



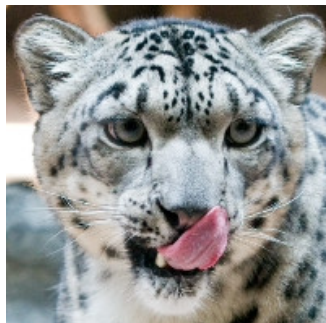
Weregeld



A Corax Story from "Corax anthology"

Written by Gav Thorpe

Created by



&



~ **Dramatis Personae** ~

The Primarchs

Corvus Corax, The Ravenlord, the Saviour of Deliverance

Leman Russ, The Wolf King, the Lord of Winter and War

Followers of the Ravenlord

Agapito Nev, Commander of the Talons

Branne Nev, Commander of the Raptors

Soukhounou, Commander of the Hawks

Aloni Tev, Commander of the Falcons

Gherith Arendi, Commander of the Black Guard, former Shadow Warden

Chovani, Sergeant, Talons

Corbyk, Talon

Gal, Talon

Vanda, Talon

Henn, Thunderhawk pilot, Talons

Navar Hef, Lieutenant, Raptors

Xanda Neroka, Lieutenant, Raptors

Devor, Raptor

Kannak, Raptor

Drayk, Raptor

Garba, Raptor

Volb, Raptor

Fannas, Raptor

Sannad, Raptor

Kempel, Raptor

Ghelt, Chooser of the Slain, Dark Fury assault squad

Korin, Mor Deythan

Shray Chavyon, Provisional lieutenant, Black Guard

Balsar Kurthuri, Chief Librarian of the XIX Legion

Syth Arriax, Librarian

Fara Tex, Librarian

Noriz, Captain, VII Legion

Annovuldi, Warsmith, IV Legion

Kasati Nuon, Battle-brother, VIII Legion

Kardozia, Dreadnought, Iron Father of the X Legion

Arcatus Vindix Centurio, Legio Custodes

Nasturi Ephrenia, Strategium controller of the battle-barge Avenger

Connra Deakon, Astropath, Avenger

Elvvix Jasson, Watch-captain, Shadowed Guardian

Fasuusi, Navigator, Shadowed Guardian

Khira, Captain, legionary commander of the Providence

Vabus, Lieutenant, legionary commander of the Revenant

Marcus Valerius, Vice-Caesari of the Therion Cohort

Pelon, Tribune

Theuril, Mechanicum magos

Warriors of the Rout

Ogvai Ogvai Helmschrot, Wolf Lord of Tra

Amlodhi Skarssen, Wolf Lord of Fyf

Sturgard Joriksson, Wolf Lord of Tra-Tra

Oki, Called Scarred, Wolf Lord of Tolv

Rathvin, Former watch-pack leader

Bjorn, Called Fell-handed, pack leader

Enemies of the Imperium

Horus Lupercal, Warmaster, arch-traitor, Primarch of the Sons of Horus

Ezekyle Abaddon, First Captain, commander of the Justaerin

Alpharius, Lord of Serpents, Primarch of the Alpha Legion

Delerax, Lieutenant commander, World Eaters

Prologue

The sound of Corax's footsteps resounded along the plain stone walls of the corridor.

Above him, Deliverance was almost deserted. It would take many more years to rebuild the strength of the Raven Guard, but his successors had that task in hand. They had been warned not to look to him for leadership any longer. They would forge their own futures – not just Raven Guard, but Raptors, Black Guard, and all the others who had yet to choose their names.

A new age, a new order.

Guilliman had, as always, been the best prepared for what had come after.

What needed to come after.

There was little enough left for Corax to fight for. Fragile hope had given way to desperation, before nihilism and then vengeance had carried him through the following years. Now he was empty, his father dead, his brothers...

He did not want to think about his brothers.

His strides were laboured. The burden that weighed him down was greater than any physical load. It was only determination that carried him along – or perhaps stubbornness; it was impossible to separate the two feelings now. Righteousness had always played second part to humility in the Ravenlord and, now that it had gone, all that was left was a vague pragmatism.

This was a task that needed to be carried out, no matter how awful, no matter the significance for himself.

So Corax had come here, to the Red Level. A place that had given the prisoners of Lycaeus nightmares. The torture cells, the haunt of the most depraved guards and the scene of such exploitation and degradation that it had seemed almost incredible,

at least until the excesses perpetrated by Fulgrim and his decadent Legion had eclipsed all else.

Here, Corax had buried his shame, hidden those too far gone even for a clean death on the battlefields of the Scouring.

The solution was clear to him.

He had known it for a long time, but he could not convince others of its truth.

The Imperium did not need his ilk. The galaxy was changed forever, and mortal men were best left to run their own affairs. If they were to fail then it would be by their own mistakes.

Nevermore would they be the pawns of flawed demigods.

There was only one task left to him to complete.

One

It was quicker for Hef to take the stairs on all fours, using the leverage of his long arms to clear each flight with two leaps. He rebounded around each landing, his momentum carrying him up the next set of steps. Behind him more Raptors tried to keep up; some of them laboured under their deformities.

He could smell the Night Lords on the upper decks – the scent brought out an unstoppable desire to kill. Hef tried to justify it as a righteous hatred of his wicked foes, but he knew that it was far

more primal in origin. Some had been wounded earlier in the boarding action and their blood had brought forth the animal instinct of a predator.

As he reached the command deck a hail of bolts greeted him, cracked armour and ripped chunks from his altered flesh. He ignored the blood that streamed from his injuries and ran along the short corridor. The Night Lords, seven of them, retreated quickly, but not so swiftly that they reached the sanctuary of the main bridge before Hef caught them. He leapt the last three metres, and his unsheathed claws speared into the closest as though his war-plate were made of synth-leather.

A chainsword bit into his shoulder, the first blow that registered anything like pain. Snarling, Hef threw out a clawed hand and tore the faceplate from his attacker. The Night Lord reeled back just as the other Raptors caught up with Hef. Garba, the first, felled the wounded Night Lord with a well-placed knife blow, the deadly blade wielded in his prehensile tail.

Kannak barrelled into the traitors at full speed; the jutting spines and armoured ridges that covered most of his body turned him into a living battering ram. Scaled green skin nearly luminescent in the ship's combat lighting, Volb followed close behind.

A close-range bolter shot caught Hef in the side of the head. The round glanced from his skull to explode a few centimetres away. The detonation ripped open skin but thankfully penetrated no deeper. Hef stumbled sideways, stunned by the concussive blast so close to his ear.

The bark of fire and rasp of chain weapons rang oddly to Hef. Still dizzy, he retreated a few paces and allowed his brothers to push on without him. They secured the main bridge door over the bodies of the remaining Night Lords, though the corpses of two Raptors spilled thick blood across the decking among the fallen traitors.

Two more dead. Hef updated his mental tally. Three hundred and twenty-four Raptors remained.

‘Engines secured, lieutenant,’ Neroka reported over the comm-device that had been riveted into place over Hef’s ear and jaw. ‘Human crew, a couple of renegade tech-priests. All dead, as ordered. We lost Fannas and Kelpel.’

Three hundred and twenty-two. Hef couldn’t remember why he had started counting, only that it seemed important now. The tally had started at four hundred and eleven.

‘Finish your lower deck sweep,’ the lieutenant growled, taking his time to form the words properly with his misshapen mouth. ‘We have the command deck.’

‘Lieutenant!’ Devor’s shout from beyond the door brought Hef quickly into the bridge. He found his old friend standing beside one of the communications positions. Its servitor was decapitated, the head still hanging from the cables that attached it to the console. The other half-men had also been destroyed, their chests ripped out or skulls caved in.

‘They did this before we boarded,’ said Devor. ‘They really didn’t want us examining the servitor cores.’

‘Too long dead for taste-memory too,’ added Kannak. The Raptor stood in the centre of the command chamber to ensure none of his long spines caught on the servitor corpses. ‘I think they did this the moment we started overhauling them.’

Hef activated the manual display of the comm-feed. The last contact had been three weeks earlier. So had the one before that. The message source and destination was different for both. Examining the previous logs, it was obvious that a great deal of communications traffic had passed through the ship.

‘I count at least four separate Night Lords vessels in-system with this ship before its last translation,’ Hef told the others. He continued scrolling through the log. ‘Five. Six. Six ships. With this

one, that makes seven traitor vessels in one place. That can't be good news.'

'They must have done this to stop us finding out where they were going,' said Devor.

Hef activated the ship's internal vox.

'Neroka, do you have Magos Theuril with you?'

'Yes, lieutenant. She is stabilising the engine core. I think the Night Lords tried to scuttle the ship but we got here first.'

'Have her access the Geller field generator records. I want to know how long this ship was in warp space last jump.'

'I have something here,' said Drayk from beside the navigation position. The screen's glow glinted on the tusks that jutted from his malformed jaw. 'The results of the post-translation scan. They arrived here to the galactic north-west of the standard orbital plane.'

'Bring up a chart,' said Hef, crossing to join Drayk. The display rippled with a star field and then zoomed in, centring on their current position in the Sellacis System. The lieutenant's claws prevented him from manipulating the display himself and he gestured for Drayk to continue with the controls. 'Slide back along their axis of arrival.'

Drayk did so as they waited for Theuril's report. Hef tapped his claws on the brushed steel console. A few minutes later Neroka contacted Hef.

'Lieutenant, the Magos says that the ship was in warp for thirteen or fourteen days.'

'Thank you, Neroka.'

'But she said it made four short jumps previous to that. It reminded her of an intersystem shuttle run. Two hundred and eight hours each way, every time give or take a couple of hours.'

'A warp channel. Or stable beacon.'

‘A channel in these storms? Has to be a beacon, I think.’

Hef flicked an impatient claw, indicating for Drayk to move the display the equivalent of seventy-five light years back towards the ship’s assumed point of origin.

‘There!’ He jabbed a claw at the screen. ‘Oddyssian System. Seventy-one light years from here. It has an Old Night beacon – that would explain the short jumps.’

Drayk spooled the control wheel to enlarge the view to include the nearby systems. ‘Damn...’

‘What?’

The other Raptor traced a line with his gauntlet, linking the Oddyssian star with another. ‘There’s only one system within eight and a half days. It’s Dexius.’

‘Dexius?’ said Devor. ‘Where Lord Corax is mustering the Legion?’

A flush of apprehension ran through Hef as he absorbed this information. He keyed his vox to open a full-channel transmission.

‘All units, abandon sweep. We are returning to the Fearless immediately.’ He cut the link and looked at his companions. ‘We need to warn the primarch. The Night Lords are going to attack Dexius.’

Agapito paced back and forth across the bridge of the Shadowed Guardian, but the commander of the Talons did not take his eyes from the main screen. The ship that had entered the system four days ago was little more than a brighter spark against the stars. It was a warship, but only a small escort. Even so, its presence was as welcome as a seal leak in an enviro-dome.

‘Hail them again,’ he snapped at his communications technician. ‘Make it clear that we will open fire if they raise their shields or power their weapons.’

The attendant nodded and spoke into the pick-up of his console.

‘Unidentified vessel, this is the battle-barge Shadowed Guardian of the Raven Guard Legion. You have entered void space of the Dexius System, currently under our aegis. Maintain course and do not raise power to any defensive or offensive systems. Identify yourselves immediately or be boarded.’

Static hissed in reply.

‘We’re going aboard,’ the commander told his subordinates. ‘Duty guard report to the starboard flight bay. Prepare a Thunderhawk for launch.’

‘Just five squads, commander?’ The watch captain, an unaugmented human called Elvvix Jasson, cocked his head in a gesture of unease. He smoothed his hands down his black uniform coat. ‘It may only be a frigate but it could house twice that number of traitors, commander.’

‘When you are triggering a trap, you only put in your finger, not your whole hand,’ said Agapito. ‘Any sign of trouble and we’ll withdraw and annihilate the ship from here.’

‘Beg your pardon, commander, but why not simply annihilate it right now?’

‘Intelligence. We need to find where it’s been. Also, we need every ship we can get. It could be abandoned, dumped here by the warp. Or a skeleton crew. Comms could have been destroyed.’

‘Of course, commander. I meant no insubordination.’

‘I know, Jasson. Being cautious, yes? Nothing wrong with that.’

Agapito accepted the watch captain’s salute with a nod and strode towards the main bridge doors. As he headed down the decks to the flight bay he unhooked his helmet from his belt. Before he put it on he ran the tip of a gauntleted finger across it,

tracing the faint crack that ran from the top to just above the right eye lens. Most of his armour had been replaced over the last few years, but the helmet had stayed true, the same he had worn on the day that they had dropped into the Urgall Depression on Isstvan.

He remembered the moment the shell had exploded. A piece of shrapnel the size of his fist had struck his helm from the airburst. Other pieces of jagged metal had cut down two of his fellow Raven Guard to each side, just a couple of metres away.

With his eyes closed, the oily scent of the conveyor became the smell of blood. The rattle of the chains turned into the chatter of bolters; the buzz of the lumen globe became the hiss of las-blasts.

Agapito swallowed hard, not trying to fight the memories, welcoming them. The cries of the dying were a war song in his thoughts. The thunder of traitor guns was the beat of the drum to which he marched into battle.

With a creak and a bang the conveyor arrived at its destination. Agapito's eyes flicked open, bringing him back to the present.

The doors opened. The commander stood for a moment longer, jaw clenched, eyes narrowed. Taking a breath, he put on his helmet and stepped out.

From just a few hundred metres away it was clear the ship had seen a lot of battle. Its hull was heavily scarred, some of the damage so recent that it hadn't been repaired, leaving gaping rents in its flank. The engines were working, spitting fitful bursts of plasma. Its trajectory was slightly curving; the ship rolled slowly about its prow-stern axis, doubtless a consequence of its unorthodox exit from warp space within the boundary of the Mandeville point.

The lamps of the Thunderhawk played over a stretch of the hull, illuminating plasma burns and large, pale patches of what Agapito knew to be ferrofoam. The close-range auspexes returned only minimal details – residual life signs perhaps, but almost impossible to distinguish from the nascent energies of the plasma reactor and environmental systems.

‘Could be someone aboard,’ said Vanda, examining the gunship’s scanning system.

‘Servitors, vermin, any number of things could still be alive on there without crew,’ replied Agapito.

‘Commander!’ The call from the pilot, Henn, drew their attention through the main canopy. He had lamps fixed on a particular stretch of the frigate’s prow. ‘Not quite so unidentified now.’

The lights showed up a circle of dark blue along the side of the beak-shaped ram. Upon it was a much faded Legion symbol: a winged skull.

‘Night Lords,’ growled Agapito.

The atmosphere in the cockpit grew even tenser. Agapito glared out of the canopy, fists on the console in front.

‘Trust nothing,’ he said. He glanced at Vanda’s screen. ‘Reactor in nominal mode, no chance of an overload.’

‘We should just go back and destroy it from the ship,’ said Vanda. ‘It has to be a trap, and we don’t need a frigate that badly.’

Inside his helm Agapito ground his teeth.

‘Nothing is what it seems with the Night Lords,’ warned Henn. ‘I concur with Vanda.’

Agapito turned his attention to the two other legionaries in the cockpit.

‘Did I ask for a vote?’ he growled. The two Raven Guard bowed their heads in silent apology. ‘But you are right. Henn, take us back to the battle-barge.’

The Night Lords frigate seemed to slide from view as the gunship turned away. A few seconds passed and then the cockpit displays blazed into life, scanner warnings flickering like celebration lights.

‘Commander, we are detecting rapid energy surge,’ reported Jasson over the vox.

‘We’re being targeted,’ added Vanda. ‘Point defence turrets activating!’

Henn pushed the gunship into a rolling dive while automatic countermeasures ejected scanner-baffling clouds of metal filaments and flares behind the accelerating Thunderhawk.

‘Shadowed Guardian, open fire!’ Agapito snapped across the vox.

‘Commander, the blast could–’

The commander’s voice rose to a shout. ‘Blow it out of the stars!’

Klaxons blared as the frigate’s augurs locked onto the jinking gunship; the moan of the sensor warning rose to a wail. A second later Vanda cursed.

‘Rockets launched,’ he said. ‘A score of them full cluster. Thirteen seconds to impact. Cannon rangefinder arrays have locked on.’

Ahead, the bright dot that was the battle-barge flared into an orange star for a moment. A second later trails of plasma silently seared towards the corkscrewing Thunderhawk. The closest passed within a dozen metres. More warning lights and sirens sparked into life from the proximity of the energy blasts.

‘Multiple impacts, no void shields active,’ Vanda remarked, his fingers moving quickly across the runepad of the scanners.

‘Straight and fast!’ Agapito snapped at his pilot. Henn did as ordered, pulling the Thunderhawk from its evasive rolls into a direct course away from the enemy frigate, jets leaving blue trails as it powered across the void.

A salvo of missiles from the Raven Guard ship followed eight seconds after the plasma volley, thankfully some distance away from the still-accelerating gunship. Agapito pulled himself out of his harness and floated across the cockpit to the main gunnery array. He activated the lascannon and turned its feed-link to the stern to look back at the Night Lords ship.

The frigate was aflame from midships to prow; plasma and burning gas licked along its ruptured plates like ripples of iridescent oil. The whine from the targeting detectors had fallen silent, the incoming missiles swallowed by the wave of fire from the Shadowed Guardian. Letting out a long breath, Agapito pulled himself back to his seat. As he dragged on the harness, the vox-link to the Shadowed Guardian crackled into life.

‘Commander, we are detecting multiple signals at the Mandeville boundary.’

‘More ships? Speed, direction?’

‘Coming straight for us. Six ships so far. Navigator Fasuusi thinks there are at least four more about to break through.’

‘Damn,’ muttered Agapito. ‘The ship was the trap, after all. Just not the one we were expecting.’

The first reports were understandably fractured. From first impression it might have seemed plausible that the Night Lords had come across Corax’s rally system by accident. An hour after the initial warp breaches had been detected and the scale of the incursion had grown to thirteen enemy ships, half of them warships of the line and the rest heavy transports, that theory had

been proven terribly false. Aboard the Avenger, his occasional flagship, the primarch had to concede the inevitable.

Branne, the commander of the Raptors company, was talking with Strategium Controller Ephrenia, discussing the continuing emergence of enemy ships. They fell silent as Corax approached.

‘This is a deliberate attempt to wipe us out.’ The primarch grimaced and turned his gaze from the screens to address his subordinates. ‘Look at their dispositions. Directly across the shortest route to the Mandeville boundary.’

‘And I’d bet my bolter as soon as we start moving the other way, some more ships are going to come in-system ahead of us,’ replied Branne. ‘They’re trying to flush us like game birds.’

‘We need to scatter.’ Branne looked horrified at Corax’s assessment, but the primarch cut off any protest before it could be voiced. ‘We are outclassed.’

‘We have time to call in more ships,’ suggested Ephrenia. ‘There are patrols in the neighbouring systems.’

‘Are there? Have we heard from them recently?’

Branne stepped back and sucked in a deep breath.

‘The Night Lords couldn’t possibly..’ He fell quiet, expression dark as the possibilities hit home. ‘How did we miss them?’

‘More to the point, how did they find us? I assume all of our ships followed proper jump security protocols. Nobody led them back here.’

‘And now, right now, when we are waiting for the victualling fleet from Essiry.’

‘Ah, of course. The supply convoy. Perhaps our security leak might be traced there.’

‘Why would the Essiryans betray us? We saved them from a Word Bearers invasion.’

‘Exactly, and where Lorgar’s minions are found so are his lies.’ Corax rubbed his forehead, agitated at the turn of events. ‘It only takes a handful of discontents to manufacture a betrayal, Branne. Someone that sought to profit from Horus’s patronage, perhaps.’

‘I suppose conjecture is pointless now,’ said Branne. ‘But we can still fight. If they think they can herd us like docile grox to the slaughter, we’ll offend them. One concerted strike, directly towards their main fleet. Let’s see if they have the stomach for a proper battle.’

‘I have not,’ Corax said quietly. His pronouncement stunned Branne for a second time. ‘At least, not here, not now. We are unprepared, under-strength and short of supplies.’

‘And that is what our enemies expect. They think we are weak. We will prove them wrong.’

‘We will not,’ Corax whispered. He looked at the legionaries and auxiliaries in the strategium chamber and kept his voice low. ‘I have not carefully marshalled our strength since Isstvan to throw it away in a gesture of pointless defiance. We may not be as weak as some think, but we are weak. We have been since these faithless traitors turned their guns on us.’

The primarch saw disappointment in Branne’s expression, read the desire to argue further in his eyes. Ephrenia’s expression was guarded but he saw agreement. It was useful to have a touchstone like her. Brave, clever, but unaugmented. Mortal.

A human perspective. The corners of her mouth were turned down slightly, her jaw tight. She would say nothing, but she was worried. And she had cause to be.

‘This is not a battle we can win.’ He could still picture Branne as the headstrong teenager that had been at the forefront of the revolt on Deliverance. The Raven Guard were Corax’s gene-sons, but some of them, like Branne, were akin to his brothers. He laid a

hand on the commander's shoulder. 'There may come a day when we have no option, when the battle itself, the chance to fight, is the only victory we seek. Not today.'

'Where do we run?' asked Branne, resignation in his voice. 'Our scouting patrols and the Librarians are reporting that more and more traitors are entering the surrounding sectors. The Warmaster moves his forces into the Segmentum Solar.'

'It is true. There is a gathering, a growing momentum. We are reaching a tipping point, the moment of decision.' Corax looked away to stare at nothing in particular. In his mind's eyes he pictured the star map extending a few hundred light years around Dexius. 'Horus is going to assault Earth. He must strike soon. We've seen his forces scattering, dissipating, commanders going rogue, planets slipping from his grasp with the lightest of encouragement. I think he knows that he must make his push now or lose the opportunity forever.'

'So, we return to Terra.' Branne's smile was more wry than humoured. 'It is time to stand upon a wall with the sons of Dorn and meet the traitors head-on.'

'Not so, commander.'

Corax moved to his command throne and activated one of the controls. A three-dimensional representation of the surrounding sectors glittered into life. He manipulated the hololith, its scope expanding as though the observer drew a few thousand light years further away.

'The Navigators have reported a decrease in the warp storms and the Librarians say that it is as if a tide has shifted. I think it will be possible to break out from under the weight of Horus' incoming fleets and move behind them.'

'We continue the guerrilla war?'

'You sound doubtful, commander.'

‘If Horus is going to press for Terra, I don’t think he is going to care about the systems he leaves behind. The Imperial Palace is the prize. Once he has it he can reclaim as many worlds as he wants. A second and much darker crusade...’

‘If we were to continue as we were, that would be true. But we will not. I will reassemble the Legion in full, and such auxilia as remain to be drawn to my banner. A fighting force that must still be contended against.’ Corax stroked his chin, contemplating the idea. ‘We’ll find the Warmaster himself. Stay close to his Legion all the way to the Solar System. Horus won’t be able to ignore a dagger aimed directly at his back.’

Branne nodded, his eyes filled with a fresh enthusiasm.

‘How do we extricate ourselves from the Night Lords?’ asked Ephrenia, always concerned with the practical nature of war. ‘Reflex shields and silent running, my lord?’

‘No, I do not think that will work this time. They found us here, they may well already know our disposition in detail. We need to scatter the fleet, draw the enemy in all directions.’

‘And where do we rendezvous, my lord?’ she asked.

Corax considered the void schematic, lips pursed. A long, pale finger pierced the hololith light to indicate a system.

‘Rosario?’ Branne frowned. ‘A waste-hole. There’s virtually nothing there. Some disaster with an alien species rendered it almost lifeless.’

‘Exactly,’ replied the primarch. ‘I want astropaths and Librarians broadcasting cipher nav-codes immediately. Be sure they also dedicate some messages for the Therions to pick up. Despatch standard protocol evasion orders to the fleet.’

‘Attack, withdraw, attack again, my lord?’

‘Something like that, Branne. Something like that.’

The thunder of the Shadowed Guardian's guns died away, leaving the bridge comparatively still. Agapito took a moment to appreciate the quiet while the scanner team assessed the damage from the salvo. They were less than half a day from a safe warp translation, one of the last Raven Guard vessels not to have reached the Mandeville point. The Night Lords strike cruiser had sacrificed itself – there was no chance of it taking down the much larger battle-barge – but perhaps its commander had hoped to damage the engines or other-wise stall the Shadowed Guardian for other pursuing forces.

