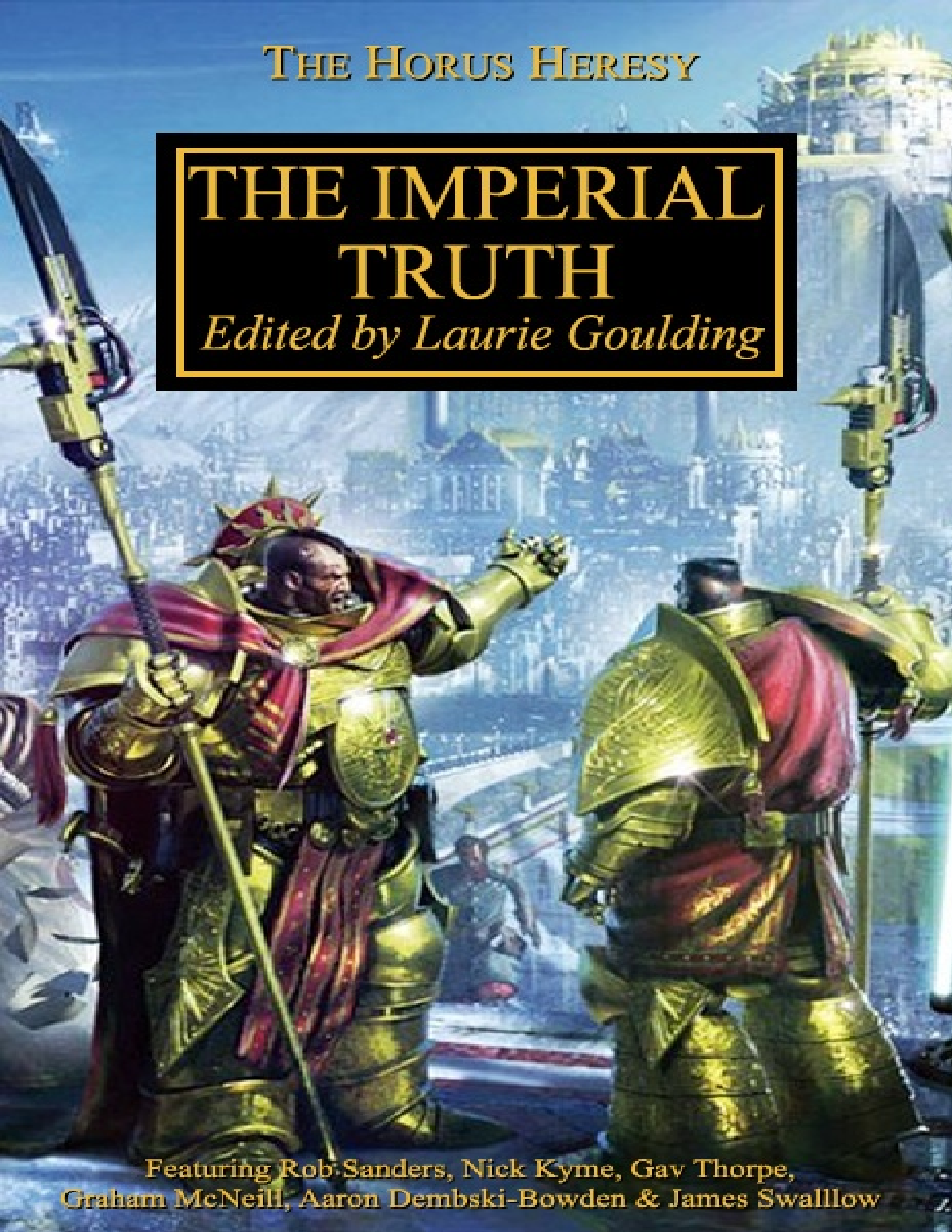


THE HORUS HERESY

THE IMPERIAL TRUTH

Edited by Laurie Goulding



Featuring Rob Sanders, Nick Kyme, Gav Thorpe,
Graham McNeill, Aaron Dembski-Bowden & James Swallow

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THE HORUS HERESY

It is a time of legend.

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

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

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

Worlds are burning. At Istvan V, Horus dealt a vicious blow and three loyal Legions were all but destroyed. War was begun, a conflict that will engulf all mankind in fire.

Treachery and betrayal have usurped honour and nobility. Assassins lurk in every shadow. Armies are gathering. All must choose a side or die.

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

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

The age of knowledge and enlightenment has ended. The Age of Darkness has begun.

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HANDS OF THE EMPEROR

Rob Sanders

THE CAVERNOUS CORRIDORS of the Imperial Palace echoed with the rhythmic clatter of armour plate. The foot knights of the Legio Custodes marched with brazen purpose, the synchronised movement of ceramite and gold an elevated heartbeat in the hallowed halls. It was the sound of tranquil urgency - of vigilance, noble and true.

Shield-Captain Enobar Stentonox was part of that vigilance, and had been for a long time. Today was different, however. Today he felt his own heart beating to the same rhythm as his marching step. Today he had the Palace watch: his first. For twenty-four hours, the security of the Imperial Palace - and by extension, of the Emperor himself - was in Stentonox's hands.

More than just a wonder crafted in blood and stone, the colossal Palace was many things to many people. To the Custodian Guard it was both security-sanctum and protectorate. To the primarch Rogal Dorn it was a bastion to fortify. To the army of ambassadors and Administratum officials that swarmed its halls, it was the heart of human governance. To the trillions of citizens on Ancient Terra and the worlds beyond, it was the centre of the known galaxy. As Master of the Watch, Stentonox would need to meet the competing demands of such roles, whilst maintaining the inviolate preservation of the Emperor's person within the Palace's mighty walls.

The shield-captain's steps were long with pride, but also heavy - not just with the ceremonial bulk of his plate, but also the crushing burden of his responsibilities. As his rattling stride took him through the Belvedereon Great Hall, he passed a marble statue of the Emperor. Couched in metaphor, it depicted the Emperor at the Declaration of Unity, balancing Terra upon one globed shoulder. For a moment, Stentonox allowed himself the indulgence of equating the honour and encumbrance to his own.

As the Great Hall became the Colonnade Simulacrux, Stentonox's march fell into step with the party of Custodians making their brisk way up the vaulted and pillar-lined passage. The architectural theme of the Great Hall had spilled out into the colossal space, and many heroes of the Unification Wars - including members of the Emperor's personal guard - were immortalised in the stone of the columns. One of these giants also strode up the grand colonnade in the flesh, leading the party that Stentonox had joined.

Constantin Valdor.

A loyal Terran, Captain-General of the Legio Custodes and Chief Custodian of the Emperor of Mankind - in that order - he walked the lofty corridors of his master's fortified palace. Brazier light dappled the golden brilliance of his battleplate, while the red of his robes honoured the blood historically spilled in the effort to safeguard his Emperor.

Stentonox suspected that there would be a great deal more blood spilled in the near future.

Flanked by members of his Ares Guard, Valdor was attended upon, at Stentonox's arrangement, by the Sentinel-Securitas Justinian Arcadius. Like a small continent, the dimensions of the Palace were broad and wide, but the Captain-General's itinerarium - known only to a few, including the Master of the Watch - now placed Valdor in the Upper Ward, which was where Stentonox had intended to meet him for the dawn report. Like a wall of beaten bronze perpetually at their back, the Custodian Dreadnought Indemnion trampled up the corridor with hydraulic menace. Its aged hull streamed with the aegis honours and ribbon banners of its own decorated service to the Emperor.

Despite the early hour, the Captain-General had a smile for Stentonox, though the shield-captain doubted that Valdor had seen the inside of his personal chambers in several days. 'Your first Palace watch?'

'Yes, Captain-General,' Stentonox confirmed.

'Then I wish you a quiet duty,' Valdor said. 'Though they rarely are.'

'If you have any advice to offer, Captain-General, then I would be glad of its guidance.'

The Chief Custodian grunted with good humour. 'Don't get too attached to your protocols and regulata. Schedules are usually shattered by the second hour. Think of the solemn observance of our responsibilities as written in stone - but freshly inscribed in volcanic rock. Each day brings new challenges that test our routines, fresh eruptions that turn the cold certainty of ritual and order to situations that are fast moving and fluid. You must live the contradiction of being

adaptable, and yet unyielding. And know that the word that will fall from your lips most often today will be "no". Anything else, shield-captain?

'No, Chief Custodian.'

'Then let us proceed with the dawn report.'

As Stentonox took his Captain-General through the matters of the day, with Arcadias filling in the blanks, his mind moved from one weighty consideration to another. The morning alone was an agitated crowd of duties and responsibilities to push through, each vying for his urgent attention. There were defensive vulnerabilities created by the Warmason's work on the Byzan Wall. One of Valdor's auricenvoys, Abhorsiax, was returning from Old Aethiopia, where the Chief Custodian had sent him to arbitrate the labour wars that had broken out between the Danakil mineral conglomerates and Hive Abyssin. The recently trialled protectorate rotations operating out of the Dolorite quad-bastions still required refinement. Consuls from the Collegia Titanica were requesting a baptismal Palace walk-by, involving the newly constructed Warlord-class Battle Titan *Vigilantia Victrum*, which the Chief Custodian was almost certain to reject out of committee. Papers, references and pict-files on the forty or so Palace sub-ambassador appointees still required the Chief Custodian's seal. A consignment of breaching munitions due for delivery to the Palace armouries had understandably not materialised from Mars, but the consignment's replacement order had similarly not arrived on schedule from the forge world of Phaeton. The Legio Custodes fleet of orbital monitors were well overdue an inspection. The Grand Provost Marshal of the Adeptus Arbites had requested an audience to discuss the dangers posed by a number of seditionist movements, all speaking against the Emperor, as well as a recent incident involving a troubled citizen firing a shot at one Palace's street-level barbicans, only to be killed in return fire by the Custodian foot knight on duty there. Witchseekers of the Silent Sisterhood were convening to discuss the maintenance of the Palace defences that no one could actually see - the Emperor's immaterial security measures. Beyond these existing matters of gravity, both Stentonox, as the Master of the Watch, and the Chief Custodian had several dozen lesser meetings and consultation sessions - more, now that the shield-captain had completed his watch report.

'Thank you,' Valdor said to the shield-captain. 'Arcadius, is there anything else?'

As the sentinel-securitas checked his lists, their group approached a towering sentry gate. The arch's barricade was raised and hung over a pair of Aquila

Terminators like a bad omen. The bulkheads were one of the many improvements that Rogal Dorn had approved for the Palace interior. Every grand design and architectural flourish now had to be adapted to new purpose: the high, decorative archways occurring at intervals down the arterial corridors were now tri-layered barricade-bulkheads, that would come down in the event of wall-breaches and slow the advance of an enemy force through the Palace.

The sentries bowed low - despite it being difficult to do so in their Tactical Dreadnought plate - and rested their helmets against the ceremonial halberds they clutched before them. As the Captain-General, sentinel-securitas and Master of the Watch passed, the pair rose back to their impressive height, resuming their silent vigil like gargoyles.

Arcadius only had one other order of business: a report that Stentonox had requested himself.

'The nodical-session Blood Games are almost at an end,' Arcadius told them, and Valdor nodded with approval. With intelligence pointing to a security threat that was only growing in imminence, the Captain General had doubled the theatre-diagnostic, pitting the best he had from the ranks of the Legio Custodes against the Palace defences. The sentinel-securitas examined both failures and near-successes to anticipate possible enemy strategies and review the Emperor's security. With the galaxy in turmoil and Valdor's days increasingly dominated by actual threats rather than hypothetical ones, the Chief Custodian had less time for the tactical rituals. It had been Stentonox's relative success in a previous round of the Blood Games that had elevated him to shield-captain, and he thought to rekindle the Chief Custodian's appetite for updates. It had worked.

'Any surprises?' Valdor asked.

'Jerichstein was intercepted in Hive Persepol,' Arcadius confirmed. 'Ran into some trouble with an entire precinct of Arbitrators. Nicator was taken by one of our gunships during a pursuit over the Caucasus. A servo-drone picked up Einocratus while mapping a section of ancient sewerage trenches beneath the Palace. The Fourth Ward fire was started by Caesarion, and Gesh was responsible for the Black Sentinels and foot knights missing from their sentry-points in the hanging gardens. But they both failed isometrics at the Cantica-Consentrica, Barbican East. I fear they were working together, which is of course prohibited by the rules of the Games.'

'The enemy won't play by our rules,' Valdor said. 'Will they, Stentonox?'

'It is difficult enough to get our allies to do so, most of the time,' the shield-captain offered.

'Exactly,' Valdor agreed.

'Which is why I've taken the unusual step of both commending and censuring the pair of them simultaneously,' Arcadius said.

