts, and had spoken more than once of his anticipation over putting it to similar purpose amongst the stars.

His hard green eyes caught the weak light, glowing like jewels at the bottom of a shallow, predator-filled pool of water as he surveyed the bowed heads and the six commanders in their subordinate chairs.

He likes to see without being seen, Sanguinius had once confided to Redloss. I would advise a warrior never to turn their back on him, if I thought it would do that warrior any good.

‘I have heard enough.’

Showing admirable reserves of courage, Holguin stood. His considerably smaller suit of plate whined with the sudden draw on its power plant. He looked up at the towering primarch.

‘Do we set course for Terra?’

‘Or for Caliban?’ Redloss called, still sitting.

The Lion frowned, as he so often frowned these nights.

‘I have decided.’

THREE

The Warmaster's resolve

'Thou shalt make war against the infidel without cessation and without mercy.'

– The Remembrancer, Gautier, M2

I

The *Invincible Reason* was the first to slip free of the warp.

It broke into the silence of real space as if onto black ice. Break thrusters fired along its prow and up the battlemented emplacements of its central ridgeline. Turbulent energies conjured by the interaction of the unreal with the real snapped from bow to stern over its pockmarked armour, summoning a halo to the immense basalt figures that stood bestride the cardinals of its dorsal spine, Dark Angels with swords raised and pinions unfurled. The remainder of the fleet followed momentarily. Space itself burst aflame as reality was ripped apart, kilometre after kilometre of void-black warship extruding from the beyond. The fires guttered briefly as the wound scarred over, flames capering after the escaping warships before the pressures of reality finally snuffed them cold. From the stillness of space it was a ballet of precision and beauty.

Aboard the bridge of the *Invincible Reason* it was the frantically unchoreographed derailment of a fifty-kilometre-long, nineteen-car locomotive.

Stenius worked the tension from his jaw. This, he knew, was the most perilous time, those few seconds between Geller field collapse and a ship's complete emergence from the warp. More ships died in those few seconds than in the weeks, months or years of insanity that preceded it. The pressure hull shuddered and groaned, the heavy transverse frames that crisscrossed the bridge like the vaults of a fane squealing with torsional stresses and engine burn. Uniformed crewmen bawled out condition reports on every major system.

'All ships accounted for,' announced Vespian, his nerves telling only in the habitual drumming of his fingers on the command dais rail. 'A clean translation.'

'Give me visual,' Stenius barked.

The oculus screen sparked into life at the same time as the heavy plasteel shutters occluding the bay windows were manually rolled back by sweating ratings. A flood of yellow light from the system sun swept away the crimson streaks of emergency lighting. Stenius' optics automatically narrowed their apertures accordingly. The rest of the bridge crew resorted to grunting in pain, shielding their eyes or looking away while their sight adapted.

'Are we at the designated coordinates?'

The Lion was seated on a throne of obsidian and ivory, offset from the command dais on a separate platform that guaranteed whoever sat in it oversight of the entire bridge. It was a very different beast to that the primarch employed for his conference chambers. That was a chair for a master to sit at ease in the company of his – for want of a more appropriate word – peers. This was a projection of force.

'Thagria Forge World,' said Stenius, without looking up from his screens. 'Confirmed.' He felt the weight of his primarch's gaze on his back as he analysed the preliminary auspex returns, his genhanced neurology processing the outputs far quicker than the crewmen or their cogitator could.

He was not sure whether this was good news or bad.

'Speak, captain.'

'Ships, sire. Ten of them, breaking off from a high anchorage over Thagria I to intercept us. They're Third Legion.'

The Lion leant forwards in his throne. 'Move to engage them.'

II

Holguin pounded towards the hazard-striped blast doors of assault bay twelve. Forty-eight minutes. That was how long it had taken for two fleets to move from

initial auspex contact into killing range. Time enough for the armourers to machine Holguin out of his armour and into Tactical Dreadnought plate, but just barely.

He moved down the passageway as though encased in a boulder, six of his equally goliath kin forced into single file behind him. Samariel. Kastael. Valiel. Breunor. Epistolary Myrdun. Xariel, a Techmarine, particularly massive with servo-harness and equipment gantry bolted to his Terminator armour. Holguin would have dearly wished to have had Carolingus beside him, but where he planned to go was no place for the Deathbringer and his voted-successor.

Launch sirens screamed from every control cupola as he crossed the threshold, alert beacons slashing the hangar with red and amber as the squad spilled through the doors and into the vestibule bays. Everywhere, crewmen dashed down narrow lanes marked out with fluorescent strips, dodging strike fighters in the process of fuelling, arming and having Ravenwing pilots drilled into the cockpits.

In that small hemisphere of order by the bay doors, however, all was clear, deliberately painted off from the rest of the hangar and plastered in aggressive signage.

The deck chief bustled over, a data-slate under one arm, to assign them to their assault ram.

The Caestus pods were ranked up along the near bulkhead, an inverted, stepped pyramid of steel jackets, buffering tanks, blast rods and remote guidance consoles replete with push-buttons and status lights. To Holguin it looked like a row of hammers across a line of antique flintlock firearms, fully cocked and primed to fire.

He left Samariel to deal with the petty officer.

Redloss was there waiting for them.

Encased in Terminator plate, Holguin dwarfed the Dreadbringer utterly, but nevertheless he tensed as Redloss extended a hand.

‘Loyalty and honour, brother,’ Redloss said.

Holguin hesitated, surprised by that simple token of brotherhood and shamed that it should be so. Had his mood grown so dark that light itself could not penetrate, or simply been so twisted by paranoia that he could no longer see it? He clasped his brother’s wrist, his oversized gauntlet swallowing Redloss’ arm to the elbow, then dipped his head. With his head enwrapped by coil mesh and shock pads, it was barely noticeable.

‘Loyalty and honour.’

They remained that way a moment, hands clasped and heads bowed, before Holguin released his grip. He stepped back.

‘I thought you opposed this plan,’ he said.

‘I do. Vehemently. We should gut the Emperor’s Children at ten thousand kilometres away, then sail through the wreckage as though nothing happened. I think you see plots where none exist, and convoluted schemes where simple explanations serve. I called you Ultramarian before, but I was wrong. You are Alpharius.’

Holguin’s hand dropped to his sword hilt. He snarled.

Redloss raised his hands in surrender. ‘I am not here to fight.’

‘And yet here we are.’

‘Here we are.’

Of all Holguin’s brothers, Redloss was one of the few that he should have been able to confide in as an equal, but it was not so straightforward in practice. There was so much that could not be said, so much that was privileged and must remain so. It was simpler to say nothing. Holguin found his thoughts turning to the Lion. Since Luther’s departure he had had no one. Even Guilliman and Sanguinius could not substitute for the one man in the galaxy who truly knew him.

He felt pity for his primarch then.

‘It is too convenient, brother,’ he said. ‘A fleet of Legiones Astartes, not so large as to threaten us and yet not so small as to be dismissed entirely, appears before us, just as we begin to doubt our course.’

‘Not all of us doubt it.’

As they spoke, the deck chief had started ushering the Terminators towards the vapour-shrouded hatch of their Caestus assault ram. Myrdun and Xariel went with him, but the warriors of the Deathwing lowered one knee to the deck, bowing their heads to pledge oaths on their blades.

Holguin drew his sword.

‘The Warmaster strings us along. I feel it. He teases us with that which we hoped to find. It is a ploy to keep us from Terra. It is the Lion he fears, and he is right to.’ Holguin was last to his knee, lowering his forehead to the crosspiece. When it arrived there, he found his mind a blank. The oathing was a Knightly custom transposed onto a secular age. He knew not what he was supposed to think. ‘I will find the proof of it,’ he muttered, before kissing the sword-and-wing device of the hilt.

He studied Redloss’ face as he rose.

‘There is something else, brother?’

The Dreadbringer regarded him in turn, then lowered his head, the traditionally spare greeting observed between Knights. ‘No, brother. Good hunting.’

III

The III Legion vessels split into two formations, like fish shoaling around the black wedge of an apex predator. Desist thrusters flared in the dark, drawing out the amethyst scales and golden edging of their dark sides. The Thagrian sun burned hard against their backs, haloing their crenelated spires with purple.

Stenius tracked their manoeuvres through his screens. Their agility in the void was impressive, but hardly surprising given their provenance. Their ships were also considerably leaner than the preliminary auspex returns had suggested. Ten ships. A formidable flexing of muscle under any situation, enough to secure a star system certainly, but eight of those ships were a mix of Destroyers and Corvettes, leaving just two capital ships to the Dark Angels’ six.

That was excluding the *Invincible Reason*, which occupied a class all of her own.

The formation tacking to port was led by an Exorcist-class grand cruiser. It was a fleet carrier, escorted by Cobra- and Venom-class torpedo boats. It could be expected to hold its distance. The other, however, steaming towards the Dark Angels’ starboard flank on an acute approach designed to bring it to within a few hundred kilometres of the *Angel Tor*’s prow, at the far edge of the I Legion line, was led by an Indrajit-class heavy cruiser. A void-warrior of rare and rugged design, the class was named for the invincible demigod of Indus myth. It was a macro-delivery vessel, built to unload millions of tonnes of ordnance onto a target at ultra-close range, packing the hull armour and the void shielding necessary to soak up the enemy’s punishment while it closed. Some apostate of the Dark Mechanicum must have cut into the ancient vessel’s transponder, because it screamed its name across the narrowing gulf of void with a feminised voice.

‘*Sybarite! Sybarite! Sybarite!*’

‘Shut that off,’ Stenius barked.

‘Aye, sir.’

‘*Syba-*’

There was a whine of feedback static and the channel went dead.

‘The *Invincible Reason* is a match for her,’ said Ozius Veseopian, studying the

holographics that broke down the raw auspex and augur reads into digestible, colour-condensed info-packets on tonnage, armament, power generation and hull thickness.

‘Not if we let her close,’ said Stenius. ‘Order the *Angel Tor* to break formation and pull to starboard. Have the *Sar Amadis* and her escorts drop to one-tenth and stand ready with torpedoes.’

If Holguin was right and this was a bluff, then the Warmaster was playing it well.

Dots of light speckled the void across a horizontal plane as the Cobras and Venoms launched their first volley of torpedoes.

‘Void banks fully charged,’ someone shouted.

‘Point defences ready.’

‘Outer hull sections sealed.’

‘We are entering range of our lances, sire,’ Stenius called over his shoulder.

‘Adjust our heading to intercept the *Sybarite*, captain,’ said the Lion. ‘She will turn and face me or I will drive my lance into her belly.’

IV

The interior of the *Caestus* smelled of wood sap and leaf mulch. Holguin could almost hear the ground litter crunching under his tread, and he looked up, startled, at what sounded like the rattling caw of a rapier bird. Before he could fix upon it, the sound shrank from his perceptual range, the forest smell becoming the familiar one of ingrained sweat and worn leather, spilled grease and promethium fuel. The cross-hatched shadow of knotted trees fell across the forward bulkhead before it, too, disappeared.

Holguin turned back to the access hatch as Myrdun, his Terminator plate gleaming with the nightshade blue of the Legion Librarian, stumped up the ramp.

‘Be seated, lieutenant.’ The Librarian’s helmet dialled up the aggression that was always there in his voice and turned it into a snarl. ‘You are standing in the aisle.’

The rest of the squad pushed inside as Myrdun got himself set, sitting down, locking in, bars coming down over the shoulders. Everything that required manipulation by hand was ludicrously large, as if designed for the clumsy hands of children.

Holguin shook the lingering fetor of decaying wood from his mind and hauled his helmet on over his head. It locked to his gorget rings with a hiss of

equalisation. His atmosphere was now fully internalised. A wash of far-red cleansed his visual display. Info-screeds and open threat brackets popped up as his armour's autonomic combat systems powered up one by one.

'Nothing,' he murmured, like a mantra.

The squad leader's chair was positioned right at the front of the breaching boom so as to be the closest to the action when it began, facing directly back down the aisle. Far too massive to turn around now that the *Caestus* was filling up, Holguin backed into it and locked himself in.

The deck chief performed a cursory systems check while the Dark Angels prepared their weapons. Kastael had his sword drawn, point down on the deck, and was muttering to the angel-winged device of the hilt as though in prayer. Myrdun had a brutal-looking double-bladed force-axe across his lap. Valiel was hefting a heavy-flamer, perfect for the corridor-to-corridor fighting they could expect aboard an enemy ship. The rest bore combi-bolters, and they clicked and chattered as they were checked over inside and out. Ammunition counters flicked across Holguin's display as his armour tethered to his own weapon's basic systems. His executioner's broadsword was back in the scabbard at his hip. Terminator armour was adequately massive to hold the blade as though it were an ordinary-sized sword.

Satisfied, the deck chief left. The hatch slammed to, the grind then hiss of pneumatic locks followed by a stiff jolt as the *Caestus*' launch systems engaged.

'The Lion and Caliban,' muttered Kastael, eyes fixed on his crosspiece.

'For the Emperor,' said Holguin.

There was an explosive lurch, the universe dislocating suddenly to propel the *Caestus* a thousand metres in a handful of seconds. G-force slammed the Dark Angels into their restraint bars as the view through the loopholes shifted from grey steel to open space. The void flickered with laser- and cannon-fire. A second *thud* ran through the craft as independent drive systems ignited, corrector thrusters adjusting its outbound heading. Holguin watched through his narrow slit as a succession of lance strikes from the *Vehemence* disembowelled a III Legion corvette and blew it apart as the ship's own internal atmosphere ignited. He looked away impassively.

'How long?' asked Myrdun.

Holguin checked his system tie-ins. 'Impact in seven. Six. Five...'

Samariel reached out to pat Breunor's thigh reassuringly.

It was an old jest that the pair of them had shared all the way from Caliban. As an aspirant, Breunor had suffered a profound phobia of high places and extremes

of speed. Even riding horseback had once made him throw up. They were all of them cured of such petty fears now. Only the camaraderie of a distant memory remained. Breunor playacted a headbutt and Samariel laughed. Holguin found himself yearning for the easy brotherhood they shared.

‘Four. Three—’

Impact hurled them towards the front of the ram. Holguin felt his transhuman physique crushed into the back of his seat. Light blazed through the forward slits, white-hot, supernova-hot, as the boom-mounted magna-meltas burned the Caestus a way through. The *Sybarite*’s hull armour evaporated without even slowing the assault ram down, rattling off its outer skin as the chill of the void condensed individual droplets into a hail of adamantium. Crash followed crash as the Caestus slammed through bulkheads and internal girdering. The ram’s inertial restraint system deadened each successive impact so that Holguin was already in the process of unharnessing when the ram dragged at last to a halt.

‘What happened to two and one?’ asked Samariel as he rose, lifting his combi-bolter in one outsized gauntlet.

‘The ship must have changed bearing,’ said Holguin. ‘It’s coming about to engage the *Invincible Reason*.’

‘That’s brave.’

Holguin turned. The forward booms were now all the way out. Jets of gas sprayed across the assault hatches, dousing fires, fast-cooling deck metals that would be glowing cherry-red from friction heat now. It filled the deck beyond with a swirling cloud, the temperature gradients frazzling his helmet optics.

‘On me.’

Holguin stepped out of the ram—

—and crunched on dead leaves. He looked down at his boot in shock, then up. Dense forest surrounded him. Animals growled from their hiding places in knot holes and burrow-lairs. Birds chirped, rustling the dark leaves as they circled the canopy in hunting flocks.

‘What is this?’

He turned with bolter raised, but where he had expected to see the nose of the Caestus, embedded in twisted cowling and spumes of vapour, there was nothing but a small figure. It was child sized, garbed in a surplice whose colours seemed to be in a constant state of seasonal flux, changing from black to brown to grey and back again. Its head was hidden by a voluminous hood. It was not human. Holguin could sense that. This was merely the guise it chose to wear lest those it deigned to appear before be driven mad.

The inside pane of Holguin's visor creaked as it began to freeze over.

'Watcher,' he breathed, fogging the inside of his helmet. 'What are you doing here?'

'*What are you doing here?*' the Calibanite spirit repeated back at him.

Holguin heard the words. He felt them. He remembered them as though they had been spoken to him before, long ago, and this visitation had called them back to his mind. They appeared in writing, repeated over and over in scrolling text on his slowly crystallising screen.

'*The Ouroboros stirs. The last chance to save Caliban is now.*'

Holguin made to speak, but the Watcher was already gone. The forests of Caliban were gone. In their place he faced Myrdun and Kastael's primed weapons. Valiel, Breunor and Samariel plodded from the ramp to secure the passageway that they had rammed into, and in the process casting their auspex net wide enough for Techmarine Xariel to get a fix on their entry point.

'Deck two,' he announced. 'Section ten. The premature impact has brought us a few hundred metres short of our destination.'

'I've been through worse,' said Samariel. He turned to Holguin. 'Brother?'

Holguin blinked and shook his head, his huge helmet and immobilised shoulder plates hiding both from his brothers. 'Lieutenant Calloson and his breachers should already be aboard. Move fast, move hard, and let the Stormbringer draw the *Sybarite's* attention.'

A howl of ecstasy and fury rang from the passageway. 'Forward.'

The Deathwing Terminators turned their guns in that direction. It came again. Louder. Nearer. Holguin heard footfalls. Twisted shadows formed along the wall of the bulkhead, appearing to writhe together in degradation and obscenity before a horde of mortals in ripped uniforms and expressions of rapture tore around the corner in a twisted climax. Some fired blindly with shotcannons and lasguns, but most came with nothing but bloody fingernails and gnashing teeth. Holguin counted a hundred. Two. Three. More still coming.

Valiel let his heavy flamer breathe.

'We cut a path to the bridge,' said Holguin, raising his combi-bolter and instructing his armour's elbow joint to lock. 'Bringers of death!'

V

Every oculus and portal showed white. The *Invincible Reason* and the *Sybarite* were less than two hundred metres apart. The volume of fire that the two ships

were dumping onto one another's shields had wiped out the entire visual range and was doing something equally appalling to the far ends of the spectrum as well. Sparks erupted from control desks. Overloads flayed whole banks of consoles. A high-grade command servitor lay in two messily torn pieces after it had gone berserk and attacked the armed ratings stationed around the command dais. They were all dead.

The Lion wiped the bloodied teeth of the *Wolf Blade* on the back of his gauntlet.

'We need to break off,' Stenius urged. 'Put some distance between us.'