'Enemy ship has been breached, commander,' reported the senior scanner operator. 'Void shields non-functional. Weapon systems non-functional. Navigation compromised.'

'They're crippled, commander, no longer a threat,' said Jasson, as though this needed pointing out. Agapito shook his head.

'No longer a threat? It seems likely the Night Lords have taken one of our victualling convoys – we've just abandoned docking facilities for a score of ships. Two weeks maximum, and this strike cruiser will be in action again.'

The whine of power armour told Agapito of Captain Chovani's approach. The newly promoted officer motioned for Jasson to give him some time with their superior.

'We are trying to escape, aren't we?' the captain asked. 'Those were the lord primarch's orders.'

'There's not another ship between us and the outer system,' Agapito replied. 'The nearest pursuit is two hours behind us. We can spare a little time.'

'To blast the ship to pieces?'

'Our supplies are low, captain,' Agapito said with a solemn shake of the head. 'I do not think it wise to expend more torpedoes or shells here.'

‘No bombardment?’

‘We’ll board. I want to see if we can find out where these Night Lords sprang from. This is a considerable fleet, but for three years we’ve seen nothing more than one or two ships from Curze’s Legion. Why have they turned up all of a sudden? Are you not curious?’

Chovani’s silence answered for him.

‘The problem with bombardment, captain, is that it is inefficient. Massive expenditure of ordnance and still no guarantee that there are no survivors. I think it is our duty to ensure that not one of them survives to continue the fight against the Emperor.’ Agapito leaned closer. ‘Remember Isstvan, brother. Remember whose colours were at the forefront of the ambush. It may have been the guns of the Iron Warriors that fired first, but it was the Night Lords and Word Bearers that plunged in the blade.’

The captain’s brow furrowed to a fierce scowl at the thought.

‘We have seven suits of Tactical Dreadnought armour still operational, captain,’ Agapito continued. ‘I assume the teleporters are still working. Would you like to pay the treacherous sons of Nostramo a visit? Maybe ask them some awkward questions?’

Chovani nodded his agreement. Agapito signalled for Jasson to assume control of the bridge. He led his fellow Raven Guard down to the armoury and called for his command squad to assemble there.

As he and the others stripped out of their regular war-plate and, with the assistance of the techmarines and their attendants, donned the much heavier-gauge Terminator armour, the commander set a countdown timer into his suit’s chronometer. By the time they were fully geared up, weapons loaded, and on the teleporter grid they would have forty-one minutes before the pursuing flotilla of Night Lords was in range of the Shadowed Guardian.

‘Bridge, confirm teleporter homer lock.’

It took several seconds for Jasson to ascertain the strength of the beacon signals for the Terminator suits.

‘Homing signal lock confirmed, commander.’

‘Automatic retrieval in thirty minutes, watch captain. We’ll not let the Night Lords get too close.’

‘Affirmative, commander. Engines and navigation will be on full standby for your return.’

Agapito did a last check with his companions, ensuring their integrated surveyor systems were operating properly. Assured that their suits were in fully functioning order, he gave the command to the tech-priests at the teleport controls.

The whine of the generators grew to piercing pitch, and the flash of artificial lightning surged across the generator columns. Sparks of power oscillated up and down each armoured warrior, the frequency building over several seconds until each was engulfed head to foot in a curtain of golden light.

The deck of the Shadowed Guardian disappeared.

For a timeless instant Agapito was exposed to the incongruous immaterium, utterly divorced from reality and conventional space-time. Subjective experience lasted a few seconds – a few seconds in which Agapito’s thoughts clustered with the roar of traitor batteries and the crack of splitting ceramite as the opening cannonade of the Iron Warriors fell upon the companies of the XIX Legion...

The fleeting feeling that occupied him as a dimly lit corridor resolved into focus around him was of confusion – a momentary bafflement that he could not remember anything from before the Dropsite Massacre.

More immediate concerns shunted that revelation to the back of his mind when a bolt-shell exploded against his left shoulder.

He turned and fired without conscious thought. The two barrels of his combi-bolter spat a hail of rounds at the midnight-blue armour of the Night Lord who had happened upon the boarding team, detonations wracking the traitor's plate from hip to gorget. A moment later the fire of two more Terminators tore at the ceramite, obliterating the plastron and turning the Space Marine within to bloody gobbets.

Agapito smiled.

'With me. Punishment is due.'

They headed in the direction of the command deck. Tactical data placed them somewhere amidships, about three levels below the bridge. Gangly, starved humans in filthy rags with whip-scourged flesh fled before their advance.

'Hold your fire,' Agapito told his warriors. 'These are slaves, not slavers.'

They pushed on towards the prow, unopposed, reaching the central access way that ran most of the ship's length. As they did so, Agapito noticed movement on the upper floor of the main arterial corridor. Floods of unaugmented humans, many of them not much older than children, streamed along the walkways and mezzanines. The pattering of naked feet and drum of boots disappeared towards the stern, away from the command bridge and, Agapito assumed, the rulers of the vessel.

'What do they know that we don't?' joked Corbyk.

Agapito said nothing, having come to the same conclusion but without mirth.

'Scanners to maximum. Anything comes near, kill it, slave or not.' The commander switched his vox-channel to signal the Shadowed Guardian. 'Confirm teleport recall signal.'

'Still clear, commander. No interference. We can you bring you back instantly.'

‘I want an active scan, precision burst directed at the command bridge area.’

‘Understood. Directing the surveyors and compiling data will take approximately one hundred and twenty seconds.’

‘Yes, just do it.’

They continued their advance, the lamps of their suits shining bright beams through the murk of the ship’s gloomy belly. They did not veer from their course, but looking into some of the adjacent chambers – magazines, storerooms and dorms for the most part – they found a lot of detritus and graffiti. Agapito had thought the poor lighting was some kind of energy conservation measure but the entire ship was in disrepair. Maintenance was clearly poor, with exposed cabling, broken lighting and intermittent atmospheric cleansers in several halls and corridors. The decks were rusting from lack of care and the bulkhead paint was peeled down to the bare metal and plasteel in many places.

Agapito checked the chronometer. They had eighteen minutes remaining before the automatic teleport would take them back to the battle-barge.

‘We don’t have time to clear the upper decks,’ he told the others. ‘We’ll head directly to the bridge.’

‘Access steps, quadrant four,’ replied Corbyk. ‘I wouldn’t trust the conveyors, not with the state of everything else.’

‘Good point. We’ll take the stairs.’

The stairwell was made of solid ferrocete, reinforced with a mesh of plasteel, strong enough to hold the weight of the Terminators – a benefit of boarding a Legiones Astartes ship. They had ascended two flights to the deck above when Jasson’s voice cut through the background hiss of the long-range vox.

‘No concentration of personnel, or force. Minimal readings from your objective, commander.’

‘Minimal readings? What does that mean, watch captain?’

‘Just background energy signature from the vessel itself, commander. I would say the bridge is inactive, if anything. There should be some kind of blip on one of the scales – vox-traffic, energy grid, life signals from the servitors. Nothing, commander, just the background noise of the ship systems.’

‘I hate Night Lords,’ muttered Chovani. ‘Cowards, all of them.’

‘At least Word Bearers just fight you,’ added Corbyk. ‘That’s the sort of despotic traitor I can admire.’

‘Focus, all of you,’ growled Agapito. ‘Jasson, you keep monitoring the surveyors. Anything spikes, anything looking like a reactor surge, any dip in beacon quality, you teleport us straight back.’

‘Yes, commander.’ Jasson did his best not to sound too put upon. ‘We’ll be monitoring for any threat.’

The stairwell was completely dark. The steps were heavily tarnished and a brief olfactory analysis confirmed the presence of dried blood.

‘Here,’ said Gal, his power fist pointing at a line of deep holes in the plastered wall. ‘Bolt impacts.’

‘We’re not the first friends to come calling,’ said Corbyk.

Their sensors flared with a renewed energy source a moment before Agapito heard boots on the steps above. A second later the walls echoed with metallic rings, their source revealed as several grenades bounded down the steps from the landing above.

‘Frag charges,’ Agapito said dismissively, recognising the pattern of the grenades. He continued up two steps before the grenades detonated with three successive cracks, the noise magnified by the confined space. Fire and shrapnel engulfed the massive greaves of his Tactical Dreadnought suit. The blast scratched and burned the black paint and gilding, but did no

actual damage to the heavy gauge layered ceramite and adamantium.

‘Gal! Take the lead.’

The commander stepped aside as best he could, turning so that the heavy-flamer-armed legionary could fit past on the steps. Reaching the mid-flight turn, Gal raised his weapon and unleashed a burst of burning promethium around the corner, the wave of flame filling the space beyond.

Agapito pushed into the still-burning residue, armour capable of operating in magma vaults more than enough protection against the heat. Through the haze he saw two Night Lords, one of them slapping at a burning slick of promethium on the backpack of the other.

He burst from the flames at full speed, the elongated claws of his left gauntlet already in motion. The closest Night Lord had time only to half turn before the crackling fist connected with the side of his helmet. Ceramite and skull snapped apart at the touch of the gleaming energy field, component atoms scattered by the disruptive effect of the lightning claw.

The second traitor ducked beneath the swing, bringing up his bolter to fire a long burst into Agapito’s chest even as the commander’s momentum carried him directly into the Night Lord. Agapito stumbled as the traitor fell. The Night Lord’s leg armour buckled beneath the weight of the Terminator war-plate. Agapito’s second stride landed on the traitor’s arm and crushed the elbow into the edge of the reinforced ferrocrete step, messily severing the limb.

He turned, weight grinding the remains of the Night Lord’s arm to splinters of ceramite and mashed flesh, tearing forth a drawn-out bellow of pain, until Agapito dropped to one knee to drive the points of two claws through the eye lenses of the traitor. Sparks scattered like embers on a breeze when the claws speared

from the back of the Night Lord's head and earthed through the step.

The squad regrouped at the next landing, one deck below the bridge entrance. Another quick consultation with the Shadowed Guardian confirmed that there were no new readings of note from the command chamber.

'We hit hard, we hit first and last,' Agapito told his warriors as they ascended the final flight of steps.

The stair brought them into an access passage about ten metres wide, some thirty metres from the armoured gate of the main bridge access. The portal was closed, an immense single plate that had been dropped across the doorway.

'This might take a moment,' said Corbyk. He hefted his thunder hammer meaningfully as he advanced. 'Watch my back.'

He was a few strides from the portal, the others following close behind, when a hydraulic hiss resounded down the corridor. Gears rumbled in the depth of the wall and the portal rose up to reveal a hellish ruddy glow streaming from the interior of the main bridge. A crimson fog billowed around the Terminators, its touch registering freezing cold on their sensors.

They stood looking at the open gateway, weapons at the ready. No enemy emerged, and sensors detected no movement within the bridge.

'Are we supposed to just step inside?' asked Gal.

'I really hate Night Lords,' Chovani muttered.

Agapito forged forward, determined to show no fear.

'Let's end this.'

The red glow permeated the shifting cloud, seeming to come from everywhere and nowhere when Agapito crossed the threshold. After two more paces he saw that in fact the ruddy aura came from nothing more unnatural than the console screens of

several abandoned stations. Armoured figures lay slumped at each position.

The clumps of the others' footfalls were muted as they followed, and the squad spread out to fill the twenty-metre broad semi-circular area at the centre of the command deck. Above was a small mezzanine shrouded with darkness. Steps descended into horseshoe-shaped sub-levels to the left and right, lit by fitful green flickering from malfunctioning displays. Here too the servitors had been removed and several key systems were monitored by legionaries, their armour leaning awkwardly where they had fallen.

'What killed them?' asked Corbyk as he approached the closest.

'This is wrong,' said Gal, panning his suit lamps through the murk.

'Oh really?' Corbyk replied sarcastically.

'Look at them!' insisted Gal.

Agapito examined the armoured forms. In the pale light of Gal's lamps he saw that the war-plate was not dark blue as he had thought, but lighter in colour. As the Raven Guard played the beam of his lights onward he revealed a symbol on the closest body's shoulder pad – an inverted omega on a white circle.

'Ultramarines?' whispered Agapito. 'How did they...? What are they doing here?'

Corbyk reached out and moved a corpse. At least, he attempted to. At his touch, rather than falling away from his hand, it wobbled slightly and then turned.

The vox crackled into life, a cross-Legion frequency, and a nerve-jangling screech pierced Agapito's ears. Judging by the shouts and swearing from the others, he was not alone in hearing it. After a moment the wailing dropped to a drawn-out hiss, which then turned into a whispered voice.

‘Flee...’

Agapito stepped back at another shout from Corbyk. The thing they had taken to be a corpse was rising up, pushing itself to its feet. Around them the other armoured forms were moving also. The red gleam of the monitors brightened, started to fluctuate with an arrhythmic pulsing.

‘Flee...’ insisted the vox-whisper again. ‘It devours...’

The Terminators unconsciously formed a circle. Back to back, weapons raised towards the apparitions lifting out of the gloom. Eight bore the livery of the Ultramarines, but two more of them, Agapito noticed, had the black war-plate and sigils of the Lion’s Dark Angels.

More lights flared into illumination as systems came online, their gleam like will o’ the wisps in the roiling smog.

‘Something, a kind of tether,’ said Corbyk.

Agapito couldn’t see at first to what the Raven Guard referred. When one of the Dark Angels swayed, turning slightly with a hand flapping uselessly at an empty pistol holster at its waist, the commander saw something connecting the Space Marine’s armour to the command station. It looked like coiled cable on first impression, but there was an altogether more organic slick to the fluid that dribbled from the crack in the legionary’s plastron, and the piping quivered with its own life; bulges travelled along its serpentine loops from the legionary to the console. There were bloody handprints on the runepad of the monitoring position.

With a crackle that startled Agapito, the main display burst into brightness, obscured by the bank of mist. The internal speakers boomed into life with a fierce growling while an impression of a monstrous face started to coalesce on the crystal panes of the screen. Agapito was filled with an impression of something unnatural, something immensely powerful coming

closer, like the bow wave of a huge ship coming to a quayside. A leviathan surfacing.

‘Get us out of here, commander!’ snapped Corbyk. ‘This place is warp-touched!’

‘Not yet,’ Agapito replied. He calmed himself with a deep breath and aimed his bolter at one of the Ultramarines. ‘First we give these poor servants of the Emperor the peace they’ve earned.’

He opened fire, and his bolts split open the helm of his target. The others joined in, pouring their fusillade into the juddering legionaries. A howl of pain and rage echoed from the address system. Gal opened up his heavy flamer with a long burst, turning in a broad arc to engulf the consoles with burning promethium. Circuits exploded and screens cracked while Agapito’s suit registered the swiftly rising temperature. He looked around the blazing bridge space to assure himself that everything was alight. Nothing mortal would survive the growing conflagration.

Pooling promethium crept towards his foot as Gal fired again, his grunts of satisfaction audible across the vox. Agapito looked down into the crawling fire and thought of the phosphex missiles that the Night Lords had unleashed at the Dropsite Massacre...

The flame was almost at his foot, mesmerising him.

‘Commander!’

He was not sure who had shouted but the call broke him out of his distraction. Not yet time for his end, his peace. The war was not over. Not yet.

‘Shadowed Guardian, emergency recall teleport. Now!’

A second and a lifetime later, the commander’s atoms reconfigured on the pads of the teleport bay. As soon as he had regained his equilibrium, a matter of a couple of seconds, Agapito checked the chronometer. Twenty-three minutes until the pursuing ships were at extreme range.

‘Command, full bombardment of the target.’

‘What about our supplies, commander?’

‘Damn the supplies, Jasson. Fire everything we have and keep firing until that ship is vapour!’

Two

Corax waited in his personal chambers and took the opportunity to review the last crew strength and munitions reports from Branne. It was not pleasant reading. Waiting for the victualling convoy had been a calculated risk, tying the Raven Guard to a single system for several weeks. That it had been delayed – intercepted by the Night Lords, Corax believed in retrospect – should have been a warning. But the parlous state of the Raven Guard’s non-legionary strength and supplies had forced Corax into the elongated stay.

That they had not been able to resupply at all verged on disaster. Choosing a near-dead system like Rosario had advantages in stealth, but, since the alien intervention that had befallen the system years earlier, its facilities to deal with a war fleet were severely limited.

A chime turned Corax in his chair, and he activated the door controls. It slid open to reveal Balsar Kurthuri, the blue blazon of the Librarius once more breaking the black of his armour on the

right shoulder. He wore no helmet; the cables of his psychic hood framed a face that was drawn, the skin hanging a little loose, eyes deeply sunken and underlined with darkness. His gaze flitted around the chamber for several seconds before it settled on Corax, who bid the Librarian to enter.

‘A communication, your message said.’ Corax invited Kurthuri to sit in one of the chairs set before his table but the Librarian declined with a gentle shake of the head. ‘A warp dream?’

‘Something more directed, my lord. The warp has been settling for some time now and our broadcasts have been reaching further and further. Two hours ago I felt a presence, another ship in the warp with us. I consulted with the Navigators and they confirmed that they could see something else sharing the same current. An hour ago I felt a direct contact.’

Corax leaned forward, hands resting on the table top.

‘What sort of contact?’

‘A message. A request. The other ship belongs to the Iron Hands. They have asked that we drop from warp in the Ukell System a few light years from here.’

‘To what end? I have no reason to trust that this is anything but an attempt to lure us into a trap.’

‘I have... touched upon the mind of the other Librarian. Or, I suppose you might say, the ripples of our thoughts have crossed. He is genuine, in my opinion. Certainly from the Iron Hands.’

‘The Iron Hands have no Librarians, Balsar. My brother, Ferrus Manus, was not overly keen on the use of warp-born powers. I am surprised you do not recall as such. That skews the matter, does it not?’

‘The Gorgon founded no formal Librarius, my lord, but his Legion does have psykers trained in our methods. I attest that he is loyal.’

‘Would you wager our lives on such vouchsafe?’

Kurthuri hesitated and then nodded.

‘Very well,’ continued Corax. ‘What did this Iron Hand desire of us?’

‘His commander wishes to speak with you, to exchange intelligence.’

‘Why can you not do this through your “contact”?’

Kurthuri shrugged. ‘It is warp-thought, not a precise system for communicating, my lord. I do not think there is any harm in diverting to Ukell. We are one ship. Easy enough to disengage and break back to warp if there is trouble.’

Corax considered this for a few moments, weighing up the potential for fresh reinforcements against the possibility of attack.

‘I will defer to your counsel, Balsar.’ He nodded and gestured for the Librarian to leave. ‘Inform them we will rendezvous at Ukell, but nothing more. Pass the order to Branne to tell the Navigators to re-plot our course.’

When Kurthuri had left, Corax sat for some time in thought. The restored Librarian had been essential for the vetting of new arrivals to his ad hoc force, and Kurthuri had been at the heart of that. Yet the powers of the warp were so fickle. He had seen first hand what a corrupting influence they could be. Years of war against traitors that had bargained their lives away in return for the power of the immaterium had taught Corax to be cautious in dealing with such matters. Though practical necessity required the Librarians to be active again, the primarch could not shake the feeling that the Emperor’s decree to cease their use could not be ignored entirely.

The Emperor had warned against their use for a reason, and perhaps the treachery of Horus and his allies was the proof of that warning.

The Light of Battle was a small patrol cruiser, dwarfed by the Avenger as the Raven Guard battle-barge moved within a few thousand kilometres to welcome aboard the Iron Hands delegation.

‘They can’t be carrying more than fifty legionaries,’ observed Branne as a pair of Thunderhawks left the patrol ship’s flight bays. ‘How have they survived alone all this time?’

‘You think they have sworn for another master?’ said Corax, standing beside the commander in the flight deck chosen to welcome the arrivals. He looked at their escort. A hundred Raven Guard, clean-limbed Raptors from Branne’s company, waited along the sides of the aircraft deck, bolters and heavy weapons at the ready, their black Mark VI armour shining in the docking lights. ‘Are there other precautions you wish to have taken?’

‘I’d prefer you not to be here, my lord,’ said Branne. ‘What if they have brought charges to detonate? They could fly their gunships directly into us, use them as missiles.’

‘You have become inventively suspicious of late, Branne.’

‘Not really, my lord. I’m just remembering how we rigged shuttles to drop atomic charges on Kiavahr...’

Corax did not reply. It was an unwelcome reminder of another dark time that had necessitated extreme actions. Would such ruthless measures be needed again before Horus was defeated? Very likely.

‘Kurthuri assures me that he and his Librarius-brothers detect no malignant intent,’ he said, trying to lighten his own mood as much as reassure Branne.

‘And you trust that against all risk, my lord?’

Corax looked sharply at his commander. ‘You have firm reason not to? Am I to fear all encounters from now on, based on nothing greater than the fact that we have enemies?’

This time it was Branne who chose to remain silent. He did not meet his primarch's gaze, but stared intently out through the docking screen that shimmered across the open wall of the flight bay.

Soon enough the glimmers of plasma engines resolved into the shape of two metallic-and-black painted Thunderhawks, their blunt noses adorned with the badges of the Iron Hands Legion. They slowed and passed through the navigational shield, turning flankwards to the primarch as they settled on bursts of landing jets.

The ramp descended and a single figure emerged. Branne grunted, nonplussed, and Corax shared his surprise. The large shape of a Dreadnought descended, a bulky war engine almost as tall as the primarch and just as broad.

From the other Thunderhawk two Terminator-armoured figures emerged, both of them sporting multi-barrelled rotary canons and power fists. Upon their armour they bore back banners stitched with the insignia of the X Legion and other devices of their company. They fell in beside the Dreadnought, one to each side. Looking closely, Corax did not recognise the class of armour they wore – some specialist derivative of the Iron Hands.

'I am Iron Father Kardozia,' the Dreadnought intoned, its bass voice echoing across the flight bay. 'Apologies that my form does not allow me to show proper deference with a bow.'

'You... You are excused that formality, Iron Father,' Corax replied after a moment. 'This is Branne, one of my commanders. Branne, you may dismiss the escort.'

The commander hesitated for a second and then nodded. A moment later the Raptors, having received the order across the vox, presented their weapons in salute to the Iron Hands and then turned to file out of the bay doors.

Corax waited, unsure how to proceed. It seemed impolitic to continue the audience in the flight bay as though hosting a guest on the doorstep, but the Iron Father's incarceration made other arrangements difficult. Corax, for the first time since he had grown to his full size, suddenly appreciated the vexations others must have undergone when confronted with the reality of playing host to a primarch.

'Follow me, Iron Father,' he said. Better to make no particular remark on the Iron Hand's internment. 'We can speak in one of the briefing halls.'

'That would be accommodating, Lord Corax.'

The Dreadnought's feet thudded on the deck as Corax turned towards the doors and led the party to the adjoining corridor. Fortunately, he had long been accustomed to navigating his way around the Avenger in a manner that suited his size, and so was able to lead Kardozia to the prepared audience chamber without unnecessary diversion. On entering the hall the two Terminators, who had not spoken nor been identified during the journey, took station on either side of the large doors.

Branne set himself at the controls of the large holoslate that dominated the wall of the briefing chamber, while Corax stood to one side. Pneumatics hissing, the Iron Father settled a couple of metres from the primarch.

'My Navigators report that your ship is alone, Lord Corax,' Kardozia began. 'I am surprised to find a primarch in charge of such a small force, even as I am heartened to learn that the rumours of your survival on Isstvan have proven true.'

'It is the nature of the war that we fight on many fronts,' Corax replied, unwilling to concede any more strategic information than was necessary.

'That is a truth we have all been forced to accept,' said the Iron Father. 'My command and I were not at Isstvan, and I cannot

say whether I would wish that we had been there or not. So terrible to have been absent from the battle, yet we are alive to continue the fight, unlike so many of our Legion brothers.'

'The loss of the Gorgon is a hard burden,' Corax said carefully, not quite sure where the conversation was leading. 'It is to the credit of the Tenth that their desire for battle endures even now. And, by account, they continue to be a force that Horus would be foolish to ignore.'