Valdor laughed. 'Kalibos?'

Taken climbing the Maximillias Wall - previously identified as a weak spot in our surveillance,' the sentinel-securitas informed Valdor.

'Did you not favour the Maximillias Wall with your infiltration?' the Chief Custodian asked Stentonox.

'The Espartic Wall, my lord.'

'Not an easy climb,' Valdor said.

'Difficult by design. Soon to be made impossible,' Stentonox said, nodding to Arcadius and adding a mental note to his duties for the day.

'But Kalibos was taken?'

Arcadius confirmed it. 'But he did not concede easily. Four of my sentinels are in the infirmary.'

'And Zantini?'

'Made it through to the Halls Econium disguised as a plenipotente from the Technovingian Sovereignty, but the new frequency fields installed beneath the flags unmasked him.'

'But they're getting closer,' Valdor admitted.

'Their near-successes honour us,' Arcadius said. 'But with every cycle of the Games we learn more of the arts of infiltration. The weaknesses and complacencies our enemies will use against us.'

'Any Custodians outstanding?'

'One,' Arcadius told Valdor and the shield-captain. 'Belisarius.'

Stentonox prided himself on knowing all of the Custodians he worked with, but he knew some better than others, and Belisarius he barely knew at all.

'His genotrace was identified by syn-grids in the Kaspasian Basin,' Arcadius continued, 'at Sinai-Persis and Hive Saqqara. Travelling west, away from the Palace. Perhaps his approach was compromised by these recent captures.'

As they approached the giant statue-lined galleries of the Bronze Arcade, the burnished doors of the Heliosicon Tower parted to reveal the large grav-carriage and its pair of passengers. Sister-Commandress Duesstra Edelstyne was a blistering vision in silver plate and rich furs.

An ornate half-helm covered her stapled lips, the vaulting nose guard of which cut between the dark intensity of her eyes. At her side stood a shaven-headed novice glossator.

As a Sister of Silence, Edelstyne was Confidente-Tranquil to Lady Krole herself and ranking maiden among the Raptor Guard allocated to the Palace's First Ward. Her sisters were stationed throughout, attending meetings in silence and standing sentinel in the halls and corridors, not unlike their Custodian counterparts; in many ways, her role was analogous to Stentonox's own. While providing empyreal protection in the Palace against witchbreeds and their invasive, immaterial probings, the Sisterhood's warriors were also welcome additions to the Palace security forces.

But this necessitated coordination, and an obligatory meeting Edelstyne and the Master of the Watch. Stentonox had scheduled the time and the place but this was neither. He acknowledged the silent stab of her glare with a nod, but turned his attention back to the Chief Custodian. 'Sounds like Belisarius just doesn't want the game to end,' Valdor said.

'But then again, who does? Monitor his progress. Keep me posted.'

Arcadius nodded. 'Thank, Chief Custodian.'

'And good luck to you, shield-captain'.

'Thank you, Captain-General,' replied Stentonox. He saluted before Valdor, Indemnon and the Ares Guard peeled off into a chasmal corridor.

'Commandress,' Stentonox boomed across the arcade. 'What can I do for you?'

Her gauntlets signed out a rapid series of gestures, the speed and insistency of which even the shield-captain could interpret as urgent. From the tender lips of the novice glossator came the translation.

'Shield-Captain Stentonox. There is something you should see.'

THE HELIOSICON TOWER was one of the tallest thrusting skyward from the Imperial Palace. It was so called because of the views it commanded of the Terran sun rising above the chromatic haze of atmospheric pollution. The bulbous minaret at the top boasted not only its own donjon and signum-complex, but also crenellated terraces outfitted both decoratively for observation, and defensively with interceptor missile launchers.

As the bronze doors slid open, Stentonox strode out onto the first terrace, accompanied by Arcadius and the two women. A Custodian tower sentry fell briefly to one knee as the Master of the Watch passed, but Edelstyne and her novice followed without acknowledgement, the sunlight glinting off their polished battle plate. Edelstyne signed.

'There.' The novice glossator pointed out to the south-west.

Stentonox followed her direction out over the haze, across the excavation-

mauled plateaus of the Himalazia. Something was emerging from the tarnished clouds beyond. Something *huge*.

From its size, it could only be one of Terra's great orbital plates, grazing the planet's upper atmosphere and moving slowly, but surely, over the mountain peaks. While each orbital plate was different - no less the victims of hideous engineering enhancements and ungainly accretions than the hives that housed billions at ground level - this one reminded Stentonox of some colossal, flattened jellyfish. The greater metropol-platform was like a parasol, with a nest of sky docks, stratomoorings and the orbital's gravitic engine column hanging down through the clouds beneath it. From the shape of its silhouetted outline, the colossal plate looked like Arcus, one of the smaller orbital conurbatia.

What alarmed the shield-captain was the fact that the swarm of tugs and shunt-craft manoeuvring the humongous plate seemed to be dragging it *towards* the Imperial Palace.

Stentonox and Arcadius exchanged glances of simultaneous realisation and alarm.

'Patch me through to the signum-complex,' the shield-captain ordered. Arcadius nodded and conferred briefly with the tower sentry.

A voice came across the encrypted vox-channel. '*Signata-Heliosicon for the Master of the Watch.*'

'This is Shield-Captain Enobar Stentonox,' he replied. 'Ident - Tarantis, Halcyon, three-fifty-two, sixty-four. Confirm.'

'*Confirmed, shield-captain. Standing by.*'

'Heliosicon,' Stentonox said. 'I am on the battle-terraces of your tower and I am looking at what appears to be an orbital about to breach both Palace air and void-space. Confirm for me, please.'

'Confirmed, shield-captain. We have orbital plate Arcus on a Himalazian approach vector.'

'Negative, Heliosicon lower, negative. Orbital plates do not have trajectory clearance to pass over the Imperial Palace.'

'*Arcus Orbital has clearance, shield-captain,*' the tower voxed back. '*Special dispensatorial order, Metacarp Three-Sixteen.*'

'Clarify, special order, tower.'

'That's a Legiones Astartes code,' Arcadius told Stentonox. 'Imperial Fists. It'll be the Warmason, or Dorn himself.'

'Tower, I am Master of the Watch - how could I not have been informed of this?' The vox went silent. 'Heliosicon Tower, respond.'

'We're collating that data for you now-'

'No,' Stentonox interrupted. 'Connect me to the ranking authority on Arcus right now.'

'Yes, shield-captain'.

'This is a mistake,' Stentonox told Arcadius, his voice threaded with steely authority. 'An oversight of monumental proportions. I want to know how this happened.'

Under the stabbing glare of Duesstra Edelstyne, Stentonox waited, the orbital plate moving through the clouds, kilometre by kilometre, into the Palace's airspace. At first, Stentonox was patched through to the orbital's stratoport admiral, who could not help him; then through a selection of gubernatorials, proctors and berg marshals who claimed that their authority on the plate had been superseded. Finally, with his anger rising, Stentonox was connected to the high commissary of the Danakil conglomerates, who told him that Arcus was currently under their mercantile sovereignty.

'Commissary,' Stentonox voxed, making each word sharp and clear. 'This is Shield-Captain Enobar Stentonox of the Legio Custodes. I am giving you a direct order - cease your approach. Your vector and presence in our airspace have not been cleared with us. You are in violation of aegis protocols and imperata of the highest-'

'Heliosicon Tower,' a voice intruded, as deep and sharp as Stentonox's own. *'This is Captain Demetrius Katafalque of the Imperial Fists Legion. I am in command aboard Arcus. This orbital will not slow or alter its vector. My orders are to see us in anchorage above the Fourth Ward and the concentra between the inner and outer walls. These are my primarch's orders and it is not for me to deny them. Check your protocols, Heliosicon Tower. Check your protocols.'*

'Arcadius?' Stentonox said grimly.

The sentinel-securitas turned from his conference with the tower sentry and the signum-complex.

'Special dispensatorial order "Metacarp Three-Sixteen" authorises Arcus to moor above the Palace and supply millions of workers from the Danakil mineral conglomerates to the Warmason Vadok Singh, for the purposes of improving the Palace fortifications,' Arcadius reported. 'The orbital is to remain, providing mobile quarters for the imported workforce.'

Stentonox shook his head. 'How could we not know about this?'

'Metacarp Three-Sixteen is still in committee. Lord Dorn must be pushing ahead with the fortifications. It is unlikely that the primarch will be denied,

given the present situation, but an objection was lodged with the Administrator Primus and a hearing scheduled. We have not been informed, because Three-Sixteen has not yet been authorised.'

'Who lodged the objection?' Stentonox asked.

After a moment's further clarification, the sentinel-securitas told him. 'Luna did - Lady Krole of the Silent Sisterhood.'

The pair of Custodians turned to Duesstra Edelstyne- The commandress gave a shrug of her armoured shoulders that needed no translation.

'Captain Katafalque,' Stentonox voxed. This is Enobar Stentonox, Master of the Watch. Your breach of our airspace puts the Imperial Palace and the Emperor at intolerable risk. The orbital plate Arcus is not authorised to be here. I urge you, captain - order your tugs to take Arcus away from this approach vector.'

'Rogal Dorn does not have time to waste on your meaningless bureaucracy,' Katafalque returned brusquely. *'Permissions have been sought. Check your protocols. I have authorisation from my primarch, just as he has authorisation to fortify the Imperial Palace. These are my orders.'*

'I cannot allow-'

'These are my orders,' Katafalque repeated, *'and I intend to follow them. I have no more choice in that than the sun has in rising above the horizon. Do what you must, shield-captain. This is Arcus, inbound on vector-Himalazia. Katafalque out.'*

'Katafalque!' Stentonox called down the vox, but the Imperial Fist was gone.

Stentonox didn't speak for a few moments. Both Arcadias and Edelstyne stared at the shield-captain in silence as Stentonox glared at the distant orbital plate.

'Arcadias.'

'Yes, shield-captain.'

'Contact Damari Ambramagne aboard the *Aerix*,' Stentonox ordered. 'Tell him I want all available Legio Custodes gun-skiffs on station above the Fourth Ward, vector-Himalazia.'

Arcadias nodded, but said nothing.

'You think it premature?' Stentonox asked.

'No, shield-captain.'

'Good, because next I want you to signal-crash the Palace. Take us to Defence Readiness Xanthus. All Custodians, Sisters, armsmen and... aye, even the Imperial Fists, are to assume their alert postings, and await further orders.'

'What about the Chief Custodian?'

'Inform him of our defence readiness and status,' Stentonox said, his instructions heavy with the accountability they carried. 'And ask him to attend me on the battlements, for it is he who shall be issuing those orders.'

AS THE ORBITAL plate descended, it eclipsed the bleak light of the rising sun. The Palace citadels and towers - having felt the reaching touch of dawn's light - were now plunged back into gloom. Terraces, parapets and balconades were crowded with Palace officiates and visitors, all alerted to the emergency by the sounding of situation-Xanthus alarms and the rapid movement of Palace defence forces. Viewing glasses, magnoculars and fearful faces were directed skywards to the monstrous approach of Arcus and the triple-tier lines of engagement being formed by the Legio Custodes gunships.

Like a wall of gold plate, ornamentation and ordnance, the gun-skiffs, stratobastia and grav-monitors of the Legio Custodes extended the Palace defences into the sky. The battle line was pugnacious and imposing. The craft held position above the slums and conurbatia bordering the outer fortifications and walled enclaves of the Palace, and presented their ornate gunnery to Arcus.

The colossal size of the orbital plate put it into an altogether different target category. As Arcus's approach swiftly became the unstoppable force to the gun-skiffs' immovable line of defence, a chorus of consternation rose from the gathered crowds upon the battlements and platforms of the Palace.

From the flight deck of the *Aerimax*, Stentonox could survey the under-plate of Arcus. Leaving the sentinel-securitas to manage defence readiness about the Palace, Stentonox had accompanied the Chief Custodian up to the gun-skiff. Constantin Valdor had been in hololithic conference with Demetrius Katafalque of the Imperial Fists for only a few minutes, but the Captain-General was already infuriated. Pledges of mutual respect and fraternity descended quickly into a debate as to what was in the best interests of the Emperor's security. Katafalque claimed that his primarch's word was inviolable. Valdor reminded the captain that the Imperial Fists were welcome guests on Terra, but that the Emperor's security - and that of the Imperial Palace - had ever been the principal concern of the Legio Custodes. Anger got the better of men who should have been above such pettiness. Insults fell from noble lips. Threats were exchanged. Punishments were promised.

'He's gone again, my lord,' a deck menial reported as the link was cut.

'Damn the Legiones Astartes and their upstart pride,' Valdor seethed.

'If it were not for such audacity there would be no need to fortify the Emperor's Palace at all.'