The two battleships were as warriors with weapons crossed. The *Invincible Reason* boasted half again the tonnage of the *Sybarite*, but she lacked her counterpart's brawn. She was a Knight, a warrior of refinement and bearing, locked in battle with an alley brawler. With every moment the two vessels spent locked together, something aboard her died. As he spoke, a violent system short at a strategium array flung a blackened crewman across the bridge and into a pipe. The battering was constant. That the *Sybarite* was taking as many bruised ribs and black eyes as his proud ship came as no consolation to Stenius at all.

'No,' the Lion said softly, staring fixedly at the white-out filling the main oculus frame, as though his heightened acuity allowed him to see something there that simple physical laws suggested he could not.

'This is to their advantage, sire.'

'Then we will rise to their betterment, captain.'

'Half the ship's navigation sensors are out. We're risking a collision by sailing this close.'

'Battle has been joined. Blood has been spilled, and I will have satisfaction.'

'Yes, sire,' Stenius answered, no trace of grievance in his voice.

Jonson was a brilliant commander, but a reactive one. In many ways that made him a superior battlefield commander to those amongst his brothers, such as Guilliman or Dorn, whose superhuman abilities caused them to plot to excess where action was demanded. There were times, though, when lesser warriors were made to suffer for it. Once he was boxed into a corner, pride would not let him back down. He would fight any battle, once it had been joined, however misguided.

'Then at least allow me to recall the *Angel Tor*. Between us, we—'

'No.'

The Lion never raised his voice. The experienced ear could detect the darkening of his mood in the lowering of his voice, the hardening of each

syllable's enunciation.

'Hold them at arm's length and keep them there. I promised Holguin every chance to prove to me that my brother plays me for a fool and I will not be found untrue to my word. Do I need to explain these orders to another captain?'

Stenius turned towards his screens. The electrical spasms running through them were such that even their glossy surfaces wouldn't betray his expression to his primarch.

'No, sire.'

VI

The blast doors onto the *Sybarite's* command bridge parted without protestation.

Xariel had been marching on them, melta pack in hand to be planted across the diagonal seam. He stood there before the open door with the bomb in his gauntlets, too massive in his armour to register any kind of reaction to the unexpected ease of their admission. If not for the slow, icicle creep of dread that came over Holguin the moment the seals on those doors had broken, it would have been comical.

He raised his broadsword into a guard, two-handed. The ammunition counter in his sensorium feed read *00000*, every shell expended on mortal chaff. They had not encountered a single legionary adversary thus far. Nor had he seen evidence of their presence aboard ship, and nothing from the Stormwing's intermittent reports suggested that they had encountered anything more than enraptured menials either. It all confirmed Holguin's suspicions – the Warmaster had spared no real strength to holding Thagria Forge World; he sought only to keep the Lion from the war on Terra, to let him believe that his strategy was bearing fruit.

And yet the sense of disquiet emanating from the bridge could not be ignored.

Something other than mortal had guided this ship from the Warmaster's muster at Beta-Garmon.

He sniffed the air inside his helmet, dreading the fetor of dead wood and rotten leaves, wary of the Watcher that had twice now sought an audience. All he could detect was a faint, syrupy odour, a cloying spice inside his nostrils and at the back of his throat. Within the hermetic environment of Tactical Dreadnought plate, that alone should have been strange, but he was too intent on what he was seeking and not finding for the thought to occur.

'What is that smell?' Kastael mumbled.

'The warp has been unsettled here,' said Myrdun darkly. 'Some sorcery thins its

walls.’

The Terminators drew in close at the Librarian’s words, as though he were a lantern against an encroaching dark. Their armour was gore-splattered and bloody. Only Breunor, ever scrupulous with his shots, still wielded his combi-bolter. Valiel and Samariel had discarded their guns for short-bladed gladii. This was why Myrdun was with them, and why each of Calloson’s breacher squads had also been accompanied by a Librarian. The Legion’s battles against the Night Lords and the Word Bearers had taught them the danger of the warcraft that the traitors had embraced. Those battles had also shown Holguin the vulnerabilities of those entities that dwelled on the other side of the material line, doling out that power like a dark lord bestowing favours upon supplicant Knights. Daemons. Maleficar. *Nephilim*.

Holguin understood why the Emperor had kept the true nature of the warp a secret from humanity. He understood, because had it been the Lion in possession of such dark lore, then he would have kept it just as devoutly. Holguin understood even as he lamented it. He was a Dark Angel. He knew the power of a secret, and it was not always a force for good.

Myrdun’s helmet grille emitted a hollow grunt as he focused his psychic strength. A white light shone briefly through the artificial glow of his lenses, and the aura of his force axe noticeably expanded. As its light touched upon him, Holguin felt some of the tension in his muscles ease.

Some. Not all.

‘Spread out, brothers, but be wary. We will find evidence of the Warmaster’s deception here. It will be in the order logs, or buried in the navigation systems, some clue of Horus’ true intent in luring the Lion ever further from the walls of Terra.’

‘And if we find nothing?’ asked Xariel.

‘Then the lack of legionary dead amongst the foe will have to be proof enough.’

Leading with the point of his sword, Holguin took a step onto the bridge and gagged.

The acrid stench had become appalling. It was as if his helmet had been stuffed with decaying flowers. His throat clenched, his eyes watered, his body responding to the sickly aroma with an anaphylaxis that his transhuman physiology should have been beyond. The effect worsened exponentially with every step, Myrdun’s psychic aura shrinking, and he managed two plodding steps up the ascent ramp before he was folded double, dry-retching over the bevelled metal. If not for the inflexibility of Terminator armour, he would have

been on his knees. A sweet pain flowered within his breast. His multi-lung could draw oxygen from water – more efficiently than the gills of a fish – or even from a partial vacuum, but it could not scavenge a single molecule from the brume that suffused his helm. Hacking and coughing scratched to him through his vox, informing him that his squad suffered as he did.

Clutching at the solid ring of his gorget, he looked up. If he had breath, he would have gasped at the ethereal beauty that had been laid on for his final moments.

The layout of the *Sybarite*'s bridge was similar to that of the *Invincible Reason*, albeit smaller, sharper. Screens flickered on and off in a delightful pattern. Weapon impacts shivered through the bulkheads and decking as though in anticipation of some promised ecstasy. Baubles of fire and metal hung over the terminals from which they had erupted, gold and purple and white, like the seed plumes on Caliban that could poison whole villages each summer. It was as though gravity and time had been found boorish and banished from the bridge. Threat brackets danced over everything, like pollinating insects gorging upon an abundance.

There was no sign of a crew. Legionary or otherwise.

Instead, every station was occupied by a glistening tentacle. There were hundreds. Each was malleable and doughy, about the thickness of a man's torso, a contorted human face or a desperately clawing hand occasionally pressing to the translucent flesh as it worked its console. Holguin felt his face slacken in horror and disgust. Nothing he had yet experienced could have prepared him for this.

That quivering morass of feelers was centred on the command dais, set slightly forward of its counterpart aboard the *Invincible Reason*, as though to put its commander fractionally nearer the action on its screens. A squamous jelly that still bore the remnants of purple legionary plate around some of its tentacular extrusions oozed over the shipmaster's throne. The golden Palatine Aquila that the III Legion had once borne with such honour had sunk into the creature's mucilaginous brow like a mocking brand. Two cephalopod eyes wobbled in place, deeply alien and yet intuitively recognisable as once human.

I was like you once, they seemed to say.

The corrupted Space Marine burred, pleasure rippling along its tentacles to engage a million trivial alterations in course, power distribution and velocity from the *Sybarite*.

'I was not expecting company so soon. How delightful. I trust that my crew

provided some diversion while they lasted.’ A sickening ripple passed through the jelly’s core body, the skein of mucus that coated it spasming with oily electricity. *‘Prince Fulgrim forwards his regards, and tenders his regrets. He assures you that he entertains no hard feelings over the destruction of Chemos. He has quite outgrown it, you see, and would have inflicted the same upon your world if he could but care enough to recall its name.’*

Holguin bared his teeth. He drew a breath.

Pride and anger stoked his tertiary lung to draw in the pungent cloud that filled his helm, and found it not nearly as devoid of air as it had convinced him it was. It cloyed to his throat wall and tasted like a hyper-concentrated sugar syrup, but he forced another lungful down. With a whir of servos, he straightened, drawing his sword into an overhead guard, the blade just off parallel to the ground, the point directed at the nightmare thing on the dais.

The creature seemed to expand as it drew in a dozen of its tentacles. *‘Yes. Good. I adore the stab and thrust of lances and batteries, but it has been an age since I last watched a bruise colour flesh.’*

‘Xariel.’ Holguin addressed the Techmarine through closed vox. He had no idea if it was truly secured against the nephilim, but he drew comfort from the precaution. ‘Cut into a terminal. Find me those orders. Anything.’

‘We were fools!’ Xariel responded aloud, outside of the closed vox. ‘To think we would find anything so mundane as an order roll aboard a nightmare like this.’

‘Do your duty, Techmarine.’

Holguin’s words worked like a slap across the face. Xariel thudded out of the way as Holguin advanced up the ramp, Samariel, Kastael, Valiel and Myrdun immediately behind him. Breunor held back, his combi-bolter raised.

‘The rest of you, with me,’ Holguin growled. ‘The nephilim is ours.’

The corrupted thing gave a hoot of derision, muscular ripples flowing through its tentacular mass. Screens flickered as tired old orders were overridden and fresh ones inputted. A subtle shift in bearing caused the gravity plates to increase their pull in compensation.

Holguin had eyes only for the beast beyond the end of his blade.

‘You will try, brother. And I appreciate the attempt.’

VII

The *Sybarite* turned. Her thuggish prow had been mauled by batteries and

lances, clouds of vaporised adamantium and hunks of debris clinging to her meagre gravity like blood smeared across a pugilist's mouth. Yet she turned her face into it, soaking up every kiloton of punishment that had previously been bound for her flanks. Shields fluctuated and died, armour buckling before they could be restored. Plasteel ran like sweat. The *Invincible Reason* ran counter to her heading, kilometre after kilometre of broadside scraping past her fractured prow. To turn now was suicide. And yet she did.

The Lion walked towards the command dais rail, displacing Stenius without so much as a word, nor any concession to indicate that the primarch cared whether the captain moved of his own volition or was brushed aside.

Gripping the rail, he stared into the oculus.

It showed the mangled amethyst and gold of the *Sybarite*'s prow.

Swinging onto a collision course.

'Manoeuvring thrusters!' Stenius roared, without waiting for permission. 'Hard to port. Engines to maximum burn.' The Lion had ordered the *Invincible Reason* in too close, and against his better judgement, Stenius had obeyed. If it was the *Sybarite*'s intention to assure mutual destruction with a collision, then there was no avoiding one now.

'Hail the *Angel Tor*,' hissed the Lion, so quietly that Stenius was not immediately certain that it had been an order. 'Hail them all. Get them off that ship. It is time to end this.'

VIII

A wide-spectrum vox-cast hissed in Holguin's ear. He ignored it, couldn't focus on anything less basic than simply staying alive. He howled a challenge as a tentacle came at him like a spear flung from horseback and smashed into his shoulder. He tottered back, the vast suite of gyroscopes and stabilisers whining as they fought to keep his body upright. With a whirl of power overspend, Holguin rotated his upper body and hacked his sword through the whipping limb.

Tartaros-pattern Terminator armour was the most advanced model of the toughest personal armour in the Imperium of Man, several centimetres of heavy-duty plasteel, layered ceramite plates and polarised sheaths around a legionary-sized frame of adamantium rods and bundle fibres. It traded mobility and visibility for awesome protection, but against something that could hit as hard as the nephilim, and as fast, it seemed an unequal trade. Valiel had already taken a

blow to the plastron. He was broken and leaking hydraulic fluids against the aft bulkhead, a red rune on Holguin's squad overlay.

The hewn appendage screamed as if it were a living thing of its own. Bloody fluids hosed the deck at Holguin's feet before the fleshy membrane broke and a human body was disgorged like an infant from a bloody caul. The one-time Imperial officer clawed at the birthing juices, blind and naked and weeping.

Holguin's lip curled as he bent back to hack through another limb as it darted over his shoulder at the legionary behind him.

'My thanks, brother,' said Samariel.

There was no levity from him now. Valiel was dead, and had demonstrated amply how pitiful mere combat blades would prove against the daemon. Without needing to be ordered, Samariel had withdrawn from the immediate fray, and he stood over Techmarine Xariel, hacking furiously at any tendrils that escaped his better-armed brothers' attentions. Kastael assaulted the nephilim on the left, somehow making a virtue of his armour's heft to turn the cuts, blocks and ripostes of the blade forms into a butcher's art. To the right went Myrdun. Where the paladin walked a flawless Spiral blade routine that any initiate of Caliban would recognise and that one in ten thousand might be gifted enough to one day master, the Librarian followed the path of a bullet: straight, unfussy and true. Every blow from his force axe drove a shockwave of agonies and improbable spumes of gore through the mass of tentacles. Bolts of psychoelectric lightning flung from his forehead seared entire clusters to the root, causing the armoured jellyfish at its core body to scream manically as it birthed more in voluptuous bursts of ectoplasm.

Holguin readjusted his stance as one glistening newborn struck towards him. There was a hard *bang* and it exploded in a welter of gore.

'Mind your defence,' Breunor chided him. 'Myrdun and Kastael are better suited to this battle.'

The jelly gurgled in rapturous amusement. '***Letting your warriors go first to face the beast? Not very chivalrous of you, brother. Is that how Luther instructed his Knights? Or was it Jonson?***'

Holguin hacked through another tentacle, then another, gaining a metre of ground in defiance of the daemon's mockery. He almost gagged on the stench of their excreta, but forced himself to suppress it and breathe.

'What was your name?' he gasped.

'***What does it matter now?***'

'I would know who – and what – you once were.'

‘There was nothing before this. This is the true self that petty oaths and loyalties and infatuations with a god who lacked the courage to call Himself thus deceived. What was the lie’s name? Even he does not remember. He could have been anyone. He could have been you. Luther. El’Jonson. He could have been any of you.’

A tentacle-whip punched under Kastael’s guard and knocked the power sword from his gauntlets. The daemon gave a roar of joy as another coiled around the paladin’s waist, pinned his arms to his sides and hoisted him casually from the deck. Breunor swore over the vox-unit, hosing the daemon with shells, splattering tentacles as the daemon beat Kastael against walls and ceiling. Sparks tore from shattered terminals, and sheets of gas from dented pipes, before Breunor finally hit true. The tentacle exploded, dropping Brother-Paladin Kastael six metres to the ground. He landed on a station rail, crumpling it and tearing away half the console with it. He did not get back up. His ident rune flickered between amber and red.

The vox-cast to Holguin’s helmet hissed like a broken pipe.

‘Brother!’ Holguin yelled, too busy fending off tentacles of his own to go to his aid.

‘So breakable,’ the daemon complained. *‘I remember now why I prefer baiting ships. You will provide no amusement at all.’*

With a roar, Myrdun squared his body to the daemon and thrust his helmeted head forwards. A wave of force pulped everything in the narrow cone between him and the daemon, granting the Librarian a clear run at the body. He advanced, breathing hard, his force axe crackling in one massive grip.

‘The Warmaster sent you here to die,’ Holguin shouted.

‘The Warmaster sends me nowhere. I go where I please, and if it ceases to please me then I go elsewhere.’

‘Lies. You are a ploy to keep us from Terra, to fool the Lion into thinking that he causes his brother injury where he does not.’

‘Your words, brother. Not mine.’

‘Admit it. Say one true thing before the Epistolary casts you in agony to whence you came.’

‘Truth?’ The nephilim gurgled with wet laughter, even as Myrdun hacked through the last of its nascent tendrils. *‘Nothing so delicious can be just shared like that. It must be earned.’*

‘Do you have it, Xariel?’ Holguin voxed. ‘I will not return without proof of Horus’ misdirection. Honour commands it.’

‘No!’ the Techmarine shouted back, his logician’s mind overwhelmed by the sheer irrationality of the *Sybarite*’s bridge. ‘I need more time.’

Holguin scowled.

Again, he caught the trace scent of crushed leaves on the air, but it was a pure odour, neither sickly nor sweet. A wind blew against his face and carried with it the growl of a beast.

‘*Turn back,*’ it said.

Without conscious thought, Holguin found himself backing down the ascent ramp.

‘***You desire something true,***’ the daemon shrieked, as if his backing down were more injurious to it than Myrdun’s axe. ‘***Then have it. But do not say you were not warned.***’

Suddenly, the vox-cast to Holguin’s helmet receivers clarified.

‘*All forces aboard the Sybarite to withdraw. Repeat, withdraw. All forces...*’

The message repeated on a loop. Holguin looked up, horror dawning. The screens and oculi positioned around the bridge were still fluctuating, dozens of them now just broken glass, but in their random jumbling of pictor views and live feeds he saw a darkness that he initially mistook for a shot of the void. With thought, however, that made no sense. They were in the middle of a struggle to the death between warships, and no bit of space in the midst of such carnage should have been so black or so clear. It was the looped vox-cast that made him realise what he was looking at. Metal. It was the *Invincible Reason*, already close enough to the prow imagers for Holguin to see the rivets on the armour plating.

He backed the last few steps towards the doors. He felt as though he were hanging over a pit.

The daemon laughed.

IX

The *Sybarite* ploughed into the *Invincible Reason*. It drove through her armour like a knife through the kidneys, perforating the pressure hull, mauling interior bulkheads, metal and bodies glittering like chaff as they spewed from the gaping tear in her side. Forward momentum pushed the heavy cruiser on, shunting *Invincible Reason* aside like a bulldozer.

Expert manoeuvring and steely nerves on the part of the bridge crew ensured the damage looked worse than it was. Burning out the last of her plasma furnaces had given her velocity enough to be almost beyond the *Sybarite* at the

moment of collision, robbing the impact of crucial force. In the same manoeuvre, cool heads had bidden the *Invincible Reason* to turn into the collision in the seconds before impact, directing the *Sybarite's* aggression down the length of the exterior hull. It made for a messy wound, but a superficial one.

Void shields flared off one another, countering force with force. Consoles and unshielded cabling sputtered, but the damage to the bridge was surprisingly mild. Little that could catch fire or explode remained that had not already done so.