'That is our hope. We are few in number, three squads in all, but we have done what we can to disrupt Horus' preparations for an attack on Terra. Now that his advance seems imminent I thought it best to move to the defence of the Throneworld.'

'You believe Horus is making his final move, Iron Father?' Branne asked.

'We have patrolled the warp lanes in this and neighbouring sectors since we learned of the treachery at Isstvan, commander. Pirates, you might call us, picking on such merchants that aid the enemy, ambushing warships within our potential to destroy. Over the last months the size of the flotillas passing through have grown and grown.' The Dreadnought swivelled its sarcophagus to face the primarch. 'A new offensive has begun already, Lord Corax.'

'So you intend to fight at Terra. I must inform you that it is, for the moment at least, not my plan to return to the Solar System.' Corax knitted his fingers together and held them to his chest. 'You are welcome to join our force, subject to my command, and continue the war from behind the advance of the enemy. Or, if you desire, you may continue on your way without delay.'

'Though I had resolved to make the journey to Terra, the battle of which I speak is not for the Throneworld, not yet. Though confronted by overwhelming force of late, we have not been without targets of opportunity. These smaller supply ships and renegade traders have furnished me with fresh knowledge. The

attention of the Warmaster seems to be turning towards the region of Beta-Garmon. Legions loyal to the Emperor and those that turned have been committing ever greater forces to the battle for an important conduit system.'

'Beta-Garmon?' Branne shook his head and started working on the hololith controls.

'I know it,' said Corax. 'One of the core jump worlds, a perfect system from which to launch the final attack on Earth.'

'Then you agree that it is imperative Horus cannot be allowed to take Beta-Garmon,' said Kardozia. 'I would be honoured to fight beside the warriors of the Nineteenth Legion.'

'Your assessment is flawed, Iron Father,' Corax said slowly. 'Or, at the least, presumptuous. I concur that Beta-Garmon is perhaps the most significant warzone prior to the invasion of the Solar System itself. I do not believe that the best way to contest it is to join the battle already underway.'

'I am perhaps bound by a different logic of war, Lord Corax, but I cannot make sense of such a declaration. How does one win a battle unless one takes part?'

'I have a few doctrines, on war and leadership, that guide my decisions. They are called my Axioms. Paramount is the Axiom of Victory. To be where the enemy does not desire you to be. If Horus pulls his forces towards Beta-Garmon you can be sure that he is confident of victory – whether swift or hard-fought. I have never known him to swing a blow without him knowing exactly how it would land. If he chooses Beta-Garmon, we must fight elsewhere.'

The Iron Father remained silent.

'I understand that this may seem difficult, but do you concede the truth of what I say?' Corax forced a smile. 'You may disagree. I am always open to new counsel.'

'To concede the battle to Horus simply because he desires it would be counter-productive, Lord Corax. A fulfilment of what the

renegade Warmaster desires. His objective is to seize Beta-Garmon and thus stage an attack directly on Terra.'

Corax shook his head, his smile disappearing. 'No, that is limited thinking, Iron Father. I mean no criticism of your method, but your conclusion is wrong. Horus desires to conquer Terra and it is this goal we must thwart. Nothing before that conflict is of consequence save as it affects that final battle. What worth the warrior who dies at Beta-Garmon if the traitors enter the Solar System?'

'Better that we stay the Warmaster's hand before it reaches Terra, or weaken his forces such that the last battle is beyond him.'

Corax stroked his lip with a long, slender finger, thinking how best to phrase his thoughts. While he was unconcerned with convincing Kardozia about the correctness of his strategy, the chance to voice his thoughts aloud, to pit them against a mind not shaped by his own Axioms, was a worthwhile endeavour in itself.

'Consider not only the actions of our enemies, but also our allies. Horus desires battle at Beta-Garmon. By your account he has despatched considerable force there. Who contests the system against him?'

'I cannot say for sure, Lord Corax. I am fortunate to have Brother Dalves, a warp-wielder, in my entourage. One of only a handful possessed by our Legion. Assisted by my astropath he has detected or received, like your signal, many broadcasts from ships heading to the battle zone. I have also drawn my conclusion from the effort the traitors are evidently expending to take the system – if it were only lightly contested such measures would not be needed. Many armies have responded, I believe, as well as forge worlds and scattered warriors of my own Legion.'

'And have you news of the Praetorian? Has Dorn moved from Terra to fight at Beta-Garmon? Do the Custodian Guard ride out to

take the battle to Horus? Maybe the Emperor himself has set forth as well?’

‘I have not heard-’

‘If such a thing occurred, we would hear the clarions across the galaxy, storms or no. If the Emperor, Malcador and Dorn do not move towards Beta-Garmon, be sure they think the battle there is already lost. Horus does not fight battles he cannot win, nor do my other brothers nor my father. Why should I throw myself onto this pyre that the Warmaster has built?’

The Iron Father was silent for some time, remaining motionless as he analysed the primarch’s words. Corax knew that the warriors of the X Legion valued cold logic, the knowledge of metal rather than the emotion of flesh. Had he presented a logic that would sway the Iron Hand?

After a while, the Dreadnought stirred into life once more, rising up on straightened legs.

‘It seems that we have discord, Lord Corax. I cannot ignore the calls of my gene-brothers any more than if they came from the lips of the Gorgon himself.’ The Iron Father lifted a clawed fist in salute. ‘I know that others think we aspire to be machines, but we are misrepresented. The desire to eliminate mortal folly, and fleshly weakness, is not to dehumanise ourselves, but to be better men. Inside this metal case remains what is left of my body, the carcass that continues to hold my spirit. Being somewhat closer to machinehood than most of my brothers in the Tenth gives me a specific viewpoint. That spirit is the essence of what I am, what it means to be a defender of humanity. I do not fault your reasoning, but I wish it were otherwise. It seems to me that risks must be taken. We cannot concede every battle to the Warmaster without contest, even if we cannot hope to win. The struggle, the degradation of his armies, is a worthy objective in itself.’

Corax raised his fist to return the salute, neither disappointed nor surprised by the passage of the conversation.

‘If I had spare supplies then I would offer them,’ said the primarch. ‘But I wish you all speed to Beta-Garmon, where I am sure you will fight with distinction and honour the memory of my brother, Ferrus Manus.’

‘We fight not to honour his memory,’ the Dreadnought said, his vocalisers hissing in a metallic approximation of a sigh. ‘All that is left is vengeance.’

‘Branne, please escort the Iron Father back to his gunship. When he has departed, direct the bridge to make way for the jump-point as quickly as possible and then return to me.’

‘As you command, my lord.’ Branne set off towards the door, the Dreadnought stomping after him. The Terminator guards fell in behind their master and then Corax was alone with his thoughts.

The primarch activated the holo-slate. He had a perfect memory of the star cluster where Beta-Garmon was situated and had already calculated the different jump times and distances depending on whether he departed directly, or went via Rosario and through assorted other routes. Seeing the stars spread out in the three-dimensional display helped him clarify his thinking, just as speaking to Kardozia or one of his subordinates brought additional perspective.

It was thus, finger on lip, staring at the display, that Branne found him ten minutes later. The commander looked at the hololith system markers and frowned.

‘I thought we were not going to Beta-Garmon, my lord.’

‘We’re not.’ Corax turned his gaze to the commander. ‘We are in no position to reveal our true strength, or lack of it, nor confront a massed enemy in open battle, no matter how many allies wait for us. But if the war is there, perhaps it would be wise to be near Beta-Garmon all the same.’

‘To be other than where the enemy desires us?’ said Branne.

Corax nodded.

Though only a few light years from Corax's original course, the diversion to Ukell and attendant deceleration and acceleration had put the Avenger several days behind its projected timeline. It was no surprise to find that the majority of the Raven Guard fleet had preceded the primarch's ship and were waiting in the Rosario System when the Avenger arrived. Corax's first action was to bring his commanders to the battle-barge for a war council, to discuss the news brought to him by Kardozia. While the ranking officers were brought aboard the Avenger, the other ships were despatched to Rosario itself to see to whom the planet currently owed its loyalties, what supplies could be scavenged and if there were any vessels or troops that could be commandeered.

The council met in the same chamber where Corax had hosted the Iron Father, each commander attended by a handful of their staff. The primarch knew them all by sight – as his force had become smaller and smaller it more closely resembled the uprising on Lycaeus. They operated more like cells than companies, individual operation and initiative over rigid structure and central command.

Branne was flanked by two of his Raptors – one each of the 'smooths' and the 'roughs' as they had unofficially called themselves. Representing the pure-gene detachment of the company was Xanda Neroka, the lieutenant markings on his Mark VI armour fresh and bright. Beside him hunched Navar Hef, a physical monstrosity of tufted hair, fangs and yellow eyes. There were fewer and fewer of the roughs: most had died in battle, while others had succumbed to their mutations. Of the survivors some, like Hef, continued to transform. A few had been confined to the lower holds, no longer masters of their own minds, though whether their madness was driven by knowledge of their fate or simple physical devolution was impossible to know.

Hef looked at Corax as he noticed his primarch's stare upon him. So distorted was his face that it was impossible to read any human expression there, but the gaze that met the primarch's still contained the spark of intelligence.

Agapito had the same square chin, brooding brow and flat cheeks as his brother, Branne, though an old scar marked him above the eye. Soukhounou was marked by tribal tattoos, pale lines and dots against his dark skin. Forced to survive on Isstvan for many months, Gherith Arendi was hollow-cheeked and sunken-eyed, his emaciation a permanent consequence, it seemed. Like Agapito he bore the mark of injuries from the Dropsite Massacre – three lacerations from left ear to shoulder. Corax knew well what manner of weapon could cause such a wound; Arendi had nearly lost his throat to the claws of a warp-tainted traitor.

It took an effort for the primarch not to move his gaze from Arendi's scar to the claws of Hef. It was unkind to make such association, but also impossible not to.

The companies of his commanders had changed much since the Hawks, Falcons, Talons and Raptors had been formed. Initially they had been dedicated detachments of tactical, support and assault troops. With the Legion divided and rejoined and divided again many times over the passing years, independence and flexibility had proven more efficient. Each company was multi-purpose now, capable of self-supporting attack, and even breaking down into far smaller operational units.

The commanders were accompanied by allies not of the Raven Guard. Arcatus Vindix Centurio was first among the Legio Custodes that had escorted the primarch from Terra. Only half a dozen of his warriors remained. Nicknamed 'the Emperor's Eagle' by the legionaries, he possessed a thin face with a sharply pointed nose, his blond hair swept back by a gold band.

Last was Captain Noriz, the Imperial Fist, who had become de facto representative of the waifs and strays of many Legions that had come together to heed Corax's call to arms.

One was missing.

'No news of Aloni?' asked the primarch.

Branne shook his head and his expression soured.

'Unconfirmed, but Lieutenant Vabus on the Revenant says the Spirit of Deliverance never made it to the jump boundary.'

'Then we must proceed as if Aloni and his crew are lost. Arendi, you have no command. The Falcons are yours.'

'With respect, my lord, I would prefer to remain directly on your staff,' said the head of the now defunct Shadow Wardens, Corax's personal retinue. 'I think I best serve the Legion there.'

Corax raised an eyebrow but his former bodyguard did not flinch. Corax shrugged. There was little to be gained by awarding command to a warrior that did not desire it.

'Very well, I shall consider alternatives.' Corax sat down at the head of the long briefing table and clasped his hands together, resting them on the dark, varnished wood. Seeing them all together reminded him that he was fast approaching a moment of decision.

'We face a turning point in the war,' he told them. 'The conflict narrows, focusing on the Solar System. It will not be long before Horus launches his decisive attack. We have known that it would come to this, despite all efforts. My strategy has been to bleed the traitors dry, to prise oppressed systems from their grasp behind their backs, to waylay and forestall their supplies to buy time for Dorn to fortify Earth. We have killed more than we have lost since Isstvan, but we cannot hope to amend for the blow we suffered at the hands of the treacherous.'

‘So I face a choice. Do we continue on this course? Do I bring the Legion together as one force? If so, to which system shall I direct it? A great cauldron of battle erupts at Beta-Garmon. That is not our kind of war, not in our diminished state. But that is not to say we cannot assist in the effort of the Emperor’s servants there.’

The primarch noticed that Agapito was agitated, eager to speak. He gestured for the commander to share whatever news burned at him.

‘I think I know where the Night Lords have come from, my lord,’ Agapito said. ‘On a ship we boarded we discovered captives. Ultramarines among them.’

‘So?’ said Arendi. ‘Did you free these captives? Where are they now? What have they told you?’

‘We could not save them.’ Agapito’s brow furrowed deeply and his jaw tightened. ‘But they did not need to speak to tell their story. The storms are dissipating – we have all witnessed it. The warp doesn’t boil with the same fury of even a month ago. Not for years have any on this side of the galaxy been able to penetrate the tempest, but now... Forces are coming west, daring the storm. These Ultramarines, and the Night Lords that brought them, must have come from the Five Hundred Worlds.’

‘There is another explanation,’ said Soukhounou. ‘Guilleman’s warriors have been despatched to other postings. They could have been on our side of the storm before the outbreak of the war.’

‘But why so many Night Lords, arriving from where?’ asked Corax. ‘I think Agapito is right. This force that beset us has newly arrived from somewhere else. The war against the Ultramarines would seem a likely source.’

‘But does that mean well or bad?’ said Branne. ‘If the Night Lords have come, does that mean they have won? We saw the Word Bearers and World Eaters go into the east and return. Maybe the Five Hundred Worlds are no more. The enemy have

lifted the storm because it's no longer needed to contain the Ultramarines and Blood Angels.'

'And Dark Angels,' added Noriz. 'When I was at Deliverance there came rumours that the Lion led a great part of his Legion into the warp tempest. It is possible that our loyal brothers have triumphed and in doing so have broken the power of the storm.'

'If that is the case they will make all speed for Terra,' said Agapito. 'We would be wise to join them.'

'Our intelligence is incomplete,' said Corax. 'There are forces on both sides not accounted for. I learned that Horus attacks Beta-Garmon with great strength, but we are low on details. Is the Warmaster himself there, does his Legion battle in the system? Where are the Alpha Legion? The White Scars? The Wolves? My brothers, ally and traitor, each worth an army – where do they fight?'

'I sense that you have a plan regardless, my lord,' said Arcatus. 'You do not summon councils to talk in circles.'

'I do have a plan,' said Corax, 'or more exactly an approach. The time for small action is fast passing. Such as it is, we must fight with all the strength we have. The Raven Guard must come together, and such allies as we have remaining.'

'You mean the Therions?' said Branne. He sounded pensive at the thought.

'Yes, the Therion Cohort. From the last communique of the vice-Caesari, they are not so far from here. Depending on how engaged they are, we would not have to wait long for them to join the muster, or perhaps rendezvous with them closer to our ultimate target.'

Branne simply nodded, whatever misgivings he had remaining unvoiced. Corax felt no urge to tease them out of the Raptors commander.

The primarch looked at Noriz and then at Arcatus.

‘I had hoped one or both of you would make representation to return to the Throneworld. I have no inclination to stand behind the walls built by Lord Dorn, but I am open to argument.’

Noriz looked at the others and then at Corax.

‘I do not doubt that I will see Terra again soon enough, my lord primarch, but I am content under your command until the time to return is obvious.’

‘Arcatus?’

‘It is not a time for hesitation, Lord Corax. Once committed, we must remain. I think there is yet time, as Captain Noriz says, to seek further injury of the traitors before we join the final defence. Simple mathematics of war suggest that time spent idle waiting for the enemy to attack diminishes our impact on the course of events. We are few in number and must maximise such multipliers as we can.’

‘True, but if the walls of Dorn are to be a multiplier, then every warrior we save to man them would count a hundred,’ argued Noriz. He smiled wryly. ‘But then I would say that. Even so, arriving in time rather than early would be fine by me.’

‘We need to know more of what occurs around Beta-Garmon,’ said Corax, ‘and the surest way to find out is to go ourselves. The closer we are to the action, the more certain the reports of it.’

‘Your commands, my lord?’ asked Agapito, standing as if eager to depart.

‘We have a while yet, and must make communication with the Therion Cohort before we depart. There are still several of our capital ships that have not yet arrived at the rendezvous, and such sustenance and supplies as we can glean from Rosario will be essential. As I see it, the war at Beta-Garmon will not be decided in days but perhaps months, even years. We can spend two more weeks here. I will assess the ongoing situation and order new movements and dispositions accordingly.’

Corax stood and dismissed them. Arendi lingered for a moment and received permission to remain with a single nod.

‘I did not mean to rebuff the honour of leading a company, Corax,’ he said. ‘I do not think company command best suits my attitude these days.’

‘And what attitude is that?’

‘To kill the traitors whenever and wherever possible.’

‘There is nothing wrong with such desire,’ said Corax. He moved around the table to stand in front of the legionary. ‘We should seek the death of our foes.’

‘But not to the exclusion of other considerations, am I correct?’ Arendi glanced over his shoulder, as if looking at the departed officers. ‘You need to be able to trust your leaders, now more than ever.’

‘What are you suggesting, Gherith?’ Corax demanded. ‘Who can I not trust?’

‘They are not traitors, that is not what I mean!’ Arendi said hurriedly. He cleared his throat. ‘Take Agapito. He’s as hungry for vengeance as I am. You don’t need two commanders spoiling for a fight, perhaps turning a blind eye or deaf ear to orders that might take them out of battle. And Noriz, and Arcatus, they will want to go to Terra at some point, no matter what they claim today. You cannot order them to remain, so what if they choose an inopportune moment to exercise their right to return to the Throneworld? If you are bringing all of us together again, every element of that fleet, every warrior in that force needs to be committed to the same ends as you are.’

Corax was silent, uncomfortable with Arendi’s assertions but not able to dismiss them out of hand.

‘And my place is here, next to you, my lord,’ Arendi concluded. ‘Bodyguard or not.’

He said nothing more and left. Not for the first time Corax's thoughts were a whirl, an ever-changing universe of factors to ponder. He leaned on the table; the wood creaked under his weight.

It would be so easy to return to his father, to seek comfort and assurance from the Emperor. So simple to stand at the wall and follow the lead of Dorn.

And so weak, to deny the real task that had been set before him.

Four days before the fleet was set to jump from the system, as the twenty-two starships that had been assembled under Corax's command accelerated towards the outer system, the astropaths and Librarians reported a movement of ships in the warp. Other vessels were in-bound. Arendi was with his primarch in the strategium of the Avenger when Balsar Kurthuri delivered the confirmation.

'A small fleet, my lord, is our best estimate.' The Librarian glanced away from Corax, aware that his vagueness was unacceptable, even though it was unavoidable. 'Half a dozen at least, no more than a dozen.'

'Warships?' said Arendi when Corax remained silent. 'Allegiance?'

'Impossible to say. We have not broadcast any inquiries. The ships may not be heading to Rosario after all – better to not attract attention.'

'We outnumber them,' Arendi said, turning to his lord. 'And we are in coherent formation. If the Night Lords have somehow followed us they will arrive piecemeal from the warp. Easy pickings.'

'Do not be so sure,' said Branne, approaching from the other side of the command deck. He stood next to Corax, who seemed

lost in thought. 'The traitors have a way with the warp tides – we have seen it often. They will come together, I expect, as one fleet.'

'And they will be destroyed as one fleet,' said Arendi. 'We still outnumber them.'

'Only just,' the primarch said at last, moving his eyes to Arendi and then Branne, his gaze quickly passing over the Librarian. 'If we assume they are all capital ships, even a handful at full strength is two-thirds of our frontline vessels. And if they are a dozen... Regardless, it is a confrontation we cannot afford. We must minimise our losses until we can commit to a worthwhile battle.'

'We run? Again?' Branne did not wholly succeed in keeping the disappointment from his voice. Corax threw a hard look at the commander of the Raptors.

'Have all my commanders become so desirous of battle that they would throw away victory to sate their bloodlust?'

Branne stepped back as though struck, stunned by the outburst. An awkward silence followed, into which Arendi ventured a further thought.

'We might not fully choose the time and place of that confrontation, Corax. The First Axiom of Victory is an ideal, but in practical terms we might just have to fight whatever enemies are presented to us, when we get the chance.'

'We take whatever fights we can get?' Corax's lip curled. 'That is the nadir of our ambition. I vowed that Horus would rue the day he did not finish the Raven Guard at Isstvan. Time runs short to be true to my word, and I will not waste what might be the last telling blow of my Legion.'

'Of course,' said Arendi, suppressing any further dissent.

'I...' Kurthuri stopped even before he started. A twitch of the eye indicated that he was listening to his vox bead. The Librarian's

eyes widened with surprise. He sub-vocalised a reply and nodded as he received a response.

‘The omens favour us, my lord,’ he said. ‘Connra Deakon, our most senior astrotelepath, has received a direct communication from the incoming ships.’ The Librarian smiled and looked at the commanders. ‘They come from Deliverance, my friends. The ciphers and countersigns are all correct. Reinforcements from our home world.’

Corax immediately ordered his Chief Librarian to seek further confirmation of the incoming ships’ loyalty and identities and Kurthuri hurried away to comply. For a while neither the primarch nor his officers said anything, contemplating in silence the import of this news.

‘We did put out an encrypted call for all Raven Guard to assemble here,’ Branne said eventually, with a hint of a smile. ‘With the storms weakening, the astropaths’ signal must have reached as far as the Ravenspire!’

‘Or they had already left and were seeking us,’ said Arendi. ‘Even in the best conditions their progress would have to be miraculously swift to arrive so soon.’

‘True,’ conceded Branne. He flexed his fingers as if in anticipation. ‘How many, do you think? It’s been years since any forces arrived from Deliverance. How many legionaries have passed through in that time?’

‘Temper your excitement, commander,’ Corax said quietly. ‘Young, untested troops are of questionable value at this time. Given even the most generous timescale for their induction, enhancement and training, none of them can be more than six months into their black carapaces. And with little experience as Scouts to act as foundation.’

‘We were all such raw material once,’ said Arendi. He looked at his primarch, the immense warrior quizzical in his expression,

and could not fight back a short laugh. 'At least, those of us not personally created by the Emperor. Haven't we been looking for some good news lately? Let's be thankful for the small boons we get.'

Corax did not look convinced.

'We shall see,' he said. He started towards the portal of the strategium. 'If all proves well, have the arriving fleet await us at jump distance and call for their commander to report to the Avenger as soon as possible.'

He did not wait for Branne's affirmative, but strode from the main bridge, jaw set hard. The Raptors' leader directed a look at Arendi.

'He has lost too much to count many blessings,' explained Branne. 'He dare not allow himself hope.'

'How can he fight on without hope? It doesn't make any sense.'

'Don't confuse hope with belief, Gherith. Corax believes we will win. He has never doubted that – only the cost that will be paid.'

'Primarchs, eh?' Arendi let out an explosive breath. 'I've just realised who he reminds me of. Himself. Before the Emperor came.'

'What's that?'

'The primarch, he was like this before the uprising. Taking nothing for granted. Looking for the worst in any situation. Expecting bad news every day. As though anticipation of it could avoid calamity.' Arendi stepped close to Branne and dropped his voice. 'Everything is coming to a head, Branne. If I didn't think it impossible, I would say our primarch was nervous.'

And with that disquieting thought shared, Arendi left the strategium to seek out the other former Shadow Wardens. He had

an idea, which was as likely to get him into trouble as anything else.

Corax reviewed the ranks of black armoured warriors standing perfectly to attention in the main muster hall of the Ravenstrike. Four hundred and twenty-six Raven Guard, armoured in Mark VI war-plate manufactured on Kiavahr, armed with the latest bolter designs and heavy weapons. A similar number awaited inspection on two more battle-barges, freshly refitted at the docks of Natolli Prime. In all, one thousand, one hundred and forty-eight legionaries. With them they had brought four Natolian regiments, some six thousand Imperial Army veterans and the transports to carry them.

Corax remained stern as he strode along the front rank. The armour of the newcomers was painted in the flat black of the Raven Guard and they bore the Legion device and squad markings, but no company or battalion sigils. Arendi followed, just a step behind.

‘You seem eager, Gherith,’ the primarch remarked. ‘You dog my steps like a shadow.’