'Indeed, Chief Custodian,' agreed Stentonox.

'No service,' Valdor said, 'even one assumed in a master's name, should imperil the master served.'

'Yes, my lord.'

'It is madness,' Valdor muttered, almost to himself. 'It's officious madness, and it must be stopped.'

'What are your orders, Captain-General?'

Valdor stared out across the flight deck of the *Aeriaz*. The sky was gone. There was only the orbital plate - its stratomoorings, skydocks and platforms creeping irresistibly towards them, dominating the deck view. 'The tugs and tenders?' he asked.

'I have gunships standing by to board or cripple them,' Stentonox reported. 'But in truth, inertial drift alone will carry Arcus to anchorage above the Fourth Ward.'

'Then let us not waste time with that,' Valdor said. 'Opinion, shield-captain?'

'Calibrated reversal of Arcus's gravitic drives will slow the orbital before bringing it to a stop.'

Valdor nodded gravely. Nobody on the flight deck spoke as the Chief Custodian weighed danger against danger. The decision did not come easily to the Captain-General, but when it did it was delivered with confidence and grim determination.

'Shield-captain?'

'Yes, sir?'

'Seize the plate.'

IN A SLOW broadside of gold, their grav-attack craft streamed away from the launch bays of the Legio Custodes ships; the stately battle line was a vision to behold as it closed upon the great gravitic engine column and passed below the orbital under-plate. Through his transport's gunnery embrasure, Shield-Captain Stentonox caught sight of thousands of indentured workers watching in horror from the projecting observation decks. Stentonox could only imagine the confusion of the common man, as the reverent servants of the Emperor went head to head in the skies over Terra.

He would preferred to have made a more direct insertion, but could not risk taking his grav-transports any closer to the structure. The powerful inverse fields fluxing about the gravitic drives and suspensor vanes would play havoc with the polarity of their own power plants. Stentonox had been warned that the grav-attacks could literally drop out of the sky - therefore, a safer, if less convenient, insertion site had been identified. The Legio Custodes would simply have to advance through the generatorium decks and take the engineering section at the head of the column by force.

'Custodian,' Stentonox said to Gustus Doloran, his Cataphractii sergeant-at-arms. 'Extend Captain Katafalque my compliments and inform him that I intend to fire upon Arcus. Tell him that for the safety of his warriors, he should withdraw from the shell sections and platforms about the engine column.'

'Very good, sir,' Doloran replied from the depths of his golden Terminator plate.

Stentonox was confronted with an almost impossible task - here, on the orbital plate, he would need to combine his many years of both combat training and diplomacy. Constantin Valdor had commanded that Arcus be taken, but Stentonox was fully aware that in these times of distrust and rebellion, he could not afford to slaughter the VII Legion above the Imperial Palace. Like the pugilist paid to throw the fight, he would have to pull his punches.

Unlike the pugilist, he still needed to win. A victory swift and unequivocal.

The impending action was a logistical and diplomatic nightmare. It made the shield-captain's mind ache with the unruly possibilities of chance.

'No reply from the plate, sir,' the sergeant-at-arms reported.

Stentonox nodded. 'Tell Captain Ambramagne that he is cleared to fire.'

'Very good, sir.'

'And open a channel to our attack craft, if you please.'

'Open, shield-captain.'

'Custodians, this is the Master of the Watch. We have a daunting task ahead of us, a task I expect you to carry out with your usual precision and determination. The Space Marines aboard Arcus are our allies, but they are operating outside their jurisdiction. It falls to us to assert the supreme authority of the Emperor of Mankind, even amongst his most loyal servants. We will do this by force, if required. Your Captain-General has ordered the orbital plate taken. It will be so, but you will take no life in the execution of such orders. There will be *no killing*. Those are my orders. I am invoking battle proprieties. As our comrades-at-arms, I want all Imperial Fists classed as *decora-intelligenta*. Come the conclusion of

this unfortunate action they will be questioned, and they will be debriefed, but they will be alive. But while you should consider their lives sacred, their blood is not. Punish them as your pride dictates. We may break them, but we will not butcher them. The galaxy has witnessed enough of such endings.'

'*Aeriax* firing, shield-captain,' Sergeant Doloran informed him.

'Stand by,' Stentonox voxed. 'Ten seconds.'

A storm of fire erupted from the presented cannons of the skiffs and gunships, hammering into the shell plating of the engine column.

Thick beams and blasts turned the generatorum decks of the column into maelstroms of light, sound and twisted metal. With the gunners' aim avoiding any of the critical systems keeping the orbital plate afloat, the grav-attacks of the Legio Custodes followed the bombardment in through the surface shielding and the wreckage of the hull superstructure.

Arcus wasn't a military installation, and boasted no defensive weaponry of its own, but the atmospheric locks and thick metal shell of the exterior still presented an obstacle to arriving forces. In ordering the barrage, Stentonox had removed that obstacle.

'Custodians, disembark.'

The brazen doors of the grav-attack craft slid open. Foot knights, Custodians and Aquila Terminators stepped out into the inferno raging between the ruined decks. The reflected flames turned each warrior into a spectacle of blinding gold. Striding through the destruction, their towering helms scraping the ceiling and guardian spears cutting wreckage confidently from their path, the Custodians assumed formation on the blazing decks.

'Pattern Draco,' Stentonox ordered.

Moving away from the destruction and into the narrow corridors of the generatoria chambers, the invaders assumed a demi-sheltron formation, with foot knights hunkered and advancing through the engine column behind their thick, gilded shields, Custodian Guard squads aimed the boltguns of their power halberds across their comrades' pauldrons. Between them, Custodians in Cataphractii Terminator plate settled the barrel lengths of aquila-nozzled incinerators. Not only did the formation create a shield-wall for its conquering advance, but also extended a wall of flame that drove back potential defenders.

Moving with his command squad through the generatorium complex, Stentonox had Doloran relay his cautionary commands while Sergeant Memnon coordinated the advance.

'Anything?' Stentonox asked. It took a moment to recall confirmations from

the advance teams spread out through the occupied decks.

'No contacts on auspex,' Doloran told him. 'No sightings.'

Stentonox grunted - that was either very good, or very bad. Demetrius Katafalque, confronted with the reality of an atmospheric assault and occupation of the plate, might have reconsidered his former bullishness, although Stentonox thought this unlikely. The Imperial Fists were experts in siege warfare, and in even the short window of opportunity provided, they could have mounted a determined defence. The narrow corridors of the generatoria were not without strategic virtue and Katafalque had, if he required, millions of indentured innocents to put between himself and the Custodians. With the passageways and engineering sections empty, it seemed that Katafalque had decided to make use of neither.

As he advanced, the shield-captain's unease grew. Following their explosive entrance, the Custodians' unimpeded progress had taken them through the silent decks, almost halfway to their destination. Even if Katafalque had acknowledged his courteous warning and withdrawn everyone from the outer sections, Stentonox would have expected some resistance by now. At this rate, their mission would be completed within minutes and Arcus force-anchored to a dead stop.

Stentonox's mind raced. This wasn't right.

He thought of Demetrius Katafalque, his predicament no more comfortable than the shield-captain's own. The Imperial Fists captain wanted loyalist blood on his gauntlets no more than Stentonox did. Like the shield-captain, Katafalque would recognise the conflict as a diplomatic nightmare, perhaps, like Stentonox, he had also prohibited the use of deadly force. Taking the orbital plate under such restrictions was difficult enough. How could-

'Captain Katafalque's compliments, sir' said the sergeant-at-arms, announcing the opening of a new vox-channel.

'Connect us,' Stentonox said, as they entered the engineering section.

'Shield-captain.' The Imperial Fist's dour voice echoed about Stentonox's high-helm.

'Captain.'

'I extend the same courtesy that you did me,' Katafalque said. *'Withdraw your men from the engineering section. Now.'*

'Demetrius, wait,' Stentonox called, but a burst of static told him that the captain was gone.

As step after armoured step took them closer to their objective, Stentonox

tried to put himself in Katafalque's position. How would he stop the Custodian advance, without the wilful spilling of blood? The shield-captain's steps slowed. His visored helm drifted towards the deck.

'Sergeant-at-arms...'

'Yes, shield-cap-'

The detonations came from above and below. They were probably seismic charges, transported in with the indentured labour force for the Warmason's excavations, set into the perimeter of the structural deck and floor plating.

Metal groaned. Beams fractured. Secondary blasts erupted.

Six floors in the engineering section - through which the different Custodian teams were advancing - simply fell out of the orbital plate.

The timing was perfect. The deadweight of girders, decking and industrial machinery was dragged instantly downwards. There was no time for orders. No vox-transmissions.

As the deck fell away and the buckled ceiling came down to meet him, Stentonox fought against every instinct and moved towards the detonations. Two steps across the falling floor took him to within leaping distance of the chamber's edge - the jump was heavy and awkward, but it gave the shield-captain the lift he needed. Clawing at the wall with his gilded gauntlets, he latched onto a ragged ledge where the structural supports had been ripped away.

Hanging by his fingertips, Stentonox looked down. The mass of wreckage buckled and crumbled into sections, falling away with the damaged plate hull. Custodians scrambled. Some found their way to the outstretched gauntlets of their anchored comrades. Some were snatched back by rearguard warriors who had yet to enter the engineering section. The rest tumbled with the descending wreckage, holding on to floor sections or machinery as it fell through the bottom of the under-plate.

The shield-captain's arm shot out for a flailing foot knight toppling from the deck above and still clutching his shield. Stentonox snatched him out of the air, the digits of his gauntlet like a grapnel that buried themselves in the plates of the Custodian's armour. Heaving the warrior up to a hold on the ledge, Stentonox adjusted his own precarious grip.

It reminded him of the Espartic Wall - that torturous climb of one of the Palace's most challenging fortifications. Many veterans among their number been forced to scale such obstacles as part of the ritual Blood Games. Stentonox could only hope that their training had not been forgotten.

'Name?' Stentonox put to the foot knight beside him.

'Vega, sir.'

With one hand the Custodian took off his helmet and stared down at the dizzying vision of Terra that had opened up before them. He was shorter than most among the Legio Custodes, but squat and hungry for action. He spat his shock and disgust into the open void below.

Like other Custodians about the empty chamber's ragged perimeter, Stentonox heaved himself up to a more secure perch, and Vega did likewise. The wind howled about them. Beneath the orbital plate - kilometres beneath, in fact - the shield-captain could see the distant Himalazian landscape. Even from this height, he could make out the conurbatia bordering the concentric outer walls of the Imperial Palace.

The wreckage of the engineering decks disintegrated as it fell, crashing down along the busy architecture of the column's starboard side, scattering grav-foils, aerials and suspensor vanes. Stentonox tried to imagine the horror of those poor souls on the ground beneath them, looking up at this unfolding nightmare. He also watched his goldplated Custodians tumble and fall through the descending debris, their crimson cloaks whipping violently about them as they grew smaller and smaller to his eyes.

The immense energies of the gravitic drives exerted their pull upon wreckage as it reached the strongest part of the conical field beneath Arcus. Shrieking and grinding, and in total defiance of the laws of physics, the remains of the shattered decks billowed outwards, scattering the last of the tiny golden figures towards the column's surface before settling into a lazy, listless tumble around it. Rather than plummeting all the way to the surface and inflicting untold devastation at ground level, the debris began to *orbit* the orbital.

It was an incidental effect of the plate's construction, but one that would save the lives of Stentonox's men. For now, at least.

Some tried to angle their descent and kick away from twisted support struts and heavy metal decking. Instead of falling through screaming emptiness, they smashed through nests of antennae and vanes on the gravitic engine column itself. The shield-captain was horrified at those velocity-arresting impacts; the rending and crumpling of armour plate as Custodians came to a precarious stop, tangled in the busy column sensoria. One warrior outfitted in heavy Cataphractii plate crashed straight down through the mesh of several maintenance platforms before clawing his way to a halt on the shell plating of the column's lowermost point.

Then Stentonox saw Doloran, the sergeant-at-arms clinging like a bulky,

brazen gargoyle to what was left of the ruined deck immediately below them.

'Transports,' the shield-captain called out across the vox. 'This is Stentonox. Custodians overboard. I repeat - Custodians overboard. Track suit signatures and attempt a vectored rescue. Advise caution, wreckage in the air.'

'*Shield-captain,*' a Custodian aboard one grav-attack replied. '*The fields about the gravitic column...*'

Stentonox smacked an armoured fist against the metal of the wall section. 'Damn you,' he barked back. 'You will *attempt* an intervention. You will not put Legio Custodes transports or personnel at risk.'

'*Received.*'

Within moments, Stentonox saw the small swarm of transports dropping into view, their hulls turning with the vectored descent and the gravitic acceleration of their own engine coils.