Twenty-nine minutes after wishing Holguin and his Deathwing good luck, Farith Redloss returned to the bridge.

'Damage report!' Stenius roared out to someone as Redloss ran up the ascent ramp to join him on the command dais by his primarch.

Vesepian coughed on the plastek smoke spewing from the machine pits. Various crewmen crawled about in the dark. Nobody answered right away. The *Invincible Reason* spoke for them, an unholy squeal of metal friction as the two warlords ran against one another, skin on skin. The sound was almost elegiac compared to the whine raised by the void shields. They ripsawed through the acoustic registers, the two shield bubbles pushing and scraping and spasming against each other. The pitch oscillated towards an inflection point where it impinged even on a Space Marine's ability to tune it out.

Redloss winced and held his ears.

Even the Lion looked mildly discomforted.

'What is that noise?' Stenius shouted. He stared at his screen displays.

Redloss had a sense that he knew. He knew weapons, better than he knew people. In the shriek of shields on shields he heard the laughter of gods. Masses of kinetic energy were being dumped into the warp, conjoining the embattled ships over an active fissure to the immaterium. That had been the *Sybarite's* intention all along. To form a conduit.

They meant to board.

'Stand to repel!' he yelled, already drawing his bolt pistol.

A clap of psychic pressure peeled away the railings that ringed the command dais, like petals plucked from a flower, and then crushed it. The implosion murdered Commodore Vesepian instantly, crushing the fragile mortal, and hurled Redloss and Stenius in opposite directions from the dais. The Lion was driven back into his throne with a grunt.

In his place, a Grekan colossus stood bestride the shattered dais. Pink-skinned and glistening with electricity, the nephilim was lasciviously clad in purple-and-gold Legion plate, its forehead branded with a Palatine Aquila. A long, lolloping

tongue draped from its gurning mouth. It carried a hoplite spear in one hand and a circular shield in the other, tentacles wriggling from under its armpits.

‘Lion of the Forest.’ It dipped its spear as though offering salute. *‘Your brothers on Beta-Garmon send you their blessings.’*

Redloss felt a paralysis that was crippling and brief, supplanted almost immediately by the violent need to end the source of it. The memory of the Great Beast that had butchered his family when he was but eight years old had remained with him. Through every round of conditioning, indoctrination and neuroenhancement imaginable it was still there. It had led him to the Order, to the Legion, into the Destroyer company and ultimately to the Dreadwing. He was the bringer of death now. The desire to utterly annihilate monstrosities like this one was what gave him the hunger to fight on.

‘For the Lion!’ He squeezed the trigger with a roar.

Bolter-fire ripped into the behemoth’s flank. It laughed it off. Its armour, clearly now something other than the Mk II Legion plate that it still resembled, deflected almost every shot, and of those few shells that did manage to break through, not one successfully detonated. It was as though the daemon possessed no mass. As the survivors of the bridge crew overcame their shock and reached for sidearms, las-bolts began to stab at it. Sitting up from the wreckage of an auspex table with a whine, Stenius drew his weapon. It was a little-used Mk IX compact heavy stubber, perfect for shipboard action, about the size of a shorn-off shotcannon and perfectly proportioned for the transhuman grip of a Legionese Astartes to wield as a pistol. The weapon roared as it hammered out shells.

The daemon chuckled under the abuse.

It took a single, giant stride towards the Lion’s throne and smashed down with the base of its shield. The primarch threw himself aside, and the throne exploded into shards of volcanic rock and ivory.

Redloss discarded his bolt pistol and drew his battleaxe. Charging onto the dais, he thumbed the activation stud and wreathed the double-edged blade in the blue glow of a molecular disruption field. Bolter-fire would be of limited effect here.

Daemons responded best to the older tools of war.

Fire. Blades. Magic.

Hate.

The Lion rolled out from under the daemon’s feet and ignited the *Wolf Blade*. Black adamantium teeth revved, belligerent and ever hungry. Redloss watched in awe as the primarch dragged the enormous chainsword across the backs of the daemon’s calves. The colossus roared, hamstrung, and swung back with its

shield. It would have torn the merlons from a parapet, but the Lion bent back, already turning. The shield punched through his blonde mane, and he backhanded *Wolf Blade* into the daemon's breast-plate. Pink jelly and ichorous ooze gushed from the mauled plate in torrents. The daemon bayed and shed rapturous tears. It stepped forward, the primarch's sword erupting from its spine in a curdled howl.

'*Bliiiiissssss*,' it murmured.

Throughout the exchange, Stenius had never stopped firing. He unloaded his compact into the daemon's euphoric grin until the handcannon clicked empty. With a war shout from old Caliban, Redloss hacked his battleaxe towards the nephilim's thigh. A contemptuous blow from the haft of its spear sent Redloss and his ancestral weapon flying apart. The axe whirled end over end before driving thirty centimetres into a bulkhead. Redloss performed a cartwheel, crashing onto his back just outside of the dais.

He scrambled back up as the Lion ripped *Wolf Blade* from the daemon's belly, pirouetted with the momentum of the action, then used the motion of both to drive the sword into the daemon's hip. The blade cut diagonally, messily, through the navel, the groin, and out again in an eruption of gore from between its legs.

The daemon's jigsawed right leg fell like discarded meat, the rest of it toppling over backwards with an outraged howl.

For a beast of apparently negligible mass, its fall demolished an entire bank of consoles and crumpled the deck. It laughed, a tear in its eye, as the Lion pounced from the dais and plunged *Wolf Blade* into its throat.

Machine action sawed the gurgling daemon's head from its body.

Redloss watched in perfect stillness. The Lion was the greatest warrior in the galaxy. Bar none. No man, no brother primarch or daemon, could fight him and prevail. Perhaps Holguin had been right. Perhaps Terra *needed* the Lion on its walls. Who else could hope to stand toe to toe with beings like Horus, or Angron, and triumph?

Dorn? The Wolf?

The very thought made him snort.

The Lion drew his bloodied sword from the gooey wreckage of the daemon's neck and lowered it, disengaging the motors as he stood to his full height. Sparks cascaded over his armour from the main oculus, hanging broken from a single chain behind him.

'Let there be no further doubt as to the Warmaster's resolve to hold this world,'

he said, looking down at the dissolving daemon.

As he spoke, an alert blinked from one of the vox terminals. It emitted an incongruous chime and blinked again, unheeded. There were no crewmen left at the station to answer it. Stenius dragged his frame through the wreckage of desks and chairs and activated the console.

‘It’s a ship hail,’ he said.

The captain looked shaken. A rare glimpse of actual combat, Redloss surmised.

‘One of ours?’ said the Lion.

‘No, lord. It’s a Mechanicum signature, originating from the ring system of one of the outer planets. They are requesting permission to join our fleet.’

FOUR

Parley

'War is all about opportunity. To be victorious, we must always be ready to take hold of opportunities as they arise.'

– Lion El'Jonson, advising Zahariel

I

The Arvus lighter *Archemidius* killed her engines and came in cold, the magnetic tractors of the *Invincible Reason* picking her up as she entered the field radius of the shuttle bay. She shuddered under the intercalating field lines, like an old ironclad sea ship caught in ice. To Magos-Prime Heironymax Veltarae – rightful incumbent of the fabricatories of Thagria, observing from behind the pilot's socket – it felt as though he were a prize piece of salvage, a trophy claimed from the battle with the III Legiones Astartes. Either the Dark Angels distrusted the piloting skills of the Thagrian adsecularis, or they distrusted Heironymax himself.

Neither hypothetical augured positively for this encounter.

The gathered technobility – exiles from the fiefdoms of Zumandu, Calith Etol, Nagra Excelsor and Dawn, crammed into the confines of the Arvus – watched the landing, or tried to, from the limited number of viewing portals available. Even for those with the body strength or the authority codes to command a view,

there was little to see. The bay was dark. To Heironymax, it felt like being a fly drawn into a web of magnetic field lines.

‘The Dark Angels possess a minimal understanding of diplomatic protocol,’ complained Coadjutor General Rygan Indomitii.

The prickly Nagran magos was clad in his sacerdotal finery, as befit the august nature of their host. The red of his robes was bright, the hexagrammic trim presenting a pleasingly counterintuitive asymmetry. The oil on his dendrites and facial sheath was freshly applied. For all that the ecumenicals had toiled over the vestments, however, it was impossible to entirely obscure their wear. Where they lay against the dendritic joints and the bulk of his shoulders, the monomolecular layering had thinned almost to the point of transparency.

‘Hauling us into a cargo bay like scrap,’ the coadjutor went on.

‘These are untrusting times,’ said Heironymax.

It was as much an observation as it was an accusation. The other archmagi, fabricarii and domini had the residual human decency to remain silent.

The Arvus clumped as it was put down. Heironymax transmitted a neural instruction to the landing doors. They descended with a squeal of leaking hydraulics and metal oxidation and hit the deck with a dolorous *clang*.

It looked as though power had been cut to the entire deck. The lights were out, just a handful of emergency striplights to throw the spare, metallic edges into some kind of relief. The terminals were down. Heironymax’s data tethers failed to detect the dimmest trace of a noosphere. If the *Archemidius* had been welcomed by a company-strength force of cataphractii guards, then it would not have been a more potent demonstration of distrust than this.

‘Damage appears minimal,’ observed Orim Menelux of Dawn.

‘Lumen intensity is suboptimal,’ Rygan corrected.

‘Little in our situation is optimal,’ said Heironymax, and then with an unspoken mental nudge sent their six-strong detail of adsecularis pounding down the ramp.

The tech-thralls were clad in knee-length red surplices, golden cinctures and chaplets and a technically ornate over-armor of yellow pyrite scales. They engendered the troops with a gloss that they did not warrant. But they were all that Heironymax had left. The weapons they bore were compact, multi-barrelled mitralocks, colloquially known to the Thagria skitarii as thrum-guns for the shotgun-like flare of las-energy they fired. They were safety locked, triggers and barrels sealed with tape as an added precaution, in accordance with the shipmaster’s instructions.

Sharing anxious bursts of binharic chatter, the magi descended after them.

In recognition of the fact that they had suffered the trauma of exile and the indignity of seeking asylum in the sanctuary of an erstwhile rival, Heironymax accorded their behavioural ticks a degree of leniency, but even so he found his fellow magi infuriating. While there was a tacit understanding that Heironymax, their host and benefactor, was preeminent, the rest vied constantly amongst themselves. Deposed lords and frustrated heirs. Ambitious baronets for whom loyalty to the Treaty of Mars was a convenient banner for the pursuit of older feuds. For them, defeating Horus was of secondary consideration to surviving his war in a stronger position than their feudal rivals.

In more enlightened days, an honour guard of such illustrious leaders of worlds would have been a distinction worthy of the Fabricatrix Ferrum himself. And perhaps that was not too high an ambition to hold? Of all the forge worlds in the industry-rich corridor of space along the border of segmenta Pacificus and Obscurus known as the Iron Worlds, he was the one loyal magos to have held on to even a vestige of his holdings. Five years he had fought without any higher ambition for himself, without any rational belief that his fight *could* be won. He had fought for the purity of his logic, out of sheer intransigency in the face of those who would contradict it.

But now the Lion was here. Horus was nowhere.

The war could be won.

So why not him?

From behind him Epsilon-mu emitted an eidolic whistle of binharic, code-scrambled for Heironymax's ears alone. The scyllax guardian-automata, last of a cohort of fifty that had once guarded his person at the fabricator-court of Thagria, hovered by means of arcane anti-gravitics by his shoulder. The ghost of silica animus about its wraith-like form inspired envy and unease in equal measure.

Heironymax nodded.

'I agree. It does appear safe.'

He directed a thought to *Archemidius*' drive manifold to cool the lift jets. Then he flung back his cloak and stepped onto the ramp.

Unlike most adepts of his four centuries and eminent rank, he retained a highly anthropoid central chassis. His torso was gloved in a muscle cuirass of titanium-gold alloy, hand-shaped with Martian sand. His thighs were similarly clad, but his lower legs and arms were bare, burnished ceramic. Replacement fingers bristled with signet devices and digital weaponry. As an added layer of concealed protection, an Ordinatus-grade kinetic conversion field had been

wired into the cavity formerly occupied by his stomach. It would halt a forced blast from a plasma cannon. In his right hand he bore a sceptre. It displayed the Machina Opus with a flared halo upon which the stars of the Iron Worlds were arranged in constellations. Each one was identified by its own precious jewel. Thagria was represented by a diamond the size of an unaugmented human eyeball. It was also a potent power weapon. It was the sceptre, and the sceptre alone, that secured Heironymax's claim to Thagria Forge World.

He was a magnificent sight. Fit for the eyes of a primarch.

Past the eyes, oculi and blink-sensoriae of his 'peers' and thralls, he strode towards the tall grey woman at the base of the ramp. A mortal, she wore a dark green uniform jacket over a flak vest and her hair in a severe ponytail.

'You are not Captain Stenius,' said Heironymax.

'Good eye,' she said wryly. 'Captain Kellandra Vray. Stenius is otherwise occupied.'

Heironymax executed a bow. 'It is an honour unreserved to be admitted aboard so noble a warship. She is Gloriana class, is she not?'

The captain pulled a slight frown, but did not answer.

Ordinarily, Heironymax might have been more guarded in his situation, but five years of attrition had left him desperate. More desperate than he had realised he was before a Legiones Astartes fleet had translated into the system and promised him an end.

'I have not been aboard one in several decades.'

'You have been aboard one?' said Vray suddenly.

The question caught Heironymax unprepared.

'The *Alpha*. She once docked at our orbital ring for refit and repair, a resupply of their heavy ordnance after the compliance of the Hagia Synthex. The shipmaster honoured me with a tour of her vessel.'

'Alpha Legion?'

'As I said.' Heironymax felt the authority he had borne with him from the *Archemidius* ebbing away. 'It was several decades ago.'

Vray smiled thinly. She threw a gesture to the forty Dark Angels legionaries positioned in the shadows behind her. Their black armour blended them perfectly to the bulkheads. Heironymax's throat tightened as they lowered their bolters.

She leant in. 'How does my ship compare?'

'She appears a little smaller.'

The captain made a face that Heironymax suspected was knowing. 'Walk with me, sir,' she said. 'The Lion is waiting.'

II

It hurt to stand, but appearances and the honour of the Lion demanded that Holguin make the attempt. With both palms flat to the table, he pushed himself up from his chair. Back straight, head up, eyes unwavering on the door, he stood. Situated directly across from him, Farith Redloss mirrored him exactly.

The Thagrian delegation entered.

The chamber in which the Lion had chosen to receive them was a more spartan, utilitarian space than the grand halls of his strategium, the command bridge and its annexes being no place for those not of the Legion. A single ovoid table of lacquered wood stood surrounded by chairs for an even dozen, with little room for more even should they have elected to stand. There were no banners or ostentation, no woodwork to hide the steel-frame utility of the bulkheads. The only ornament was a pewter bust of the Lord Cypher mounted on the wall above the head of the table where it could observe. The message was clear: Caliban may have been many light years distant, but the Guardian of the Order was still watching.

Directly beneath its gaze, in a chair that was half again larger than Holguin's and reinforced with steel, the Lion remained seated. His chin rested on the steepled roof of his fingers, hard green eyes marking and assessing the worth of each of the six magi as they ushered themselves towards chairs at the far end of the table from the two Dark Angels and their primarch.

Once all were seated and had quieted their babbling, the Lion nodded.

It was the barest of gestures, hardly noticeable at all except to those who knew him best and were stood by his side. It was followed immediately by the grinding whir of powered battleplate as Holguin and Redloss resumed their seats.

Holguin suppressed a wince.

He had been at the *Sybarite's* leading edge when it struck the *Invincible Reason*. He was lucky to be alive. Valiel and Kastael had not enjoyed such fortune. Everything had happened too quickly for him to pull them out with him. Calloson and over a hundred breachers of the Stormwing too were as yet unaccounted for. Thunderhawk sorties were being flown half-hourly to scour the wreckage, though hopes among the crews were not high. If not for the remarkable helmsmanship of the mourned Commodore Vesebian and his crew, the toll would surely have been much higher. Holguin, Myrdun, Xariel, Samariel and Breunor would almost certainly have been amongst them.

He might still have been, had he not been forewarned.

As if a legionary squire had arranged for a corsage for the conference table, Holguin again caught the trace scent of crushed leaves on the air, and heard the far-distant growl of a beast. He shook his head. The Watcher had saved his life. Why? Why him? He should feel grateful, but he did not. He felt used, tainted, as if their interest in him came perforce of some unconscious disloyalty to the Throne. He bit his lip and resolved not to compound the failing it bespoke.

Of such battles, all that his face showed was an ascetic's fortitude against pain.

He caught Redloss' eye across the table, and a moment of superficial understanding passed between them. Comprehension of the extent of his injuries, sympathy for being dragged to this audience in spite of them, admiration for the stoicism with which he suffered. There was much that could pass unsaid in but a glance between brothers, much that could never – and would never – be spoken aloud. But there was so much more that could not. Matters of the heart and the soul that only words and time could elaborate, and which even a brother could not intuit.

The moment passed, and like that the moment was gone.

They both looked down the length of the table.

The Mechanicum representatives presented an interchangeable grouping of hooded forms, nightmarish admixtures of skeletal iron and flesh facsimile, gowned and jewelled like noblemen of old, but hunched and wittering like brain-diseased fools from the Northwolds. One stood out. By happenstance or design he had assumed the seat immediately opposing the Lion. Holguin corrected his assessment. The adepts of the Mechanicum left nothing to happenstance. He had installed himself in a position of prominence, a counterweight to the primarch himself, and he had done so with purpose. He was bronzed like a statue, wearing an ostentatious cuirass of golden armour that had been machined to mimic an anatomically exaggerated human form. On a magos of the Mechanicum, it struck Holguin as at best ironic, at worst condescending.

Captain Vray circled around the table to whisper in the Lion's ear, too quiet even for Holguin, at his left hand, to pick up. When she was finished, she withdrew to stand to attention behind the primarch's shoulder, leaving a buffer of empty chairs between the Mechanicum representatives and the Dark Angels. She did not attempt to announce anyone. The magi did not speak. Neither did Holguin. Nor Redloss.

The honour was not theirs.