‘I was thinking, which is perhaps a poor use of my time, I know,’ said Arendi. ‘On what you said, about offering me command of the Falcons. I have reconsidered the offer.’

‘Yes?’ Corax stopped and turned on his heel. ‘You think I would extend the invitation again after being refused?’

Arendi showed no shame, and met his master’s gaze.

‘I don’t want the Falcons. I want these legionaries. My lord.’

Corax’s eyes narrowed.

‘Why?’

‘Fresh meat,’ Arendi replied quietly. ‘I mean, a fresh start. Clean cloth. Whatever you want to call it, a chance to set the future straight.’

‘And you’re the man to do that?’ Corax was unconvinced. ‘I made Branne my Master of Recruits for a reason.’

‘And gave him the Raptors,’ replied Arendi. He continued quickly as Corax’s displeasure increased. ‘Not that Branne had anything to do with... I mean, he is a fearsome warrior and leader...’

Corax’s silent glare forced Arendi to continue. ‘I miss my Shadow Wardens,’ he confessed. ‘It wasn’t about being your bodyguards. Even after the Legion came it was obvious that you were a greater fighter than any company of Space Marines. But we would always be close. Dependable. You trusted us to do whatever you commanded. Your hand, our blades.’

‘You said I could not trust you, only weeks ago. You made a good point. Of all my ranked officers, you are the least stable. Why should I believe you now?’

‘Because I was wrong?’ Arendi’s stare had not moved from the primarch. Corax’s attention flicked to the pale stripes of his facial scars and back to his eyes. The legionary read the primarch’s meaning. He pointed to the claw marks. ‘I said I was after revenge. Perhaps I still am. But there are different ways of getting back at the traitors. It was Agapito who told me you once said “Victory is Vengeance”. Well, maybe leading a thousand new Shadow Wardens against the traitors is vengeance too.’

They reached the end of the line and Corax gestured to the officer at the end to step forward.

‘Name?’ asked the primarch.

‘Shray Chayvon, my lord,’ replied the officer. ‘Provisional lieutenant, my lord.’

‘There are forty-one of my original Shadow Wardens left, scattered through the other companies,’ Arendi continued. ‘A perfect officer corps.’

‘You do not have time to train them in the manner of the Shadow Wardens,’ Corax countered, then turned back to Chayvon. ‘Well turned out, lieutenant. What do you want to do now?’

‘My lord?’ The officer’s expression was hidden by the baleen-snouted mask of his Mark VI armour, but his confusion was obvious.

‘You are a Space Marine of the Emperor, a legionary of the Raven Guard. You aspired to this since you were old enough to know who we were, yes?’

‘Yes, my lord! I have always hoped to serve you in the Legion.’

‘And now that you are a Raven Guard, what do you want to do, Lieutenant?’

The officer reflexively glanced towards Arendi for guidance.

‘Just say what’s on your mind,’ Arendi told him. ‘The truth.’

‘I want to kill traitors, my lord,’ said the officer. ‘That’s what I’ve been trained to do.’

Arendi laughed. Corax was not so humoured. The words reminded him of Halvar Diaro, one of the initial Raptors, those who had come to be known amongst their company brothers as the First Nine. All were dead now. One of the curses of his primarch heritage, Corax’s memory meant he could recall the death reports of every warrior that had ever served under him. Diaro had been split in half by a traitor lascannon at Mourner’s Drift. The primarch motioned for Chayvon to return to the line.

‘You are right of course, my lord – I don’t have time to train them as your Shadow Wardens,’ Arendi said. ‘But then again, we’re not fighting prison guards or orks. We’re going to kill traitor legionaries. I reviewed the armoury manifests. There’s a big consignment of heavy and support weapons from Kiavahr with the reinforcements. New blood might be better used that way than right at the sharp end of an attack or a bodyguard. We’re going to

get into a straight-up fight soon enough, Corax. Some big guns never hurt.'

The specifics themselves did not interest Corax as much as the fact that Arendi had spent some time working them out. He was impassioned, invigorated by the idea of commanding these new troops. Senior officers, those whose service dated back to the rebellion before the arrival of the Emperor, were few on the ground these days. Would any of the others really want to take command of what was, to all intents, an untested force? They might well be a yoke across the back of their commander.

'You can have them,' the primarch told Arendi. The legionary accepted this with a grave nod, but the hint of a smile danced at the corner of his lips.

'We'll have to get them some company colours,' said Arendi. 'What would you like, Corax?'

'Leave them as they are,' the primarch replied. 'I like them as they are.'

'All right then, we'll be your Black Guard, my lord.'

'I like that too,' Corax said with a thoughtful nod. 'You might no longer be my shadow, but you stay as close as one for now, and you do exactly as I command. My hand, your blades.'

'Yes, my lord. As it always was.'

As he was leaving the hall, Corax's keen hearing caught a conversation between Arendi and the new lieutenant, who was asking if he had given the right answer to the primarch.

'The only answer worth giving,' he heard the new commander of the Black Guard reply.

Hef followed Branne, trying hard not to knuckle along with his hands although his extended arms made it easier than staying upright. The commander had offered no explanation as to why Hef and the other Raptors had been called aboard the Avenger. The

fleet had been informed that reinforcements had arrived from Deliverance; perhaps they were going to be added to the Raptors?

They passed one of the training halls and Hef saw several squads at bolter drill, moving back and forth in harmony with each other. It reminded the lieutenant of his training – cut short by the encroachment of the genetic mutation introduced into his system.

‘What was that, Navar?’ They stopped by the open door. Branne turned his head, his expression one of inquiry.

Hef realised he had let out a growl.

‘The new ones?’ Hef said to cover himself. It hadn’t been what he meant to say but the words formed differently to what he was thinking, as though there was interference between brain and mouth. He formed his next sentence with more care. ‘What is to become of the newcomers? Are the Raptors to be reinforced, sir?’

Branne shook his head.

‘No, they are now the Black Guard, apparently. Arendi has taken charge. That’s why you’ve all been recalled to the Avenger to fight for me directly. The Black Guard will be taking command of the support ships and escorts.’

‘No more Raptors,’ wheezed Hef.

‘Something of a dying breed,’ said Branne, not without sympathy. He thumped a comradely fist against Hef’s heavily modified plastron. ‘These Black Guard don’t have the heart of true Raptors, anyway. Irreplaceable, you are. Unique.’

Hef accepted this with a silent nod, but the words did not sit comfortably for him. Branne was a good commander. Diligent, disciplined and brave. But though he led the Raptors, he was not one of them. He did not know what was in their hearts, any more than Hef could know what it had been like to fight alongside the primarch to free Deliverance. More than a generation divided

them; an entirely different galaxy separated their experiences even before one considered the physical changes.

‘Doomed,’ whispered Hef, before he could stop the words leaving his lips.

Branne looked at him sharply.

‘No! When Terra is free from the threat of Horus, Corax will speak with the Emperor himself. It was the Emperor’s knowledge that Corax used to bring life to the Raptors, and it is the Emperor’s knowledge that will cure you.’

The thought brightened Hef’s mood, even though losing command of the Fearless was a disappointment. Given the occasional lapses that had troubled Hef of late – not that he had mentioned them to anyone – perhaps it was for the best.

‘Time to tell the others of their new duties,’ said Branne. He moved off along the corridor.

Hef lingered for a few seconds more, watching the Black Guard go through their drills. Four years. Four years separated him from them, the gulf as wide as the century that separated Hef from Branne. Too swiftly the hope of the future became the mistakes of the past.

Then another thought occurred. Perhaps if they travelled to Terra he would actually come to meet the Emperor. Cheered by this possibility, Hef hurried after his commander.

Branne could see the Glory of Therion through the viewports of the shuttle. The Imperial Army transport, commissioned at the outbreak of the civil war, was larger than the Avenger. Its slab sides contained over three hundred holds, launch bays, barracks, medicae facilities and strategic command halls. Beyond stretched the rest of the Therion Cohort, dozens of ships carrying thousands of troops and war machines. Despite its bulk the Glory of Therion was purely a transport and bore less firepower than a strike

cruiser – hence the line of battleships and grand cruisers that glittered a few thousand kilometres away.

‘It’s big,’ said Branne.

‘Yes,’ said Corax, lost in thought. ‘Big.’

The leader of the Raven Guard had been distracted since they had dropped into the Pallas System for the rendezvous. He could only guess at what occupied his primarch. The commander tried another tack to engage Corax.

‘Is this ceremony really necessary, my lord? Couldn’t we have just translated, signalled to the vice-Caesari and carried on?’

‘The ceremony is important, Branne. Therion and Deliverance have long-standing bonds that should be renewed on occasion.’

Branne decided that the straightforward approach would serve best.

‘What concerns you, my lord? You have spoken barely ten words since we met this morning.’

‘I have much to think about,’ said the primarch. ‘Perhaps I need to concentrate rather than engage in chatter with my warriors.’

Chastened, Branne held his silence for the rest of the journey.

A guard of honour fifty strong waited for the primarch and Branne. Arendi and a squad of his new Black Guard joined them from the main compartment as they set foot on the Therion vessel.

‘If you would follow me, Lord Corax,’ said an officer with a half-cape and sash, the clasp that connected them indicating the rank of a tribune.

Branne stepped forward and examined the officer closely.

‘Pelon? Marcus made you tribune?’

‘The vice-Caesari did, Commander Branne,’ said the officer. He lowered his voice. ‘I still prepare his meals and wash his laundry, all the same. No command status...’

A gentle cough from Corax reminded them of his presence and the Therion tribune bowed and waved a hand for Corax to follow before heading towards the flight bay doors.

‘A novelty to be the one granted audience for a change,’ remarked the primarch as they stepped into the corridor and turned after Pelon.

Just as Corax had not long before guided the Iron Father to council, now the tribune led the primarch to one of the mustering halls of the Glory of Therion. A thousand warriors and more awaited the contingent from the Raven Guard, a full quarter of them officers from the attendant regiments and vessels. They stood to attention and lifted their weapons in salute as Corax stepped into the immense chamber. To one side, standing atop a small stage, Marcus Valerius waited.

He was in his thirties, as far as such things could be guessed, handsome and aristocratic from the lineage of Old Earth. Clean-shaven, the vice-Caesari was heavily tanned, his eyes bright against the dark of his flesh, the gold of his cuff stark against exposed hands that were crossed with thin lines of pale scar tissue. He held a rod of office at his hip, and a laspistol and sabre hung on his belt.

Pelon peeled away to the ranked soldiers and the vice-Caesari dropped to one knee, head dipped, when Corax ascended the flight of steps with two strides. Standing again, Valerius lifted a fist to his chest plate. A deafening crash resounded across the hall as the Therions followed suit and raised their voices in a single wordless shout of praise.

‘Hail Corax,’ boomed Valerius. ‘Hail the saviour of Deliverance, Commander of the Raven Guard, honoured bylord of Therion!’

Corax took the salute of the Therions in silence, his expression grave. Valerius looked tiny compared to the primarch, overwhelmed by the physical presence of Corax even more than a legionary. It was like an infant looking up at an adult.

‘How many?’ the primarch asked.

‘Twenty-three thousand fighting men and women, my lord,’ Valerius replied. ‘Three armoured battalions, one artillery regiment, three air wings – one bomber and two mixed-purpose. Carried on fourteen transporters escorted by three deep void squadrons with full crew and orbital assets.’

‘That’s a lot of soldiers,’ said Branne. ‘Where have you been hiding them?’

Valerius smiled.

‘Good to see you, Commander Branne. The Therion Cohort has been receiving constant reinforcements for the past two years. Our motherworld is generous, and the loyal Mechanicum happen to supply the arms and vehicles we need in return for protection against their traitor priests.’

‘You are fortunate,’ said Corax.

‘Blessed, you might say,’ said the vice-Caesari. ‘We stand ready to serve the Emperor and defend the Throneworld with even greater vigour than Therion itself.’

‘We’re not going to Terra,’ said Branne with a shake of the head.

‘We’re not?’ Marcus Valerius regained his composure quickly. ‘Where...?’

‘Our next battlezone is under review,’ Corax told Marcus. He turned away and started back towards the doors. The Black Guard hurried after, taken by surprise by their leader’s sudden departure. The long ranks of Therions held aloft their arms again

at the bark of their officers. Arendi darted a quick look at Branne and followed.

‘With twenty-three thousand Imperial soldiers in tow,’ Branne said, ‘I’ll bet you the Avenger against this shiny new ship he’s not planning a sneak attack.’

If not for the support of his power armour, Balsar Kurthuri would have been stooped as he made his way back to the Librarius chamber of the Avenger. Reaching the threshold of the sanctum hall he set his shoulders and took a deep breath. The other Librarians needed to see him full of vigour despite the arduous labours they had undertaken.

He touched a gauntleted finger to the lock of the door and sent a psychic signal. A minute buzz of power flickered along the crystal runelock and a moment later came the heavy thud of a bolt dropping. Kurthuri pushed at the door and it swung easily on its hinges, allowing him to step into the sanctum.

Hard-edged runic shapes lined the walls. They gently glowed with power that pulsed in time with the background rhythm of the Geller field that enveloped the warp-drifting battle-barge. To Kurthuri it was like stepping from a room filled with a babbling crowd into solitude and silence.

Two others of his select brotherhood waited for him. They sat on the benches at the centre of the hall, facing each other, heads bowed. Fara Tek was an old veteran of the uprising, his face lined with age despite his Space Marine physiology. They had long familiarity, beginning with the shared experience of the experiments by the Kiavahrans on those that had shown unusual talents. Both had spent time on the Red Level of the prison before Corax had rescued them with his rebellion.

The other was also a native of Deliverance, Syth Arriax, discovered by the Librarius not long before the treachery of Horus. Though less than thirty Terran years old, Syth looked twice

that age, his grey eyes heavy with forced experience and hard-won wisdom.

Neither looked up as Kurthuri approached but he felt the touch of their awareness on his mind.

‘I was not expecting you, Fara,’ he said aloud. It was better to speak openly in this place – the warded walls kept psychic energy in as well as without and the hall acted like an echo chamber on telepathic communication. ‘When did you arrive from the Kosmoz?’

‘An hour ago, Balsar, my dear comrade.’ Fara did not move but a stroke of welcoming psychic power briefly touched Kurthuri’s thoughts. ‘I have something I need to share with you.’

‘You spoke to the primarch?’ said Syth.

‘I have been in council with him for the past three hours, yes.’ Kurthuri sat next to Syth. The younger Librarian looked at him finally. Balsar sighed. ‘He will not go to Beta-Garmon. He is adamant.’

‘But the signs... The calls are overwhelming!’ There was a pleading look in Syth’s eyes – an expression Kurthuri had never thought to see on a Space Marine. ‘If he could but hear... Every waking moment it is there. You told him? You told him of the voices crying out, of the endless war?’

‘I told him all of it,’ Kurthuri replied sharply. ‘As I promised I would. He will not go to Beta-Garmon.’

‘Perhaps he is right not to,’ Fara said quietly. He turned to face the Chief Librarian and reached out a hand, inviting Balsar to grasp it. ‘I captured this a few minutes before I left the Kosmoz. I thought it better if you accepted it directly.’

‘What is it?’ Kurthuri asked, his fingers still a few centimetres from gripping Fara’s hand. ‘A broadcast? An intercept?’

‘I am not sure. I do believe I was intended to receive it.’

Kurthuri laid his hand on the palm of the other Librarian and allowed their thoughts to merge. From among the subconscious froth rose a memory, like a landscape resolving into focus; it became larger and sharper until it encompassed Kurthuri. Fara set the recollection free and it drifted into Kurthuri's mind, seeping into his thoughts like water into sand.

Fara's memory became his memory.

Background noise. The swirl of the storm that had beset the galaxy for more than half a decade. Quieter now than the roar that had erupted from its creation. Lessened strength and long familiarity turned it to little more than static – annoying but no longer harmful. As one tunes the vox to a specific channel, so Kurthuri filtered out the sibilant rush.

In its place he recognised the phenomenon that had beset the warp for thousands of light years around Beta-Garmon. The immaterium was alive with broadcasts and messages and visions, as though the metaphorical vox set had been placed in a room with thirty others, a hundred others, all tuned at different frequencies. All were ciphered, little more than shrieks, babbles and distortion. Glimpses of visions snaked around the edges of Fara/Kurthuri's awareness. Colour, movement. Nothing more distinct.

He felt as well as saw, heard and smelled. Anger. Fear. A lot of fear, the Terror. A dread of war so great, the ripple of bloodshed that could drown worlds. And blackest fate. A blanketing darkness, a possibility of the end of all things, the defeat Fara/Kurthuri despised and feared more than any other. The Astronomican silenced, stilled, gone forever.

The potential death of the Emperor rippled back through time, a looming shadow on their thoughts that had grown starker of late.

But it was not this that Fara/Kurthuri headed towards.

A piercing howl, a light of a bright flame. One and the same, they pierced the gloomy tumult.

A wolf at bay, surrounded by hounds and foul beasts.

And laughter. A cruel cackle, a booming guffaw, a heartless chuckle.

Through the dusk light slipped a lone silhouette, a wolf with ears drawn back, tail sagging, blood gushing from the wounds on its flanks.

But waiting in the darkness was something terrible, something vast and many-headed. Serpentine and doused in crimson gore, its eyes crackled with lightning.

‘Where?’ whispered Kurthuri as he took his hand away. He blinked, the face of his companion swinging in and out like a reflection of a settling pool.

‘I could not tell,’ said the other Librarian.

‘It has to be the Wolf King,’ said Kurthuri. ‘Where is Russ? What has happened?’

‘I tried to find it again,’ said Syth, ‘but even the echo has been swallowed by the maelstrom coming out of Beta-Garmon. I did find something else though. The trail of a wolfship nearby, one of the Rout’s strike cruisers, I think. It was calling for help. Not far, no more than ten light years. They might know where we could find Leman Russ.’

Kurthuri pushed himself up, invigorated by the news. He needed to see the primarch again.

The first spread of bombardment shells took the enemy ship just ahead of its engines, while raking fire from the Word Bearers batteries raked across the prow of the Providence. Void shields sparked and sputtered, engulfing the Raven Guard battle-barge stem to stern with wavering blossoms of purple and white.

‘Keep on them,’ Agapito told his crew. ‘Cripple their engines.’

The Word Bearers ship fired its manoeuvring thrusters hard, trying to brake its progress and turn to keep the Providence within the arc of its starboard gun decks. Targeting with its dorsal array, the Raven Guard ship had no such issue and continued to lay continual fire into the other vessel as it passed a few hundred kilometres beneath it. Rolling a quarter-turn about its axis, the Providence brought its own broadside to bear and unleashed a blistering cannonade of laser and plasma to accompany the bombardment shells.

Vented gases and bursts of energy bloomed from hull breaches around the stern of the enemy vessel. After another salvo the tubes of the engines fell dark.

‘Steering, keep us below that ship. Gunnery, laser weapons only. Cut them apart.’

‘Where are they going?’ asked the ship’s regular commander, Captain Khira, while his bridge staff complied with Agapito’s orders. He referred to the Space Wolves strike cruiser that still headed on a direct course for the fourth world in orbit around the star simply marked on the charts as SV-87-7.

‘Hail them and I’ll ask,’ said Agapito.

The communications officer did as requested. Agapito monitored the continuing bursts of laser fire from the batteries as his gunners systematically targeted small sections of the enemy’s armour, directing focused pulses of fire to penetrate metal and ferrocrete many metres thick. A few minutes later the officer attracted Agapito’s attention with a raised hand.

‘I have Rathvin, a captain of the Third Company, commander,’ said the lieutenant.

‘Personal channel,’ replied the commander, tapping a finger to the bead in his ear. He heard the crackle of the connection. ‘This is Commander Agapito of the Raven Guard, Rathvin. I have been personally despatched by Lord Corax to speak with you.’

‘And welcome you are too, Commander Agapito.’

‘You seem pretty occupied with getting somewhere. This sector is swarming with traitors, why did you drop out here and risk discovery?’

‘As you say, commander, the whole sector is rife with Horus’ men, like rats in the bilge hold. We hoped they might not pay attention to a little ship like us. We were wrong. But never mind. We got here anyway.’

‘This place is lifeless, what made you come here?’

‘We have to pick up something for the Wolf King.’

‘Important enough to be killed over?’

‘Tell you what, Raven Guard, when you are finished with those Word Bearers tricksters, follow us in. I’ll show you why we came here.’

Branne met Rathvin on a large asteroid in orbit over the fourth world.

It was literally a barren rock. With their gunships maintaining position a few hundred metres overhead, they moved in long leaps across the surface until they spied a metal column. No more than two metres high, it was almost impossible to see against the dark grey.

‘Here we are, Commander Branne,’ Rathvin said. His tone was solemn now as they bounded over to it. Branne’s auto-senses picked up a low yield radioactive register.

‘You came for a metal pole?’

‘It is a key-totem, you ignorant prison-son outlander,’ Rathvin replied, though without genuine rancour. ‘Watch and be enlightened.’

Now close, Branne could see that the column had faint runes inscribed in rings around it, and he detected a buzz of circuitry within. The Space Wolf operated a plate on the surface, moving it

aside to reveal a fine mesh grille. A puff of vapour from his mask indicated that Rathvin had expelled a little of the air inside his helm. Tiny crystals drifted into the meshwork before the Space Wolf slid shut the aperture.

‘Gene-coder,’ he explained.

The tracery of sigils lit up, their yellow glow sharp in the vacuum. A rumble beneath Branne’s feet caused him to step back as the ground shifted.

Rocks parted to reveal a clinically white tunnel heading directly down into the rock, lit by a row of lumen strips along the ceiling. Rathvin started heading down before the gateway had finished opening. Branne hurried after him.

About forty metres down they came to a solid wall, as plain and white as the rest of the tunnel, save for a single badge in the shape of the VI Legion’s sigil. At a touch, a horizontal hairline crack appeared to either side. It widened a moment later, the upper and lower parts of the portal sliding effortlessly into the rock.

Beyond was a small, semi-circular chamber, an alcove no more than a metre deep. Inside was a pedestal about a metre and a half high, made of the same metal as the key-totem. A faint buzz and blur at its top betrayed the presence of a stasis field. When Rathvin stepped forwards, the haze dissipated to reveal an axe with a slender crescent-bladed head on an angled handle.

Rathvin plucked the weapon free, lifting it easily in one hand, swiping back and forth a few times.

‘All this way for an axe? It’s nice, but not worth losing a ship over.’

Rathvin said nothing. He spun on one heel, the axe held level. The head slid smoothly into the wall until the haft hit the rock, like a hot knife through tallow. Rathvin tugged it free, revealing a slender wound no more than half a millimetre thick.

'It's a really nice axe, you Ravens would say,' said the captain. 'Good for any foe. Even... Well, any foe. And our king desires it for a special occasion.'

Branne said nothing, but wondered why the Space Wolves would hide away such a weapon. When they turned back to the surface, he had a small revelation.

'That doesn't look like it was made on Fenris.'

'I never said it was, Commander Branne.' Rathvin put the axe over his shoulder and started up the corridor. 'With your permission, I would like audience with the Ravenlord.'

Three

'The Avenger's more like a meeting hall than a battle-barge these days,' Branne grumbled to Hef as they watched the small contingent of Space Wolves enter the briefing chamber Corax had adopted to hold his various audiences.

He glanced at Hef, who stared at the Space Wolves without blinking. It was hard to read the lieutenant's expression these days, but Branne noticed Hef's claws opening and closing with agitation.

The Space Wolves stopped just inside the room and looked around the chamber. Their gaze lingered on the Raptors a while longer than he expected.

‘The primarch is waiting,’ Branne said pointedly to Rathvin, irritated by captain’s expression as he passed an eye over the Raptors, as though an effluent system had become blocked and left a malodorous air in the hall. ‘Is there a problem?’

Branne noticed that Hef had moved behind him, putting the commander between him and the doorway.

‘What is it, Hef?’ the commander asked. ‘Stop loitering like a nervous potboy. And look at me when I address you.’

The lieutenant dragged his eyes from the new arrivals, glanced at Branne and then looked away, unable to hold his superior’s gaze.