'Custodians on the column,' Stentonox called across the open channel, with no idea if they could hear him or not, 'you are authorised to shed your plate, if required.' It was largely pointless advice, but it was all that he could give them. It might provide the warriors with something to concentrate on other than their impending death. 'In the event of freefall, use-'

Bolter fire suddenly cut through the cold air before the shield-captain. On the far side of the wind-screaming emptiness created by the missing engineering section, Imperial Fists Space Marines were assuming cover at the cranked doors and airlocks on each of the decks that had formerly led to the demolished section. Sparks showered Stentonox as another stream of disciplined fire impacted about him.

Stentonox shook his head. Demetrius Katafalque was a cold bastard. Even now, diplomatic protocols between the Legiones Astartes and the Emperor's Custodians should be maintained. Stentonox, the sergeant-at-arms and the rescued foot knight were all easy targets, clinging to the shattered walls - no challenge at all for the lethal aim of the Imperial Fists. Return fire from Custodian guardian spears hammered back at the sons of Dorn, mauling their blasted cover.

'Kill classifications are still in force,' Stentonox ordered across the vox. At the opposite end of the ruined section, foot knights with their shields provided cover for Custodian marksmen in the gaping passages and demolished decking.

'*But captain-*' Sergeant Memnon began.

'Battle proprieties, sergeant,' Stentonox returned. 'Those are my orders. Suppression fire only.'

'We can work our way around the section.'

'Negative. Hold position.' For all the Custodians knew, the Imperial Fists could have wired the entire quarter to blow and drop out of the bottom of the orbital plate. 'Sergeant Doloran, Custodian Vega - with me.'

Stentonox made a powered jump from the shattered ledge, across the howling open space and through the gunfire, down onto what was left of the lower deck and the sergeant-at-arms. He was swiftly followed by Vega, and the three of them edged their way along the jagged perimeter, swinging from several mauled struts before putting their boots down on solid decking. Above them the fire fight raged, bolter fire streaming back and forth across the open space, drumming into the ruined architecture.

Suddenly, the lights on the airlock in front of them began to flash, and the Custodians pulled back into the the section wreckage. The bulkhead cleared its seals, and a combat squad of Imperial Fists filed through, the bright yellow of their plate almost in itself a challenge.

They took up position on the shattered deck, ready to offer more suppression fire and seemingly oblivious to the intruders in their midst.

Erupting from the twisted metal and sparking machinery, Vega surprised the Space Marines; he deflected a couple of bolt-rounds with his shield before slamming the two nearest warriors back into the Wall, sending the barrels of their weapons wide.

Another Fist turned to find the sergeant-at-arms already at his side. A gilded fist smashed the Space Marine's faceplate, sending him back towards the lock. Tearing the ruined helm free, the Imperial Fist brought up his bolter, but Doloran already had his gauntlets on the weapon's casing, leaning in with the full weight of his Terminator armour. The sergeant smashed back with an elbow, slamming his opponent's skull off the compartment wall.

Of the two remaining squad members, the closest turned to find Stentonox standing behind him. The shield-captain's face betrayed a cold fury. A wild bolt-round sang off the sculpted gold of his pauldron, but Stentonox kicked out and knocked the Space Marine from the edge of the shattered deck and into the yawning drop beyond it.

Charging him back into a warrior that had wrestled himself free from behind Vega's shield, Stentonox grappled the last Space Marine, and rained a storm of heavy blows down upon them both. He heard servos creak and war-plate fracture beneath his relentless punches.

'Ready?' the shield-captain roared at Vega, who still had one struggling Space

Marine and his bolter jammed up against the wall.

'Yes, sir!' The foot knight angled the shield and ran it along the wall like a dozer blade, ploughing all three Imperial Fists from their footing and over the edge into the howling sky. As they fell, Stenonox heard the futility of bolt-rounds fired back up at the under-plate.

The shield captain turned. Doloran was standing with the unconscious body of his opponent hanging limply by one arm. Stenonox nodded, and the sergeant-at-arms launched the Imperial Fist after his flailing brothers.

'Shield-captain,' chirped the vox. It was one of the grav-transports.

'Report.'

'We cannot reach the Custodians on the engine column, or hold station beneath it. The inverse gravitic interference is too strong.'

'Damn,' Stenonox murmured. It had been a long shot. Mid-air interception would be impossible without sending the transports into a similar freefall. As the shield-captain peered over the ragged edge, down at the Imperial Fists now also smashing through the merciless nest of vanes and aerals, his only comfort was that Katafalque's men would share the same fate as his.

As a second squad of Imperial Fists streamed from the airlock, weapons raised and demanding their surrender, both Vega and the sergeant-at-arms moved to counter them. Something had been unleashed in the pair - even without their sweeping blades and bolters, they were ready for battle. They were ready to pound Space Marines into the deck with their bare hands.

'No,' Stenonox said. 'Stand down.'

The order was quiet, but confident, and it was obeyed. As the Imperial Fists surrounded the Custodians, shouting commands and jabbing weapon muzzles at them, the vox crackled again.

'What are your orders, shield-captain?'

'Stand by,' Stenonox voxed back, as he raised his gauntlets in submission, with Vega and Doloran following suit. 'The game's not over. I've just introduced some new pieces to the board.'

WITH LITTLE CEREMONY, diplomacy or respect, the three Custodians had their gauntlets bound and were bundled through the doors of a nearby freight elevator.

As it rose rapidly through the crowded floors of the orbital plate, Stenonox felt the pull of ascension in the pit of his stomach. As the seconds ebbed away, he thought of his Custodians clawing and tumbling their way down the outside of the colossal gravitic column; he knew that they would keep their heads,

removing their armour plate and using their cloaks and cardinals to create drag and tangle amongst the architecture.

He also knew, however, there was no way back up to the under-plate, and that it was only a matter of time before they ran out of handholds.

In tossing the Imperial Fists overboard, the shield-captain had consigned them to the same fate.

The doors shuddered open, and the Space Marines sent them out onto the operations deck of the orbital plate with a rough shove. With boltguns in their backs, Stentonox, Vega and Doloran were marched between rows of consoles and servitor-manned rune banks to the centre of the large chamber. Blast screens rumbled aside to reveal the thin skies beyond and let in the brilliance of the Terran sun, casting mercantile menials, bridge staff and officials from the Danakil mining conglomerates in silhouette.

From out of the glare strode an Imperial Fists officer, his eyes grim, his jaw taut and his white hair cut into a tonsure crown. He was flanked by a pair of legionary champions, who held Stentonox and his men in the unswerving aim of their ornate boltguns.

'Katafalque-' Stentonox began, as the shield-captain was forced to his knees by his captors.

'What the hell do you think you're doing?' Demetrius Katafalque demanded.

'Katafalque, listen to me-'

'No! Do you have any idea what you've done - in this, a time of war and betrayal?'

'Don't lecture me, *legionary*,' Stentonox spat back. 'You think just because you use the unforgiving earth of Terra as a weapon rather than your boltguns, that you have not murdered my warriors - the Emperor's own Custodians? What dark diplomacy is that, Fist?'

Katafalque sneered. 'You will pay for what you have done.'

'I did what I had to,' Stentonox seethed. 'What you forced me to do, and I'd do it again. We will both pay for your stubborn refusal to see sense. You have no authority to be here.'

'Rogal Dorn-'

'Rogal Dorn's word might be law anywhere else in the galaxy,' Stentonox told him, 'but here, in and above the Imperial Palace, we all answer to a higher authority.'

'The primarch seeks to secure the seat of that authority,' Katafalque stormed back.

'And in doing so, he imperils it.'

'That is your opinion, but we have official authorisation.'

'No, you do not,' the shield-captain told him. 'Though you undoubtedly will. The Warmason will have his indentured labour and the Palace will be further fortified... but not today, Demetrius. Not today. I understand your desires - I share them. But terrible mistakes have been made in the name of expediency, and it is my duty to protect the Emperor from the consequences of such mistakes.'

'I will see my primarch's orders through,' Katafalque assured the shield-captain.

'Just listen to me,' Stentonox said, coming as close to imploring as his pride would allow. 'My men - your men, too - are desperately clawing their way down the gravitic column. When they slip beyond the drives' reach, they will fall to their deaths. We have no time for this. Give the order. Engage the gravitic anchor. Bring the orbital plate to a halt and in so doing, save our men.'

Katafalque stared at the shield-captain, his face contorting with hatred and disgust.

'Engage the anchor, Demetrius, and they will be drawn safely down to ground level.'

'I will not' Katafalque said finally. 'I will not be hostage to the games, perverse logic and trickery of the Legio Custodes, with your infamous disguises and deceptions. Some say it is wisdom to play at being the enemy and learn from simulated conflict, but all I see is a force at war with itself.'

'And I need not lecture the Legionem Astartes about that!' Stentonox bit back his outrage. 'This is Lord Dorn's adamant, his obstinacy in you.'

'A failing, perhaps,' Katafalque admitted. 'My men will die for it, as your men will die for yours. Ask yourself this, shield-captain - how much further will you compound this failure? Arcus is going to the Palace. Those are my primarch's orders.'

Stentonox sighed. 'Demetrius, for the sake of the Emperor's blood that runs through your veins and those of your men about to die, please... Engage the anchor.'

Demetrius Katafalque leaned in towards the kneeling shield-captain. 'No, Custodian,' he whispered. 'I will not.'

Stentonox allowed his head to fall. There was nothing more that he could do.

There was sudden commotion upon the operations deck. A report from a servitor was communicated urgently to an operations menial, who in turn passed

it to the deck officer.

'My lord,' the man called out across the operations chamber to Katafalque. 'The gravitic anchor has been engaged.'

Shock, followed by anger, clouded Katafalque's snarling face. There was no exclamation. No confusion. No rage. He simply glared at Stentonox, his eyes alight with hatred and distrust.

'I want confirmation,' he said.

Lowering the barrel of his beautifully crafted boltgun and putting an armoured digit to the side of his helm, one of his champions sent the query. 'Our brothers confirm it,' he reported. 'The anchor has initiated gravitic reversal.'

'How long?.' Katafalque asked, without taking his eyes from the shield-captain.

'Two hours, my lord,' the deck officer informed him by way of an apology. 'Two hours for the column to complete its cycle and for us then to disengage it again.'

Katafalque nodded slowly to himself. Stentonox looked up at him.

The two observed a moment of grim silence. 'Our brother Fists, and the Custodians?'

'Caught in the gravity well,' the deck officer confirmed. 'Along with some debris and loose fixtures from the conurbatia below.'

'This will not help you,' Katafalque muttered to Stentonox.

The Custodian was lost in thought, however. His men could not have been responsible for such an action, but he wasn't about to tell the captain that.

Alarms sounded across the operations deck.

'What is it now?' Katafalque demanded. His other champion strode across the deck and cut through the small throng of menials about the sensorium console.

'Gunships, inbound,' the Imperial Fist reported. 'Lunar designations. The Silent Sisterhood, captain. They're making an atmospheric approach.'

Katafalque's lips found their way back to a snarl. 'Get me a vox-link.'

'No need - we're receiving a hololithic transmission, my lord,' the deck officer announced.

'On projectors,' Katafalque commanded. 'We shall hear of our sisters business in these great affairs.'

The spectral representation of a woman misted into a fixed signal before them. Stentonox saw immediately that it was Duesstra Edelstyne Sister-Commandress of the Raptor Guard and Confidante-Tranquil to Lady Krole, who had first alerted the Master of the Watch to the threat of the orbital plate. The novice

glossator stood at her ghostly mistress side.

'*Captain Katafalque,*' she said, translating. '*Do you know to whom you speak?*'

'I do, my lady,' Katafalque replied. 'We have collaborated many times on the Palace fortifications. You have my utmost respect, sister-

commandress, but do not think that will allow you to interfere in what are already crowded and unfortunate affairs.'

'Listen to me, captain. I am going to prevent you from committing any further to this calamitous endeavour. Information has recently come to my attention regarding the indentured workforce on board Arcus. Records show that the Danakil mineral conglomerates assured you that each and every one of their workers had met the demands of security. Isometrics, gene-profiling and so forth.'

'This is correct.'

'I'm afraid to inform you, captain,' the glossator continued to translate, *'that the Palace has been put on high alert. It is currently at situation-Xanthus and will remain so while the orbital plate remains on station or approach. Situation-Xanthus requires a higher level of Palace clearance than conglomerate isometrics - Danakil's profiling does not extend to psionic screening and associated genetic mutations. It is the Sisterhood's suspicion that your labour population might harbour witchbreeds and unsanctioned psyker-strains.'*

Demetrius Katafalque turned his stabbing glare from the hololith to Stentonox. Edelstyne produced a scroll document and held it up.