The Lion leant forwards until his elbows sat upon the high table, his jaw still

resting on his fingertips. His eyes shifted subtly in colour as he passed under the lights, the way a forest canopy could vary between dark green and light as one rode beneath it. The Lion was thinking. It was in his nature to do so. Even in his brief periods of sleep, Holguin suspected, the primarch belaboured over suspicions and paranoias in his dreams, invoking phantoms both able and malign to press upon those who, in reality, were neither.

‘What brings the representatives of the Mechanicum to my table?’ he said, after everyone had ruminated in discomfort for almost five minutes.

‘My name is Heironymax,’ said the golden magos, leaning forward as if to mirror the primarch, but only managing to go so far. It was seldom wise to look a primarch in the eye. ‘Prime Artificer of Thagria.’ His gaze slid sideways as if to take succour from his fellow adepts. ‘And it is *Mechanicus* now. Perhaps you have not heard.’

‘Heard?’ said the Lion.

‘Of the resolution of the Binary Succession, the formation of the Adeptus Mechanicus and the ascension of Zagreus Kane, blessed of the Omnissiah, to the High Lords of Terra.’

Redloss and Holguin shared a look. Holguin shook his head.

He had seen the same take hold of Magna Macragge Civitas during Curze’s brief and bloody campaign of terror there. Hearsay. Rumour. Even the forests of Caliban could not flourish with such aggression, or in the total absence of light. He had heard it said that the Ninth Order was destroyed and Corswain dead, that Luther had fallen in defence of Caliban, that Luther had been spotted on old Earth at Horus’ side. Whence did such stories spring? He understood how they flourished, but who sowed the first seed, and why?

Unbidden, his thoughts turned to the Watchers and he suppressed a shudder.

Perhaps no one then, and for reasons no human mind could convey.

‘It seems unlikely that the High Lords would extend your master a seat amongst them,’ said the Lion, upon due consideration. ‘Or that he would surrender his own power to accept. I would not.’

‘Improbability and impossibility are, alas, quite different things,’ said Heironymax. ‘Ten years ago we would have considered civil war unlikely. I would have considered this meeting unlikely.’

‘I understand that you have met one of my brothers once before.’

Heironymax glanced at Vray. He shifted in his chair. His jaw repositioned slightly, as though he were biting belatedly on his tongue. ‘Alpharius,’ he said, with apparent reluctance. ‘Yes. A rare honour, at the time.’

‘And how did you find my brother?’

‘Closed.’

The Lion raised an eyebrow, less an invitation than a command to continue.

‘You are not entirely dissimilar.’

Redloss stiffened at the perceived insult, but the Lion appeared to smile. There one moment, then gone.

‘Explain to me how you have managed to persevere for so long,’ he said.

One of the other magi leant forwards. His shape was humanoid, but oddly contoured and lumpen as though he wore some manner of arthropoid carapace beneath his scarlet robes. He had not been introduced.

‘When the Titan Legions were withdrawn from the forge worlds to defend the Segmentum Solar, we became easy targets. Most of our worlds fell, or simply sided with Horus and laid siege to those who did not.’

‘Resolving old enmities,’ another concurred.

‘With his seat amongst the High Lords Fabricator Kane did allow for the reinforcement of those forge worlds that had survived,’ Heironymax reminded them.

‘A few skitarii legions,’ complained the first. ‘Of limited assistance against the traitors’ god-machines.’

‘And too late, Heironymax,’ spoke a fourth in grating Low Gothic. ‘At the rimward edge of the Iron Corridor, Thagria was the dual beneficiary of being the farthest from Isstvan and the nearest to Sol. Its reinforcement arrived in time to bear you to your retreat around Thagria XII.’

The emphasis placed on the word *retreat* was as snarling as it was unmistakable.

‘They arrived in time because I actually fought for my world, Menelux,’ said Heironymax. ‘Perhaps if you had not fled Dawn at the first augury of Horus’ vanguard, then you might not be beholden to me now and your clone-son would not be ruling as a puppet of Kelbor-Hal.’

The one called Menelux emitted a code-blurt, but fell silent, dendrites twitching.

‘Perhaps these arguments can be held until you are aboard your own ship,’ growled Redloss. ‘Lest you try the patience of the primarch.’

Again, the Lion briefly wore a smile.

‘I concur.’ Heironymax glared at his brethren until they quieted.

‘Is Thagria still functioning to provision Horus’ forces?’ Holguin asked. In response to the magos’ blank expression, he went on. ‘The final call to war has

been issued by Horus himself, for all forces and supply vessels to rendezvous at Beta-Garmon.'

'Then why are you here and not there?' the last of the five magi asked.

Holguin looked down at the table, unable to give an answer that could satisfy all his oaths and his honour.

'You say you have received tidings from Terra,' Redloss answered instead. 'You must have heard this for yourself.'

'We have not.' Heironymax shook his head. 'The Magos Pretender of Thagria, a Tech-Witch named Bellonitrix, has remained in communication with our former contacts in the Twentieth Legion. My astropaths have intercepted a number of communications, but they are few now, and fatigued. I have not had the resources to decrypt them all.'

The Lion appeared satisfied with that answer.

'So what do you want from us?' said Holguin, lifting his gaze.

Heironymax raised his sceptre and set it on the table in front of him. It was about a metre long, shaped like a crozius with a bejewelled and highly elaborate cog Mechanicum at its apex. It thumped heavily on the lacquer.

'This proclaims me the rightful lord of Thagria.'

'Any man may hold a stick and claim it theirs,' said the Lion.

'I wish to retake Thagria. You wish to hurt the Warmaster from afar. Our interests intersect more than they diverge.'

The Lion frowned, deep in conjecture, his face a perfect blank, the grim repose and golden locks of a wearied angel. Vray whispered something in his ear, which the primarch appeared to heed, for his eye flickered but for a moment. The primarch let his hands fall from his chin, then sat back in his chair. It was as though someone had just cut the power to a hololithic projection.

Magos Heironymax looked uncertainly between the primarch and his two lieutenants. Holguin gave a shake of his head. This audience was over.

The Lion needed time to brood.

III

Farith Redloss had pulled on the central fork of his trifurcated beard until it was frayed. He was not a patient man. It had been almost two hours since Captain Vray had escorted the magi from the ship. Time that had passed slowly. With a brusque effort at smoothing out his beard, he glanced across the table to Holguin. The Deathbringer was silent in meditation. His eyes stared, unblinking.

‘What is your opinion, brother?’ Redloss asked softly, not wishing to disturb the Lion’s circumspection.

Holguin said nothing.

Redloss returned his gaze to his beard with a sigh.

‘Why did we need to hold this audience aboard the *Vehemence*?’ Holguin murmured.

Redloss grinned and looked back up. Killing the noosphere to the section had been his idea. Vray had been resistant, but he had insisted. ‘The Legion must appear unified and strong, here and now more than ever. The *Invincible Reason* was in no fit state to do that.’

‘I cannot believe that six Mechanicum adepts mistook *Vehemence* for a Gloriana.’

‘They were expecting to see it, and so that is what they saw. It’s not so complicated to understand.’

‘Do not speak to me as if I am a child,’ Holguin snarled.

‘Forgive me, brother, but you have not been yourself lately.’

‘No.’

‘No?’

‘I have not been myself. But you are wrong if you think it just lately.’

Redloss frowned across at him. He was starting to worry about his brother. He had been meaning to raise the incident in the primarch’s chambers for several days, but had not found either the proper time or the words. Holguin’s fitness for duty was a matter for Carolingus or, ultimately, the Lion himself. A sudden sense of threat made him glance sideways. He had almost forgotten that his primarch was still there, silent in repose. It was almost frightening, how still and unobtrusive so godlike a being could be. He shifted position in his chair and looked back at Holguin.

‘I asked your opinion, brother. Of Heironymax and his kith?’

Holguin appeared to ponder, as if he had not given the matter weight before he was asked.

‘I don’t trust them,’ he said.

‘Nor I.’ Redloss looked at his hands, set flat on the table. ‘You can’t be that close to the Twentieth and not have your thoughts twisted by association. Do you believe this tale of theirs? An Adeptus Mechanicus? Fresh Legions from Terra?’

Holguin shook his head. ‘Did you mark how they war openly amongst themselves?’

‘I did.’

‘Perhaps I should insist Magos Heironymax join my fleet permanently,’ said the Lion suddenly, straightening in his chair. ‘He has given my sons something on which they can both be agreed.’

Redloss and Holguin grinned. It had been a long time since either of them had heard the primarch address his warriors in such familial terms.

‘I do not trust them either,’ he said. ‘But we have little choice. We cannot leave a forge world in the hands of Horus and the Twentieth. It is what we came here to take away.’

Holguin bowed his head to the table. ‘Yes, lord.’

‘So we are going to aid them?’ said Redloss.

The Lion produced a rare smile. ‘No, Farith. *They* are going to aid *us*.’

‘How, sire?’ Holguin looked up, his face a diligent mask.

‘Do you recall the assault on Blood Mountain?’

‘I recall it, sire, but I didn’t fight.’

The Lion raised an eyebrow.

Redloss gave a bark of laughter. ‘I was ten, sire. I believe Holguin would have been...’ He glanced at the Deathbringer. ‘What, eight?’

‘Maybe seven.’

‘Find someone who remembers,’ said the Lion, the shade of his eyes darkening as his whole face became distant. ‘There must be somebody still aboard who was there.’

FIVE

Shade of Sangrula

'If a world has fallen to the enemy, then a campaign to take it back is a waste of resources. Break the worlds, break the foe...'

– Primarch Lion El'Jonson, his personal writings,
dated 011.M31 approx.

I

The world was copper-brown, coloured by the adamantium silicates that swathed its surface in desert. Of Thagria, it was said, one had only to shovel sufficient quantities of sand, and ships and armour almost forged themselves. It was an inhospitable world, tidally locked to its ferocious parent star and several million kilometres short of the system's habitable belt. One hemisphere was a molten hellscape of terminal day, the other a frigid desert battered by storms induced by the thousand-degree temperature gradient across the terminator line. It was an ugly world. It looked like a bullet slug, fired into space and impacted on armourglass. An industrial ring, straddling the day-night line, crinkled its circumference, its mines and manufactories massive enough to deform the planet's outline. The planetary capitol, a blister of permacrete storm shelter and geothermal exchangers known as Cardinal Duplex, extended several kilometres from the southern pole, where the world's twenty-degree axial tilt created a

temperate lagoon of twilight.

The true work of the forge world, however, took place in orbit.

An archipelago chain of orbital plates hid in the planet's shade, speckling its dark side with the lights of its arcologies and its forges. Nothing so grand as Lemurya, Rodinia or Kanyakumari of Terra, they were bare-bones constructions of girders and cables, each plate nevertheless encompassing millions of square kilometres of permacrete and plasteel and thousands of levels.

Against a backdrop of such vastness a void fight should have been an insignificant affair, but the laws of scale demurred. Las-tracers stitched between city-sized warships. The brightest objects in the sky became the engine stacks of capital ships as they manoeuvred between plates and, very briefly, the explosion of system fighters as they died.

Watching from a distance of half a million kilometres with the second-rate ships, surrounded by the screens of the *Invincible Reason*'s secondary command bridge, Stenius felt something close to contentment.

He had never shied from battle. Not once. But it gratified him to see the *Vehemence* and the *Angel Tor* sound the charge for a change. He had taken a hard lesson at the hands of the Gordian League: his immortality was entirely contingent on the strength of his brothers and the competence of his primarch. Nor was he immune to the irony of the fact that his maiming that day had kept him alive when so many of his contemporaries – Elikas and Kohl, and even Titus after a fashion – were now dead. He wiped a thin trail of drool from his chin as he turned away from the hemispherical array of readouts.

He had seen the most vicious and bloody war to have engulfed humanity since the Dark Age of Technology almost to its final days.

He would be damned if he was going to let himself be killed now.

'Status of gunships?' he demanded.

'Full complement loaded and prepped for launch, sir,' said a young altern in crisp naval greens. She was Vesebian's replacement. Stenius had not yet learned her name.

'Launch them.'

'Yes, sir.'

There was something in her expression.

'Speak freely,' said Stenius.

'Why does the primarch not just destroy the plates?'

Stenius' respirator produced a wheezing chuckle. 'The Lion knows what he is doing.'

‘Yes, sir.’ The mortal looked away, apparently relieved. ‘The *Vehemence* is deploying drop pods to the surface. Our other ships are escorting the *Pythagoran* in.’

The *Pythagoran* was Heironymax’s ship, a Lunar-class cruiser bedecked in scarlet and gold. Stenius would have used the Mechanicum as line-breakers, let them prove their allegiance where the heat of the crucible would show its weaknesses, but the Lion was honourable to a fault.

‘They’re deploying landers,’ the altern finished.

‘Then the bridge is yours.’

Stenius turned and limped towards the bridge doors.

‘Sir?’

‘I have duties to perform elsewhere,’ said Stenius.

‘Where, sir? In case I need to call for you?’

Stenius clumsily tapped his stainless steel nose, a Terran gesture that he knew would be lost on the Calibanite woman. ‘Somewhere even your predecessor never knew existed.’

II

The Thunderhawk set down on an apron of frosty permacrete surrounded by gantry cranes and gargantuan rotunda silos. Lines of tracer fire twinkled from the access scaffolding and inspection portals, making it appear as though every window was lit, every face watching. Holguin was first onto the platform. He leapt from the ramp with sword drawn, clad in his preferred artificer plate, crimson curlicue glittering under the cosmic struggle being waged above his head. He tensed as his boot touched onto the permacrete.

He looked around, but no sudden bouquet of mulched leaves or animal musk filled his helmet. His muscles relaxed.

Perhaps the Watchers had taken his inaction with regards to their warnings as the reproach he had intended. They had challenged the strength of his honour and he had passed. He had borne witness to their aspersions on Caliban’s fate and remained true.

In its place, he saw war – beautiful, perfect war.

Scimitar jetbikes lashed between the plate’s columnar spires, heavy bolters firing on targets he could not yet see. Thunderhawks and Storm Eagles disappeared amidst the tangle of metallic rigging to set down, deploying additional breacher and assault units to the fight. Heavier Thunderhawk

transporters came in with a howl of turbofan descent thrusters, darkening the thin atmosphere of the plate into entrail-like ropes about their wings as they approached, bearing Land Raiders and Vindicator siege tanks in their claws. This was as much a city fight as it was a boarding action, and for all that the Lion had demanded the plate be claimed intact, Holguin knew that the brute strength and firepower of the Ironwing would be required if an entrenched foe were not to bog them down. Gunfire rang through the plate's hollow superstructure. Screams. It already sounded as though it was coming from everywhere. Somewhere nearby, something electrical was burning.

He felt his earlier misgivings evaporate. This was what he had been made for.

Emerging from the ramp behind Holguin, Deathwing veterans in advanced tactical battleplate fanned out onto the landing site, gunning down dock militia as they emerged. The mortals' feebly inaccurate auto-fire whizzed by, rattling against the thick armour of the Thunderhawk.

With a cyclical scream from its turbofans, the gunship lifted off the permacrete, but not before turning its quintet of twin-lined bolters to light up the militia positions at the far end of the apron. Designed to mow through armoured warriors and monstrous xenos, the high-ex shells ripped the common soldiers to meat. The men appeared to dance as they were torn open, jerking about to staccato booms, the clatter of shells and the strobing lights of explosions.

Holguin turned his sword point-down to the ground and dropped to one knee, lowering his head to the pommel.

This time his mind was filled with joy.

He thought of the Lion, of Sar Luther on fair Caliban, and of the Emperor, beloved by all, immaculate still on distant, holy Terra.

'For the Lion and Caliban,' he breathed, voice hoarse with emotion.

'Eyes up,' said Samariel. 'Here they come.'

The distinctive rattle of a tracked vehicle sounded from one of the nearby avenues, the snap of thallax lightning weaponry drawing nearer.

'We have walked too long in the dark, brother,' said Holguin, rising, even as the gale-force of the lifting Thunderhawk sought to push his shoulders back down. 'Hunting the Night Lords' shadows over Thramas, chasing dreams and prophecies, battling nephilia in the Ruinstorm. To fight a ready and willing foe. To fight a *war!*' He spun his sword upright, striding forwards with a purpose he had not felt in many months. 'Loyalty and honour, my brothers! For the Throne!'

III

The extractorplexes located six degrees radial west from Cardinal Duplex stood nine hundred metres high. Varicoloured flames belched from orifices of all sizes across its infernal height, and the sound of adamantium sand being ground and smashed together at supernova temperatures thundered across the desert sky like an earthshaker barrage every fifteen seconds.

Farith Redloss took a guilty pleasure in watching them all burn.

It reminded him of the fires that had devoured his village in the Windmir heights. The night that the beasts from the forest had come. He had been eight years old. The memory no longer brought the nightmares that it once had. The ability to feel fear had been taken from him, leaving only hatred, a need for vengeance and a gaping hollow where fear might once have been to temper those drives. He lived for the fire. He knew the inner workings of his artificer plate better than most Techmarines in the Legion. He could field-strip the boltgun in his hand in under a minute, and describe the detonation stages of the phosphex bombs secured to his belt harness in detail. He could do all of that. If he were so inclined. Destruction had always fascinated him. It had become his trade, and he knew its tools well.

A squadron of Primaris lightnings decorated in the emblems of Dreadwing and Firewing boomed overhead. Frothing missile trails looped out from their underwing hardpoints, hypersonic, levelling what was left of the extractorplexes under a barrage of rad-missiles before the sound of the aircraft had even caught up.

They broke off and screamed for orbit.

When Redloss checked the radiation levels on his suit augurs, or crushed underfoot a lump of rubble on which phosphex residue still burned, he knew exactly what he was doing here.

He was killing this world. He was murdering it for a hundred generations.

And he took pleasure in it.

'Targets left,' voxed Danaeus.

The Dreadwing did not consider them 'enemies' nor 'people'. They were objectives to be eliminated, to be tallied subsequently from the dead.

Redloss turned even as hard rounds banged off his armour. Two hundred metres to the left, a cohort of renegade skitarii had moved into the rubble of a permacrete confab. It had been flattened under the first aerial sorties and drop pod strikes, but its rugged skeleton still provided excellent cover. His sensorium flooded his visor with alerts. Radium rounds. The Mechanicum chose to fight radiation with radiation. In the enclosing privacy of his battleplate, Redloss

smiled. If he had cared at all for the fate of this world, then that might have troubled him.

Beyond the Lion, the Legion and Caliban, Redloss cared for very little.