When he spoke, he did so with deliberation, carefully articulating each syllable around his misshapen fangs. Branne hoped that was the only reason for the slow, stilted manner of his subordinate, but it was hard not to recognise the gradual degradation that had been suffered by the warriors under Branne’s command. Hef had fared relatively well, but it was sadly only a matter of time before his own twisted body became his worst enemy.

‘I feel... exposed.’ Hef stepped back, moving again as Branne took a sidestep to keep the Space Wolves in view. ‘They should not see me. Us. Not see the roughs.’

‘I see. Well, forget about them. Corax is not ashamed of your appearance, and you shouldn’t be either.’

‘It is not shame, but caution. Space Wolves won’t understand us.’ Hef moved from foot to foot, unable to keep still. It was uncharacteristic of the calmness that had earned him his officer’s rank. ‘Judgement on what we became.’

‘Who cares what some Sons of Russ think, Hef? Look him in the eye, let him see what you are. If you stand strong, they’ll respect you.’

‘Better not to stir the pan, commander.’ Hef retreated a few more steps, indicating his desire to leave. ‘With your permission, commander?’

‘No,’ said Branne. ‘I want you here. Stay at the back if you wish.’

Hef reluctantly nodded his ungainly head and moved behind the other Raptors, a distorted shadow of black fur and armour.

Branne returned his attention to the visitors, who had just finished introducing themselves to Corax. Branne had brought down one of Corax’s throne-like chairs and installed it in the briefing hall. The primarch sat, but he did not seem comfortable, perched at the edge as he leaned towards the Space Wolves.

‘Tell me what you know of Beta-Garmon, and the war that rages there.’

Rathvin shrugged.

‘Not much, Ravenlord. We have heard what you have heard, of the greatest of battles setting the system aflame.’

‘You have had no detailed instructions from your Legion?’ Corax frowned. ‘Are you in communication with your commanders? How did you receive orders to retrieve the artefact from SV-87-7?’

‘The Sons of Russ are not at Beta-Garmon, Ravenlord,’ said Rathvin with a shake of the head. ‘We fight at Yarant Three.’

Corax’s frown deepened. Branne turned to one of the consoles and brought up a small star map to locate the system. It was only three hundred light years from their current position.

‘Russ is at Yarant?’ Corax murmured, his brow creasing. ‘Against whom does he fight?’

‘Many foes. Alpharius has pursued us for years, and has brought some friends for the final reckoning.’

‘The Alpha Legion,’ Corax said carefully. Branne sensed the tension coming from the primarch – a feeling he shared. ‘With Alpharius himself? You are sure of this?’

‘Who can be sure of anything in these dark times, Ravenlord? The Rout fight at Yarant, and warriors from the Alpha Legion, World Eaters and Thousand Sons are ranked against them. So we were told.’

‘If Lord Russ fails, those armies will be free to reinforce Beta-Garmon,’ said Valerius, who had been taken back into the council of the primarch with the return of the Therion Cohort.

‘It’s still an open battle,’ said Arendi. ‘Is that the sort of engagement where we are best suited? If we could isolate the traitors’ supply line–’

‘Our brothers are trapped,’ Rathvin interrupted him. ‘That is all. We go to Yarant to die with our king and Legion, as far as you are concerned.’

‘That seems wasteful,’ said Branne. ‘Dying, I mean.’

Rathvin move his gaze to Branne, his expression fierce.

‘Many traitors will die first, I promise you, commander.’ He looked back at Corax. ‘You would be welcome, Ravenlord, to fight beside the Wolf King. As your man says, if you wish to influence the fight at Beta-Garmon, you might do well to make haste to Yarant Three. The Lord of Winter and War seeks an opportunity to strike a most unexpected blow.’

‘I unwittingly led my Legion into a trap and seventy thousand legionaries died,’ Corax said, eyes narrowed. ‘Why would I willingly lead the survivors into another?’

The Space Wolf shrugged again.

‘We are going to Yarant, Ravenlord, as my primarch ordered. Your business is your business.’ He glanced at his companions and

received assuring nods from them in return. 'But may I ask a question of you?'

'Of course, what do you wish to know?'

'A brother of ours, Arvan Woundweaver, do you know where he is?'

'I have not heard of him before this moment, captain. Should I have?'

'I had hoped you might,' the Space Wolf said, his expression grim. 'It seems that great Woundweaver is missing. He was sent to look for you, the mighty Ravenlord.'

'To look for me?' Corax sat back. 'Do not give up hope yet that your brother lives. He did not find me, but I have made it my purpose not to be easily found. He might have already returned to Russ.'

'It is unlikely,' said Rathvin. 'He swore an oath to fulfil his mission, as did I.'

'What mission? Why was this Woundweaver seeking me?'

There was a pause and Rathvin looked at his brother legionaries again.

'I can hear you subvocalising over the vox,' Corax said sharply. 'And I have learned a little Fenrisian from your grandfather over the years. Speak plainly, and quickly. What is a "watch-pack", exactly?'

'Emissaries,' said the Space Wolf, but Corax was not satisfied with this and stood up. Rathvin retreated several steps. 'Guardians of truth, then, Ravenlord. Messengers for Malcador and our liege. To ensure the Emperor's will was upheld, that all stayed true to the cause.'

'I see. Guard dogs.' Corax loomed over Rathvin; his shadow engulfed the legionary. 'Do you remember where I was born,

captain? Do you think I would take kindly to such things? Why me? Why the Raven Guard? What doubts did your lord have?’

‘None! Watch-packs were sent to every primarch – Woundweaver was to find you. I was to locate Horus and seek his counsel, but events at Isstvan... Well, let us say that Horus’ loyalty stopped being a matter of doubt, eh? I heard of his turn before we ever came close to the system, and we were left fighting alongside some Iron Hands until a summons from the Wolf King brought us here.’

Corax withdrew, mollified by this answer.

‘Very well,’ said the primarch. ‘Should Woundweaver find me, I shall send him to Yarant.’

‘You will not come with us?’

‘Not directly. But I will aid my brother if I can.’

‘Then we shall look to your assistance, Ravenlord.’

A few formalities were arranged – vox-codes and channels, security protocols should the Raven Guard and Space Wolves meet again. Corax wished Rathvin well and bade him to convey the same to Russ, and then the Space Wolves departed. Corax was again in deep thought, his dark stare directed through the far wall.

‘We could save them,’ said Arendi. ‘The Space Wolves.’

‘It seems that their many enemies have finally caught up with them,’ said Corax. ‘We need room to operate properly. If Beta-Garmon is too congested for us, Yarant will be no better. I said we shall assist if we can, but I will not throw us into pointless battle.’

‘Not pointless,’ said Arendi, insistent. ‘We can rescue the Space Wolves.’

‘Enter a warzone, a system filled with traitor ships, attain orbital dominance over a particular region of a world and lift away the remnants of a Legion without becoming trapped ourselves? How do you suggest we achieve that, Gherith? How

would we put our hand in that particular furnace and not be burned?’

‘Perhaps we should have asked those that did it once before,’ said Arendi. He looked at Branne and then Valerius. ‘I was not there, of course, but I hear it was a most spectacular achievement. Any suggestions?’

Branne kept his gaze fixed firmly on the primarch but he caught a momentary flash of discomfort on the face of the vice-Caesari. Agapito spoke before Branne could answer.

‘Circumstances aligned perfectly for our extraction,’ said the other commander. ‘Fortune as much as planning.’

Corax turned his gaze to Branne too, black orbs that burrowed into his thoughts.

‘Do you wish me to pull together a rescue mission, my lord?’ Branne said evenly. He looked at Valerius. ‘Would the Therions be prepared again to assist?’

‘I am at the disposal of Lord Corax, as ever,’ said Marcus. ‘In whatever capacity he desires. I am the instrument of the Emperor’s will. If he wishes us to deliver the Space Wolves from harm, we shall.’

‘Of course,’ Corax said quietly, his expression unreadable. He visibly focused, eyes quickly scanning the room. They settled on Branne. ‘Make some preparations, talk to Rathvin, see what you can find out about the situation at Yarant.’

‘We’re really going to do this, my lord? Again?’

‘I will consider all options, commander. All options.’

Navar Hef watched the Space Wolves depart, but still he could barely breathe. He was sure they stared at the Raptors as they left, certain their hands moved closer to their weapons at what they saw.

He turned his head to look at the other Raptors and found the gaze of Neroka fixed on him. The other Raptor, his face so perfectly formed in contrast to the monstrous visage of Hef, tilted his head towards the primarch and raised his eyebrows.

Hef shook his head.

Neroka frowned. His next look spoke volumes and Hef could read the intent instantly. If you don't say something, it implied, then I will.

Reluctantly, Hef nodded. Neroka looked doubtful and the lieutenant scowled and nodded more forcefully.

While Arendi led his Black Guard away, Branne turned and dismissed his Raptors. The others turned and filed out in perfect step, but Hef stopped just at the door. Would Neroka really see through his threat? It seemed likely, and the longer Hef left matters as they were, the more it would fester. If for nothing else, he valued their bond more than he desired to avoid the consequences of confession. But was now the right time? The primarch had more than ever on his mind; he really needed nothing else to occupy him. The future of all of them hung in the balance; the decisions Lord Corax made over the following days would decide the course of the Legion.

Branne looked at him with a furrowed brow, of concern rather than anger.

'What's wrong, Hef? Are you in pain?'

The lieutenant hesitated. It would be simple enough to feign a convenient discomfort, admit himself to the apothecarion for a few days. The Space Wolves would be gone by then, the matter not quite as provocative.

Cowardly thoughts. Unworthy of a Raven Guard. He thought of Branne's words earlier, his utter faith in the Raptors and their loyalty.

‘I need... I need to talk to you and Lord Corax,’ Hef said slowly. ‘There was an incident you must hear about.’

Branne’s gaze moved to the primarch, who sat alone, eyes fixed on a point on the floor.

‘Perhaps another time,’ said the commander. ‘Lord Corax is occupied at the moment.’

Hef almost deferred to Branne but a stab of guilt turned in his gut and he shook his head.

‘No, I must talk to you now.’ He lumbered past Branne towards Corax. ‘My lord!’

The primarch dragged himself out of his reverie and his dark gaze fell upon Hef. It took all of the lieutenant’s will not to flinch at that inhuman stare. He stopped in front of his master, gaze downcast. It was impossible to know where to start and Hef’s tongue failed him, thick and useless in his mouth.

‘Speak, lieutenant,’ Corax said, his voice gentle, coaxing. Hef forced himself to look up and, rather than the interrogating gaze of a warlord, he found himself looking into deep pools of sable, familiar and comforting.

‘I have... I have committed a terrible act, my lord. A terrible act.’

‘Tell me.’ Corax’s voice was neither stern nor soft. ‘Unburden yourself, Hef.’

‘The Space Wolf, Arvan Woundweaver. I killed him.’

The thrum of the cogitating machines and background hiss of the light fittings seemed deafening in the silence. Branne looked about to explode but the primarch stilled him with a raised hand.

‘Go on,’ said Corax, betraying no emotion.

‘On patrol. Wilderness system, VL-276-87.’

‘Your encounter with the Sons of Horus,’ Corax interrupted. His eidetic memory brought forth more details from Hef’s

carefully constructed report. 'A satellite base, weapons store. All enemy killed. Reactor breach during the fighting destroyed all of the stored munitions.'

'The base belonged to Space Wolves. It was held by Woundweaver and the watch-pack sent after you, my lord.'

'So you killed them?' barked Branne, his fury finally breaking out. 'Worse still, you kept it a secret from me?'

Hef began to stumble over his words, his careful and measured speech giving way to his bestial tendencies under stress. 'Woundweaver saw us. Saw roughs. He hate us, I see it. And he would tell Lord Russ. We hear what the Space Wolf just say... I mean, just said. Watch-packs to judge our loyalty. Woundweaver was sent to look for deviation, and found deviants. His mission, given him by Russ himself. Said as much to me.'

Hef's gaze pleaded with Corax for understanding.

'Like Sons of Magnus?' he continued. 'The Rout, coming for the Raven Guard. Now is worst time for more dispute, more distractions.'

'Russ would never-' began Branne.

'He would,' Corax cut him off, 'if he was ordered to do so by our father. If he thought we were a threat. If he saw... that is, if he doubted my loyalty.'

The primarch took a deep breath and his expression looked haunted for a moment as he considered the possibility of the Space Wolves being ordered against the Raven Guard.

'He would do it, even amongst this carnage, to make the point,' Corax muttered. His focus returned and he stared at Hef. 'The reports were a fabrication?'

'I ordered my men to secrecy,' Hef continued. 'Blame is mine.'

'They didn't have to comply with an improper order,' said Branne. 'Sign off on false reports. They are complicit.'

‘Did comply. Willingly, even. Every rough knows why I did it. Space Wolves were touched by... changes, like Raptors. Beasts inside. Some had gone bad when we found ship. Woundweaver and warriors had killed ones gone bad. Would see us, treat us like ones gone bad, kill roughs as well. “Weregeld”, he called us, called himself and the twisted ones. A price, he said. Price for what, my lord, he didn’t say. Woundweaver would come to Lord Corax, accuse him of crimes. Wanted to spare my lord difficult decision.’

‘Spare me?’ Corax looked amused for a moment, but his expression quickly hardened. ‘It is not your concern to spare me anything, lieutenant. The deed was perhaps ill-considered, but the concealment was a betrayal of trust.’

These last words elicited a gasp of genuine pain from Hef, as though Corax had thrust one of his talons through the chest of the mutated legionary.

‘I know, my lord! Very bad! I was afraid. Afraid for us. Afraid for you.’

‘Afraid...?’ said Branne, surprised to hear the word from a Space Marine.

‘Assessed a risk, commander,’ Hef tried to explain. ‘Conclusion not good for Raptors, not good for Raven Guard or Lord Corax.’

‘Understandable, Hef,’ said Corax. His next words dashed any hope that flickered into life in Hef’s breast. ‘But still unforgivable.’

‘I’ll deal with him, my lord,’ Branne sighed. ‘Confinement for the time being.’

‘No,’ said Corax. ‘You’ll do nothing for the moment.’

‘My lord? Surely some kind of punishment–’

‘And what do we tell the other Raptors, commander?’ snapped Corax. ‘Would you have this crime become the talk of the

fleet? And with Rathvin not even departed from the Avenger? I need to consider all aspects of the situation.'

'I am very sorry, my lord,' Hef gibbered. 'So very sorry. Would atone in any way, just tell me how.'

'I will find a way, Navar Hef, mark my word. And I believe you. I accept your repentance and trust that you will conceal nothing from me again. Though I cannot strip you of your command without prompting questions, consider yourself returned to the ranks. You will exercise no command authority. Tell the others of your conspiracy that I am aware of it now, and that you will all remain in your dormitories until informed of your fate by Commander Branne.'

'Of course, my lord. We are at your mercy.'

Hef loped out of the briefing hall, his heart still heavy, but lightened a little by his confession.

'What's to be done with them then, my lord?'

Branne's question hung in the air. Corax did not know the answer. He had nothing. His vast intellect could not calculate a solution. His many years of experience threw up no precedents. The distilled wisdom of a hundred philosophers and political thinkers was high on principle and low on detail.

'Leave me, Branne,' he whispered.

The commander reluctantly complied, casting a worried glance at his lord at the threshold.

'They made a big mistake, my lord, but they are loyal. Loyal to you.'

Corax said nothing and Branne left.

The primarch considered his options, trying to fit them into the wider picture. Yet however he looked at the situation it was the implications that dragged at his thoughts.

It was not the loyalty of the Raptors he did not trust, it was his own judgement. He had often thought of the Raptors as a polluted pool, in which pure water still remained in the depths, one that might be cleaned of its taint eventually. But what if the pollution, the corruption, went all the way to the bottom?

Weregeld, the Fenrisians had called it. A price to be paid.

It was superstitious nonsense. What agency would arbitrate such a matter? Who would judge it or impose the cost?

He considered the Raptors true Raven Guard in their hearts and minds, and had said as much to the Legion to assuage distrust of their twisted bodies.

Was he wrong?

A whirlwind of lightning scoured across a dark forest, its buzzing the cackle of a hundred thousand maniacs. Howls on the wind. The roar of bolters. The boom of shells. An azure storm filled the sky, every crack of thunder a heartbeat of a god, every pulse of light revealed a million watching eyes. Through the shadows of the impossibly vast trees loped the wolves, despairing and wounded, their dripping blood a crimson trail through grey bleakness. Their plaintive whines became the cries of dying legionaries that drowned out the turmoil of the storm...

Sweat-soaked, his heart hammering, Marcus Valerius rose from his sleep. Pelon was at the end of the bed, sitting on a small, plain chair with a tumbler of water already in hand.

Valerius drank deeply, draining the cup before he passed it back to his manservant. Pelon placed the tumbler aside and stood up.

‘Shall I fetch the journal, my master?’

‘Yes,’ croaked Valerius, throat still dry, lips cracked. ‘And my uniform. Signal the Avenger, I have to speak with the lord primarch.’

The door chime woke Corax. He was still at his desk, the assembled reports from Branne arranged across its dark stone top. He did not remember falling asleep – almost an impossibility for one with his faculties. Yet how long since he had slept previously? A week? More?

The mind needed time to rest, restore, cogitate and absorb. It was not fatigue that had driven him to sleep, simply a shutting down of physical systems to allow his brain to focus away from the distractions of sight, sounds and touch.

And yet no revelation clamoured for his attention on waking. The dilemmas of the previous day remained dilemmas.

Though he was of no firm resolution, he was of a mind to return to Terra. Despite all that weighed against such action, Corax thought the company of his father, his brothers, might be the best place to stand at the end.

He knew the choice was cowardice – to avoid seeing Leman Russ, which would require full disclosure of what had happened between Hef and Woundweaver. That would mean revealing the deformed Raptors. How the Wolf King would react would be anyone's guess. It was better that there was no more division.

A crass rationalisation, but one Corax was happy to cling to for the moment.

The door chimed again.

'Open!' He sat up and straightened the papers. He realised it was dark – the chamber had dimmed the light strip after a period of inactivity. 'Lights up!'

The brightening illumination fell upon Branne, his face a mask of consternation. Behind him was Marcus Valerius in full uniform, agitated. Corax could not see him but he could smell a third man standing just out of sight in the corridor.

Corax beckoned. 'Come in, commander. Vice-Caesari.'

Branne looked apologetic.

‘Marcus insisted, my lord. I told him you were occupied with strategy, but he says he cannot delay his audience.’

Valerius tentatively stepped across the threshold; another Therion in the uniform of a tribune, just behind, clutched a much-thumbed book to his chest.

‘We have to go to Yarant,’ the vice-Caesari blurted, stepping around Branne. ‘We have to save Russ and his Wolves.’

‘Have to, vice-Caesari?’ Corax’s lips thinned and his eyes narrowed.

‘Sorry, my lord,’ said Branne. ‘I did not know what Marcus wanted. I thought it was urgent...’ He placed a hand on the vice-Caesari’s arm. ‘We’ll talk about this first.’

‘No!’ Valerius pulled himself away from the commander’s grip. He turned and grabbed the book from his attendant and opened at a marked page. He started to read. ‘A broken crown on a desert dune. A many-headed dragon issues from a cave bathed in blood.’ He flicked to another leaf of the book. ‘A howling wolf, swallowed by a storm.’ He turned the page. ‘A tempest of lightning engulfing a forest in which hide the wolves.’

‘What is this?’ growled Branne. ‘Marcus, what are you doing?’

He made to snatch the book from Valerius but the Therion turned, blocking the Space Marine’s arm.

‘Warnings, my lord!’ the vice-Caesari’s fingers clenched the book and he stared at the primarch. ‘My dreams, Lord Corax. Omens, visions. Portents from the Emperor. Another one. It can be done. We can rescue the sons of Fenris.’

‘No more!’ barked Branne. He grabbed hold of Valerius’s arm and pulled him towards the door. ‘The primarch does not need to hear this nonsense.’

‘Unhand him, commander.’ Corax spoke quietly, but his authority was absolute. Branne complied immediately, releasing his hold on the Therion officer. ‘Marcus, explain yourself.’

‘It is nothing–’ started Branne.

Corax silenced him with a stare. ‘Vice-Caesari, your explanation, please.’

‘I have dreams, my lord. Prescient dreams. I see what will come. In metaphor, visions, impressions.’ He took a deep breath. ‘I know you must think me insane, my lord, but I can no longer hide the truth whatever the consequences. My faith demands such honesty or it is hollow. I thought at first the visions came from you, but I know now that they are a gift of the Emperor. Warnings he sends to me.’

Corax swallowed hard and kept his face passive. This was a conversation he had never expected. He was at a loss and took sanctuary in emotional detachment.

‘Warnings? Dreams?’ He looked at Branne. ‘You seem to know of this already.’

The commander said nothing, but looked utterly wretched. He flinched from the primarch’s gaze and then turned a dagger-stare on Marcus. ‘The vice-Caesari has come to me before with such claims, my lord.’

‘He has? And you did not think fit to tell me?’

Branne’s silence was all the confession Corax expected. The primarch returned his attention to Valerius and gestured for the Therion to hand over his book.

‘This is a record of your... visions?’

Marcus nodded and gave him the journal, reverent in the way he passed it to Corax.

‘Some of them I do not understand, they are on matters beyond my knowledge, events I have not witnessed or identified.’

Many have come to pass. Some I have acted on, and they have proven their worth.'

The journal was of thin paper bound in cheap card – the sort of book issued to officers for making disciplinary and logistical notes when absent from a cogitator. The script inside was scrawled in uneven lines. The manservant's writing, Corax assumed, for a Therion of Marcus' breeding would have far better penmanship. As he looked more closely, he saw there were comments and marks in a far rounder, smoother hand – notes from the vice-Caesari. Some were clarifications, many didn't make sense, seemingly sentences out of context.

He flicked back and forth. Each page had a date, a location and then a garbled description of something Marcus had dreamed. At the bottom of a few pages, in Marcus' hand, were written places and dates in capitals.

'What are these? Corax asked. He turned the book and pointed at one such notation.

'Where the vision was proven true, my lord.'

Corax looked at the open page. The citation read GHORNA, 676009.M31. He skimmed the preceding vision, which spoke of a hot desert and a spring of fresh water washing away a black filth.

'Ghorna?' he said.

'An agri-world, my lord. I took the Cohort there and found Death Guard plundering its shipment stations. We slew them and resupplied.'

'I see.' Corax looked at other pages. 'How did you know to go to Ghorna?'

'Guesswork, mostly, my lord,' admitted Marcus. 'Or perhaps intuition, you might say. It was the third system we checked. My visions are not precise, as you can see.' He whispered the next words, almost inaudible. 'Divine guidance...'

‘And how does this relate to Yarant?’

‘Repeated dreams, my lord, for several weeks. It’s all in there. The wolves being hunted, the storm and the many-headed beast that stalks them is the same every time.’

‘Yes, I understand that. But why do you say it means we can rescue them?’

‘It doesn’t,’ Branne said quickly. He stepped in front of Valerius. ‘Anxiety dreams, nothing more. The war takes its tolls in different ways.’

‘Stand aside, commander,’ Corax growled. ‘I am speaking to the vice-Caesari.’

Branne reluctantly retreated, hands opening and closing into fists, his eyes flicking between the primarch and vice-Caesari.

‘The first page, my lord,’ Valerius said quietly. ‘That will make every-thing clear. I didn’t start taking the notes back then, but included all of my dreams when I began.’

Corax turned to the start of the journal. The dream spoke of a bloodstained hurricane across a desolate hillside. He read of crimson winds and the cawing of ravens. Hearts quickening, he absorbed the description of flames consuming the flock, turning them to sparks, their caws becoming the roar of bolters and thunder of battle.

The book shook in his trembling hand. He did not need to read further but all the same he had to look at the notation at the bottom of the page.

ISSTVAN, 566006.M31

Corax felt numb. His stare moved from Valerius to Branne and back again, not quite seeing either of them.

‘This is what brought you to Isstvan? A dream?’

'A... A vision, my lord.' Valerius wrung his hands. 'To save you. I thought it came from you, but I was wrong. It was the Emperor reaching out.'

'You believe this?' Corax's gaze fell on Branne. 'You believe that the Emperor sends vice-Caesari Marcus Valerius visions to guide his acts?'