'Under section six-fourteen of the Vondrabung Proclamation, I am authorised to impound Arcus and its indentured workforce for processing and interrogation at the Scholastica Psykana facility atop Hive Illium.'

'You're serious?' Katafalque said, looking from Stentonox to Edelstyne and then back again.

'Always, captain,' the glossator assured him. *'These are serious matters. So serious, in fact, that the Somnus Citadel has sent word to Rogal Dorn. He is yet to reply, but he will. He will want to avoid the embarrassment of his Legion smuggling dangerous, unsanctioned psykers through the security measures including his own security measures - and into the Imperial Palace. What do you think, Captain Katafalque?'*

Moments passed. The captain said nothing, then finally nodded. 'Yes, Lord Dorn would want to avoid such complications. It was fortunate that you took such an interest in our little misunderstanding.'

'Many organisations pride themselves on being the right hand of the Emperor,

captain. They cannot all be so. Sometimes, it's difficult for one hand to know what the other is doing.'

'Quite,' Katafalque said through gritted teeth. 'The Imperial Fists shall stand sentinel over the indentured population and see Arcus safely to your facility at Illium.'

'We shall take dual-custodianship of the orbital plate, captain,' Edelstyne had her glossator inform him. *'Please clear your hangers for the Raptor Guard's gunships and transports. Edelstyne out.'*

Both the commandress and her novice dissipated into a static haze.

The operations deck was silent.

'Release them,' Katafalque ordered. 'Order the other squads to stand down.'

As the Imperial Fists released their binders, Stentonox and his Custodians got to their feet. 'Likewise,' Stentonox told his sergeant-at-arms.

'Vega - make your way down to the engineering and maintenance decks. You will lead the effort to rescue our men from the column. Inform Captain-General Valdor that we will be returning with the transports.' He fixed Katafalque with a raw glare, 'The action has been prosecuted, and has reached a satisfactory conclusion for both contingents. Tell him... Tell him there are no significant casualties to report on either side.'

As the shield-captain turned to leave, Katafalque grabbed him by the arm. Stentonox tensed.

'I want you to know,' Katafalque told him, 'that regardless of your officious truths or her convenient lies, it is you that has acted inappropriately here today. The Legio Custodes, the Silent Sisterhood - you put yourselves between the Emperor and his enemies. I guarantee that a day will come when you're going to wish that the wall between the Emperor and his enemies is taller and thicker than it is. When that day comes, you will understand how pointless, and indeed reckless, this has all been.'

Without looking at Katafalque, Stentonox pulled away and made for the elevator, leaving Arcus to the Imperial Fists.

IT WAS LATE. Braziers of incense glowed about the vaulted corridors and halls of the Imperial Palace. Ordinarily, the Master of the Watch would debrief the sentinel-securitas, so that the captain of the next shift could be presented with details of importance and continuity. Since the palace was still at situation-Xanthus, Enobar Stentonox found himself debriefing the Chief Custodian himself.

They walked the arcades of the Second Ward as they talked, the alarm-status also necessitating double the Ares Guard for the Captain-General and a foot knight sentry to escort the Master of the Watch on his duties, as protocol dictated. The Custodians approached the concentrica-barbican, signalling their passage from the outer to the inner regions of the Palace.

It had been a long day for both of them. Beyond the incident on the orbital plate, Stentonox had spent the rest of his watch attempting to catch up with the schedule. He had failed miserably. He would be passing a colossal list of unfinished business on to the next Master of the Watch, just as his predecessor had done to him.

Constantin Valdor had left the blockade lines before Arcus to embark upon a full Palace inspection, taking the opportunity to review the minutiae of the Emperor's security under a genuine Xanthus-alert situation. This had led into an emergency session of the Caucum Aegis: a strategic assembly of Custodian veterans that advised the Captain-General on matters of security. The arrival of the orbital plate - and the diplomatic nightmare that had ensued - required greater review. It had been unexpected, and therefore manifested as ten times the perceived threat.

It was exactly the kind of danger that the Blood Games could not prepare them for. The future validity of the Games themselves had even come into question.

From the Caucum Aegis, the Chief Custodian had gone into a meeting with the Sigillite himself, which had left him dark and introspective.

'So the orbital plate has cleared Palace airspace,' Valdor confirmed.

'Yes, sir,' Stentonox said. 'On its way to Illium, Emperor willing, with Captain Katafalque still on board.'

'He's a stubborn, humourless bastard,' Valdor sighed. 'Not unlike Dorn himself. That said, there's no one from the Legiones Astartes I'd rather have manning our walls.'

Stentonox found himself forced to agree.

The shield-captain found himself lost in thought. The action on Arcus was behind him, but Stentonox had found it difficult to relax. It wasn't just that the Palace was still at high alert; something had been gnawing away at the back of his mind, the niggling feeling that he had missed something important. Something he didn't want to leave unattended for the next Master of the Watch to deal with...

He let his eyes drift from Constantin Valdor and across the glorious, golden

plate of his Ares Guard. He looked up at the Terminators on the concentric security gate, and at the sentry assigned to him as Master of the Watch. His gaze fell to the Custodian's rank and testimonials. *Lentum Foot Knight, Vega Eritreus Sengral Obispum.*

'Shield-captain?' said Valdor.

Vega.

There was something about the way the foot knight carried himself - about the way he strode, tall and proud, with his guardian spear held before him.

'Shield-captain,' Valdor pressed. 'Is there anything else?'

'Just one piece of outstanding business, sir,' Stentonox replied.

The shield-captain spun upon his armoured heel. He went for the foot knight escorting him down the arcade, but the Custodian's halberd was between them in a flash. Stentonox grabbed the haft and the pair wrestled for control of the weapon, prompting the Chief Custodian's Ares Guard to surround their master in a protective formation.

Stentonox got a thumb over the ejection stud on the boltgun attachment's breach, and the heavy magazine clattered to the ground as he and the foot knight circled, pushing each other back and forth across the arcade. Vega heaved the guardian spear forwards with a powerful shove, smashing Stentonox in the face.

As the shield-captain fell back against the wall, the Ares Guard levelled their own weapons at the foot knight. 'Hold your fire,' Stentonox managed, but Vega came at them, throwing the halberd like a javelin. The shield-captain went to grab the unarmed foot knight but found himself snatched around with lightning speed.

Vega used the shield-captain as a pivot to turn and propel Stentonox straight into the Ares Guard formation. The foot knight followed him, snatching a short sword from the scabbard of one of the veteran Custodians. The blade's owner paid for its loss - Vega rammed it into the warrior's back, then whipped it back to parry the spear thrusts of the others.

Stentonox came up between the foot knight and the nearest Ares Guard. He grabbed Vega's sword arm, burying his shoulder in the foot knight's armoured chest. Smashing down with his elbow, Stentonox knocked the weapon out of his opponent's grip. As the blade clattered to the stone floor, the shield-captain turned to restrain him but was greeted with an armoured headbutt to the face.

Dodging the sweeping blade of a guardian spear, the foot knight snatched at the weapon, turning it in its owner's grasp and disarming the Custodian. Heaving the warrior back into the opposite wall with a crack of golden battleplate, Vega

found himself face to face with his true target: Constantin Valdor.

The Captain-General of the Legio Custodes had not been watching the unfolding chaos like some casual observer, waiting for his Custodians to defend him. He was primed. He was ready. His attacker's moves had been blinding, his assault confident, but Vega had barely recovered his balance when the great fist of the Chief Custodian took him squarely in the faceplate.

The foot knight was propelled backwards by the sheer force of the blow. He tumbled back, his knees flying over his shoulders, and landing some distance up the passageway on his face and breastplate. Pushing himself to his knees, he shook the skull-rattling force of the impact from his helmet.

Sentries came from the concentra gate, levelling the long barrels of their incinerators at the foot knight, and the Ares Guard surrounded the Chief Custodian once more. Stentonox stood beside the injured, wiping blood from his broken nose.

'Enough,' the shield-captain told Vega, 'or I clear them to fire.'

The foot knight got shakily to his feet, looking back at the Terminators behind him and the concentra gate to the inner Palace, then back to Stentonox and the Chief Custodian. He went limp, and nodded his surrender.

'Report to the infirmary,' Stentonox told the wounded Ares Guard, sending them on their way.

'Captain Stentonox?' Valdor put to the captain.

The shield-captain turned and presented himself similarly, Vega stood to attention.

'Captain-General, may I present Custodian Belisanus,' Stentonox said. 'The final participant in the present cycle of the Blood Games.'

Constantin Valdor's tired face broke into a grim smile of appreciation. The foot knight took off his ruined high helm, revealing the fresh face of a young and ambitious Custodian.

'Impressive.'

'That's not the half of it, sir,' Stentonox said. 'I have deduced that Custodian Belisarius was also on board the orbital plate today - he had been hoping to gain access to the Palace as one of the indentured workforce.'

Stentonox looked to the young Custodian, who nodded slowly.

Valdor nodded as well. 'I'll wager he would have succeeded.'

'Perhaps,' the shield-captain replied. 'Instead, he found his talents turned to... diplomatic sabotage, engaging the gravitic anchor from the orbital plate's drive column, and thereby saving the lives of both Legio Custodes and Legiones

Astartes. He also covertly alerted the Silent Sisterhood to our stalemate, thereby saving everyone else.'

'You knew this at the time?' Valdor asked.

'No, sir - unfortunately I did not,' Stentonox admitted. 'Custodian Belisarius did not wish to compromise his performance in the games.

Regrettably, I came to the realisation only a few moments ago. Belisarius must have left the plate disguised as one of our own, Custodian Vega. He intended to infiltrate the Palace defences as... well, as one of the Legio Custodes, sir. I fear he pushed his luck when he assigned himself as my sentry in the hope of achieving access to the inner Palace.' Stentonox ran the forefinger and thumb of one gauntlet down his now crooked nose. 'It almost smacks of hubris.'

'And it almost worked.' Valdor concluded.

'Indeed, sir,' the shield-captain said. 'It seems to me that Custodian Belisarius was trying to make a point. As part of his infiltration, he clearly made you a target - I think that it would be wise to learn something from this. As principal among the Emperor's protectors and the head of the Palace's security, you are a target for our enemies.'

'We all are,' Valdor said. 'All those who stand between Horus and the Emperor.'

'Sir.'

The Chief Custodian looked at them both for a long moment. 'We'll talk more of this, though. We'll talk about what else can be done.'

It had been a long day. Stentonox had carried the duty of Palace security for only twenty-four hours, and yet he felt completely drained. Exhausted, even. He found it difficult to imagine the strength it might take to carry such a burden with every day that dawned.

Pushing through his Ares Guard and walking up towards the concentric gate, Constantin Valdor turned back to the battered Stentonox and Belisarius. 'Know this - I sleep better knowing that there are Custodians like you within our ranks. For now, let us enjoy some well-earned rest. When the enemy is at our gates, there will be little time for such luxuries.'

THE PHOENICIAN

Nick Kyme

I AM DYING. A flickering retinal display tells me that my cybernetics are functioning, but I cannot move them. Without flesh to impel it, the iron means nothing. Without an engine to drive it, what use is the machine? For all its ostensible fortitude and resilience, I now discover that iron is just as weak as flesh. It is ironic that only now does this revelation strike me.

Julius is walking away from me, the arrogant cur. It takes me a moment to realise why he is upside down and I see his armoured heels disappearing into the distance. My Tactical Dreadnought armour has failed.

I'm on my back, trying to hold in my guts.

I am not alone.

The dead are everywhere, their ranks swelling with each passing second. Morlocks in funerary black surround me. I see snatches of iconography, a splash of blood. Their wounds are fresh, but the legacy of them, and the wounds against this Legion, will linger long after this battle has ended. I will not see its end, though. I feel no regret or sadness - anger fills me instead, a black well of hatred that I am slowly slipping into.

My head lolls to the side, and I see a face I recognise. I rasp a name.

'Desaan...'

He doesn't answer. My brother is already gone.

I try to suppress the sense of fatalism that seizes my mind, just as the chill of death begins to seize my body.

I want to believe that this can all end in victory, that we weren't simply undone by a lie.

Then I see him, emerging through a cloud of smoke, shimmering in the heat haze from a thousand fires, and the one whom he faces. Death is close, its hands around my throat, digging through my innards with eager talons. Slit from

abdomen to neck, the pain rivals anything I have ever felt before... But I must hang on. I have to see this.

Blackness crouches at the edge of my vision. I am content to let it, just as long as I can remain conscious.

Two brothers face one another amidst an ocean of war, the dead lapping at their feet.

One is stern - his eyes like pools of mercury, hair cut close to the scalp. Cold and unyielding, his face is as craggy and hard as a Medusan cliff. Black as coal, with arms of pearlescent silver, he is brawn personified with a fresh-forged vengeance.