His return fire chewed through a steel rebar to which permacrete clung like meat on a bone, as he continued sideways into cover of his own.

Some kind of thermal induction unit designed to store solar energy as hot water, it was a massive metal drum surrounded by partial walls and rubble, and had survived the demolition of the surrounding confabs more or less intact. Radium bullets smacked against the heat-shielded black steel as Redloss drew in behind it.

He checked the disposition of his squad in his sensorium display.

Gawain dropped to one knee, the two-metre-long missile launch tube enwrapped within a suspensor web on the legionary's shoulder. Light flared from the barrel of the launcher, black smoke from the back, and a rad-missile obliterated what was left of the confab to a steaming hash of unstable atoms and flying electrons.

Redloss' visual display whited out as radiation levels spiked, helmet augurs clicking furiously.

Shots continued to ping out of the rad-storm, but they were much reduced and poorly aimed. The foot soldiers of the Mechanicum were almost as durable as an armoured legionary, but that *almost* was an important qualifier. That level of radiation would almost certainly be degrading the skitarii's optics and haywiring their targeting wetware.

Danaeus and Melwen continued their advance into the building, firing in short bursts, but continuously.

The squad ident runes in Redloss' display stuttered as they moved into the epicentre of the radiation, even as his augurs and other systems came back in a buzz of static.

Another bombing sortie rocketed overhead, Storm Eagle and Fire Raptor gunships ripping down whole structures with massed heavy bolter-fire. It was Redloss' task to go through what they left standing. Block by block, unit by unit, man by man, obliterate what the aerial assaults had missed. Vastael's Firewing provided long-range and anti-armour support, but this was a Dreadwing operation. As far as he saw it, the entire invasion was a Dreadwing operation. Slash and burn, deface and destroy, salt the earth and ensure that no trace of disloyalty remains to blossom from the ash again.

The Order of Caliban had not possessed the sorts of weapons that he employed

now. Volkite. Bio-alchem. Antiplant. Some thought his embrace of them unchivalrous, a gross abandonment of the virtues and traditions of the Order. They were wrong.

Redloss did not know how to explain.

Vastael and Holguin, and even the Lion himself, had allowed loyalist Mechanicus commanders to provide on-the-ground guidance and light-infantry support.

But not Redloss. Not the Dreadwing. Their work was not for others to see.

That was what Redloss embraced – a warrior fraternity that kept its secrets best for no other wished to know them. He was a Knight of Caliban. He had abandoned nothing.

‘*Targets, fifty metres,*’ voxed Werrin, ahead. ‘*Thallax cohort.*’

‘We are the Angels of Death,’ said Redloss. ‘For the Lion and Caliban, we destroy everything.’

IV

Magos-Prime Heironymax Veltarae killed arithmetically.

Every forward step was followed by one more, every skitarii slave-soldier and thallax battle construct slain was followed by one more. Las-fire rippled across his conversion field, a scintillating halo of white light whose brightness was in direct inverse proportion to the killing energy being directed his way. He walked into his enemy’s best efforts to murder him, even as stray bolts of las mowed through the adsecularis that witlessly discarded their lives in exchange for his.

He brought his graviton gun to bear.

It was a large, two-handed weapon, made heavy by the byzantine technologies contained within its ormolu casing and covered in antique decoration. For all its high techno-arcana, the firing mechanism was visceral. He pulled the trigger, impelling a stream of exotic matter into the ruined blocks. A succession of implosive pulses crushed permacrete, cracked adamantium and ruptured organs inside cyborgised exoplate. Pressurised water spouted from a twisted mains pipe, misting into a concatenated sequence of rainbows as Heironymax crunched onto the rubble and continued forwards.

The algorithmically perfect walls of the Cardinal Duplex soared over the broken bones of fabricatory barracks and transit silos, set against a copper sky. A preliminary orbital strike from the Dark Angels fleet had effectively flattened the capitol, gouging a battlefield with a radius of about twenty kilometres from

Thagria's ancient basilicae. Ordinatus behemoths on both sides stomped through the wreckage. Thanata-class siege automata used the corner frames of once-kilometre-high spires for cover while Krios battletanks and Leman Russ transports blasted at one another over debris-strewn plains. There were no Titans left on Thagria, but these lesser engines of war were more than capable of making the earth beneath them shudder. Thunderbolts and Avengers duelled over the ashen sky, over pressure and noise. Artillery tanks pounded at one another like gods smiting a mortal battlefield. In comparison, the skitarii tussled almost at arm's length. It had become a smelting, a mingling of parts. All were encased in the same armour of crimson and gold, all inscribed with the same circuit hagiography, for all claimed ownership of this world and would not set aside its emblems for another.

The battle being waged over those conventional spectra was little more than the aftershock of that being fought over the noosphere. With ancient weapons of the deadliest technologies, both sides sought to block and suborn the inload-exload abilities of the other's force. Soldiers stood dumb while their units advanced without them. Whole cohorts of adsecularis, their security protocols frayed by years of conflict, suddenly stopped fighting and allowed themselves to be mown down. Aircraft were driven into ruined hab-spires, disappearing into shredded wreckage and fireballs.

<Engaging signum-seven-seven-five...>

<Pending further instruction...>

<Initiating withdrawal protocols...>

Even Heironymax's multiplexed data tethers provided only sketchy reports from his forces across the planet and in orbit.

<The Dark Angels push northwards,> canted Dominus Menelux.

<I am aware of it,> Heironymax returned.

He was fully aware of the destruction that was being wrought on the manufactories to the north also. He could *see* it. Thick plumes of smoke blotted the horizon, the familiar jagged skyline of kiln-spires and effluvia stacks noticeable by their absence. Heironymax estimated that the destruction of the extractorplexes would set Thagria's shipbuilding capabilities back by at least three months. He did not know if the Dark Angels were preparing for failure or if they simply did not trust him with the forge world.

Either way, it was dispiriting.

The main thrust of the battle would be here, at the capitol, before the walls of Cardinal Duplex. Heironymax was throwing everything he had left at it. His

forces were but a fraction of Magos Pretender Bellonitrix's, but after years of attrition and retreat it felt glorious. His whole body seemed to glow, a blood energy that had little to do with the output of his conversion field. His enemy too seemed to feel that this was it, the chance for a decisive blow to end this struggle one way or the other. She could have sat within her walls and slugged this out with artillery, but instead she had sallied forth to crush Heironymax utterly, and finally.

Was this how the battle for Terra would be, he wondered, warriors who ten years ago would have called each other kin after scrapping over every heap of rubble that had once held significance? Did this scene play itself out before a hundred citadels, quantum echoes of that singular conflict being waged over the Imperial Palace? Did the Emperor and Horus even now seek one another out through the ashes of their dreams, as he and the Pretender did here?

The ruined wall of an auxillia sacristy collapsed before the glacis spikes of a macrocarid explorer.

Clad in blood-red plates and golden etching, the troop carrier rode on a low-slung chassis and two sets of armoured tracks. Its glacis had been shaped into the form of a helmeted head, as if the Machine-God of Mars bore his troops to war. It heaved to a sudden stop. Debris slid off its sloped roof. Ramps crashed to the permacrete and disgorged half a dozen hulking brutes in void-hardened armour. Ogryn charonites. They were juggernauts of flesh and steel, ten feet tall, cybernetics bolted crudely onto their horrifyingly massive abhuman frames. Dust from the destruction of the sacristy blasted over Heironymax's entourage, forming a patina on his conversion field as he brought his gun to bear. The raw muscularity of the abomination-tech flooded him with loathing.

'Even with the wealth of the forge world to command, you turn to these unholy technologies. How far you have fallen.'

Magos-Prime Heironymax Veltarae killed geometrically.

Every forward step brought him *two* more, every foe slain brought him *two* more. A graviton pulse cracked an ogryn's armour and crushed its belly, a thick organic soup leaking through the buckled plates. The brute roared, pain overriding even its near-total obedience systems. Another ogryn shoved it aside, ploughing forwards like a bulldozer.

The adsecularis' gun lines scorched the charging cyborg black. Flocks of cyber-ocularis drizzled it with las. It was still going when it hit the adsecularis and started tearing men apart. Fearlessly, the adsecularis kept on firing, maintaining the same rate even as one ogryn, then two, then three were wading through them.

A tech-thrall clubbed a brute's thigh with the stock of his mitralock before being caught in a charonite claw and crushed from collar bone to kneecaps. What the ogryn tossed aside was barely human. Epsilon-mu, the scyllax guardian automata, dragged one ogryn down in its combat dendrites, but the rest ignored the thralls seeking to flood them with bodies, artlessly smashing and gouging their way towards Heironymax. Adhering to their protocols to the decimal.

Heironymax refused to take a backward step.

At point-blank range, his graviton obliterated the ogryn nearest to him, crushing its mass into a fist-sized ball of meat that cracked the permacrete where it fell. Another roared at him. It was twice his height, maddened by steroidal chemicals, haloed by a thermal haze and tattooed by las-fire. Two supplementary limbs sprouted from Heironymax's torso. The power blade ignited. The chainfist gunned into life. The ogryn punched at him with one goliath claw. Heironymax ducked underneath it and rammed his chainfist into its belly. It chewed through armour and spat out flesh. The lobotomised abhuman did not feel it. It snapped the adamantium radial and ulna rods from his chainfist attachment with a single blow of its claw, and then threw him down. Bled of power, the chainfist stopped whirring, still embedded in its gut. Electricity fizzled from the severed limb. The ogryn shuffled forwards. It raised its claw.

Blood spattered Heironymax's face. The ogryn's knees weakened, then gave, thumping to the ground next to the magos. The impact seemed to jar something loose, and the ogryn's head slid away from the horrific saw-edged cut across its neck. It hit the ground beside Heironymax with a thump. The rest of the corpse fell sideways and crushed it.

The Lion stood over Heironymax, the residual energies of teleportation still crawling over the scrollwork of his battleplate. He extended a black-armoured gauntlet.

Heironymax found his courage unequal to taking it.

'I was beginning to fear that you would not arrive in time,' he said.

'The immediate orbit needed to be cleansed of defences before my ships could move into range.' It was not an apology, but it was as near to one as any mortal would ever receive. As the Lion spoke, the Terminators of his honour guard butchered the last of the ogryn charonites, and then proceeded to rip apart the macrocarid explorator and the wall it had become embedded in. A squadron of matt-black Thunderhawk gunships screamed overhead, bearing more.

'This is where the traitors of Thagria will know to find us.'

V

The myrmidon secutor was good. Every ratio of her design flawless, every function of her form and action calculated to the thousandth decimal. It took Holguin two brisk exchanges of blows to get her measure. He dropped to one knee as the secutor's power axe hissed towards his neck, lowering his sword against his pauldron, parallel to the angle of his back. The axe struck it and slid down. A lesser warrior than the myrmidon would have been off-balanced, exposed herself to a punch to the jaw from the cross-piece, or a pauldron slam, but the secutor was an artisan of war. Body segments clicked, rotating across one another, then she launched herself into a pneumatic flurry of attacks. Holguin backed away lightly. He parried every blow, responded with a counter when the opportunity presented, the ingrained routines of the Spiral combining into unbreakable defence and irresistible assault.

This was what it was to be a Dark Angel, a Knight of the Order of Caliban. To be free of intrigue. Of doubt.

With a metallic crack the secutor's piston limbs propelled her forward. Her feet left the ground as though she had ignited a concealed jump pack. Light bursts and las-fire rained from wrist- and shoulder-mounted weaponry and splashed across Holguin's armour. It was a distraction only. He ignored it, focused on the axe.

With more time than he seemed to possess, he sidestepped, then swept his sword back in a diagonally rising stroke that separated the secutor's legs from her torso.

That did not stop what was left of her flipping over onto her back as she crashed to the floor.

Holguin turned and crushed her torso under his boot before she could open fire. It took six more stamps to finally put her down.

Armour whickering like a well-trained destrier, its blood running hot from the fight, he looked up.

The myrmidon secutors and their adsecularis thralls had sprung their ambush where the main arterials of the landing aprons narrowed to the capillaries that fed the mega-refineries. The walls that towered over them were close and thick, matt-grey permacrete, galvanised steel and a solid layer of suborbital frost. It would take something more powerful than a Vindicator to clear a road through it. Holguin had known it for a trap immediately, but could think of no more expeditious a way of drawing his foe to battle than springing it.

The dead were piled up, three deep in places, mostly lightly armoured adsecularis, blown up by mass-reactive fire or carved in twain by powered blades. Bolters continued to rattle. Light and fire swept across the walls with every burst, revealing the blood splatters like messages hidden in the dark.

Holguin shook the unpleasant notion from his mind and charged forward, blade raised, boots pulverising the enemy's dead.

A dozen Deathwing veterans duelled with a dozen myrmidon secutors. Had Holguin closed his eyes – and he knew that he could walk the Spiral path in such a fashion if he chose – he could almost have imagined that this was just another dispute, two Knight-Kings settling their differences in the old manner of ritualised combat between champions.

But too much blood had been spilt for that to be enough now. Too much evil set free.

He split a secutor to the middle with a downstroke. His executioner sword struck something tough there, some kind of secondary personality core or a resuscitation matrix, and became embedded in the secutor's sternum. He ripped it out in a welter of gore. The secutor drew his arm back to drive his axe into Holguin's chest. Samariel blew his head off with a point-blank shot from his bolt pistol. There was no time for gratitude. Holguin could not even be sure if his brother knew he was there. The Deathwing veteran turned aside and rammed his gladius to the hilt into another secutor's throat. Holguin forged ahead. The sheer size and weight of his armoured body forced the secutor back, buying Samariel the time to saw the magos' head half off, then stave in his face with a blow from the pommel piece.

Ahead, the walkway widened. More fighting spilled into it from another direction, an access road or a building exit that Holguin could not yet see. His maps were out of date. The Dark Mechanicum had made changes since Heironymax's usurpation.

Three times the height of a Space Marine and sheathed in power fields, a Domitar-class close-assault robot laid about itself with graviton hammers like a foundry engine that had gone berserk on scrapcode. It had reduced the walls around it to rubble, gap-toothed grimaces of steel bracing, and was patiently obliterating every skitarii legionary that came close.

At first glance it would have been easy to dismiss it as another out-of-control automata turning to butcher its own, but he recognised the tech-warriors' long cloaks, their coats of mirrored scales and their elaborately fanned helms. Unlike Heironymax's maniples, which looked identical to those they were ostensibly

here to destroy, these hailed from the world of an erstwhile rival. Rygan Indomitii, coadjutor general of Nagra Excelsor. They looked well armed and equipped, but in the confines of the mega-refinery capillary they were well-armed mice in a cage with a Calibanite lion.

‘They are with us!’ Holguin yelled to his brothers, freeing his sword.

Without a thought for himself, he ran forwards with a yell and plunged his sword into the rotator cuff that joined its torso to its hips. The blade pierced its layers of atomantic shielding and slid in deep, bursting from the opposite side. Electricity sparked around the hilt. He grunted as it snapped onto his hand and walked up his arm.

Holguin was no lay medic or Apothecary, but when faced with a man, he could intuit well enough how to find the heart or the neck to grace his foe with a quick end.

He did not know how to kill the Domitar so cleanly.

Rotating about its torso axis until its gears became caught on Holguin’s blade, the robotic Knight turned and gavelled with its hammer. The weapon struck the side of the plastron. The unleashed graviton surge constricted the plate, warped it, and only the inherent tensile plasticity of ceramite allowed it to revert to its original mould unbroken. The strength of the five-metre-tall battle automata threw him back. He smacked into the wall, his power pack taking the brunt. Rolling brownouts flickered through his battleplate. Alert tones made garbled sounds inside his helmet as one limb after another lost power, restored it, lost it again, his sensorium stuttering and seizing. Day-old wounds from the *Sybarite*, only partially healed, split and began to bleed anew. He saw spots. They became falling leaves. He smelled leaf mould and heard the roar of the beasts.

He shook his head.

‘No.’

Shook it harder.

‘For the Throneworld!’

The roar in his ears grew to become that of bolters as Breunor and Samariel advanced, hammering the Domitar with shells. Their fire banged off metal and flared against shielding, blowing away the occasional exposed curl of armour, staggering it enough to drive it back a pace from Holguin. He pushed himself up against the wall as it turned ponderously to face the two legionaries, unable to rotate freely with Holguin’s sword in its midriff. Even as it did so, the Nagran skitarii continued to punish it from behind. Breunor paused to reload. Samariel kept going, covering the few seconds it would take his brother to insert the fresh

clip, and blasted out the Domitar's left knee joint. It swayed, punch drunk, while the two Dark Angels and a cohort of skitarii legionaries hammered it with rounds, before finally giving a great spasm and collapsing to the ground with a sound like a Predator crashing through an armoury.

Samariel fired another half a dozen rounds into its head, while Breunor helped Holguin stand. He accepted his brother's shoulder gladly and looked up as Rygan Indomitii appeared from behind his skitarii bodyguard. The magos looked a very different beast to the hunched and hooded servile that Holguin had seen in his master's shadow aboard the *Vehemence*. Now he was a warrior, straight-backed, unclenched and humming with trauma-inducing energies. His red Nagran cloak fluttered as heat exchangers in his shell-like exo-armour vented excess power. The stave he wielded crackled with corposant.

War had liberated him.

He and Holguin were more alike than he had allowed.

'You charged a Domitar-class battle automata,' Rygan said, apparently amazed. 'You would risk your organic chassis for mine. Why?'

'My liege-lord pledged you my sword,' Holguin said, leaning against Breunor as he proffered the magos a bow.

Rygan appeared to process that. 'My thanks, lieutenant.'

'They are unnecessary.'

'I disagree. I had grown careless. My progress through the plate had been easier fought than I had anticipated and I had allowed my predictive routines to drift. The presence of a Domitar-class battle automata surprised me.'

'Magos Heironymax and the Lion himself spearhead the assault on the renegades' stronghold. Our foe will know that to be our main thrust.'

'You do not resent being denied a place there?' said Rygan. He sounded suspicious.

Holguin, however, could but answer truthfully. 'I do not.'

His wounds may have been a factor, he knew, but the Lion had nevertheless chosen wisely in assigning each of his sons the task that suited not only their talents, but their sensitivities. It gave the lie to the common slander that the Lion possessed a blind spot in his dealings with people. Holguin could not have demolished the Thagrian extraction facilities with the same abandon as Redloss was capable. Redloss could not have secured their administrative, cultural and religious centres of the Thagrian plates with as little collateral injury as Holguin was prepared to inflict.