'No!' Branne shook his head fiercely. 'No, I don't believe that. I don't...' He turned on Valerius, lip curled. 'That is not what you said to me!'

'Where else might they have come from, but the Emperor?' pleaded Marcus.

Where else indeed? Corax stood up. He dropped the book on the ground, fighting to control his anger.

'Go,' he managed to say between gritted teeth.

'My lord, let me explain.' Branne took a step forward while Valerius snatched up his book and held it to his chest as though it was precious.

'Go!'

The primarch's roar was like a shockwave. The two Therions threw themselves to the floor, quailing in fear. Branne staggered backwards, reeling from the intensity of the outburst.

Corax revealed himself, dropping the blanketing aura that kept the majesty of his primarch nature hidden. 'Go!'

Tears streaming down their faces, Valerius and his attendant fled. Branne bowed, shaking in his armour, and retreated to the door. He looked as though he might protest again but one final look at his master stilled any further comment and he too retreated.

Corax stood for a long time, fists on his desk, staring at the door. The lights seemed stark, too bright, too intense. He was laid

bare before their scrutiny. There was nowhere to hide in the light, nowhere to find sanctuary.

‘Doors. Lights down.’

He much preferred the shadows.

No ceremony, no guard of honour. A shortly worded summons brought Marcus Valerius back to the Avenger. He was met on the flight deck by Branne. The commander was alone, his face an impassive mask. Three days had passed since the vice-Caesari had shared his divinely inspired gift, during which he had heard nothing from either Branne or the primarch.

‘What is his mood?’ he asked Branne.

‘I don’t know,’ muttered the commander.

‘Why has he asked for me? Has he said anything to you?’

The two of them turned into the corridor and for the first time in many years Marcus was struck by how stark the interior of the ship was, how much it reminded him of the endless corridors and whitewashed chambers of the Ravenspire. No hangings, no paintings, no decoration. A prison still in its appearance.

‘I’ve not spoken to him. He’s kept to himself since you left.’

‘It has been years since I’ve spent any amount of time in the company of the primarch but that cannot bode well.’

Branne said nothing for several minutes, until they reached their destination. It was Corax’s personal chamber, not far from the strategium. The door was closed. Branne held out a hand to stop Marcus as he reached for the alert rune.

‘Not yet, we’ll wait for the others.’ The commander’s expression softened. ‘There’s something we have to talk about. I know why you had to tell him, but you should have spoken to me first.’

'I had not understood the implications, not until I heard about Yarant Three. Then it became clear and I could not hold my tongue.'

'Even so, you were stupid to bring it up like that. We could have approached Corax together, prepared him a little better.'

'But we have nothing to be ashamed of, why are you talking like this? We saved the Legion!'

'He has a lot on his mind lately.' Branne leaned closer, conspiratorial. 'Trouble with some of my Raptors. He is... sensitive to certain things at the moment.'

'With you, you mean?' Marcus looked at Branne and realised that his mood was not angry, it was pensive. He was even more worried by what Corax might say than the vice-Caesari. 'I am sorry. I did not mean to bring you into further disfavour.'

'Disfavour I can live with,' said Branne. 'I've talked to the other commanders – not mentioning you, of course – and we're worried he might do something ill-considered.'

'Lord Corax has the keenest mind of any in this fleet, an intellect to rival the greatest. I do not think he could ever be accused of stupidity.'

'You'd be surprised,' Branne murmured. 'Sometimes his spirit overrules his brain. I knew him before he was a primarch. Before he knew he was a primarch, back on Deliverance. He seems cold and calculating at times, ruthless maybe. But he feels it, I know. Think! He can remember every person he has killed, every wound inflicted, every injury suffered. Every planet crushed, rebellion destroyed, regime overthrown. He remembers it all, in precise detail.'

Marcus considered this, or tried to. It was too much to comprehend. Branne bent so that he was level with Marcus, eye-to-eye, his stare intense.

‘The only thing that keeps him from breaking is knowing he has done the right thing, that the cause was just and the end result a benefit to mankind.’ The commander glanced away and swallowed hard, unnerved by what he was about to say. ‘If he doubts that... If he were to doubt himself for too long, ask too many of the wrong questions, what would happen?’

It did not bear thinking about. Marcus had heard too many stories of the likes of the Night Hunter, Angron and Fulgrim to feel comfortable with the notion of Corax turning his back on the Emperor. He shuddered and evidently Branne noticed his reaction.

‘You see. He is walking a precipice at the moment. The war turns upon small margins, a wrong decision now... All will be lost.’

‘Perhaps he wants to lose...’ Marcus could barely believe he had said the words, but the reaction from Branne, or lack of, proved that he had not been alone in thinking them.

‘We need to give him something to fight for, to restore his faith in the truth.’

Valerius’s hand moved to the pocket of his coat where he always kept a small copy of the *Lectitio Divinitatus*. No. That was not the solution. Corax was not of a mind to accept the Emperor’s divinity yet, and any assertion of such would earn his greater displeasure.

‘What about freedom?’ suggested the vice-Caesari. ‘The dream he aspired to from the start.’

Branne did not have time to reply. The sound of boots down the hallway announced the arrival of Agapito and Arendi. Marcus saluted the two commanders and received raised fists in response.

They waited in silence, all sharing similar disquiet. Agapito could feel the tension around Branne and Marcus, but he did not bother to ask its nature – his brother was almost a stranger of late and Marcus literally one by long absence.

Soukhounou arrived a few minutes later. Their council complete, none but the highest commanders present, Agapito stepped past his brother and pressed the rune to activate the door chime.

Ten seconds passed. Ten seconds that stretched into eternity, longer even than the first agonising salvo of the traitors' bombardment at Isstvan. That had been ten seconds of incomprehension, of mayhem and death. That had been ten seconds of activity, of scurrying for cover, of barking orders and trying to make sense of a universe that had imploded.

But ten seconds waiting for Lord Corax to bid them enter, when Agapito knew that so much was amiss, was a torture.

Eventually the door hummed open, to reveal the primarch sitting behind the plateau of his desk, hands resting one atop the other on the dark surface. He seemed placid, gaze moving from one arrival to the next as they passed into the chamber.

There were no chairs on their side of the desk and so they stood in a line, like errant scholam children summoned before their stern lesson master. Agapito had to wonder if the sense of humiliation was intentional and wondered again what transgressions Branne had committed beyond his knowledge.

'I have reached a decision,' said Corax. His eyes rested on Marcus. 'The army of the Therion Cohort will go to Beta-Garmon and lend the weight of their guns to the fight there.'

Valerius nodded hesitantly, stunned by the announcement. By all accounts coming out of the war-torn system, Beta-Garmon had become a whirlpool of destruction, dragging in more and more armies and fleets, crushing them against each other in a ceaseless crucible of battle that left only corpses and wreckage. Marcus' eyes were wet and he blinked rapidly, trying to clear them, understanding immediately that such a command was a one-way trip. Deliberately so.

‘The army, my lord?’ Valerius said, picking up on the specifics of Corax’s command.

‘Yes, and only such transports needed to move your men.’ Corax pushed a data-slate across the desk. ‘Your credentials, and my testimonial, to be presented to whomever is in command of the Imperial forces in that region.’

‘My lord, is it wise to split our forces?’ asked Branne.

‘The command has been issued,’ Corax replied bluntly, his eyes not wavering from the vice-Caesari.

‘And it is understood, my lord,’ Valerius replied with a deep bow. ‘We shall endeavour to bring victory in the name of the Emperor.’

Corax said nothing to this, but moved his gaze to Branne.

‘The recall of the Raptors to the Avenger is complete?’

‘Yes, my lord.’

‘The company will be rededicated to a specialist assault role. Given the dire nature of our supplies at present, all ranged weaponry will be given to the other companies and close assault drill will be adopted.’

‘You’re taking our guns away, my lord?’ Branne was as distraught by this pronouncement as Valerius had been by his orders. ‘Is this a punishment?’

Corax frowned, the first sign of emotion he had displayed since they had entered.

‘A somewhat petty act in the circumstance, if it was. No, I have calculated the best effectiveness of the forces I have to hand. The Raptors are too few in number to provide tactical or strategic support, and their ammunition and weapons would be better used by the other companies, who can be more flexible in deployment. The Raptors’ losses, both in battle and through continued degradation of ability, make them suited to this function.’

‘Like the breacher teams from the uprising?’ said Arendi. ‘Go in hard, turn the enemy’s eyes, allow others to manoeuvre into place.’

‘We called them the bait draft for a reason,’ growled Branne. ‘And they were volunteers. Hotheads, discontents. Terminal cases...’ His indignation became dismay. ‘Terminal cases. Is that how you see the Raptors then, my lord?’

Corax met the accusation with a placid stare. ‘You will assemble the Raptors into a shock force and drill them in decisive strike tactics. They will be the claw that punches through the enemy’s armour and the Talons, Black Guard and Hawks will be the weight of the fist behind them.’ The primarch leaned forward. ‘My planning will depend upon the Raptors, Branne. I expect you to lead them as you have done so already. As an example. From the front.’

The implications of the primarch’s words were not lost on any of them. Agapito shared a glance with Soukhounou and the latter cleared his throat.

‘You have chosen a destination, my lord?’ the commander asked. ‘If only the Therions are heading to Beta-Garmon, are we returning to Terra?’

‘No, commander, we will not be returning to the Throneworld.’

Agapito wondered if he was the only one to think this sounded like a decree, the word ‘ever’ left silent but implied.

‘So, Yarant then,’ suggested Arendi. ‘To rescue Russ and his Wolves.’

‘Yarant,’ said Corax.

He did not address the second part of Arendi’s assertion, another unspoken but telling admission. Agapito’s growing sense of unease was fast becoming a more solid fear but he could not voice it.

The primarch was no more forthcoming and perfunctorily dismissed them back to their duties with an order to prepare for the warp jump to Yarant III as quickly as possible. As they left, the Custodian Arcatus was waiting outside, Captain Noriz with him.

‘Speak softly and accept whatever the primarch tells you,’ Agapito warned them as he passed. ‘Lord Corax is not in a forgiving temper today.’

The commanders assembled a little further down the passageway as the chamber doors closed. None of them spoke for a few seconds, unwilling to give voice to potentially rebellious thoughts and doubts. Soukhounou, the Terran, who had been part of the Legion before the arrival of the primarch, broke the silence. It surprised Agapito a little that he spoke in support of Corax.

‘Our fate is revealed,’ Soukhounou said quietly, meeting the gaze of each in turn. ‘We have our orders. Let us now do our duty as best we can, as loyal warriors. It is not our place to judge, only to fight.’

‘Victorus aut Mortis, by the old tongue,’ Branne murmured. ‘Victory or Death.’

A call stopped Marcus before he set foot on the steps of the shuttle that would take him back to the Glory of Therion. He recognised Branne’s voice and turned, surprised. For a heartbeat hope flared, the hope that Corax had relented in his decision and despatched Branne with fresh orders. Seeing the grim face of the commander quashed that hope moments after it had blossomed.

Branne caught up with the vice-Caesari. Marcus waited for him to speak, but the Space Marine was at a loss; his expression betrayed conflicted emotions. He was wrestling with feelings and thoughts that perhaps had not risen since he had become a legionary of the Emperor.

‘What will be, will be,’ Valerius said. He fidgeted with the sash across his breastplate – the Red a symbol of Therion bleeding for

the Emperor. The cloth between his fingers gave him a little comfort. But only a little. The ragged copy of the *Lectitio Divinitus* in his pocket was his source of strength now. 'We cannot change the course of the past.'

'It is... not right,' Branne managed to say, as though these four words were a grand declaration of defiance.

'I understand,' Valerius assured him. The Therion general smiled. 'These are not the first complex questions I have had to face in recent years.'

'I'm sure,' said Branne. He exhaled, hard and long. 'It's a warzone, it's dangerous, but it's not a death sentence.'

'We both know the primarch's intent.'

'Do we?' snapped Branne. 'Why doubt what he says? Maybe he does hope the Therions can swing the battle at Beta-Garmon.'

'Then why keep our warships?' Valerius asked, holding up the data-slate the primarch had given him. 'His orders are explicit. We are to take transports only. The lord primarch has taken my cruisers and battleships and the best of the crew and officers. He did not see fit to share his intent for them. We will be reliant on other forces to protect us in the void.'

Branne said nothing.

'I know that you do not agree, but I believe that the Emperor shall watch over me,' said Marcus, reading the doubt in Branne's expression. 'What passes is by His will and plan.'

He raised his fist to his chest as a salute. The Raven Guard commander shook his head and extended a hand in friendship. Valerius took it.

'I'll see you at the victory parade,' said Branne, but the joke sounded forced, over-compensating.

Valerius could feel his knees weakening; the delay and Branne's awkward farewell only served to bring home the finality

of the moment. He could not bring himself to look his companion, his friend, in the eye and he turned back to the steps. He would not let the commander's last sight of him be of a mortal man succumbing to his fears.

Back straight, strides measured, Valerius ascended to the shuttle.

He did not look back. The steps retracted and the door hissed closed.

Marcus Valerius never looked upon the face of Commander Branne Nev again.

Kurthuri sensed all was not well the moment he laid eyes on Corax. He did not need any psychic ability to see that the primarch was troubled. Corax stood with his back to the door, face hidden, but his shoulders were hunched, and his hands made fists. Only the light of a few screens lit the chamber; all else was in darkness.

'My lord?'

'You are to return to Terra,' Corax said. He did not turn. 'I am disbanding the Librarius again, as commanded by the Edict of Nikaea.'

'Have I offended in some way, my lord? Have we done something wrong?'

'It is I that has offended, Balsar. I defied the edict, even though Arcatus and others expressly warned me against such action.'

'Circumstances have changed dramatically since the Emperor held council at Nikaea, my lord. Exigent circumstances.' Kurthuri took a breath. 'We have been most rigorous in our tests and checks, my lord. There is no taint here.'

'No taint?' Corax shifted but still did not look at the Librarian. 'A bold statement, Balsar. Who are we to gainsay the Emperor's judgement? It is not our place to determine the laws.'

‘On a practical level, the fleet is poorly served with astropaths, my lord. If you wish for me to depart, that is well enough, but my brothers can still provide valuable service.’

‘I did not ask for your opinion.’ Corax flexed his long, pale fingers, as though opening and closing talons. ‘Malcador and the Emperor will judge best what use you can be to the Imperium.’

‘I understand, my lord. But might I suggest that my brothers remain, returned to the battle companies once more, as before. Just in case. If Lord Malcador sees fit to exonerate me, I shall convey as much to my brothers to avoid the delay of physical return.’

After a few seconds, Corax nodded.

‘Very well. You will go to the Sigillite and receive his judgement in person. Your brothers are under ban of their powers again. Any use of them without specific order will be a capital offence. Am I clear?’

‘Absolutely, my lord.’ Kurthuri backed towards the door, fist held in a salute. ‘One other matter, if you would indulge me, my lord.’

‘What is it?’

‘It seems wasteful to send a ship with a single warrior for cargo.’

‘You will not be going alone, Balsar. The others will be waiting for you on the starboard flight deck in two hours.’

‘Yes, my lord.’

Kurthuri left, worried by this turn of events but aware that he had salvaged what good he could from the situation. Of even greater concern was the primarch’s demeanour. Not once had he looked at the Librarian during the exchange.

What was it that the primarch did not want him to see?

The flight bay was crowded as Branne waited for the last arrivals. Arcatus and his Custodians were already at the ramp of the Stormbird, Kurthuri close to them. Two dozen legionaries and officers in different liveries stood next to another gunship – the strays of other Legions the Raven Guard had absorbed over the past years.

Two in particular stood out – the metallic war-plate of Annovuldi, former Warsmith of the Iron Warriors and the midnight blue of the Night Lord Kasati Nuon. These two alone were the surviving loyalists from Legions that had sided with Horus, gathered to fight beneath Corax's banner in the years since.

Annovuldi attracted Branne's attention with a look but, before the commander could respond, the inward bay doors opened to admit Captain Noriz and the remaining Imperial Fists of his command. They trooped onto the deck in neat ranks and files, taking up their lines next to the other non-Raven Guard.

'You get your wish a little early,' Branne said to Noriz. 'Back to Terra already.'

'Yes, it seems so,' the Imperial Fist replied, 'though it leaves me in two minds.'

Branne did not have to ask concerning the nature of such divided thoughts. Arcatus stepped forward and made his doubt more plainly known.

'Lord Corax's behaviour of these last few days has not been reassuring, Branne,' the Custodian Guard said. 'Erratic.'

Branne fought the instinct to defend his primarch, but could not leave the accusation unanswered.

'He knows what he's doing,' he told them all. Branne paced over to Kurthuri and then back to Noriz, but he looked at Arcatus. 'Not erratic, he's entirely within his character. Just not the one you've ever seen. None of you know about the Long Shadows, the night before we launched the uprising on Deliverance. As you can

imagine, there were always a few rebels we had doubts about. Not their loyalty, maybe, but their motives, their courage, their ability. They'd proven useful enough in the preceding months, getting everything ready, but were they fighters? Could we trust our backs to them?'

'Lord Corax does not trust us,' said Nuon with a grim smile. 'He is clearing out the unworthy.'

'The distractions,' Branne corrected him. 'The "Long Shadows", he called those he had chosen to not participate in the main assaults. He had another job for them, one they could undertake without him having to worry about what they'd done. In fact, he would be far past worrying if they had to do it.'

'The Long Shadows hid across the cell blocks. Their job was to man the detonation charges we'd placed on the dome generators and seal-ways. If it went badly, if the uprising failed, they were to blow the prison to pieces, break the domes and suffocate everyone inside...' Branne stroked a hand across his brow at the memory. 'There were to be no survivors that next day. No life in bondage, Corax had said. For all of us, volunteers, fighters, those that didn't even know there was going to be a revolution. No middle ground. Victory or death.'

'So he doesn't trust us to help bring victory today, but is expecting us to clean up afterwards if he fails,' said Annovuldi.

Branne nodded. He stepped closer to Noriz and pulled something from a pouch at his belt. It was the rusted iron ring with two equally corroded keys hanging from it – he had offered it to Noriz in a wager regarding which primarch would kill the Warmaster, what seemed like a lifetime ago now.

'I figure Russ isn't going to get to Horus any time soon,' he told the Imperial Fist, holding out the prize.

'You're right,' said the captain, taking the keys. Removing a golden shield from the lanyard on his right shoulder plate, he held

up the Narandia battle-honour he had originally offered in return. 'There's been no word that Sanguinius is doing any better. It seems I'll be wrong as well.'

Branne laughed and took the shield. He clasped it in his fist and banged Noriz's breastplate a couple of times.

'Don't let the traitors take the Palace,' he told the Imperial Fist. 'I want to see it again.'

'Then bring us Corax and the Wolf King, if you can. I'll look for your return.'

Branne nodded once, but he knew that such was not in the thinking of his primarch. As the others boarded their gunships, Balsar Kurthuri approached. He gave Branne a salute.

'My brothers will keep to their oaths,' he assured the commander. 'I can't say what shadows surround the primarch of late but there is no taint amongst us. Stay true to each other, to him, to the Emperor.'

'Have no doubt of it,' Branne replied. 'Say what you want about Beta-Garmon, about where we're going, but Terra is going to be the last and greatest battlefield of this war, and you'll be right there.'

'I'm certain that Malcador will find something needlessly complicated for me to do.' He leaned closer, his voice earnest. 'We are part of the universe, interacting with it and being shaped by it in ways impossible to trace beyond the immediate. I have gazed into the darkest corners of reality and they have gazed back into me, but I am true to the Imperium and its creator. Every foe slain, every battle fought means something. If not that day then the next, or the next, or a year later or ten thousand years. Echoes of the greatest wars sound for a long time.'

Branne said nothing, taken aback by the frankness of those words, and not sure that he understood them entirely. He watched the Librarian board the closest Stormbird and then moved

towards the corridor when plasma jets burned into life. The door was open, and Gherith Arendi waited in the passage.

‘The Long Shadows depart,’ said the leader of the Black Guard. ‘The last night before the hardest day.’

‘Corax has everything prepared,’ said Branne. ‘No more distractions, no more hangers-on. Tomorrow, we jump for Yarant.’

Four

Guided by the best Navigators in the fleet, the warships of the Imperial Army broke warp on the far side of Yarant’s star, partially masked by its incandescence. Despite such precautions, their entry was not flawless. Alerted to their arrival, if not sure of their numbers and purpose, the orbiting flotillas of assembled traitor warships divided. Some continued their close support of the battle on the surface of Yarant III, but the greater part broke away to investigate the newly arrived threat.

The incoming battleships and cruiser seemed undeterred by the size of the fleet moving across the system to confront them. Passing the stellar boundary, they made battle lines in preparation to meet the renegade ships bearing down upon them. Perhaps believing the Therions and Natollians desperate or insane, the traitors managed their own formations to encircle the arriving warships. The two forces powered towards the inevitable contact, gun decks ready, shields crackling.

Committed, there was nothing that the traitors could do when Corax ordered the ships of the Raven Guard to deactivate their reflex shields.

Each battle-barge, cruiser and frigate was tethered to a Therion warship. Towed through the warp, each had crossed the translation boundary into Yarant at the exact same moment as its

twin, invisible to all detection, even the senses of Librarians and Navigators.

The Legion ships had just enough time to detach their docking claws and power away from their surrogates, redirecting the output of their energy defences to banks of void shields.

Torpedoes from the two clashing fleets filled the void. While the traitors emptied their flight bays of gunships and interceptors the loyalists continued to accelerate, keeping close behind a wave of lethal ordnance.

The Raven Guard and auxilia had a single, simple objective: break through to the orbit of Yarant III. Their attack lacked finesse, but it did not need any. The ships of Horus' followers burned retro thrusters and manoeuvred hard to come to new headings, but it was too late to counter the single hammer blow directed at the heart of the traitor fleet.

Though outgunned across the system, Branne's genius ploy had brought the Raven Guard and their allies against just a third of the enemy. As the lead Alpha Legion ships parted to avoid the concentrated wave of torpedoes directed at them, the warships of Corax pounced, catching them in lethal crossfires.

Ship after ship passed through the centre of the splitting traitors; bombardment cannons and broadsides hurled the last of their munitions, spitting plasma and las in constant salvos. While the traitors scrambled to recover some semblance of order, grand cruisers burned and battle-barges broke from stern to prow under the incessant attacks.

On the bridge of the Avenger, Branne cheered. He could not control himself, so pleased was he that the plan had actually worked. He gave no thought to the fact that Corax had specified that the strategy only needed to get them to Yarant – no consideration had been given to how they would leave the system. The Avenger formed the point of the attack alongside the battle-barges Providence and Shadowed Guardian commanded by

Agapito and Soukhounou respectively, the drop pod cascades and flight bays filled to capacity from the rest of the fleet, ready to despatch the Raptors and Black Guard down to the surface in a single devastating drop.

'Well done, commander,' Corax said quietly, standing just to one side of Branne. The primarch had been so taciturn of late, so withdrawn, those three simple words were as much a cause for celebration as the success of his plan.

Giving no thought to return fire, their void shields flaring from the cannonades of their foes, the Raven Guard pressed on towards the battle on Yarant III. The Natollians and Therions turned, magazines still full from recent supply, gun crews at full capacity. The warships formed up to protect the Legion of Corax, creating a barrier of torpedoes, fighter-bombers and ships-of-the-line to dissuade the traitors from pursuit. Squadrons of destroyers and frigates hunted down crippled enemy ships many times their size and finished them with blasts from lance turrets and mass driver batteries.

Having been driven from orbit by the traitors, the scattered remnants of the Space Wolves fleet converged from the outer system too – guessing Corax's intent, they seized upon the arrival of the Raven Guard and headed back towards the contested world. Faced with approaching foes from opposite directions, the ships still at high anchorage faced an impossible choice: abandon their watch over the planet, or be trapped between two vengeful fleets.

Their commanders chose the worst of both, dividing their forces.

Many Alpha Legion ships and those of the Thousand Sons chose to withdraw before they were trapped trying to fight within the gravity well of the planet. The World Eaters universally opted to fight, supported by a few remaining Alpha Legion cruisers and vassal ships from the Imperial Army.

Their resistance did not last long.