Ferrus Manus, the Gorgon. My father.

The other is slender, even in his purple and gold armour. His unhelmed visage is handsome, the epitome of physical perfection, and long white hair streaks from his head like flashes of fire. He has my father's weapon, the great hammer *Forgebreaker*. As he climbs to a spur of rock, this vainglorious yet deadly peacock, his movements are swaggering and arrogant.

Fulgrim, the Phoenician. My father's brother.

Ferrus Manus will kill him for this affront. As he strides towards the spur with purpose, the living making way for this dash while the dead linger underfoot, he draws *Fireblade*. It bums like his anger, righteously.

Fulgrim's smile remains. His arms are open as if to embrace the Gorgon. In truth, it is a mocking challenge. Below, my few surviving brothers of the Avernii Clan clash with the Phoenix Guard. Lightning claw meets halberd, and the death toll amongst the Morlocks and the Emperor's Children rises.

I black out for a few seconds. My eyes are bloody and I witness the rest of the battle through a crimson filter that my retinal lenses cannot correct.

Forgebreaker looks heavy; too noble a weapon for Fulgrim's ignoble hands, but he wields it deftly and I am reminded of his awesome prowess.

My father speaks words of accusation, but my hearing is fading and I fail to catch them. His teeth are bared in a predatory snarl. Fulgrim's too, revealed in a liar's grin.

From despair comes fury. Ferrus Manus charges the spur, his brother upon it.

My father is a brawler, brute strength and undeniable power, but Fulgrim's technique is choreographed like a dancer's. Even with *Forgebreaker*, he is swift and precise. He rains blows against my father's defence, smashes him down time and again. Ferrus Manus will not be bowed. Anger fuels him, and Fulgrim feels the heat of it. His smile wavers, turning to an uncertain frown.

I am weakening; my body is shutting down. My mind clings on by the thinnest skein. I have to see this. I need to know...

They circle, two demi-gods surrounded by the last of my dying kin. My father's pauldron is dented by a glancing blow. The return is quick and two-handed, and leaves a fiery split in the Phoenician's war-plate. The Gorgon recoils, the haft of *Forgebreaker* smashed into his pugilist's nose. He replies with a downward slash that Fulgrim dodges; a second cut clips the primarch's cheek and he snarls. He thrusts out with the hammer, a jab that punches the air from my father's lungs and leaves him gasping. A desperate cross-cut keeps Fulgrim at arm's length as the Phoenician leaps back to avoid *Fireblade's* sting. One-handed, Fulgrim loops the stolen hammer around for a murderous blow, but Ferrus Manus blocks it. Sparks cascade, lightning crackling from both weapons.

I hear thunder, and imagine the very earth trembling against the fury of this duel.

For a moment they are locked, brother versus brother, *Fireblade* grinding against *Forgebreaker's* haft.

With a roar, Ferrus Manus throws Fulgrim off, but the Phoenician is quick to recover. He spins away from the thrust aimed at his chest and lands a punch against the Gorgon's exposed jaw. He shrugs it off and draws a cut down Fulgrim's flank. Hard to tell for certain - my vision is starting to blur and the pain has ebbed to a dull ache that will soon become an endless cold - but I swear that the Phoenician exhaled in pleasure at that last wound.

Truly, he is depraved.

Mocking laughter erupts from Fulgrim, his arrogance boundless even in the face of incandescent hatred. Savagely, my father lashes out and rips the shoulder guard from Fulgrim's otherwise pristine armour. If I could make a fist in triumph, I would. With gathering momentum, the Gorgon turns inside the Phoenician's guard and makes to thrust with *Fireblade*.

My eyes widen in anticipation of victory...

But Fulgrim counters, faster than any warrior has a right to, and turns the blow aside before crafting one of his own that strikes my father's skull.

Anguish rises with the blood in my gorge, but I dare not look away. I could not even if I wanted to.

Ferrus Manus is staggered, bowed on one knee but resolute. Blood is streaming from his head, drenching him in a red shroud. Gritting his teeth, he finds a gap in the Phoenician's otherwise flawless guard and cuts deep across his torso.

Fulgrim falls back, *Forgebreaker* no longer in his grasp as he clutches at his body. On their knees, they stare at one another, but I am struck by the Phoenician's apparent melancholy. I suspect lucidity has already fled, for I look upon Fulgrim and see true sadness. It is usurped by acceptance as Ferrus Manus rises to his feet.

Fireblade hangs aloft like a frozen comet, burning.

I am about to commit myself to duty's end. Death has stayed its hand and I am thankful for it.

But the fatal blow does not fall. I blink and wonder if I have missed some crucial moment.

A silver blade flashes in Fulgrim's grip. It halts *Fireblade* mid-swing, but the burning sword is descending all the same.

A harsh flash of light hurts my eyes, but I no longer have the strength to look away. An aura, dark and eldritch, has enveloped both primarchs - I see Fulgrim on his feet and my father back on his knees, his armour parted as though it were parchment.

I want to cry out, to rage at the wrongness of it. Fate has been thwarted. As I near death, I see it, I see the thing inside the Phoenician. It is writhing and serpentine, yet the flesh-host around it is staggering, bereft of his usual finesse.

Fulgrim's eyes widen, and as they meet my own, I see his terror. I see the desperate urgency in him that screams not to kill his brother.

The blow falls. I cannot stop it. Iron skin shears apart, cleaved by amethyst fire.

I detect the reek of something spoiled, rotten meat and old flesh. Rolling over the slopes, surging from some unseen place come katabatic winds. They wash over me, over the dead, and I hear voices trapped within them.

They are screaming.

There are voices within the screams, beckoning me on. They come from the Land of Shadows, from Medusa, where the revenants of old, long forgotten lives still walk. They come for me, the slain warriors of the Clan Avernii, reaching out to take me with them, to grant me peace.

I recoil as their faces change, as noble Medusan sons devolve into wraithly phantoms. Fingers wither into talons, eyes shrink into orbless sockets. They seek to drag me into the darkness, and I have just enough will left to deny them their soul-feast.

Upon the Isstvan plain, a chilling tempest rages, with my dead father and his killers at the heart of it. I see the essence of life leaving the Gorgon through his

severed neck. His head lies separate from it, glassy-eyed and etched with rage.

As the wind dies, I feel my torment just beginning.

Fulgrim stoops, although it isn't the Phoenician. With one hand, he seizes my father's cropped hair and presents the bloody head to me.

I do not see a primarch - I behold a monster. My closeness to death has gifted me that truth.

And in that moment, as my heart beats its last and a final breath saws painfully through my lungs, I realise what faces us. I can see it dearly.

I see that we-

BY THE LION'S COMMAND

Gav Thorpe

'SENESCHAL, DO WE open fire?'

Chapter Master Belath's question cut across the din of warning klaxons. Corswain tore his eyes from the sensor display, away from the runes that showed traitor ships arrowing towards the centre of the fleet like a spear aimed for his heart. Signal returns confirmed that they were the same Death Guard ships that he had chased across twelve devastated star systems.

'What are the separatists doing?' the seneschal demanded as he looked to Urizel, who was overseeing the augury consoles.

'Their vessels are powering up, seneschal. No locking scans detected,' The legionary leaned over the wasted forms of the slaved servitors to examine the main screen. 'Reactor spikes in the orbital stations. Weapons are arming. Torpedo tubes are closed.'

Corswain took the news without comment while Belath paced back and forth across the quarterdeck of the strategium, whispering curses.

'If you have something to say,' Corswain muttered, 'then speak it.'

'I was merely regretting the decision to come to Argeus without the full Legion, seneschal,' Belath replied, regaining his composure.

'My decision, you mean. You raised little objection at the command council.'

'With respect, seneschal, it is of no consequence how we come to be here. Do we open fire on the separatists? We cannot allow them the first volley.'

Corswain turned. 'Do not open fire! Manoeuvre the fleet to counter the Death Guard approach. All ships to reform on our position.'

'That will bring more of the fleet into range of the orbital platforms and expose us to the rebels,' Belath protested.

'I issued an order, Chapter Master. I did not invite opinion. We will meet the Death Guard in battle.'

'But the rebels-'

'President-General Remercus has observed the agreed truce thus far. If the separatists wished to attack us, they have already had ample opportunity:

'Unless they were waiting for something.'

'Carry out my orders.' Corswain did not shout, but his curt tone forestalled any further debate.

Belath nodded reluctantly and moved to the communications array to one side of the command deck. From here he relayed the order to the other eleven Dark Angels vessels currently standing off from the so-called 'Free Army of Terra Nullius'.

It was not the first time that the Dark Angels had encountered a world that had ceded from the Imperium and yet not dedicated itself to Horus; it was, however, the most military. Seven capital ships and transports for more than three hundred thousand men had gathered at this proclaimed safe haven. It was a force that could conquer whole systems, idly waiting for the civil war to resolve itself.

On the display, the lead ships of the Death Guard fleet approached the outlying Dark Angels vessels. The three smaller escort ships retreated towards the strike cruisers and battle-barges of the main fleet, speeding out of range before they came under any fire.

It was no satisfaction to Corswain that the Librarians' telepathic auguries of the traitor fleet's location had been proven true. If only he had shown more faith in their abilities, then he would not now be outnumbered and out of position between two potential foes.

'Communications - send priority transmission to the President-General. Redirect to my quarters.'

Belath frowned. 'You're leaving the strategium?'

'You may be new to the command of the Second Order, Chapter Master, but I have every confidence you will respond properly to this attack. I have other matters that demand my attention.'

As Corswain departed the strategium, two legionaries from his personal guard fell in behind their commander. He stopped to address them.

'Return to the command deck to assist Chapter Master Belath. Be sure to remind him that he is not to fire on the Free Army, or their orbital stations, unless they directly target us.'

The Space Marines saluted in acknowledgement and turned away, leaving Corswain to walk unattended. He kept the vox-channel open to monitor the unfolding fleet action - in the two minutes it took him to reach the door of his

personal chambers, the Death Guard had broken off their headlong rush, having failed to take the pickets unawares with their ambush. It seemed that they were regrouping for a more concerted thrust towards the Dark Angels.

As the door hissed closed behind him, Corswain slumped against the wall beside it, his armour whining as it strove to match his sagging frame. The seneschal closed his eyes and rested his head against the bare metal, trying to think.

'A foolish errand,' he muttered, echoing the words Grand Master Haradin had spoken at the council.

Perhaps it had been foolish, but the council had demanded - albeit in a veiled manner - that Corswain take the lead.

A sharp crack cut through the raised voices as Corswain slammed his sheathed sword onto the worn wood of the table. The Seneschal of the Dark Angels glared at the assembled Masters of the Legion.

'Shouting at cross-purposes gets us nowhere.'

Silenced for the moment, the eight commanders sat back in their seats, glowering at one another. Corswain took a breath and looked to each of them in turn. They regarded him warily.

'What else would you have me do?' he demanded. 'The Lion's last command, a command he gave to me in person, was to bring word of his actions to Lord Russ of the Space Wolves, and to engage the enemy wherever possible.'

'The enemy are to be found everywhere, Russ nowhere,' said Haradin, Grand Master of the Third Order. Two of his Chapter Masters, Nerael and Zanthus, nodded their approval. 'Was it really the Lion's intent to split the Legion over so many systems?'

'We are but fifteen thousand light years from Caliban,' said Astrovel, Fourth Chapter Master of the Seventh Order. 'We should see first to the defence of our home world.' He shook his head, his scarred face grim. 'The Lion would give us short regard if we chased after this Death Guard traitor, only to allow the foe to fall upon Caliban as they have hundreds of other worlds.'

'We chase shadows,' said Haradin. 'A dozen systems we have scoured for this foe, and we find each in uproar or destroyed, tainted by his presence. He leads us away from the strength of the Death Guard on purpose - I would swear to it.'

Corswain looked to his right, where Dalmeon stood to one side of the council, and the Librarian stepped closer to the table at a gesture from the seneschal. 'I cannot divine his intent, but we have had some success in finding his location.'

There are certain portents that we believe point to Typhon's next target. The warp is in turmoil, riven by the powers of darkness, and wherever we look we see destruction and despair. Despite this, our auguries point to the Argeus system, some two hundred light years from our present position.'