'I pray that the Omnissiah will grant us the same success when we come to

Nagra Excelsor.’

Holguin did not know what to say. Even his thoughts made him feel fraudulent. He was hoping that when this battle was won and the costs tallied, the Lion would see reason and plot course for Terra. He was spared the expectation of an answer by the shrill howl of a chainfist working on a steel door.

The gate was large, built for vehicular access. The Lingua Technis etched across the lintel scrollwork identified it as a storage facility, but elaborated no further.

Holguin’s mission was to take, hold and secure compliance. He remembered the pained smile he had worn when the Lion had thoughtlessly used the word ‘compliance’. A critical corollary to that, however, was for the tagging and logging of the contents of every refinery, storage facility and silo on the plate. Everything that Thagria fashioned was refined and finished here, held for sanctifying and eventual export to traitors off-world. There would be artefacts in storage that Holguin would not want to be forced into a firefight in the vicinity of – that was a given.

He pushed gently against Breunor, his shoulder motors whirring.

‘I can stand, brother. Pull the skitarii back and set charges to that door.’

‘Belay that, brother.’

With a ground-shaking thud, Ironbringer Titus moved up behind them, scraping permacrete from the walls off the hard angles of chassis. He moved slowly. His wide-splayed feet and Castraferrum-pattern gyroscopes gave the venerable a sense of balance superior even to Holguin’s, but the bodies he was forced to trample over made for unsteady footing.

If he fell in this narrow corridor, he would not be getting up again.

Holguin drew aside, as did Rygan’s Mechanicus, the skitarius with the chainfist executing a bow to the venerable machine as he withdrew.

Titus’ power fist whined as it spooled to full charge.

‘It should have been I who went first, Deathbringer. I would have crushed the secutors. And I would have greatly enjoyed testing my prowess upon the Domitar.’

Holguin bowed his head, chastened. ‘You shame me, venerable brother.’

‘For such was my intent.’

Metal screamed as Titus’ power fist smashed in the door, pulverised its molecules at the quantum level.

The Dreadnought marched through the wreckage without pausing.

‘Wait for me here, brother.’ Holguin gestured Breunor to the fallen battle

automata as he unshipped his bolter and checked it over. ‘See if you can retrieve my sword for me.’ He clapped the grumbling veteran across the shoulder and followed the ancient inside.

Samariel drew in alongside him, Rygan and his skitarii spilling in through the blown doorway behind them.

Stab lights cast out into the hangar like grapnels into the dark.

‘What the...?’

Holguin reached out to touch the yellow-and-black hazard symbol that had been plastered across the crate stack in front of him. It showed a human skull, cracked, surrounded by the concentric rings of an explosion. He pulled his fingers back before he touched it.

‘Everyone pull out,’ he said, speaking quickly. ‘Samariel, get them out. Brother Titus, set a perimeter a hundred metres from this location.’ It would not be enough. It would not be anywhere *near* enough.

He activated his helmet vox and was greeted by a wall of static.

‘There is a scattering field in effect,’ said Rygan.

With a frown, Holguin stepped back outside and tried again.

‘Stenius? This is Holguin.’

‘*Stenius.*’ The voice came through distorted by distance and radiation, but it came through.

‘I need you to place a flag on my location.’

‘*I cannot. I am not currently on the bridge.*’

‘Then where are you?’

‘*If the Lion wished you to know that then the Lion would have told you himself.*’

Holguin bit his tongue.

‘Never mind. I am sending you the coordinates now.’

VI

Stenius received Holguin’s report, his dead face unmoving. ‘Stand by,’ he said when the Deathbringer was finished, then killed the vox-link. Stenius was not in the habit of making errors, but he checked again that the link was severed. ‘You heard that,’ he said, addressing the puppet of meat that stood, unbreathing, behind his neck. If the abomination was attempting to unnerve him then it would have to do something worse than just stand there.

‘We heard,’ it said.

It spoke like a dreamer.

Stenius turned to look at it. The servitor was emaciated, aged by misuse well beyond the eleven or twelve Terran years of its biological age. Its neck lay at an angle, its eyes glassy. Brittle bone and muscle wastage made it crooked. The loincloth it wore was stained and stank accordingly.

‘You know what to do then.’

A pipe extended from the slave’s back and another from its skull, connecting it to the unintelligible mechanical orrery at the centre of the chamber. Contained within that dizzying array of cables and wires and circuit-coated plates was a perfect sphere of marbled black and witching grey. Flecks of gold trailed across its surface, seemingly at random. Stenius was one of only four, excluding the Lion and those now dead, who had spent long enough in the entity’s presence to know that it was not random. He had the impression that, through some warp-borne sense, it was regarding him as he regarded it. He did not know how, except that it was not through the faded meat eyes of its puppet.

It had called itself Tuchulcha.

Stenius saw that the golden motes had started moving more swiftly, teasing the eyes with brief hints of pattern.

‘We know.’

VII

‘Stand by for what?’ said Coadjutor Rygan as Holguin stepped back inside.

‘I know not,’ said Holguin. ‘That is why we must stand by.’

When Titus and Samariel had withdrawn to establish a secure perimeter around the mega-refinery warehouse, Rygan Indomitii had refused to be removed. This was Adeptus Mechanicus technology, he insisted, and he would entrust it to no other. Whether he sought to keep it from the hands of the Dark Angels or Magos Prime Heironymax Veltarae, Holguin could not be sure. He had kept with him only a single skitarius alpha, heavily rebuilt and bulky, armed with a stocky maxima boltgun that could turn an armoured legionary to shredded paper at close range.

‘How long?’ asked Rygan.

‘I do not know.’

Leaving the anxious magos be, Holguin walked towards the rack of caskets. The caskets were each four metres wide, one and a half high and twenty centimetres thick with lead walls. There were thirty of them that he could see. Discarding caution, he ran his gauntlet over the embossed runes. He could not

read the *Lingua-technis*, but he already knew what was inside. Cyclonic torpedoes. He saw now why the door had taken a Dreadnought to break through, and why the structure had been covered by a scattering field.

If Holguin had been made responsible for such a trove, then he would have undertaken the same precautions.

He felt a curdling of unease in his belly. He could not explain it. It had nothing to do with being confined in a hangar with thirty warheads that were each powerful enough to obliterate a world.

‘You should permit me to remove the ordnance to my ship,’ said Rygan.

‘The *Pythagoran*?’

‘No, the risks would be too great. I refer to my ship. It is a light frigate, small but well shielded, and considerably safer with your reserve ships.’

‘No,’ said Holguin.

He was sick of the adept’s gamesmanship. It reminded him too starkly of the circular intrigues of his own Legion.

‘There is no need for such aggression, voted-lieutenant. My position is founded purely on logic. We cannot permit such potent ordnance to remain here while our forces fight. It must be removed to a less unstable location.’

‘I know. Our orders are to stand—’

Holguin stopped himself.

The atmosphere in the hangar had changed. No shots had been fired there, yet suddenly the area was awash with the odours of cordite, ozone and fyceline. Snatched bits and pieces of sound rang from the metal shelving. It was as though an insane magos had diced through a vox-log before gluing the tape back together and playing back the randomised recording. Screams. Gunfire. A dozen different types of weapon. Redloss might have been able to identify them from the split-second reports, but Holguin lacked his brother’s affinity for instruments of death. Holguin had, at most, half a second to process the random sensory onslaught before the hangar was flooded with bodies.

It was not like teleportation.

Being witness to a body’s forced passage through the warp left its own peculiar bad taste in the mouth. It was like having an alternating current fed through your skin whilst a slow-release capsule spilt poison into your gut. It took its time, its own slow torture. This was instantaneous. One moment Holguin, Rygan and the alpha had been alone. The next they were not. It was as though some manner of apocalyptic D-weapon had scooped up the Lion, Heironymax and everything else in a twenty-metre radius, then deposited them here.

The Dark Angels' armour was hot and shuddering with recent violence. Smoke shrouded them, yet to disperse into the lighter air in which it now found itself. Coppery sand and small mounds of spent casings littered the ground at their feet. All the evidence presented had it that they had been sore-pressed mere moments ago, but they were as composed as relics now.

The loyalist adsecularii that had been delivered with them had not been as prepared for what had just happened. Las-fire from their mitralocks slashed the air, still firing on targets that were now tens of thousands of kilometres away on Thagria, raking instead along the hardened caskets, hinge clamps and hazard seals. A loose flurry left a scorch mark across Holguin's plastron and rerebrace. A bolt punched through Rygan's chest and exploded from his back, leaving a hole that a mortal warrior could have passed an arm through. The coadjutor-general did not even make a sound as he died. Before Holguin had processed what was happening, the Nagran alpha made a rapid response. He was under fire and his magos was down. He swung his maxima bolter towards the adsecularii, only for *Wolf Blade* to howl through his neck in a geyser of oily blood and pallid meat.

All became still.

Magos Heironymax looked around as though he had been hit by a photon grenade.

'What just happened?' He saw Rygan's body, the headless alpha slumped over him. 'What have you done?'

Ignoring him, the Lion walked towards Holguin. The Deathbringer dropped to one knee. It was as much for fear that he would pass out as respect for his primarch. His head was spinning out of control. He knew of only one technology aboard the *Invincible Reason* capable of enacting a mass teleportation as flawlessly as he had just witnessed. Tuchulcha. The warp device that the primarch had wrested from Calas Typhon on Perditus. He closed his eyes, not daring to face what they had seen. A bitter taste filled his mouth. With the Ruinstorm vanquished, Holguin and Redloss had together taken the Lion's vow that the need for the alien technology had passed.

The Lion cupped Holguin's helm in his gauntlet. The weight of it bowed his head.

'It is over, Hol.'

Holguin did not understand. Everything he had felt, the return of his certitude, the conviction of a just war, it had become radioactive dust running through his fingers. 'I thought we were going to aid them.'

‘No, Hol. I told you that they were going to aid us.’

‘But you were leading the main assault on the gates.’

The primarch removed his hand. Holguin looked up. The Lion’s face was drawn into a frown, as though he had done something necessary but distasteful.

‘As I did at Blood Mountain,’ said the Lion.

Holguin bowed his head, this time of his own volition.

Now, he understood.

SIX

The Lion's honour

'He is the only one of my brothers that I cannot abide. I can never tell what he is really thinking...'

– Alpharius, on the Lion

I

Blood Mountain, otherwise known as Sangrula in the old forest dialect, had been the last great battle of the Order of Caliban. Before they had become a Legion. It had been there that the Lion had broken the Knights of Lupus and brought all of Caliban's Knights under his banners. It had been the battle that had finally opened up the Northwolds, the last great wilderness, to the Lion's purges. For Redloss, memories of the day were bittersweet. It had come shortly after his induction into the Order, but before the great unveiling of the cosmos, and the ten-year-old boy he had been had had every reason to fear that the last and greatest battle of human history had just been fought without him. It had taken some time, time that Holguin had argued was better spent in meditation and study, but Redloss had found an Apothecary by the name of Borgias who had been there. With eyes trained upon a great distance, as though the divide between veteran and neophyte had been set in stone that day, Borgias had recounted his experience of the battle.

He spoke of how Luther and the Lion had ridden hard and true at the gates of Sangrula, their banners proud, those two warriors' mere presence drawing the Knights of Lupus' attention from the true offensive led by Sar Hadariel on the western approaches. Redloss had listened and absorbed. He had assumed that in the battle for Thagria *he* would be the true offensive that the Lion's Sangrulan feint would mask, that the primarch would lure the Mechanicum to his banners while *he* crippled Thagria's industrial power.

He had not expected... this.

The annihilation wreckage of Thagria filled the ocular displays. The orbital plates that had not already been bombarded to oblivion slowly buckled under the unrelenting cyclonic strain. Eddy pulses rippled through the debris field, driving lumps of metal – some still hundreds of kilometres across – to the edges of the cloud. Watching it was a ghoulish act. It was like standing on the shoreline near to where a great naval battle had been fought, watching the wreckage wash up. It was not the act of destruction itself that troubled Redloss' conscience. He had cheered first and loudest when Chemos had fallen to the *Invincible Reason's* guns, and had championed the destruction of those worlds that followed it into inexistence. Nor was it the obfuscation of their true intentions from the Mechanicus, for he was a Dark Angel, and he knew that knowledge remained powerful only so long as it was protected. It was not that Magos Heironymax now screamed and cursed from a nulled cell in one of Konrad Curze's dark decks, for there was no shortage of dark and best-forgotten things hidden aboard the *Invincible Reason*.

No, it was that the primarch had not seen fit to inform *him*.

A second-in-command had to know his lord's mind. If something befell Redloss, then the Last Breath Protocol ensured that Danaeus or Gawain would be able to prosecute his will as though he were still there to issue those orders.

What would have happened on Thagria if the primarch had suffered harm?

Wearing a frown as dark as his wargear, Redloss watched an explosion stain the debris field. A manufactory plate, barely visible in the cloud, came apart in apparent slow motion, releasing the turquoise-and-silver bauble of a partially assembled strike cruiser which disintegrated like dropped glass on impact.

What had become of the chivalric Knight that Redloss had once followed without question? Had he ever truly been, or was he a myth born of the nobler company he had once kept and the more honest times they had shared?

He was the Lion's man, the weapon of mass destruction in his unflinching glove, but the treacherous thought would not refrain from his mind.

Luther would not have done this.

‘I am tracking several dozen Mechanicum transponders within the debris field,’ Stenius reported with lispng dispassion, reading from a handheld slate as if from a shipping manifest. ‘The interference is making it difficult to distinguish Heironymax’s and the other loyal Mechanicus ships from the renegades.’

There was barely a functional terminal left to the main bridge. Even those that had not been destroyed completely, or damaged beyond all repair during the battle with the *Sybarite*, had been stripped out to grant the repair details access to the underdeck. Aside from a pair of junior adjuncts bearing the captain’s data-slates, those details were all the crew that the main bridge currently had, cutting and welding at a nervous remove. The Lion favoured its relative tranquillity to the confined bustle of the secondary bridge.

‘Let them go,’ said the Lion, his eyes flicking between the temporary displays, or simply through the high arched windows, seeing things in those split-second glances that no mortal mind could perceive.

Stenius nodded to one of his aides, who relayed the instruction down to the secondary bridge.

‘Then why, sire?’

Holguin looked the way Redloss was starting to feel, as if the lights of the cosmos were just too far away to ever reach his eyes and all he could see in front of his face was black. He stood with hands clasped together over his plastron. His scabbard and holsters were all empty. As Redloss had heard it, Breunor had recovered the Deathbringer’s sword from the corpse of a Domitar-pattern battle robot only for Holguin to order him to return it and leave it to die with Thagria.

‘They would have betrayed us,’ said the Lion.

‘No,’ Holguin answered coldly. ‘They would not.’

‘They always do. I learned that lesson on Diamat.’

‘Heironymax was not Archoi, sire. As Guilliman was not Horus.’

The primarch turned his hard green stare from the screen. ‘Do not discountenance your instincts, Hol. Nor you, Farith. You did not trust them either. You were right not to.’

‘No, sire.’

Holguin unclasped his hands and clenched them into fists by his sides.

Redloss spoke quickly.

‘Then why spare their ships?’

‘They no longer pose an immediate threat, or value to the Warmaster,’ said the Lion dismissively, then turned to Stenius. ‘Are the remaining cyclonic devices

secured aboard?’

‘They are, sire.’

‘Then order the fleet to the Mandeville point, captain. Plot an exit path to pass as many outer-system bases and extraction facilities as possible. We will do as much damage as we can using conventional ordnance for as long as we are within range.’

‘Yes, sire.’ Stenius remained neutral in both face and speech. Redloss did not know if it was practised or a result of his injuries.

‘If Heironymax was not an enemy before, then he will be now,’ Holguin muttered.

The Lion took note of his tone.

‘We can look no further than our own now, my son.’

Redloss stared up at the virulent churn of debris in the temporary oculus. He was not sure he could extend his trust even as far as that.

‘What, then, is our course?’ he asked, his voice every bit as measured as Stenius’, his gaze as unfixed.

‘Terra,’ said Holguin. ‘Please, sire, I beg it of you.’

‘This again?’ said the Lion, his irritation showing.

Holguin descended to one knee and bowed his head to his thigh. ‘Yes, sire. Now, and every day until I convince you. I would beg this of you. I need this. *We* need this. Summon Corswain. Return to Caliban to make peace with Astellan, Israfael and Luther.’ The Lion stiffened at the mention of that name, but with his head bowed, Holguin was oblivious and spoke on. ‘Then strike at Terra with a Legion’s strength. Can you not see what this war has done to our Legion? You can save it, sire. We can save Terra.’

The last was an appeal to the primarch’s pride. Even with despair loosening his tongue, Holguin was still a masterful orator. He knew that the Lion would be swifter to Terra’s walls to dispute Dorn’s or Guilliman’s claims of glory than he would to actually prevent Horus from seizing their father’s empire. The Lion glanced at Redloss, who nodded slowly, cautiously. The primarch appeared to soften. His expression eased, his eyes lightened. His shoulders relaxed, loosening the cross of his arms across his chest. For a moment, he ceased to be ‘the Lion of the Forest’ and became the father that Redloss had lost as a boy and always wished for him to be.

He sighed, exhaling the weight of the galaxy.

‘Konrad warned me of this, you know.’

‘Warned you...?’ said Redloss, perplexed.

The Lion waved his hand vaguely. ‘Everything. This. He told me that I would not reach Terra’s walls before the end.’

‘And you took the monster at his word?’ Holguin exclaimed. He rose to his feet, but even quivering with rage, the primarch towered over him. ‘You speak the very definition of a self-fulfilling prophecy.’

‘Recall your place, Hol,’ said the Lion, his lowering voice being, for him, as clenched fists and flung consoles were for other men. ‘Of course I did not. I argued with him, I denied him. I *fought* him. But Sanguinius believed him. Then I argued with *him*. But a man can only doubt the Angel for so long. Too much of what he promised came to pass, and if it was so for him then why not the Night Haunter? Is it not more comforting to believe that my brother was brought low by visions of this future than that the Emperor set out with the deliberate intent of creating a monster?’

‘And so this is why you chose this course?’ said Redloss.