As the Avenger closed towards high orbit, Corax immediately recognised the voice that hailed from one of the approaching Space Wolves squadrons.

‘Captain Rathvin, I am pleased that you managed to make your delivery,’ the primarch replied.

‘I am sorry to say that it didn’t help. But that is another conversation, Ravenlord, for another time.’

‘How goes the battle? Have you received report from your high command?’

‘Nothing but scraps. I hope it is because my brothers are more intent on waging war than sending communications.’

‘I have to locate my brother. Early scans show fighting across a large battlefield. Where on Yarrant is Lemman Russ located?’

‘I don’t know, Ravenlord, but finding him shouldn’t be difficult.’

‘How so, captain?’

‘Look for the greatest number of foes, the biggest battle. He’ll be somewhere close to the middle of it.’

The pulse of anti-aircraft fire lit the skies. Flickers of blue and green gleamed from bleached bones – the skeletons of vast beasts littered the Red Dunes for many kilometres. Huge ribcages and vertebrae jutted like the wreckage of war machines. Phalangeal outcrops and femur-propped hills shaped the ruddy sands, breaks against the gentle but constant wind that blew from dark frothing seas to the south.

Had the hab block-sized monsters been wiped out by some cataclysm, or had they been drawn to the Karadek Valley on some deathly migration over centuries in times past?

It was an idle interest that distracted Korin as he waited for the next opportunity to move. The Mor Deythan crouched in the lee of a thighbone that rose twice his height from a sand drift –

and extended much further underground it seemed. In this sandy nook he waited, counting down the seconds until the closest laser cannon paused for its recharge cycle.

It used to be that the Shadowmasters had hunted in squads, using their unique Corax-gifted abilities to sow discord and terror amongst their foes. Now they worked alone, their number reduced to a handful amongst all the legionaries of the Raven Guard.

The Skyhammer gun emplacement just a dozen metres ahead fell quiet. Soundlessly Korin rose from his position, sliding over the dunes like a desert serpent. He seemed to flicker like the shadows cast by the more distant gun batteries, as though jumping from one shadow directly to the next.

He was within pistol range of the crew in a few seconds, but the weapon remained at his belt, his forearm-mounted blades dull for the time being. They were not his target.

The next salvo of fire lasted thirty seconds, a blind fusillade trying to catch the Whispercutters and Shadowhawks circling unseen above. With a loud whine, the gun powered down again. The crew, three Imperial Army soldiers, complained quietly about the weather while they blew on their hands in the chill night.

By the time the cannon opened fire once more, Korin was well past the boundary and heading towards his objective. He moved quickly now, inside the cordon of vehicles and patrols guarding the headquarters of one of the World Eaters commanders. Elsewhere along the battlefield, other Mor Deythan would be infiltrating the traitor lines in a similar manner.

The World Eaters command centre had been easy enough to find. Ciphers and codes were poor defence against the Raven Guard. The confusion caused by their attack had elicited a storm of traffic, broadcast on many media, and a flurry of messengers, gunship flights and other activity. Isolating the node points of such bursts identified the crucial elements in the enemy command

network as easily as if they had erected flags to announce their presence.

In the case of this particular commander, he had hung flags – two Legion banners hung from cross-poles mounted on the backs of a pair of Spartan heavy transports that were parked close to the pre-fabricated drop-bunker he used as his command centre.

Korin found a spot in which to nestle that hid him from all angles except the bunker. He adjusted the auto-senses of his specialist war-plate, dropping down all the readings except audio, which intensified to bring the myriad sounds of the desert alive. The Shadowmaster existed in pure soundscape for several seconds – even the hiss of the wind over the sand shaped his picture of the environment. It was simple enough to filter out the extraneous noises to focus on human sounds.

He heard the World Eaters talking. Much he could not understand, either a local argot of their Legion or an artificial battle-cant devised for secrecy. It made no difference, as he heard a word over and over again – Delerax. The name of the lieutenant commander. He was definitely in the bunker.

Korin slid closer to the outpost, his stripped-down armour making no more noise than the desultory snap of the flags and the hum of the Spartans' batteries.

There was no guard set at the door, though two legionaries manned the roof guns. Korin was already beneath the closest, the shield of his autocannon blocking his sight to the Shadowmaster. Almost within touching distance of the bunker wall, Korin pulled a coin-sized beacon from his belt and tossed it to the base of the ferrocrete structure.

He withdrew quickly, lest by chance some enemy legionary happened to spot the low-spectrum signal pulsing from the beacon. Twenty seconds later he was a hundred metres away, concealed amidst the great bony landscape.

A spark appeared in the blackness, a blue dot that rapidly expanded into the plume of a missile engine. Sirens wailed across the traitor camp. Anti-air turrets whined but they were not quick enough. Korin smiled and tracked the executor missile right until the moment it struck the base of the bunker.

Like the Caestus assault rams used to breach fortifications, the executor was tipped with a melta detonator that seared through two metres of ferrocrete in an instant. The gleaming core of the projectile disappeared into the foundations. Half a second later the wall of the structure exploded, turned to fragments and particles carried aloft by an expanding plasma cloud.

It was not enough to destroy the headquarters, nor was it intended to be. The walls had gone though, the roof partially collapsed, leaving a five-metre hole open to the elements.

Overhead a Whispercutter glided noiselessly into the glow of the missile strike. Armoured figures along its length dropped away to fall groundwards – a Dark Fury squad, dedicated to assassination missions. Their jump packs whined into life just moments before they hit the ground, heard only by Korin among the shouts of dismay and confusion that had erupted from the remains of the bunker. The shimmer of lightning claws broke the shadows. Sergeant Ghelt, the Chooser of the Slain, led his Dark Furies into the ruddy light of the headquarters' interior and their claws crackled into deadly life, cerulean sparks reflecting from the plasma-smoothed edged of the crater.

Korin's mission was accomplished and he drew back into the darkness. When he was half a kilometre away, he signalled the Darkwing gunship from which Commander Agapito coordinated the decapitation attacks.

'Target Four-Alpha eliminated,' he reported.

'Affirmative, Wraith Four. Await Whispercutter transportation to next target.'

The traitors lost a dozen command-level officers. Augurs and vox-casts were met with static as the fleet of Raven Guard ships above Yarant III employed their 'shadowcast' strategy and blanketed all channels and wavelengths with fluctuating barrages of energy and traffic, making it impossible for anyone to communicate or scan for more than a kilometre.

The Raven Guard needed no such communications, for they had been carefully briefed, and down to individual squads knew their specific role in the battle to come. As the terminus of dawn crossed the battle line where the traitors continued their attack against the beleaguered Space Wolves, Corax led the main assault.

Mor Deythan and Dark Fury squads already on the surface attacked behind the enemy formations, picking objectives of opportunity to waylay or destroy. Under the cover of these fresh attacks, dozens of Stormbirds, Thunderhawks, Shadowhawks and Darkwings fell from orbit, unpowered for the first few kilometres, invisible to all augurs.

When their jets finally burned into life, they swept out from the glare of the rising sun, vague silhouettes against the glaring pale blue orb of Yarant's star. Missiles, rockets and lascannons announced their arrival; the fire of detonations raked through traitor squads and battle tanks massed for the next attack against Leman Russ's Legion.

Agapito was on a Darkwing in the first wave, leaping from the gunship with his command squad before it even touched down. The impact of his landing did not shock him, but the scene that greeted him gave him pause for a moment.

The hillside was littered with hundreds of dead, in the livery of the Space Wolves and their enemies. Traitor guns pounded out a thunderous beat from the nearby batteries. The tangled remains of legionaries seemed to grasp at Agapito's feet, causing him to stumble, and dead eyes stared accusingly at him from broken helms.

In his mind he was back at the Urgall Depression, surrounded on all sides. He fired indiscriminately, shooting any figure that was not black-clad. There was no shortage of foes to target. Heavy-weapons fire screamed and whined past him, lighting the battlefield with more explosions.

And like Isstvan, Corax was there.

The primarch stood on the ramp of a descending Stormbird, his claws bright against the gloomy interior, an ornate pistol in his fist. He stepped away from the gunship into the rushing wind, his wings snapping out a second later. Corax soared down through the smoke and flames. Fire Raptor attack craft flanked the swooping primarch, their guns leaving trails of dead legionaries with their passing.

Unlike on that day when the civil war had begun for the Raven Guard, there was none to match Corax. No Lorgar or Night Haunter to stall his vengeance. Lightning strikes erupted from his claws as he landed, sweeping limbs and heads from the legionaries that swarmed towards him. His wings lashed out, their razor edges splitting traitorous bodies, eviscerating with each sweep of an ebon pinion.

‘On!’ roared Agapito, reloading his bolter. ‘Into them!’

The Falcons, Talons, Black Guard and Raptor smooths surged into the enemy, racing over the bodies of dead Space Wolves and traitors.

Already destabilised by the attacks on their commanders, a fresh and vengeful foe in their midst, such officers as remained amongst the Thousand Sons, Alpha Legion and World Eaters ordered a retreat. They had the advantage of numbers, of guns and tanks. There was no need to be drawn into a futile melee against a raging primarch.

Agapito urged on his warriors, desperate to pursue. He knew that the enemy would rally and sweep all before them, given time.

Corax had another perspective. The primarch ordered his Legion to hold, to secure the withdrawal of the last Space Wolves, and it was with a knot of anguish in his gut that Agapito complied and brought his company to a halt. Gunships continued to harry the retreating traitors, but soon they had moved into range of their anti-air guns and the Raven Guard aircraft were forced to break off.

It was then that the orbital barrage commenced and fire rained from the heavens, driving the traitors even further back, splitting their armies, making them seek whatever shelter they could.

The ship attack continued until midday, when Corax ordered the fleet to conserve what ammunition remained to support the final attack. Caked in dried blood, his claws still sheathed with flares of lightning, the primarch strode the ruin of the enemy army, seeking any Fenrisians that might still live, guiding the Apothecaries to the wounded.

In time, he called his commanders to conference while the squads created a perimeter across the hillsides.

‘Russ is not here,’ the primarch said, perplexed.

‘Is he dead already?’ asked Branne. ‘Are we too late?’

Corax said nothing to this, keeping his thoughts guarded. He turned and scoured the hills with dark eyes, then pointed to one of the distant mountain slopes.

‘There,’ he declared. ‘Two hearth-ships of Fenris guard a fortress. There we will find the Wolf King. Lift the shadowcast and hail our friends. I would let my brother know he does not fight alone.’

‘The enemy are not broken, my lord,’ said Agapito. ‘They’ll come again.’

‘Yes, they will,’ replied the primarch. ‘But we have a few hours. We will use them wisely.’

'I am Bjorn,' said the warrior that came forth to meet Corax. Squads of Space Wolves had assembled quickly across the battlefield, barring the route to the Fenrisian hearth-ships.

'You are one of the Wolf Lords, Bjorn?' asked Corax when the legionary motioned for the primarch to follow him towards the headquarters.

'No, not a Wolf Lord,' Bjorn's expression darkened. 'But the others... the Wolf Lords, think I have a wyrd upon me. My path has crossed the Wolf King's too many times for it to be chance, so the Runepriests say.'

'Wyrd? I do not recognise this term.'

'A fate, you might call it. Or a curse. A geas, for good or ill, entwined with the path walked by the Lord of Winter and War. A talisman, they hope.'

The Space Wolves formed a rough guard of honour around Corax and his commanders as they marched on the makeshift headquarters of the VI Legion. Columns of tanks and warriors were withdrawing, many thousands of Space Wolves converging from across the mountain and valley. The din of battle continued to reverberate along the slopes from further afield as more distant companies carried on the fight.

'Where is your primarch?' Corax asked, seeing no sign of his brother amongst the returning squads. 'I would speak with Leman Russ.'

Bjorn looked uneasy at this proposition and nodded towards the two gull-winged orbital landers.

'You should come with me.'

The Wolf Lords left, to hold conference on the defence of their last bastion on Yarant. Bjorn and other guards stood just outside the chamber, reluctantly allowing the master of the Raven Guard some privacy with his stricken brother.

Corax glanced towards the door, assuring himself that he would not be overheard. Like his ability to pass unseen, he could mask his words from notice or recollection. Thinking about these... traits... made him even more uncomfortable.

‘It was a mistake,’ he whispered, still kneeling with the Wolf King cradled close to his chest. ‘We were a mistake, brother, I know that now. I see it for myself, in my own blundering. I see it in the eyes of the mistakes I created, just as surely as the Emperor sees it in ours. There is no sense of guilt, only good intentions gone bad.’

‘But this was not meant to be. We were not meant to be. The universe is correcting itself. Expunging the infection. How could I have been blind to it for so long? Pride? Arrogance, perhaps? To think we were better, stronger, special. Horus is only following his true nature. Have we simply been denying ours?’

Memories crowded into his thoughts, jostling for attention, each of them carrying a message so obvious in hindsight. He let out a long, rattling breath and laid his brother carefully back upon the makeshift bier. Then he stood, keeping his voice almost inaudible.

‘We have been touched by forces beyond the Emperor’s own design – you know this, brother, as well as I do. No good comes from that which in evil is born, no matter the purpose or cause. I look at Curze and see myself. Do you find Angron in your reflection? How thin is the veneer that keeps us loyal, keeps us civilised? But for chance, it seems, any of us might now have crossed that line. Does the line even exist, or do we simply draw it in front of us as suits our own vanity?’

He recalled words spat at him from the lips of a dying sorcerer on the Atlas city-platform. Yes, a sorcerer. Not a psyker, not a thing of science and reason, but a wielder of the arcane, the supernatural. Such things existed even if the Emperor would deny them.

‘How could the Emperor create such demigods with science alone? Warriors that can withstand tank shells? Leaders whose every word must be obeyed? Creatures with powers far beyond any Thunder Warrior or legionary? Why do you think the Emperor decided not to simply recreate his children when they were lost? What unique gifts of darkness did he pass to you?’

‘I used to think there was righteous justice,’ he continued, his gaze moving from Russ to the warriors at the doorway. ‘That whatever I did, it served humanity. There is only one way left to aid mankind, and it does not include our survival, O King of Wolves. This is not our universe, and it never was. You cannot create legends and myths in a laboratory.’

Other faces were in his memory, vying for attention, demanding that their messages be remembered. Nathian, the bolt-shell destroying his skull, a self-inflicted end to the turmoil. How had he known? How had Nathian seen what Corax had not?

‘You often spoke of the Fenrisian notion of a good death,’ said the Raven Guard. ‘If there is such a thing, I desire it. I should have taken it on Isstvan. Time and again fate presented me with opportunity, but I denied it. Against Curze and Lorgar. I could have ended their vileness. And Angron. How many has he butchered since I fled his axes?’

‘Rational, sensible decisions, weighing advantage and cost, each time. But mistakes, all. The universe does not want us. It is unnatural that I survived.’ He sighed, thinking of Marcus Valerius and the red sash that he wore so proudly. ‘Visions. Visions sent by the Emperor? I think not. Something else guided those that rescued me. Another hand moved my warriors to intervene at Isstvan. Powers we do not willingly serve still bend us to their will through the manipulation of others. I was not meant to survive Isstvan, and all that has befallen us since is simply a correction of that failing course. It is not coincidence that we are here, facing

annihilation once more. This time I embrace my destiny. I will let the darkness be expunged.'

He walked quietly to the door.

'Bjorn, I would speak with your leaders.'

Amlodhi Skarssen, named the Jarl of Fyf, bore a huge shield, two-thirds as tall as himself, circular in shape and bearing the blazon of the VI Legion in black upon a yellow field. The adamantium bore dents and cuts from savage blows that had been possessed of a strength that daunted even Corax. A Jarl of Torv, 'Scarred' Oki, stood with a spear of gold in his grasp. A third jarl, Sturgard Joriksson of the Rout's Ninth Company, bore an ornate bastard sword that was as tall as he was.

'You have thirty minutes,' Corax told the assembled Wolf Lords. 'The enemy will be upon us in half an hour. We have orbital supremacy for another sixty minutes, at least. That gives you enough time to evacuate the Wolf King and whatever warriors you have remaining. Our gunships are at your disposal as well as your own.'

The Space Wolves looked at the primarch in disbelief.

'Leave?' laughed Amlodhi Skarssen. 'You call into question our heritage and courage in the same breath, Ravenlord. Why would we leave, when our blades are still thirsty?'

'To fight again,' Corax said, slowly and deliberately. 'I am giving you the chance to save yourselves. To stand on the walls of the Imperial Palace beside the Emperor himself. I will be issuing orders to my Legion. Most are going to depart. You should leave with them.'

'The Allfather might be glad of the company, it's true,' said Ogvai. 'But I don't think we would be able to settle the weremeld.'

A chill ran in Corax's blood at those words.

‘The weregeld,’ explained Bjorn, speaking softly, his gaze moving constantly back to his comatose primarch, ‘is a debt in blood. An unbalancing of the scales that must be set right, ere we pass from this life.’

‘This is our war, Ravenlord,’ said Amlodhi. ‘This is the battle we started. These are the enemies we have made. We have no regrets. But you would deny us the right to settle the balance.’

‘You want to die?’ Corax looked at them all, with their war-scarred armour and defiant stares.

‘Do you... Ravenlord?’

The whispered words from Lemman Russ caused them all to turn in surprise. Corax felt his stomach fall away, becoming a dark abyss that he wished would swallow him. The Wolf King raised himself on one elbow and gazed at his brother. ‘Did you come here... to fight, or to die...?’

‘What happened to you, my brother?’ Corax asked. It was a few seconds before Russ replied, rising unsteadily to a sitting position.

‘Nothing that matters now.’

He reached out, one hand to Amlodhi, the other to Oki. The Jarl of Fyf placed the Wolf King’s shield upon his arm. The other hesitated, and Sturgard stepped forward. ‘Would you not prefer your frostblade, my king?’

‘Not today,’ said Russ.

‘Are you well?’ asked Bjorn, his frown deep. ‘You hate that spear.’

Russ chuckled, but then his face became sombre.

‘Do you know why? The night after the Emperor gifted me with that footlance, I had a dream. I dreamed of fire and pain, and a storm that would engulf me. I woke certain that I would die with that weapon in my hand. Was that foretelling also part of the

Emperor's gift? I don't know, but it seemed to me that I should not ever bear the spear out of choice.'

He gestured again for Oki to give him the weapon. The Wolf Lord hesitantly handed it over. Russ looked at Corax and tried to stand from the bier. His limbs trembled and he collapsed back, a terrible incarnation of the mind willing but the body weak.

'A good death, then?' said Corax.

'If there is such a thing, brother.'

'We'll not know either way, will we?'

'I suppose not.'

They regarded each other in silence for a minute, neither giving away their true feelings. Corax hated the part of himself that still desired for the Wolf King to take charge, to say that they would leave and return to Terra.

Russ grinned, toothily. 'We each carry our past with us. Many have come to settle their arguments with me – I should not like to disappoint them.'

He once again struggled to rise, his jarls pressing close. But the effort was too much and the Wolf King fell back, his eyes rolling closed, his breathing ragged.

'He'll give account before this is over,' Corax assured the legionaries, but the words were an empty platitude.

At a nod from Amlodhi, Bjorn stepped forward and took up the Wolf King's spear. There was a moment of resistance. Russ growled. His eyes flicked back and forth beneath their lids but did not open.

Then his fingers relaxed and Bjorn prised the weapon free. He moved to pass it to Oki but the jarl held up his hands and stepped away.

'It is a wyrd-weapon. You can keep it, Bjorn the Fell-handed.'

‘The Wolftime is upon us,’ Bjorn muttered. He ran a gauntlet up the spear and along the golden blade, the clawed fingers of his other hand gripping the shaft tightly. ‘We’re all doomed.’

In his shock, Agapito forgot all decorum. For a moment he cared nothing for rank or the Legion. In that instant he could do nothing but speak his mind to the man who had been a friend for many decades. ‘Leave without you? You have to be insane to think we would agree to that!’

‘If the Wolves can fight to the last, my lord, so can we,’ added Soukhounou with a little more tact. ‘There’s no reason we should be above such pointless gestures, too.’

In the shadow of his Stormbird, itself dwarfed by the nearby ship, Corax prowled, as though still confined to a cell back on Deliverance. Around them, the Space Wolves made preparations for their final stand while squads of Raven Guard moved silently through the controlled anarchy of the mustering VI.

The enemy were clearly visible on the other side of the valley. Sporadic shelling had begun testing out the resolve of the loyalists to defend their fortress, while armoured forces manoeuvred for the final thrust.

‘You will leave,’ he said quietly, turning his black gaze upon them. ‘I command it.’

‘Except for the Raptors,’ replied Arendi. ‘You want to keep the Raptors. Why is that, Branne? What is special about you?’

The commander said nothing, his expression as dark as a storm cloud.

‘This is my decision,’ Corax told them. He looked straight at Arendi. ‘My will.’

The commander of the newly formed Black Guard swallowed, fighting back a retort. He nodded to signal his acquiescence. ‘As you order, so I obey, my lord.’

'You will take the rank of Legion Master, Gherith,' Corax added, eliciting more surprise from his commanders.

'That is your rank, my lord,' Soukhounou protested quietly.

'It existed before me, you know that best of all here present.'

'I am honoured, but perhaps—'

'It is my will!' The primarch's sharp retort and the flash of a claw startled them all. Corax glanced at the nearby Space Wolves and dropped his voice again. 'Let us not pretend any further. The Raptors have no future. It is better this way. In battle, with honour, as Raven Guard legionaries.'

'It's true,' Branne muttered. 'Better this way. For everyone.'

Agapito sighed and nodded his acknowledgement of their orders, and the others did so too. Corax looked at them in turn, his stare lingering, searching each for several seconds before he turned away and moved swiftly through the squads of the VI Legion.

None of the commanders said anything as each absorbed the import of what their primarch had said.

'I really thought we would rescue the Space Wolves,' Soukhounou admitted. 'I did not understand how deeply the darkness had settled in him.'

'You must believe me, I didn't want it this way,' Branne told them. He avoided meeting Agapito's gaze, his stare directed out across the gathering sons of Fenris. 'I mean, for you all to be sent away.'

'We all must die sometime,' said Arendi, slapping Branne on the arm. 'Be sure a tidy number of traitors go first.'

'Aye. We will be sure.'

Soukhounou shook his head. The Terran glanced between Branne and Agapito, and back again. Then he shrugged and walked away. 'I'll leave you to it.'

‘Brother.’ Agapito wanted Branne to look at him. ‘Brother.’

‘It fits, doesn’t it?’ the Raptors commander said, still watching the Wolves. ‘I plucked you all from Isstvan. Now you are the ones leaving me behind. You said I would never know what it was like waiting to die there. You’re right. How could I feel that?’

‘Branne...’ Agapito held out a hand, but his brother stepped away, avoiding it. He finally turned to look at Agapito.

‘I think about it. About that decision. So close... So close to thinking Valerius insane, to throwing him in the brig. What then? None of this! You would all be dead. I would be too. There haven’t been many of us, but we’ve made a difference, haven’t we? We’ve kept Horus and his filthy friends busy, right? But there was a moment—’

Agapito seized hold of his brother’s breastplate and pulled him closer. ‘What happened, happened. This isn’t punishment. This isn’t levelling the balance. It’s just what happens. We’re warriors, and this is war.’

They fell silent, hands laid upon each other’s pauldrons, eyes locked together. They had stood like that the night before the rebellion, knowing that it might be the last chance they had of fixing the image of each other in their thoughts. The memory was sharp for both of them still and, though they had both been changed in ways they had not imagined possible back then, for a minute they were naught but two brothers comforting each other on the eve of destiny.

It was Branne that pulled away first. He forced a smile.

‘We conquered the galaxy, Agapito. Two skinny prison boys not worth a spit. We saw the stars and walked beside immortals. Can’t complain about that.’

‘Damn right.’ Agapito laughed. ‘We would have been kings in lesser company!’

His laughter faded as Branne walked away, though Agapito watched him until he was lost amongst the Space Wolves.

Corax allowed himself to drift out of the awareness of those around him, moving from the conscious thoughts of his brother's legionaries. Branne was already organising the remnants of the Raptors and the others were marshalling the rest of the Legion to orbit.

'Is this channel secure? Can we be overheard?'