'Thank you, Dalmeon.' Corswain looked at the other commanders. *'We cannot know where Mortarion and the rest of the Death Guard linger, but we have unfinished business with Typhon.'*

'Surely you don't intend to move all of our forces on this evidence?' said Haradin. *'With no offence to our brother Librarian, such visions could amount to nothing. A foolish errand.'*

'You are right,' Corswain sighed, *lifting his sword from the table and hooking it back onto his belt. 'Warp-screaming has never been an exact art.'*

'The empyrean is a fickle power,' said Astrovel, *regarding Dalmeon with narrowed eyes. 'It was for good reason that the Emperor forbade the use of such... talents.'*

'That matter was settled by the Lion,' said Corswain. *'Needs dictate a new perspective.'*

'A perspective Brother-Redemptor Nemiel did not share,' said Astwvel. *'I would not countermand the will of the Lion, but we cannot know his full intent in such matters.'*

'I think the Lion made his position perfectly clear,' said Haradin. *'At least, there is no further argument from Nemiel, is there?'*

'This gossip is pointless,' snapped Corswain. *'Were the Lion here, such words would not flow so easily from your lips, Grand Master. I am his authority now - you will show me equal respect.'*

'So I ask again, what do you intend for the Legion?' asked Haradin. *'This is the third council you have brought me to, and yet our objective is no clearer and no closer than before the first.'*

'Watch your tongue, brother,' glowered Belath, *newly promoted to command of the Second Order. 'Your accusations are not needed here. The Lion named Corswain as his second. Surely you do not dispute the wishes of the primarch?'*

Haradin stared in silence at him. Corswain knew the veteran Grand Master's words had not been intended as an insult - simply a goad for him to make a decision. Corswain felt the gazes of the council upon him and wondered why the Lion had chosen him for this task; he wished that another had been placed in command. But that was not to be, and Corswain had sworn to his primarch that he would lead in his stead. A decision had to be made.

'You are right,' Corswain said again, directing his words to Haradin. 'To send the whole fleet on such scant information would be foolish. The Legion will break by Orders, and I will travel with Belath and the Second. We will move to Argeus to find the truth of the matter, with force sufficient for the

task if Typhon is to be found there. The rest of you will continue our search of the neighbouring systems, to locate the Space Wolves or bring the fight to the enemy as you find them.'

'That is your command?' asked Haradin, looking unconvinced.

'It is,' said Corswain. 'Spread word to the rest of the Legion. The fleet will disperse in twelve hours.'

The Grand Master shrugged. 'As you order, seneschal, so we will obey.'

'Seneschal, we have contact with President-General Remercus.'

Corswain opened his eyes and strode across the small antechamber to the communications monitor. He entered his cipher code and the screen flickered into life, revealing the face of the separatists' leader.

When Corswain had first met him, Remercus had seemed surprisingly young; a slight man no more than forty Terran years of age. His hair was cut short, but there were threads of grey in his carefully trimmed beard.

'As I predicted, you have brought your war to Terra Nullius, Corswain. I warned you that your presence here made mockery of our neutrality.'

'The Death Guard were already here,' Corswain replied, keeping his temper in check. 'It is convenient, is it not, that they eluded detection by your fleet.'

'I do not doubt that the eyes of the Legiones Astartes can see into every asteroid field and dust cloud, but those of the Free Army cannot. Perhaps they followed your fleet to the system. I find it a remarkable coincidence that both the Dark Angels and Death Guard happen upon our world in such a short space of time.'

'It is no coincidence, Remercus. We have hunted this fleet for a hundred days. We would have brought them to battle somewhere. Perhaps the greater coincidence is finding them here where so many ships and soldiers of the Imperium stand idle.'

'We have debated this before; do you wish to have the same arguments again, Corswain? Terra Nullius is not interested in this war waged amongst the Legions. If either fleet attempts to land troops on our planet, we will protect ourselves.'

The internal vox-link crackled into life before Corswain could reply,

temporarily muting the President-General. It was Belath.

'Seneschal, the Death Guard are five minutes from effective range. The fleet is performing defensive manoeuvres but it would be wise to launch a pre-emptive strike. They outgun us, Corswain. We cannot allow them to gain the upper hand in position as well.'

Corswain sighed. 'Remain within range of the orbital batteries. Launch anti-torpedo drones and attack craft. Manoeuvre for line of engagement.'

'We have little room to move, seneschal. To form a line of battle will take us into the Free Army vessels. We waste time while you treat with these rebels.'

'I am fully aware of the strategic situation, Chapter Master, and I will judge the best use of my time. Execute my commands.'

Corswain severed the link and turned his attention back to the President-General.

'Time is pressing, so I will be frank. There is no neutrality in this war. There are no bystanders. You say it is waged by the Legiones Astartes. Perhaps, but billions have died already that did not seek conflict.'

'Is that a threat, Seneschal Corswain of the Dark Angels?'

Remercus looked away for a moment and exchanged words with someone, too quietly for Corswain to hear over the transmission. When he turned back to the communicator, his eyes were wide with anger.

'You move your ships towards my fleet? A cowardly tactic, using poorly armed transports as shields against your enemies. You show your true colours too soon, Corswain. Just as during the Great Crusade, you will build your victory upon the bodies of much humbler men.'

'Countless dead legionaries would stand as argument to that accusation.' Corswain replied, riled by the implication of Remercus's words. 'How many of my brothers lie dead thanks to the frailties of the humble? How many of my brothers laid down their lives to stem a breach in the line opened by fleeing cowards, or died in the first assault so that Imperial Army regiments could advance uncontested? You know your words are as empty as the promises of Horus.'

'I have heard no such promises, if that is your meaning. What manner of man are you that you so desire war you cannot comprehend the motives of those of us who would desire a life without it?'

Another report from Belath punctured Corswain's indignation, giving him a moment to collect his thoughts. 'Seneschal, the Free Army ships are dispersing.'

'The Death Guard should be your only concern, Chapter Master. What are they

doing?'

'Forming up for an attack against our line. We need to turn and match them, or they will be able to concentrate their firepower on one part of the fleet.'

'What heading?'

'Seneschal?'

'On what heading are the Death Guard approaching, Chapter Master? Against which part of the fleet will they bring their attack to bear?' There was a pause while Belath retrieved this information.

'They are coming for us, seneschal. Wrath's Descent would appear to be at the centre of their attack axis. We should bring the vanguard about to support.'

'All ships are to remain on course as previously ordered. The Death Guard attack is a feint. They would not dare to come within range of the orbital batteries.'

'Is it wise to rely on the separatists, seneschal? Their ships make no move to counter the Death Guard approach.'

'I am not relying on the Free Army, Belath, I am depending upon the tactical instincts of our foe. Only a madman would dare engage an enemy under the cover of orbital defences. The Death Guard commander is trying to force us into a direct clash, which would bring us out of range of the batteries.'

'Is that a gamble we can risk? What assurance have you had that the rebels are not at this very moment in communication with the enemy commander?'

'Superior wisdom will prevail, Chapter Master. Do not forget the lessons of the spiral, though the teaching may have fallen out of favour of late. One must bring the enemy close, into one's own ground, to ensure victory.'

'I fail to see the relevance of the lesson in this situation, seneschal. Surely it would be wiser to meet force with equal force? If we cannot, then- Damn, incoming torpedoes!'

The vox went dead, and a moment later the warning sirens wailed, alerting the crew to brace for impact. Corswain overrode the alarm inside his chambers and restored the link to Remercus.

'I am not sure I have your full attention, Seneschal Corswain,' said the President-General.

'You do not, Remercus.' The situation lent haste to his words and Corswain's patience was worn thin by the man's insolence. 'My fleet is under attack from a traitor force. A force you are aiding by your continued inaction. Emperor damn you, will you sit there and watch us be destroyed?'

'I have no choice,' said Remercus, his regret seemingly genuine. He dolefully

shook his head. *'What am I to do? If I aid the Dark Angels now, we make ourselves enemies of the Death Guard. If we come to the assistance of Mortarion's Legion, then your battle-brothers will not be slow in seeking vengeance. The galaxy burns, seneschal, and we are all caught up in the flames. But if we are patient we can pass through this conflagration, if not unscathed, then at least alive.'*

Corswain sought a retort to Remercus's honest assessment of the situation, but one did not spring to mind. The galaxy had ever been divided into two camps for him: those to fight against, and those to fight alongside. He thought of the Night Lords - of how he had spent time studying them, and had considered them allies even though their methods had seemed alien and barbarous. Though he had been as shocked as any by Horus's treachery, he had not been surprised by Curze's faithlessness.

Ally had so easily become enemy.

Now he was confronted with the possibility that there was a third view, a grey area that contained neither friend nor foe. When the Lion had told him that matters were more complex than Corswain could imagine, perhaps it had been a situation such as this that the primarch had foreseen.

'We are living in complex times, Cor, and there is no easy division between those who fight on our side and those who fight against us. Antagonism towards Horus and his Legions no longer guarantees fealty to the Emperor. There are other powers exercising their right to dominion.'

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

'Tell me, whom do you serve?' the Lion asked in reply to the question.

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

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

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

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

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

'Who said I was talking about Horus... ?'

The primarch closed his eyes, and rubbed his brow for a few moments. Then he looked at Corswain, gauging his mettle. 'It is not for you to concern yourself, little brother. Prepare the task force, and let greater burdens sit upon my shoulders alone.'

THAT BURDEN NOW rested firmly upon Corswain's shoulders, too. It been hard to watch the Lion leave, but the seneschal had understood, as best he could, the reasons for the primarch's departure. Events unfolding on the Eastern Fringe could not be ignored, and maybe presented as much of a threat to the Emperor as Horus's own treachery. Or so the Lion had implied.

The first time he had assembled the command council, the seneschal had asked himself what the Lion would do in the same situation. It had been a fruitless exercise. Corswain believed that he knew his primarch better than most, but the Lion's thoughts and strategies were as far beyond the seneschal's understanding as a human's to an insect. The primarchs saw the universe in ways he never could, and to second-guess their motivations was to invite endless frustration.

'No swift reply, Seneschal Corswain? No trite argument to persuade me of the merit of sacrificing my soldiers?'

Remercus snapped Corswain back from his thoughts, to the pressing matter. He could feel and hear the battle-barge trembling as cannons and missile banks opened fire to intercept the incoming torpedoes. The deck shuddered constantly beneath him as the gunnery decks unleashed their broadsides. The reality of it added urgency to his message.

'No, I see that you have not broken your oaths to the Imperium easily, President-General. It must be hard, feeling the pressure of so many lives weighing on every decision you make. The people of Terra Nullius are fortunate to have such a strong leader.'

'Sarcasm, seneschal?'

'No, I speak plainly. It is hard, is it not? To sit by and watch those who brought the Imperial Truth to the stars savage themselves for the ambitions and egos of a few. I envy you the luxury of inaction.'

'I do not understand,' said Remercus. *'It was your Warmaster that unleashed this terror.'*

'The Warmaster, aye. Great Horus, raised up by the hand of the Emperor himself. How much safer you must feel to hide here from his war, trusting the

fate of the galaxy to the efforts of others.' Remercus's reply was lost in static as the void shields flared. The *Wrath's Descent* shook under a series of impacts, forcing Corswain to steady himself with a hand upon the communications monitor. Klaxons blared again, signalling emergency crews to their stations.

'Chapter Master Belath, make your report.'

'Light damage only, seneschal. The Crusader has not fared so well - the strike cruiser took the full brunt of the salvo. Her shields are down, and she's suffered several hull breaches.'

'Have the Crusader lay into closer orbit, and reform the line.'

'Let us turn and respond with our own torpedoes! We will redirect their attack.'

'I have no intention of redirecting the attack, Chapter Master. If we turn, we will move out from the cover of the batteries, as I told you.'

'The protection of silent batteries is worthless!'

'Have faith, Belath.'

'Faith? In what?'

'If not in my skills of persuasion, which I understand might be lacking, have faith in common humanity.'

'It is common humanity that is sitting by while we come under attack. Even before they turned from the Emperor, these Free Army cowards were more burden than boon.'

Corswain shook his head. 'If you truly believe that, Chapter Master, then they would be right to leave us to settle our own conflict.'

'Apologies, I spoke out of turn.' Belath did not speak for several seconds though the link remained open. Then the Chapter Master growled with consternation. *'Their flagship is adjusting course to come alongside, seneschal. Signal identifiers confirm - it's the damnable Terminus Est.'*

This pronouncement, though expected, gave Corswain pause to doubt his choice of strategy. Not only was Typhon fully capable of daring the orbital defences if he sensed weakness, his battle-barge was one of the largest ever built, outgunning the *Wrath's Descent* by many decks.

'For good or ill, I have chosen our course and now we must see it through to the end. There is nothing to be gained by questioning ourselves. Recall attack craft to the landing bays, and have all repair crews standing by. I expect we will be suffering the full might of the enemy broadside shortly, as a precursor to boarding.'

'You sound very calm at the prospect, seneschal.'

It was true. Corswain felt no apprehension or excitement. His mind had been whirling, but now, faced with such grim inevitability, his thoughts had assumed a laser-like focus. He wondered if this was how the Lion's brain worked all of the time.