The Lion nodded. ‘Do you remember Sar Amadis?’

Redloss and Holguin shook their heads. Stenius stared blankly.

‘How soon the legend fades,’ the Lion sighed. ‘When I was young, he was the greatest Knight of the Order.’ His expression clouded with memory. ‘One of them.’ Redloss could not help but note how he failed to name the other. ‘One day he returned to Aldurukh from a mauling by the Lion of Endriago. He lived yet, but he knew that there was no fight left in his body. There was naught left to him after delivering his tidings but to take up arms one last time and ride into the forest.’

‘This is a counsel of despair!’ said Holguin.

‘Is it? Then perhaps despair is the righteous course, if that is what I have chosen. Perhaps I am privy to information that I have chosen not to share with you, Hol.’ The Lion’s nostrils flared, and Redloss feared that he would strike Holguin down with his bare hands. The Deathbringer squared his jaw, as though inviting it. ‘Leave us,’ the Lion whispered. Though his eyes were locked on Holguin’s, it was clear to all at whom the order was directed. Quietly and quickly, the repair crews packed up their gear and hurried out. Stenius’ aides shuffled after them, leaving only the three legionaries alone with their primarch.

He waited while the doors closed.

‘The Astronomican has gone dark. A great shadow has fallen across its light.’

Redloss felt as though his primarch had pushed a knife through his ribs.

‘What?’

The Lion grew stern. ‘I know you are not deaf, Farith, nor slow.’

‘So how did we navigate here?’

‘With Tuchulcha, of course,’ said Stenius, grinning coldly.

Redloss gaped at him. He wondered when it was that the captain had worked his way back into the primarch’s graces, or if he had ever left them at all. Perhaps that had been just another rumour, for the Lion had done nothing to corroborate the story of his fall. But then, he never did.

The captain’s face was blank.

‘We have been reliant on the warp entity since the destruction of Luth Tyre,’ said the Lion. ‘Only Stenius and Mistress Fiana were made aware.’

‘But if it has gone dark...’

‘If it has gone dark, then we must use Tuchulcha one last time,’ said Holguin. ‘We must return to Terra and see for ourselves.’

The Lion shook his head. ‘If it is gone, then the Angel’s gravest prophecies have come to pass – he has fallen to the *Worldbreaker* and Horus now defiles my father’s Throne.’

‘But, sire,’ said Holguin. ‘There could be a thousand reasons for the dimming of Terra’s beacon. We cannot know for certain until we see for ourselves, and until we do then surely we cannot abandon the Throne.’

‘No, Hol. I am already certain. This war is lost, as Curze and Sanguinius both foretold to me that it would be. All that remains for the Dark Angels now is to take up arms and ride out, and ensure that my brother Horus does not have a galaxy left to rule.’

Redloss stared up at his primarch, eyes stinging with the tears that his transhuman physiology knew not how to shed.

‘The Dreadwing will ride with you, sire. We shall let the galaxy burn.’

Stenius nodded stiffly. It was difficult, as always, to be certain, but Redloss thought he looked pleased by this outcome. ‘As you order, sire.’

The Lion turned to Holguin.

‘Do you mean to fight me, Hol?’

Holguin shook his head, backing away, but it was not the invitation that he refuted – it was the primarch.

‘If the Emperor had only warned us. If you and Sar Luther could only have settled your differences on Sarosh like men, instead of banishing your most loyal Knight and forbidding that his name be spoken. How much of this nightmare might have been avoided if there was but one amongst us who could speak one word to another that was true?’

With that, the Deathbringer turned and walked away.

He did not look back.

II

Redloss sat in his private arming chamber, alone. He had set his helmet on a stand, and had manually dismantled his armour, loosening every screw using a hand tool. It had taken over an hour, but Redloss had welcomed the interlude and mourned its passing. Then he had stripped, cleaned and reassembled his bolter. It sat now in an open case while Redloss bent over the blade of his axe and worked it with a whetstone, the enormous muscles of his back and shoulders easing into the motion. He had made only two full passes of the blade when the bare skin of his nape began to goosebump. The braziers spluttered, as if in a sudden breeze, the scent of wood smoke and burning threatening to transport him directly to one dark night on benighted Caliban. He wrinkled his nose and ignored it, scraping the whetstone down the curve of the blade.

‘Begone,’ he muttered. ‘Since Davin you have been testing my patience, and I have heard enough lies for a lifetime.’

‘We say nothing that is untrue.’

‘I will not argue for a return to Caliban.’

‘Your course will bring only division and ruin.’

‘I said begone.’ Redloss lifted his axe to sight along the blade.

‘Bring our warning to Holguin, or to your Lion. You will see in their faces that we speak truth.’

Redloss spoke no more, and eventually the candles flickered back to their normal burn. Warmth returned slowly to the chamber. Lowering the axe to his lap, he resumed the whetstone’s work.

He had gone too long in solitude, dismissing his own fears, allowing the darkness in his primarch’s Legion to grow. A large part of him did long to share the Watcher’s warnings with Holguin. Yearned for it, even, in truth. But he would not go to Holguin like that, clutching at the broken pieces of their friendship like a Knight without a lord. The hour was already too late for that. There was too much that should have been said long ago, and too much still between them that could not be aired even now. Nor could he confide in Vastael, or Aloceri. His brothers would think his spirit broken.

The thought of approaching a Terran, like Stenius or Titus, never occurred.

And the Lion?

Redloss frowned, stone pausing over his axe-blade.

He *still* remembered the fate of Brother-Redemptor Nemiel.

It would have to remain his secret. Redloss could keep just one more. He glanced back over his shoulder and breathed out in relief. He had a sense that this visitation would be his last.

For now, he had a galaxy to burn.

EPILOGUE

'O irreversible decrees of the Fates, that never swerve from your stated course!'

– Galfridus Arturus, M2

The palace burned. Its sprawling plan, laid down by increment over millennia, had culminated in a glorious basilica on an epic scale. It was a fortress, capitol, monument, fane, its completion the project of one who had set Himself apart from history and sought to make the future His own. Now, its walls had been brought low and His dreams with them, humbled by the creation of His own genius. The blood that tarred its triumphal plazas was its own, spilled by wayward sons. And half a galaxy away, on another world, *another* palace burned. It too had accumulated battlements and halls over millennia, its finished state the vision of a leader such as arises on a world but once in a thousand years. It too had been brought low. It too ran with the blood of its fallen sons.

This was the future that could not be escaped, as indelible to those with the sense for it as the present. The galaxy was aflame, the primordial annihilator rampant, the pattern repeated over and over, and the gods of the warp gluttoned on the hubris of man.

'We told him that Chaos could not be defeated, only fought.'

The other Watchers stood in silent observation, witnessing the fall of what the

humans – placed in their charge by pure chance – had called Aldurukh. None of them were truly present. Their existence was not limited by time or place in such a fashion. Nor was their true form that of the cowed diminutive by which they visited this corporeal dimension, even when unobserved. They were creatures of ritual and habit, not unlike the human culture that, through infrequent intervention, they had incidentally cultivated over fifteen thousand years.

Not that one span of time occurred to them as being greater or lesser than any other.

‘They ignore our warnings,’ said another.

‘They do not listen.’

‘A failing of the race. Did Eldrad of the aeldari not attempt to forewarn the Phoenician?’

‘We had a duty to try. If Chaos is to be defeated on Earth, then it will rise again here.’

‘It is already too late. The Ouroboros stirs. The Lion continues to employ its power.’

The Watchers were silent as they considered the possible outcomes of their inactions. Theirs was not a linear continuum. Time was a mosaic, three-dimensional and beautiful, too much for any one set of eyes, however studied, to interpret as a complete image. Each detail needed to be viewed in isolation and judged on its own merits. They were creatures of potential, and though the future before them grew dark, there were paths that a keen eye might discern.

‘The Angels will have a part to play yet, come the end of it all.’

‘Perhaps, but I fear that the destruction of Caliban is our last hope for the future now. It will be the final blow that sunders them. Is even the Lion willing to commit such an act?’

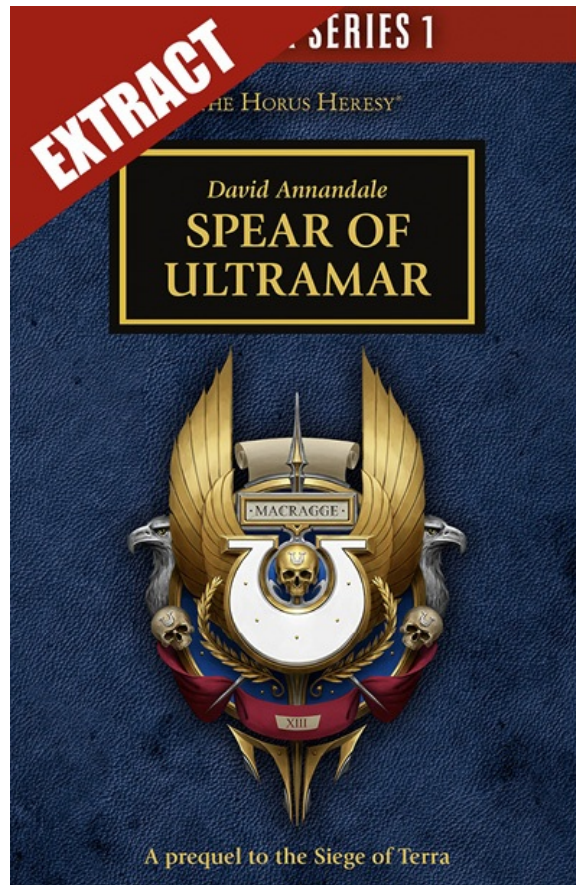
The Watchers pondered the ineffable as the first war of the Fallen played out, a tessellation in the repeating pattern of the mosaic. One alone amongst them turned his hooded gaze upward, looking for the spread of stars known colloquially as the Iron Corridor.

‘I do not think that will be a problem.’

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

David Guymer wrote the Primarchs novel *Ferrus Manus: Gorgon of Medusa*, and for Warhammer 40,000 *The Eye of Medusa*, *The Voice of Mars* and the two The Beast Arises novels *Echoes of the Long War* and *The Last Son of Dorn*. For Warhammer Age of Sigmar he wrote the audio dramas *The Beasts of Cartha*, *Fist of Mork*, *Fist of Gork*, *Great Red* and *Only the Faithful*. He is also the author of the Gotrek & Felix novels *Slayer*, *Kinslayer* and *City of the Damned* and the Gotrek audio drama *Realmslayer*. He is a freelance writer and occasional scientist based in the East Riding, and was a finalist in the 2014 David Gemmell Awards for his novel *Headtaker*.

An extract from *Spear of Ultramar*.



The frame of the sandglass is wrought iron, and unadorned. It holds the crystal bulbs in a stern grip, as unyielding and blank to entreaty as time. It once belonged to Guilliman's adoptive father, Konor. It has been in his private senate chambers in Macragge Civitas, and by chance and strength, it has survived the blows and tumults of war. The crystal is scarred, the iron scorched with burns, but the sandglass has travelled from Macragge to the battleship *Ultimus Mundi*. It was ancient when it belonged to Konor. It is too imprecise for practical use, but as a personal goad it serves well. Over a foot high, it stands on a corner of Guilliman's desk. He began to use it shortly after the engagement with the World Eaters in the Diavanos system. It is not the approximate hour that the sandglass marks that is important to him. It is the sight of the falling grains, and the slipping away of time they represent.

Guilliman turned the sandglass over for the first time and let the sands fall when he saw the signs that the nature of his role in the war had changed. Horus had hurled a gauntlet to keep Sanguinius and the Blood Angels from reaching Terra. Guilliman countered by forcing the larger portions of the enemy forces to deal with him and his larger fleet, opening the way for Sanguinius.

Recently, the enemy's tactics have altered. And now, what the Ultramarines have found, or more particularly have *not* found since arriving in the Apamea system, is confirmation that the war has entered another phase.

Titus Prayto and Drakus Gorod enter Guilliman's study. The Librarian of the Ultramarines and the commander of the Invictarus Suzerain Bodyguard both have expressions suggesting a cautious, guarded, puzzled optimism. Prayto has the features proper to a warrior-scholar, sharp and thoughtful, his gaze always observing, and guarded against easy conclusions. Gorod, in contrast, is massive even by the standards of Legiones Astartes, his hulking shape belying his nobility and intelligence.

'It is as the initial scans suggested,' Prayto says. 'The enemy has abandoned

Apamea.’

Guilliman nods. On a monumental, circular, oaken table in the centre of the study is a vellum map of the galactic south. On it, Guilliman has laid obsidian icons representing the Ultramarines fleet and the traitor forces. The positions are speculative. He moves them around a lot. He takes into account what little concrete information has come his way, but the map is a vast theoretical. He uses it to play out scenarios, to pace through one narrative after another of the progress of the war, to find the most likely, and use that to guide his own actions. He has left an enemy icon over Apamea. Now he removes it and holds it, pensively working through where he should place it next.

‘Where are they?’ Gorod asks. ‘This system is a great prize to give up without a fight.’ Apamea has two forge worlds. It is still far enough from Terra that its position is not strategic, but if Guilliman can use it to resupply his forces, so can Horus. What Horus cannot do, and Guilliman will, is gather more willing, loyal armies to bolster his strength further. Even if blocking the Blood Angels is no longer a priority, Apamea is worth holding under most military considerations. Only a very select set of circumstances would dictate abandoning it.

‘There is no sign of a conflict?’ Guilliman asks.

‘Very little,’ says Gorod. ‘Some signs of conquest, yes, when the traitors took the system. But nothing recent.’

‘They pulled out,’ Prayto says. ‘They were not driven out.’

‘So where did they go?’ Gorod wonders.

‘Here,’ says Guilliman. He places the icon next to the largest mass of enemy fleets, in the broad vicinity of Terra. There is no doubt about the pattern he is seeing now. The Ultramarines have encountered at most token garrisons in the last few systems. And now nothing. ‘Horus is feeling pressed,’ says Guilliman. ‘If he is abandoning what he has held, then his goal is more urgent, and more critical, than stopping Sanguinius.’

‘We can theorise the Blood Angels have reached Terra, then,’ says Prayto.

‘I believe so. There are two things that would force his hand. That is one of them. The other is the pressure we are exerting. Theoretical – the Blood Angels are on Terra, and Horus feels he must lay siege to, and break, Terra before our arrival, or he will lose what advantage he has. And there is Beta-Garmon.’ He points to the system on the map. ‘It is the gateway to Terra. We are reaching the point in this war where speculation will vanish. We will know what Horus must do, and he will know the same of us. And in the end, this is the essential truth. If he is to have a chance of taking Terra, it must be soon.’

‘This is if he means to conquer the Throneworld,’ says Gorod. ‘And not simply destroy it.’

‘He won’t,’ Guilliman says. ‘I thought I knew my brother, and I was wrong, on many levels. But I can still recognise Horus, even through the atrocities he has committed. And I recognise his approach to war. Destroying Terra will not satisfy him. He will not be satisfied unless he feels he has defeated our father. He will not rest until he has proven his superiority. That need is a flaw. It buys us time.’

‘Enough time?’ Prayto asks.

Guilliman glances at the grains draining into the bottom bulb of the sandglass. ‘That is our duty now. To ensure the time we have is enough.’

‘Guilliman will come to Carchera,’ Warsmith Khrossus says. ‘That is not in question.’

‘His arrival is not the question that concerns me,’ says Vûrtaq.

‘I don’t think there are any questions left at all,’ Darhug says.

Khrossus is silent for a moment, regarding his captains. They are both right, he thinks. And he is sure they both know it.

Like him, the captains’ faces are scarred with the decades of battle. Lank, black hair hangs over Darhug’s heavy brow. His eyes, sunken and shadowed, are bitter coal; Darhug buried his last ideas of hope long ago. The fire in his gaze is the smouldering, eternal burn of an underground seam.

The flames in Vûrtaq’s eyes are brighter, more feverish. His scars stand out an angry red against his pale skin, and his jaw works convulsively when he isn’t speaking, as if he were grinding hate between his teeth. He is more reckless than Darhug, though Khrossus has never had cause to fault his discipline when it comes to obeying orders and following the battle plan. Strategically, if Darhug is steady as an artillery barrage, Vûrtaq is the torpedo. Khrossus needs their complementary strengths for the campaign he is mounting.

Khrossus’ flesh is a grey of scabbed wounds and the angry pink of burn scars. He has been battered and burnished by war into an ingot of human iron. He knows what he looks like, and what he looks like is war, savage and ugly. This is as it should be. He bears the face of truth, and he is proud to do so.

The three Iron Warriors are standing at the exit of the pass leading to the industrial hive of Siderius. The rockcrete of the road is pitted and uneven, broken up by the weight of the countless transports that carried the output of Siderius to the outlying cities. The mountains press close around the forge city.

Peaks are high and jagged, and cliff faces sheer granite, as if hacked by a god's cleaver. Siderius is in a narrow bowl of a valley, its existence due to the immense riches of the region's ore deposits, and the insatiable need to extract them.

In the depths of the valley the air is still, but above the mountains the winds blow with perpetual hurricane violence. Siderius has no space port. There is not enough level space to accommodate one, and the winds are a threat to any aircraft that might try to take off from the city.

The structures of the hive are cramped, built one on top of the other until the city resembles a frozen geyser of metal. The air in its valley is black and almost thick enough to drink. The smoke from thousands of chimneys wreathes Siderius in the ghosts of industry, the thick shroud streaked by the flames of burn-off and the glow of forges.

Khrossus recognised Siderius' potential value as a fortress the moment he laid eyes on it, when the Iron Warriors took the Carchera system. Using the hive as a central keep, it would be possible to hold Carchera against a superior force for some time. Only it isn't merely a superior force that is heading for the system. And holding the planet is not the primary mission.

You will block him, Perturabo told Khrossus. You will block Guilliman and you will bloody him, for as long as possible.

'If Horus wants the Ultramarines stopped,' says Darhug, 'it will take more than us to do it.'

'He doesn't need them stopped,' says Khrossus. 'He wants Terra, and to get Terra, he needs Guilliman slowed and damaged. So we make his fleet bleed and we kill his momentum.'

'For how long?' asks Vûrtaq.

'Until the last man standing.'

'How will we know that will be enough?' asks Darhug.

'We will make it be enough.'

Darhug snorts. 'I'm sure Horus will remember us in fine speeches once he is Emperor.'