'Fully encrypted,' replied Nasturi Ephrenia. 'I am alone as you requested, my lord.'

'Call me Corax,' he said. A promontory provided a convenient seat and he lowered himself onto it to gaze out over the bustle of activity below.

'It's been a long time since I used that name informally,' said the controller. 'What has been troubling you?'

'You were the first face I saw, Nasturi. Alone, confused, abandoned. Yours was the first face in that cold, hard place where I woke.'

She said nothing, understanding that it was not her place to speak. Not yet.

'I have been thinking about that moment a lot. That instant where past and future became one. What would have happened if the guards had found me first?'

'I don't understand, Corax.'

'Could I have become something else? What is rooted in me, and what was grown by the company I kept? What if I had been raised by oppressors, and not the oppressed?'

'That's impossible to answer, Corax, and you know it.'

'So help me. Tell me something good I've done. Something objectively beneficial.'

‘You saved my life,’ she said without hesitation. ‘That moment you are talking about? A second later, you killed the guard that had been my tormentor for as long as I could remember. You gave me his head as a gift. You never knew what that meant to me. I was so close to ending it. Even at that age, I was broken, without hope. I saw what they did to the others, what waited for me. Worse, if that guard had lived. I would have died soon enough, by his hand, or mine.’

‘I... You never spoke of this before.’

‘I didn’t have to. I saw you rip off the head of the man that had terrified and abused me since I was born, and then I knew that everything would be all right. I knew that we could fight back, that there was justice and it was clad in white skin and black hair.’

Corax suddenly remembered their meeting with such clarity that it hurt as much as the moment when it had happened, her pain writ so large on her infant features as the guard dragged her away by the hair. He had never seen it before in this way, but he could see it now – the absolute and personal terror she had felt in the grip of that man.

And her laugh, a reaction of sheer relief and delight when the young primarch had torn off the guard’s head.

His eyes searched the mustering army and settled upon Bjorn, who stood alone, watching the approaching enemy, the spear of Russ driven into the hard ground by his side.

‘We named you Corvus Corax for a reason,’ she told him. ‘The Saviour.’

‘Thank you,’ he said, and cut the vox-link.

The drop harness was uncomfortable. It bit into Hef’s flesh in strange places, not designed for his unnatural frame. He bore the discomfort in silence, holding back the growls that wanted to break free.

The pod was dark, almost pitch black. He could hear the reverberations through the hull of the Avenger. The thrum of void shield generators bursting into life. The steady rattle of macro cannons on the gun decks. The hiss of the massive dorsal turret turntable carrying the bombardment cannon and the thud of its firing.

The breathing of his companions was a mix of steady and laboured. Some of the Raptors hissed, panted and coughed, their breath coming from distorted throats and jaws, whistling from bestial nostrils.

Hef was no stranger to the wait before battle. His life had been filled with such since his induction into the Legion. Today he felt something else, something aside from the usual tension, the welcome anticipation.

He felt shame.

Nothing had been said, no accusation made, but he knew his actions had been responsible for the primarch's change in attitude to the Raptors. The final act of condemnation had come when Branne, stony faced, had brought together the company and rearranged them into roughs and smooths. All of the roughs were gathered into a few squads, to be deployed together from the drop pods when called upon.

Hef could well guess what manner of attack awaited him and his deformed brothers. Corax had finally tired of the lie, of hiding his secret abominations. This would be their last battle, no matter what the outcome.

They had heard what had happened to the Therion Cohort before the jump to Yarrant, despatched to a war that nobody could win. Hef did not know what the Imperial Army soldiers had done to displease the primarch, but it could not have been anything worse than what Hef had done to Woundweaver and his watch-pack.

Thoughts of the Space Wolf's death brought a fresh surge of guilt.

Hef whined. He could not stop himself. It crawled from his throat unbidden, sharp and loud in the confines of the drop pod.

He hated himself more each moment. He hated what he was becoming, and the weakness within him that made him succumb to his own darkness. He was slipping away and the worst part was that he knew it. There would be a moment, a line crossed, when it would no longer matter, but until then he felt every second of his slide into feral insanity. The flesh could be tortured no more but his mind plunged into fresh depths.

'Finish,' he growled, wrapping his clawed hands around the restraints. His limbs trembled, filled with frustration and pain, desiring release. 'Finish!'

To stand as one warrior against the force of the traitors that surged across the valley was to be a pebble cast against the incoming tide but together the Raven Guard and Space Wolves faced the threat. Branne saw Corax emerge from the stronghold with Bjorn and the Wolf Lords. There was no sign of Lemman Russ and his mood sank a little. Another primarch on the field of battle would have eased his thoughts.

The Sons of Russ made much ceremony of their preparations, and daubed their armour and faces with bloody handprints. There were chanting and howls, guttural oaths and the brandishing of weapons as they swore themselves to saga-worthy deeds. Branne saw wildness in the eyes of many – an animal glare he recognised all too well from the most devolved of the Raptors.

The followers of the Warmaster had spent the hours well, taking stock of the situation and planning accordingly. This was no hunt for the remnants of a Legion and their incapacitated leader, this was all-out war to exterminate the warriors of Corax and Russ. They advanced fast, sparing only the briefest time for a

preliminary bombardment, trusting to proximity to protect them against attack from orbit.

It was a strange feeling for Branne, to finally have an inkling of what it must have been like on Isstvan, waiting for the inevitable blow to fall. There had been little by way of report from the battle-fleet, but he had to believe that the greater number of the traitor vessels would soon be returning to Yarant, and would destroy the Raven Guard's last lifeline within hours. He had been present when Corax had ordered the remaining Natollian and Therion ship commanders to die fighting, to rain down death upon the traitors for as long as possible and then to turn their guns against the enemy ships.

The clamour of the Space Wolves, of clarions and war shouts swelled up around him.

He found himself strangely calm, accepting of this fate.

Commander Branne Nev readied his weapons.

The Raptors fell in behind the primarch, as did the Wolves, as though they had adopted the Ravenlord in the absence of their own commander. The Fenrisian companies advanced at speed, quickly outpacing the Raven Guard contingents, moving to meet the wave of legionaries that poured across the hillsides.

The VI Legion's veterans took up overwatch positions and opened fire with heavier weapons, gunning down the enemy warriors that tried to outflank them. Russ's Wolf Guard and several squads kept closer to Corax, guarding his back even as shells and missiles fell amongst them once more. The crash of the hearth-ship guns was lost in the tumult of gunship engines and battle cannons and the incessant snarl of thousands of bolters.

Movement above drew Corax's eye – gunships that bore the livery and markings of a different master to the warriors marching from the east. Not the blue of the Alpha Legion, but the dark war-plate of the XVI Legion's First Company elite.

So, the Sons of Horus were in force here, too. How portentous that renaming now seemed. In a single act, the dedication of the Luna Wolves to the Warmaster seemed in hindsight to be the culmination of all the ambition and selfishness that had manifested in Horus.

Corax watched as the many gunships disgorged squads of warriors wearing heavy Terminator armour, supported by at least a dozen Dreadnoughts. For whatever reason, Horus had sent his very best to ensure the destruction of his brother Russ.

The Ravenlord turned his attention back to the onrushing Legions. When the traitors were almost upon the line of Space Wolves, Corax took to the air and ascended in a spiral.

And then he disappeared.

It had been too long. The Avenger had fallen quiet, only the constant throb of reactors and void shields to disturb the calm.

Hef reached out a claw and flicked the communicator pick-up into life.

‘Command? Is Pod Two-Seven. No launch. Is malfunction, perhaps?’

‘Pod Two-Seven. No malfunction. No launch order given. Lord Corax has direct authorisation for Raptor launch protocols.’

‘Lord Corax?’

‘That is correct, Lieutenant Hef. We are awaiting the primarch’s direct order.’

‘Understood.’

Hef deactivated the vox. He could feel the eyes of the others upon him, but did not look up to meet their gaze.

Lord Corax had taken command of the Raptors away from Branne?

‘It’s just us, Hef,’ said Devor, from the harness to his left. ‘Just the roughs. The smooths went down with Branne, I’m sure.’

‘What is he waiting for?’ asked Sannad, his voice a hoarse whisper, the light of the drop pod casting a ruddy sheen over his milky-white flesh. ‘We can fight!’

Hef knew why. He owed it to the others to explain.

‘Last fight, for us.’ His nostrils flared at the thought. ‘Primarch send us into last battle only. Not want to show us unless nobody survive as witness.’

Cloaked by his unnatural power, Corax scythed into the unsuspecting World Eaters. Claws and wings slashed bloody ruin through the advancing ranks, leaving gouges of dismembered legionaries in his wake. He turned, rose, and fell again, decapitating a score of foes with his next pass.

Confusion rippled out through the army as this unseen blade sliced through its warriors. Focused on nothing but the death of his enemies, Corax swooped and ascended and dived again, each time carving ragged furrows through the companies of armoured warriors ascending the hill. Blasts from his pistol burst through the thickest plate, making short work of those that tried to retreat from the unseen apparition churning through their squad-brothers.

Though a hundred fell to his attacks in the first minutes, ten times that number surged onwards, unheeding of the terror assailing their companions, intent only on bringing the final humiliation to the Wolf King and his sons.

Corax watched Bjorn and the Wolves meet the incoming horde with their own charge. The spear he had taken from the hand of his unconscious lord was a glittering thunderbolt that flashed and burned, and each strike of its gilded head left half a dozen dead legionaries scattered over the scorched ground.

The Wolves of Fenris moved ceaselessly through the hail of autocannon and bolter fire, always one step away from the aim of

their enemies, their plate sparking with the few rounds that found their mark.

A World Eaters Terminator broke from the melee and rushed Bjorn, twin chainfists splashing the blood of the Wolf King's sons. Bjorn thrust out with his own clawed gauntlet, its blades piercing the warrior's thick breastplate with apparent ease.

Corax killed a score more of the legionaries and worked his way back to his brother's elite guard. Like a bloody whirlwind, he wove and turned, hacking apart those traitors that briefly eluded the Wolf Guard's murderous swings and thrusts. The World Eaters did not relent, their implants forcing them into assault after assault that left them torn asunder by the wrath of the Ravenlord and his unlikely allies, their armour and flesh scattered as though tossed into the whirring blades of a gyroplane.

Around them the Raptors and Space Wolves formed into a tight defensive cordon, assailed on all sides by the combined fury of the Thousand Sons and Alpha Legion alongside even more of the World Eaters.

Only the Sons of Horus had yet to commit.

Hef waited, listened to his breath coming in gasps. The order had to come now. It would take several minutes for the drop to complete – surely the primarch would call for his Raptors soon.

He activated the vox again.

'Command, is Hef again. Boost secure channel to Lieutenant Neroka.'

'Understood, lieutenant.' There was a slight pause. 'Your signal is being relayed now.'

'Neroka?'

'Hef?' A grunt and burst of breath indicated that the other lieutenant was engaged in some strenuous physical activity. 'I'm in the middle of a bloody fight here, where are you?'

‘On drop pod, waiting.’

A series of snarls and curses punctuated the next few seconds.

‘Why haven’t you dropped?’

‘Waiting for Lord Corax’s personal command.’

‘Well, we could certainly use you here, my friend. This battlezone is getting hotter than the furnace rooms. What is the primarch waiting for?’

Hef did not want to answer that question, but there was something he had to say.

‘I was wrong. About Woundweaver. We not meant to know fear, but I could not let Space Wolves attack Lord Corax because of us. I am sorry.’

There was no reply.

‘Neroka? Are you there?’

Only static answered.

Landing next to the grizzled Wolf Lord Sturgard Joriksson, Corax felt chainaxes and bolts biting into his armour from all sides, but he paid them no heed. Every flick of a wing, every twist of a claw, ended another traitor life. Each second brought him closer to removing the taint within himself, the corruption that was inherent in his creation and that of his brothers.

It was time to end it. Time to pay the price in blood.

He opened a vox-channel to the Avenger. ‘Prime the pod cascade for drop-assault. On my next signal.’

‘Affirmative, my lord, preparing for final wave drop.’ Ephrenia’s voice cracked as she replied, overcome by the moment. ‘Goodbye, Corax.’

He said nothing, plunging his claws into the gut of another legionary. So engrossed was he in the carnage that he did not hear

the whine of the incoming shells and the hiss of missile jets until it was too late. By the time Sturgard heard it too, he barely had time to turn.

The first detonation parted the primarch and the Space Wolves, exploding right between them. The second hit Corax square in the chest as he leapt into the air, knocking him back to the ground. The third and fourth and more became a deafening, all-consuming storm of noise and fire that battered his body and ripped apart the ground around him.

He could feel his armour breaking under the pounding, his flesh splitting and burning, bones trembling under the ferocity of the artillery attack. Through the flashes he could just about see Bjorn struggle to his feet, spear lifted in defiance even as a frag missile exploded across his pauldron and showered him with white-hot metal shards. He fell amongst the broken bodies of a trio of Wolf Guard, the spear fallen from his grasp.

Corax's thoughts turned to the Wolf King lying broken and helpless in the last fortress of the Space Wolves.

Helpless for the first time in his unnatural life.

The Ravenlord had never turned from a single soul who had needed his aid. Would he really let his enemies murder the wounded primarch? Did his own desire for penance have such a grip on him?

From the height of the mountain flew a banner that he knew well – the standard of the Warmaster's reviled First Captain, Abaddon. Though Horus himself had not come to Yarant, he had despatched his right hand to oversee the final destruction of the VI.

The image of that banner was burned into Corax's mind, and one like it but far grander that had flown above the hills over the Urgall Depression.

The all-seeing icon of the Warmaster, the Eye of Horus.

I am the Emperor's vigilance, it had once read, and the Eye of Terra.

Such arrogance, such selfishness to turn the Imperium upon itself at the greatest moment in its history. The vanity of it appalled Corax, filled him with a loathing greater than that he had held for all his gaolers combined.

He rolled to his hands and knees, his wings a crippled mass of metal and wire trailing from his back. He slashed free of their entangling burden and stood up, swaying to one side as a rocket seared past his cheek and exploded amongst the circle of corpses around him and his brother's surviving lieutenants.

Horus still lived, still threatened Terra, still threatened the Emperor himself.

'What am I doing?' Corax whispered.

This was the price. This was his weregeld. To survive. To fight.

To feel the pain each and every day.

It was not his right to choose death. It was not his place to absolve himself of his sins. Only one being could do that, and he resided upon the Throneworld.

A fresh salvo of rockets and shells shrieked down towards them. Corax snatched up Russ's spear and threw his other arm around Bjorn. Though he no longer had wings to soar, Corax could still fly. He activated his jump pack.

Its blast hurled them free of the barrage and carried them fifty metres from the impact. Fire and smoke swamped them as they crashed into the unyielding rock of the mountain.

Corax rolled to his feet as Bjorn tried to fight from his grasp. The Space Wolf leapt up, spear seized from the ground, and for a moment the Raven Guard primarch thought his brother's fell-handed warrior would strike him.

‘This is not a good death!’ Corax snapped, stepping back. ‘This is not how we leave! We don’t get to choose!’

‘You are not my father, to command me!’ cried Bjorn, stepping back.

‘There is a war to fight and if we win – when we win – we must remember who it was that brought this upon us. Not mortals, not humans, but ourselves. This was a war between the Legions. You, me, and all of my brothers have the potential for this heresy within us.’

‘It’s a little late to change our minds, don’t you think?’ Bjorn pointed with the spear at the battle that still raged around them. ‘Surrounded, outgunned, our ships about to be burned in orbit.’

Corax activated the vox. ‘Commander Branne.’

‘Yes, my lord.’

‘Begin the shadow’s parting.’

The commander exhaled with obvious relief. ‘Thank you, my lord.’

Ten seconds later the first strikes from orbit lanced down through the gloom, just a hundred metres from the shattered cordon lines. Orbs of plasma followed and, through the fresh fury of orbital attack, the silhouettes of gunships descended, their pinpoint strikes carving into the foe.

The Space Wolf shook his head in disbelief.

‘Don’t worry, Bjorn,’ Corax roared, firing his pistol wildly at the traitor ranks, the release of the moment more than he could contain without pained laughter. ‘We’ve done this before.’

Hef’s jaw ached and he realised he had been worrying at the harness without thought, gnawing the padded bracing across his armour.

He craved an end. Blissful oblivion.

The lighting in the pod brightened, the ruddy gleam of the drop replaced by the ambient blue of the regular illumination strip. The address system crackled into life and Hef recognised Branne's voice, though he found it difficult to picture the commander – only vague impressions and memories surfaced through the cloud that fogged his thoughts.

'All stations, the evacuation has begun. There will be no drop. I repeat, the Raptors will not drop.'

Some of the others laughed. Hef slammed his fist into the harness release and dropped to the deck, falling onto all fours. He placed his forehead against the cold metal, his claws scraped on the steel and he started to weep.

Sitting back on his haunches, he let out his despair in a long, tormented cry.

Ogvai Ogvai Helmschrot, the most senior surviving jarl, sat opposite Corax in the compartment of the Stormbird, staring at the primarch. They said nothing for some time; the madness of the evacuation had left everyone preoccupied and exhausted. There was a cut above Ogvai's right eye and Corax could still see slivers of ceramite in the wound.

'You should see an Apothecary,' he said.

'What next?' Ogvai asked, ignoring the primarch's concern. 'You can count the number of Great Companies we have left on one hand. I figure you know exactly what that's like. What do we do? Where do we fight now, if the Wolf King does not awaken?'

'That's up to you. I am not my brother.'

'And you? What of the Raven Guard?'

Corax let out a long, weary breath. This all felt so hatefully familiar.

‘We’ll go where we’re comfortable, where we can do the most damage to the Warmaster’s forces as they march for Terra. We’ll go back into the shadows.’

Epilogue

Corax paced slowly to the first cell door on the Red Level. He paused for a moment, repulsed and driven on in equal measure.

It had to be done.

Inside, he found a creature crouched in the corner, its skin white beneath clumps of thick black fur, its eyes round, ebon discs that stared at him without any obvious intellect. Even so, he could not ignore the similarities – the pale flesh, and the dark eyes.

They had fought the war, and they had won. Now was the time to put right the assertion he had made to the sorcerer Nathrakin, on the forge world of Constanix II.

‘I have made several oaths in my long life, but I have been careful to swear only those I could fulfil – except for one,’ he told the beast. He crouched next to the pitiful thing and it shuffled closer, comforted by his presence, though the sight of it broke the primarch’s heart. ‘One I now think may be beyond me. I looked into the face of our enemy, into the heart of the force that had corrupted them. I knew that, even if we killed Horus, that power could not be eradicated completely. Chaos will return with ever

greater strength if we allow it, if we give it the vessels it seeks and feed the ambitions that drive the weak to its embrace.'

Corax recognised the adoration and trust that radiated from the deformed Raptor. He laid one massive hand upon the former legionary's head, and the fingers of the other curled around his throat. The creature's mouth worked a few times, and drool dribbled over Corax's hand and fell to the floor in thick gobbets.

'I remember everything, and I remember my exact words before I sent that fiend back into the warp-vortex that had birthed it...'

Tears stung the primarch's eyes.

'I... I promised him that I would destroy every warp-spawned, Chaos-tainted creature in the galaxy before I die...'

The mewling, groaning thing that had been Navar Hef met his gaze.

'And I have always kept my promises, my son.'

Afterword

It's hard to talk about the Raven Guard without mentioning Deliverance Lost but, as I've written a completely different afterword for the hardback of that novel, I shall keep my thoughts on it here to a minimum. Instead I am able to delve into the novellas and short stories that have continued to tell the story of Corax and the Raven Guard since we left them, overrunning the Perfect Fortress of the Emperor's Children.

It is tempting to take each tale in turn, have a quick look at it in isolation and then move onto the next, but it would also be lazy. From the moment I first discussed Soulforge with Laurie Goulding, the Horus Heresy editor at Black Library, the plan was clear. There was unlikely to be another full Raven Guard novel on the schedule any time soon, so the story would be carried forwards in other, shorter forms. The arc of Corax and the development of the characters that would culminate in Weregeld (a title and

subject we agreed right at the outset) would be threaded through every piece of fiction as if they were one volume.

Which, of course, they now are.

It's been a blessing, in a sense. Seeing the stories together has reminded me that we have crossed a lot of the galaxy and seen the years passing in a relatively short number of words. The novella and short story form have kept each episode distinct but relevant, and when read together they carry the story swiftly to the end in a way not possible in a more traditional novel narrative.

I'm also pleasantly surprised by how well the initial idea and the themes agreed on with Laurie have persisted in the various instalments. We've known the end point for some time – Corax's fate and that of the Raven Guard, like so much of the Horus Heresy, has been part of the Warhammer 40,000 lore for many years. Getting there, charting the course that would take a heroic defender of the weak to the point at which he must destroy his own creations, was always the goal, and to do it in a way that came across as not only convincing but also sympathetic and compelling.

When Deliverance Lost ends, the situation is dire for the Imperium. The galaxy is divided by the Ruinstorm, the Space Wolves and White Scars are currently missing in action while the Imperial Fists fortify Terra. Of the other Legions, especially those on the Ultramar side of things, only scant information is forthcoming. Having chosen to bring the fight to Horus and his forces, Corax and his Legion wage planetary guerrilla warfare to slow the Warmaster's advance in any way they can.

This concept is central to the character of Corax. His Legion is all but wiped out, but he will fight on... to the last warrior, if necessary. All of the primarchs are driven by their past and their upbringing, and through these stories I return again and again to Corax's motivations.

Coming to maturity amongst political prisoners has given Corax a strong ideology that drives everything he does. More than any of his brothers, he sees himself as a liberator – first as the saviour of Deliverance, and second as a commander of the Emperor's forces, freeing the galaxy from the persistent darkness of Old Night.

He does not see himself as a conqueror, though he has conquered worlds. He does not desire dominion over the people and territories he has brought to compliance and, perhaps foremost amongst his brothers, was

ready and willing to relinquish power to mankind. Corax planned to compose a political treatise that would do for governance what Guilliman's Codex Astartes would come to do for warfare.

With the treachery of Horus brought to light, Corax found new determination and a fresh purpose. He knows better than most the sacrifices required for victory and, although he values life highly, he is far from a pacifist. Innocents will die, but Corax believes in his cause and hardens himself to their deaths. A greater aim drives him, allowing him to put aside the tragedies he must unleash in order to achieve that greater goal. As he says himself in Soulforge, 'War is a series of intentional catastrophes'.

Yet for all this, Corax holds back from a total ends-justify-the-means approach. It is this that separates him from the likes of Konrad Curze, the Night Haunter who has plagued his thoughts since their confrontation on Isstvan V. It is a hard path to tread, and perhaps one that brings Corax and his Legion more grief than necessary. He often chooses the harder ways, preserving the lives of those he has sworn to protect in favour of his own warriors, holding back from bombardment and annihilation for fear of causing too much collateral damage.

One might think that he is testing his own resolve at every opportunity, seeking to assure himself that the vainglory, selfishness and arrogance that has seen the fall of the greatest primarchs does not exist within him. This leads to self-doubt, and ultimately a questioning of everything he has done in the name of the Emperor.

On the other hand, Corax is well aware that he stands apart from humanity. He is not a mortal, something made very apparent by his own unnatural abilities and the status afforded him by the downtrodden of Lycaeus. He is a creature far removed from the humans that he protects and, while he may try to disguise his nature for the most part, he cannot deny it. It is in believing himself different but not better that he attempts to reconcile this separation.

Such was the stage when I sat down to write Weregeld, to complete not only Corax's story but also provide some closure on the other characters of the series. It seemed a tricky task, pulling together character stories from across the narrative, but with help from Laurie I identified all the pertinent threads and started tying them together. The more I worked on the synopsis, the more I realised that the central theme, the arc I had planned from the start, naturally brought everyone back into the orbit of the primarch.

I am not known for happy endings, and the story of the Raven Guard does not buck that trend. They are a microcosm of the Imperium, of humanity. Their trials, their woes, are a reflection of the greater story. It is a tale of the passing of hope, the twilight of all mankind's dreams of greatness – the end of the beginning, if not the beginning of the end.

It is, as I intended when I named the novel that would form the pillar of the narrative, a story of deliverance, lost.