'When have we ever been thanked?' says Khrossus.

'I do wonder,' Darhug says, 'what we gained in trading one master for another.'

'Meaning,' says Khrossus. 'We gained meaning.' He thinks of the years of the Great Crusade, of the grinding marches and endless, debilitating sieges. The Iron Warriors did not ask for glory. They did not expect it, and they did not care for it. Khrossus mistrusts any legionary who celebrates battle. Any soldier who exults in war does not truly understand what it means. What Khrossus does ask for is

purpose. He asks that his suffering and that of his brothers has a point. There was no purpose in serving the Emperor. Khrossus came to realise that. The Great Crusade had been constructed around a facade of purpose, when the reality was simply the destruction of one set of cultures in order to replace them with another. Khrossus has long since failed to see how one lie is better than another.

Iron within, iron without. That is the only truth he acknowledges, and it is the one constant that has never abandoned him. It sustained him during the darkest moments of the Meratara Cluster campaign.

Where is truth? Where is purpose? They lie in discipline, and in the full understanding of war. War is pain and death and destruction, and that is all that it is. There is no glorious dream at the end of it. War cannot bring about utopia. That is the great lie, and Perturabo has broken his Legion free of it.

War is not a means. It is an end. Khrossus will never again be fooled by the illusion that it can be anything else. And since it is for war that he has been fashioned, then war is his end. If that end is coming for him now, that is cause for regret only if he allows himself to believe the lies.

Perturabo has given him a battle that he cannot survive, but that he can win, and for this he is grateful.

‘Our lives for Horus’ glory, then,’ says Darhug.

‘No,’ Khrossus tells him. ‘We do not fight for Horus. We fight for Perturabo. We fight for the truth, and the truth is iron. That is what we will teach Guilliman.’

His officers nod, grimly eager to teach the lesson. Then Vûrtaq looks over Khrossus’ shoulder. ‘The sorcerers are coming,’ he says.

Khrossus looks back towards the gates of Siderius. Five Word Bearers have left the city and are walking up the pitted road towards the Iron Warriors. All five are apostles, and wear robes over their armour, embroidered in the crimson sigils of their faith.

‘I almost envy them their truth,’ says Darhug.

‘I don’t,’ Khrossus says.

‘We’ve seen evidence that they might be right,’ Vûrtaq points out.

‘And?’ says Khrossus. ‘What of it? If there are gods, does that mean I should worship them? I do not see that one means the other. Iron, brothers. There is no higher truth than iron.’

‘Iron within, iron without,’ Darhug mutters, and Vûrtaq echoes him.

‘Anything else is superfluous,’ says Khrossus. ‘For us,’ he adds. He watches the Word Bearers approach. ‘But their truth gives them their own strength, and it has

its use.’ He is going to shape the battlefield of the Carchera system into a worthy slaughterhouse, and the Word Bearers will help him do so. Khrossus knows that hope is an illusion, and he is going to strip that illusion away from Guilliman.

‘What were they doing?’ Darhug asks about the Word Bearers.

‘Inspecting their sanctuary,’ says Vûrtaq. ‘Deep in the hive. Well out of the way of the front lines.’

‘The battlefield will reach them, too, in the end,’ Khrossus says. ‘They know that as well as we do. They know how this struggle will end for all of us. They have their contribution to make, and to do it they need the isolation. They need the sanctuary.’

The Word Bearers arrive. Their leader, High Chaplain Ker Vanthax, nods solemnly to Khrossus. His brow is so heavy, his eyes glitter within shadows even under full sunlight. His skin is taut, and marked by a complex series of runes. His cheekbones are high, aristocratic, but his nose is missing. He is commanding, and he is grotesque. ‘We have made our preparations, warsmith,’ he says.

‘Then it can be done?’

‘Yes. The Ruinstorm is still strong in the vicinity of Carchera, and with it the influence of the warp on the materium. This system is ideal. We can do what you ask of us.’

‘Good.’ Khrossus turns to his captains. ‘Are we ready?’

‘Yes,’ says Darhug. ‘The final platform was being moved into position at last update.’

‘The *Warforged* awaits its orders,’ Vûrtaq says. He will take a strike cruiser against a fleet.

An echoing series of booms comes from inside the pass, followed by the long, rumbling roar of falling rock. The sealing of the pass has begun.

‘Let him come, then,’ says Khrossus. ‘Let him come.’

‘It is a strange irony,’ Ker Vanthax says, ‘that a portion of the Fourth Legion must be on the defensive end of a siege in order for a larger siege to begin.’

‘There is no such irony,’ Khrossus replies. ‘You do not understand what our strategies will mean for Guilliman. There is only the surface appearance of a siege here, and even that appearance is a trap. We are not fighting to hold Carchera. Siderius is not a citadel. It is an engine, and it is us who will be laying siege to Guilliman.’

‘That will surprise him,’ says Vûrtaq.

‘No,’ says Khrossus. ‘We will not surprise him. He will see the trap coming.’

But we will hit him so hard, his foresight won't matter.'

The hololithic transmission plate of the *Ultimus Mundi* is on a dais towards the front of the bridge. Guilliman stands on it, speaking with the hololithic spectres of his officers on the other ships of the fleet.

'Navigator Maesa has news for us,' says Guilliman. He points, and the vid-feed lenses of the transmitter turn in the direction of Maesa. The images of the Ultramarines officers adjust controls invisible to Guilliman. Now they will see the bridge of the *Ultimus Mundi* before them, the projection of it solid enough that they can focus on it and filter out the background awareness of their own bridges.

'Go ahead,' Guilliman tells Maesa. 'Describe what lies before us.'

'The conditions of our next jump concern me,' Maesa says. The navigator is a daughter of the House Pytheas, one of the magisterial houses of the Navis Nobilite. She is centuries old. Wisps of white hair, so fine they float at her slightest movement, shroud her skull. She is supported by an iron framework, but her presence commands the respect of deep experience. 'The clear passage through the Ruinstorm narrows ahead,' she explains. 'It passes directly through the Carchera system. Given the length of jumps we are able to take while still being assured of remaining on course for Terra, our next passage through the warp will take us to the Mandeville point that lies within the system, at the narrowest point of our route.'

'By your evaluation, Carchera is a choke point, then,' says Guilliman.

'I fear it is, lord primarch.'

'An ideal place for an ambush,' says Iasus, Chapter Master of the 22nd. Iasus' noble profile bears the scars of these terrible years of war.

'An inevitable one,' says Guilliman.

'You think the withdrawal we have seen does not extend to Carchera?' Verus Caspean, Chapter Master of the First, is the only other officer physically present with Guilliman. He stands on a secondary transmission dais a few metres to Guilliman's right.

'If Horus is pressed,' says Guilliman, 'then he will have no choice but to seize any chance at all that might gain him more time. It would be strategic madness to pass up this choke point. A relatively small force could make a considerable difference.'

'The mission would be a suicidal one,' says Lucretious Corvo, captain of the *Glorious Nova*. The taciturn officer is learned, and Guilliman values his thoughts

on strategy.

‘Do you have any doubt that Horus would hesitate to make that sacrifice? Particularly if he assigned it to another primarch’s Legion?’

‘No,’ Corvo admits.

Guilliman eyes the navigation map that Maesa has put up. The invitation to ambush is too perfect. ‘This is not a probability we are looking at,’ he says. ‘It is a certainty. We have moved beyond the theoretical and into the factual. Our practical must be based on this reality.’

‘If they hold the Mandeville point, they have the advantage of surprise,’ says Corvo. ‘They know where we must translate, and can prepare accordingly.’

‘Then we will remove that advantage,’ Guilliman says. ‘We know they will be waiting for us. There will be no surprise on either side. All ships will be on full alert. We will be going straight into battle when we translate into Carchera. We know the enemy will be there. We know he will attack. So will we. I want all weapons primed before we exit the warp. The entire fleet will fire a salvo at the moment we translate. We will make the ambush ours. Horus cannot spare a fleet, and even if he could, there is not a single fleet that can challenge ours. We have the overwhelming force. Our task is to render the ambush futile. If the enemy is concentrated at the Mandeville point, we will make him regret that decision.’

Guilliman’s officers acknowledge the order, and he ends the transmission. He walks over to where Maesa waits. ‘You have done well,’ he tells her, his eyes still on the map. ‘I might wish that your calculations were wrong, but I am grateful that they are not.’

‘I do only my duty, lord primarch.’

Prayto has been observing the conference with the officers from one side, and now he joins Guilliman before the hololithic display. Guilliman frowns at the tight convergence of vectors.

‘You don’t like where this is heading,’ Prayto observes.

‘I don’t like inevitability. I don’t like having my hand forced.’

‘The enemy’s hand is forced, too.’

‘Precisely. Everything here is inevitable. This war wants to destroy our belief in free will, Titus. It wants to make us believe we have to throw ourselves on the mercy of fate.’ Guilliman shook his head. ‘I will not capitulate. We will smash our way through, Titus. We will smash our way through, and we will steal the time Horus hopes to gain. We have to. Terra is waiting for us.’

Aboard the strike cruiser *Cavascor*, Iasus emerges from the hololithic

communications centre, located just aft of the bridge. The sealed chamber makes better use of the ship's energy. Big as the *Cavascor* is, it does not have the power of a battleship the size of the *Ultimus Mundi*. Captain Hierax of the Second Destroyers has been waiting outside for his Chapter Master, and the look on Iasus' stern face confirms a great deal of what he already suspects.

'The primarch suspects an ambush, then,' Hierax says.

Iasus nods. 'He is certain of it.'

The two Ultramarines fall into step beside each other.

'How did he seem?'

'Focused.'

'As he ever is.'

'Beneath that focus, he is bringing fury to Carchera.'

'He is angry, then,' says Hierax.

'Who can blame him?'

The trust between captain and Chapter Master runs deep. It was not always so. Before the war, before Horus' betrayal, Guilliman made Iasus Chapter Master of the 22nd, bringing in an outsider, passing over Hierax, who was senior captain. Iasus was not Terran. More crucially, he did not share the culture of the Destroyers. Time and battle have proven Guilliman correct in his choice. The two officers value each other's skills, and in particular recognise the importance of their different temperaments. Iasus checks the more destructive impulses of the 22nd. He is more than a guarantor of discipline, because discipline is not something that any company or Chapter of the Ultramarines lacks. But under him, the Destroyers are the shaped charge they need to be. And when he must, Iasus knows when to rein them in.

In matters of strategy, Iasus will consult Hierax and listen to his recommendations. And once he has made a determination, Hierax has absolute faith that the Chapter Master's decision is the correct one. Between the two of them, they have honed the blade that is the Destroyers. They are still the weapon that the rest of the Legion regards with some caution, and Guilliman never unleashes them without careful thought given to the consequences. He has, though, been sending them into the battle far more often since Calth. They are the embodiment of the primarch's anger, for he is the *Avenging Son*. Though Guilliman is, above all, the consummate strategist, and though he is the great rationalist in a galaxy tipped into a madness of gods and daemons, he too has rage within him, and he knows how to use it.

'He will want us in battle, then,' says Hierax. He passes a hand over his

forehead and scalp, the thick layers of scar tissue hard as gravel. Hierax has been disfigured by the wounds and burns of years of battle.

‘I think he will,’ says Iasus. ‘Have your company ready.’

Hierax does not know what action to prepare for. There is no way to know whether the Destroyers will be boarding enemy ships or making planetfall. But their force of brutal, ugly annihilation will be called upon.

Hierax is glad of it. Iasus will direct the brutality, and Hierax will take it to the enemy.

Khrossus does not have the ships and he does not have the men to take on the Ultramarines fleet directly. To hurt Guilliman, to accomplish what he must, he has to turn the entire system into a weapon.

He speaks to Darhug and Vûrtaq over the vox as they leave Carchera to take up their positions closer to the Mandeville point. ‘They are not besieging us,’ he says. ‘We are besieging them.’

‘*And do you think the Ultramarines will understand the distinction?*’ Darhug asks.

‘*Does it matter if they do?*’ says Vûrtaq.

‘*Easy for you to say.*’

It is. Of the three prongs of Khrossus’ strategy, Vûrtaq’s is the most aggressive. He is not the one who might feel besieged.

‘It does *not* matter,’ Khrossus emphasises, ‘but they will think they are the ones besieging. Make good use of that error.’

‘*I will,*’ says Darhug. ‘*Be certain of that, warsmith.*’

‘Iron without,’ says Khrossus, ‘and then iron within. That is the shape of our attack. And we will eviscerate the Ultramarines.’

Khrossus has ordered that all signals from Siderius’ communications tower be relayed to his command centre closer to the base of the hive. The tower is too far from where battle will come. Khrossus needs to be at the front lines. The chamber he has chosen is a mere cell, with just enough space for the vox equipment and a table with a map of the Carchera system. He does not need much more. The complexities of the campaign and its planning are in the past. Darhug and Vûrtaq have their orders. He trusts their judgement, and their ability to adapt to the shifting conditions of the struggle. He will do the same in Siderius.

Khrossus leaves the cell and takes a grav lift down to the underhive. He moves down through the endless clamour of the city’s industry. Though the Iron

Warriors have conquered Carchera, the gigantic production machine that is Siderius grinds on, only now everything has been turned to the needs of the IV Legion. Huge new trenches are being dug, mine shafts are opening up to become gaping abysses and gigantic reservoirs are filling with molten ore. The millions of citizens of Siderius are governed by a single purpose. They wish to live, and so they slave to fulfil the will of the warsmith.

The grav lift deposits Khrossus beside a cavern where excavators the size of hab blocks dig their immense shovels into the earth, breaking apart tunnels below, working to create a moat hundreds of metres deep.

Past the excavation site, Khrossus enters a tunnel. It bores through rock and is lined with metal plates. It drops down a steep slope, and brings him at last to the chapel of the Word Bearers.

All traces of the chamber's original purpose are gone. The Word Bearers have had it scraped clean. The walls have been altered, the angles between them deepened and the sides worked until they are perfectly sheer. The cavern now has eight identical sides. The star of Chaos is carved into the floor. Runes have been painted in blood between each of the arms of the star. The shapes of the symbols hurt Khrossus' eyes, and they writhe in his peripheral vision. Ker Vanthax stands in the centre of the star, surrounded by his acolytes. 'This is a worthy place,' the High Chaplain says to Khrossus. 'There is much blood in the stone. Many died in this spot when the mines were first being dug. Lines of energy pass through here. Lines of Chaos.' He nods, satisfied. 'Carchera will fight for us. Have you examined the planet's historical records?'

'I have been otherwise occupied.'

'Of course. Of course. I think they would be instructive. I can feel the blood that was spilled here. Though its citizens may not know it, this world owes allegiance to the gods. It is not a coincidence that the warp is strong in this system. Carchera's allegiance is why we will be able to do what we must. The hand of fate is at work here.'

'I have been working harder here than fate,' says Khrossus.

Ker Vanthax smiles. 'You are its instrument. The will of Chaos works through you.'

Khrossus grunts, noncommittal.

'Have you come to tell us it is time?' Ker Vanthax asks.

'We cannot know exactly when the Ultramarines will arrive...'

'...but they are getting close,' the High Chaplain says. 'Yes, we can sense that. We can feel their travel through the immaterium.'

‘We should begin,’ says Khrossus. ‘We should prepare our welcome.’

‘So we shall.’ Ker Vanthax nods to his brothers, and they take up positions surrounding him, standing on the points of the star that indicate the cardinal directions. One of the Word Bearers leaves the chamber for a moment and returns with an amphora. It is full of thick, rich blood. The Word Bearer pours it onto the floor, linking all the arms of the star, and daubs the armour of the other apostles. Then he resumes his place in the circle and joins in as the High Chaplain leads the chanting.

Khrossus backs away. The air turns cold, and his breath mists almost as soon as the chanting begins. The eight-pointed star seems to twist. Voices creep in around the edges of Khrossus’ hearing, voices whose mouths are shaped for more than one tongue, tongues shaped to pronounce impossible words.

Khrossus turns and makes his way back up the tunnel. What he has told his captains is true. He does not need to share the full truth of the Word Bearers to see, and believe in, the full effect it can have. Already, he feels ancient power gathering in the chamber and rising up from Carchera, into the void, reaching out to seize the enemies from Ultramar.

Before he heads to the bridge, Guilliman turns the sandglass over again. He watches the grains drop for a few moments. He will not lie to himself, and pretend that the falling grains are marking the time to the Ultramarines’ arrival in the Carchera system. They are marking the time he has to reach Terra, and they are too few, and they are slipping away.

He must pass through this system quickly.

On the bridge, as translation from the empyrean approaches, Guilliman mounts the pulpit. Shutters cover the windows of the *Ultimus Mundi*, keeping out the madness of the warp. From her navigation cell, where she lies on a bed suspended in a pool of nutrient fluids, Maesa voxes that the critical seconds are approaching. On the bridge, it is the weapons officers who hold the greater part of Guilliman’s attention.

‘Nova cannon ready to fire,’ one calls.

‘Broadsides standing by,’ says another.

The reports come in from the rest of the fleet. Every ship is prepared to open fire on targets they will not see until after the guns have opened up.

‘A salvo over a wide area, with no aim possible,’ Gorod comments. He and Prayto flank Guilliman beside the elevated pulpit.

‘No aim is necessary,’ Guilliman says. ‘We will have the luxury of precision

once we have engaged the enemy. Consider this our pre-emptive counter-attack. We know where and when we will be struck, so I will strike first.'

A servitor begins the countdown to translation. Guilliman waits in silence for the fleet to drop out of the warp. He has already given his commands. All the captains know their duty, and every ship is charging to war. Guilliman does not need to give a new order to fire. He has set out his will, and his Legion is about to carry it out.

'Translation,' the servitor says, its voice dull, the announcement too flat for the holocaust it signals.

The *Ultimus Mundi* shakes three times. The first blow is the shock of the return to the materium. The second comes with the deep-throated thrum of the Nova cannon firing and the unleashing of every other gun in a massive choir of destruction.

The battleship shakes for the third time just after the shutters pull back to reveal the Carchera system, and the cataclysm rushes in on the fleet.

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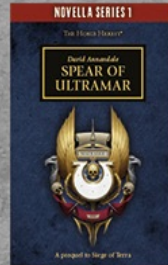
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COLLECT THEM ALL

To Nick, John, Gav, Laurie, and all who walked the Spiral before me.

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