'I will not allow this ship to be boarded, Belath. If the enemy attempt to close, we will manoeuvre to counter-board. You and I will lead the attack.'

'As you command, seneschal,' replied Belath with, perhaps for the first time since the Death Guard had been sighted, something approaching conviction. *'I will spearhead the fore party, unless you wish that honour.'*

'Aft assault will suit me fine, Chapter Master.'

BEFORE HE LEFT his chamber, Corswain picked up the remote terminal for the communicator and plugged it in to his power armour's systems. He was four levels down, the corridors ringing with the thud of armoured boots as the Dark Angels mustered for the boarding action, when the link chimed to signal connection had been re-established with Argeus. Corswain spoke as he marched towards the portside sternwards mustering hall.

'I am surprised you have anything further to say, President-General. You have made your position and reasoning quite clear, and I'll warrant that no debate will change it.'

Corswain nodded in response to the salutes of his honour guard as they greeted him in the arming chamber. Several hundred legionaries were equipping themselves with specialised boarding gear: power halberds and combat shields for close-quarters fighting; breaching rounds and melta-charges for bulkhead destruction; gravity nets and chain-rasps for void actions.

'What did you mean, that others would decide the fate of the galaxy?' Remercus sounded more hesitant than before. *'Do you not believe that Horus's rebellion will be crushed?'*

'I am not an optimist, President-General. The Arch-traitor has maintained the upper hand since the outset. I draw comfort from the fact that I will not likely live to see his victory, though I hope that my death may prevent it.'

'I would not expect such defeatism from a commander of the Legiones Astartes.' The President-General's voice seemed even more uncertain. *'Why speak of death?'*

Corswain laughed, with genuine humour.

'I am preparing to board a vessel that doubtless is manned by a superior force, in the hope that I will at least slay its master, the traitor Typhon. Beyond that, I

do not expect a single Dark Angels legionary to survive the coming encounter. It is my hope that the Death Guard, weakened by our attack, will be unable to press home the assault upon your world and the ships that orbit it.'

'You cannot know that that is their intent.'

Corswain drew his sword and twisted the blade left and right to inspect the keen edge for any burrs or nicks. There were none. He knew as much from painstaking maintenance, but the act was reassuring nonetheless.

'If you believe the Death Guard would respect your claims of neutrality, you are a bigger fool even than me. We conquered the galaxy for the Emperor and the Imperial Truth, President-General. Have no illusions - Horus plans to conquer it again in his own name. I hold no regrets over my part in the war. I hope you will have none either.' A dull rumble sounded along the battle-barge as it began a rolling broadside, prow to stem, growing louder and louder. It reverberated across the muster hall as the batteries in the deck below opened fire, masking Remercus's reply.

Moments later, the return bombardment from the *Terminus Est* smashed into the *Wrath's Descent*. Despite the aegis of the void shields, the battle-barge was rocked by the impact of shells, missiles and plasma. The sheer violence of it almost threw Corswain from his feet.

'Regretfully, I must end my transmission, President-General. Be sure not to let the Death Guard land on your world - I have seen firsthand the misery that will surely follow.'

'Wait!' snapped Remercus. *'Wait a moment. Let me think.'*

'There is no more time to think, only time to act. I have already done so. When we first detected the Death Guard we had the opportunity to disengage from orbit, but that would have left your fleet vulnerable. I have moved your transports out of the path of the enemy and lured that foe into range of your orbital cannons. What you choose to do next is entirely on your own conscience.'

'This is a trick of some kind. You hope to force my hand with this blackmail?'

'No trick, no blackmail or coercion. I go now to battle in the name of the Emperor, the Lion and the First Legion. I count myself fortunate to do so, for if the Imperium prevails then our memory, and sacrifice will be honoured.'

The huge gateways connecting the muster chamber to the launch bays opened, grinding apart on heavy rollers to reveal Thunderhawks and Stormbirds ready for launch. Corswain lifted his fist in signal to the Space Marines around him, but his words were lost as another salvo of fire crashed into the battle-barge. Bulkheads and braces overhead screeched and groaned from the punishment, but

held firm.

Corswain steadied himself. 'In two minutes my attack craft will be en route to the enemy, and your fire will hit us as likely as them.'

'Then what would you have me do.'

'President-General - fire your damn guns now!'

Corswain pulled the remote transmitter from its socket and tossed it to the deck. 'Belath, what is your status?' he asked over the internal vox.

'Preparing to embark in thirty seconds. Pilots have been briefed with attack patterns. The fleet is reforming for the counter-attack.'

'See you aboard the *Terminus Est*, brother. Death to the enemies of the Emperor.'

'Aye. Death to them!'

Corswain was the last up the ramp of the Stormbird, his honour guard already secure in their harnesses. He made his way past them and took a seat in the specially fitted command cupola beside the cockpit.

'All attack craft, prepare for launch on my command.'

The throb of the gunship's engines increased in pitch as the pilot disengaged the docking anchors. Corswain was about to issue the launch signal when his vox-link chimed with an urgent incoming message. It was Urizel.

'Seneschal, the defence platforms are opening fire!' The sensorium captain laughed. 'They're targeting the Death Guard ships!'

Corswain absorbed this news without reaction, not sure that it came in time. He sat still for a moment, eyes closed. 'And the enemy? What are they doing?'

'Moving away, seneschal. The Death Guard are breaking off their attack.'

Letting out a long breath, Corswain opened his eyes. He wanted to press the advantage while it was with him, but he knew that away from the orbital defences the Death Guard were more than the match of his ships. The Free Army vessels were too far away to intervene in any meaningful way.

'Signal the fleet. Withhold pursuit.' It pained him to say the words but he could not afford to sacrifice more of his brothers. Extended hostilities with the Night Lords had taken their toll, and with twenty thousand legionaries departed along with the Lion, the Dark Angels were a much lesser force than they had been three years earlier. 'Maintain stations. Stand down the launch.'

BELATH'S WHOLE Demeanour was contrite as he entered the chamber at Corswain's call. The Chapter Master kept his gaze lowered, hands clasped at his waist.

'I offer my sincerest apologies for my dissent, seneschal. It was disrespectful and unworthy.'

'It was,' agreed Corswain, folding his arms. His chair creaked as he leaned back. 'I am not the Lion. I cannot be the leader he is. Yet I do demand that my command is respected. I am the Primarch's Seneschal - his will and his voice. Do I make myself clear?'

'Absolutely, seneschal,' Belath bowed and then finally met Corswain's gaze. The Chapter Master smiled. 'You proved yourself worthy of the Lion's choice with the way you dealt with this encounter, I must confess, I thought for a time that your strategy of persuasion had failed.'

'I was convinced it had, too,' said Corswain.

Belath's expression was a picture of shock. 'You mean that you truly intended to board the *Terminus Est*? It was not just a ploy to force the dissidents into allying with us?'

'I sought to deceive nobody. My intent was as I commanded it.'

'I know that the primarch ordered that we engage the enemy at every turn, but were you really prepared to sacrifice us all for those damned separatists?' Belath became more incredulous. 'I admire your noble purpose, brother, but that stretches honour to breaking.'

'The Free Army can rot here alone, for all I care,' said Corswain. 'They are as bad as the traitors, and we cannot waste our resources on them. I didn't stay for the people of Argeus - I stayed for their transports and gunboats.'

The Chapter Master's expression conveyed his confusion better than any question.

'We need to regain our strength, Belath. We need more warrior.'

'Not the Free Army? Three hundred thousand soldiers is no small force.'

'Nothing compared to another twenty thousand legionaries.' Corswain enjoyed Belath's confused expression. 'You will commandeer the transports, under my authority, while I return to the Legion to continue the hunt for the Wolf.'

'And fill them how?' Belath unclasped his hands and spread them, showing empty palms. 'Where do you expect to find so many Space Marines armed and ready for war?'

Corswain smiled.

'Where they have been waiting for us for many years, Belath. On Caliban.'

THE DEVINE ADORATRICE

Graham McNeil

SLENDER TENDRILS OF flagrant smoke drifted from fang-mouthed oil burners, filling the bed-chamber with a delicious mix of cinnamon and honeysuckle. A fine sheen of oiled sweat and perfumed breath completed the indulgent atmosphere. Early morning sunlight shone in golden streaks through the slatted timber louvres over the windows, spilling languidly over the breathless couple that lay in the sumptuous bed, their eyes unfocused, their limbs entwined and their minds blissfully self-absorbed.

Three bottles of fine Caeban wine sat on a handmade table beside the bed, and red stains all across the sheets were testament to the wildness of its consumption. Raeven slipped his arm from Lyx's shoulders and traced a finger over the coiled tattoo behind her ear that was normally hidden by her auburn hair.

'Do you know how much trouble you'd be in if anyone saw that?' he asked.

'You've seen it' she replied.

'Yes, but I'm not going to report you for a cult tattoo.'

'Then why should I worry?' she said with a grin. 'You're the only one who gets to see it.'

'Not even Albard?'

'Especially not Albard,' she laughed, but he saw through her levity.

'You're not really mixed up with the Serpent cult are you?' Lyx shook her head and kissed him. 'Can you really imagine me dancing naked in the forest?'

'I am now. Is that what they do?'

'That's what they say,' said Lyx. 'That, and sacrifice virgins and mate with nagas.'

Raeven made a disgusted face. Like most people, he'd heard the rumours about the vile practices of the Serpent cult - their misguided belief in old gods and their abhorrence of all forms of authority. And like most people, he'd

dismissed them as just that, rumours.

'Anything left to drink?' asked Lyx.

He reached over her to examine the bottles. All were empty, and he slumped back onto the bed with a sigh.

'No, it's all gone.'

'We drank it all?' asked Lyx, turning onto her side. She gave him a full-lipped smile as the movement pulled the sheets down her body. Raeven took a moment to savour the nut-brown colour of her flesh and the way it rose in goosebumps in the chill air of the high bedchamber.

'I'm afraid so,' he said.

'That explains why my head feels like one of your father's pet nagas is squeezing it.'

Raeven rubbed his eyes and ran his tongue around the inside of his mouth. Like Lyx, his skin was the colour of young oak, ridged by cut lines of defined musculature. He was slender where his brother was bulky, and toned where Albard could only generously be described as 'stocky'.

With nothing nearby to drink, Raeven reached up and pulled down a coiled pipe of leathery azhdarchid skin and sucked upon the copper end piece, until the smouldering embers in the bowl on the shelf above the headboard took light. He puffed a stream of aromatic smoke into the air, making a pillow of his arm.

'I doubt if old Oruboros or Shesha could even break an egg open, these days,' he said at last. 'It's a stupid comparison to make.'

'You know what I mean,' she pouted.

'I do, but you're prettier when you're sad.'

'That must be why you're so cruel to me.'

'One of the many reasons,' agreed Raeven, letting the soothing effects of the smoke ease away the disquiet he always felt when he woke in the same bed as Lyx. As enticing as her bodily charms and paramour's skills were, he couldn't quite rid himself of the feeling that there was something unnatural about their...

Their what? Lovemaking? Hardly, since there was little love lost between them.

Rutting had something of a ring to it, in that it perfectly encapsulated the frenetic violence of their coupling, but didn't quite express the frisson he took from its taboo nature. Raeven glanced over at the ring on Lyx's finger and almost laughed as his genhanced eyes read the betrothal inscription laser-etched upon its platinum surface.

'What's funny?' asked Lyx.

'Nothing,' he said. 'I just caught a glimpse of the vow Albard had inscribed on your ring.'

She pulled her hand below the sheets, and her face flushed. She shrugged.

'It's a nice ring, and you insist I keep it on.'

'Yes,' said Raeven, letting the smoking pipe coil back up to the bowl. 'I like to know what I'm defiling.'

She smiled and reached over to pull him towards her. Her fingers brushed over the steel-rimmed sockets bored through the meat of his body at his neck and spine. He saw her flinch at the cold, metallic presence in his skin, and took a moment to savour the look of distaste that flashed in her eyes.

'You don't like them?' he asked.

'No, they're cold.'

'You should be used to that by now,' said Raeven, pushing her down onto the bed. He leaned down to kiss her, but she turned her head to the side.

'Did it hurt?' she asked. 'When the Sacristans cut you open, I mean?'

Still supporting himself on his elbows, Raeven nodded. 'Yes. The Sacristans had us immobilised with muscle inhibitors, but father decided we would undergo the surgery without the benefit of painblockers, just like they did in his day. We were paralysed, but awake the whole time.'

She flinched at the thought of being cut open by the iron-faced priests of Mars and their lickspittle Sacristans. Raeven felt his jaw clench at the memory of the procedure, strapped in a bronze gurney in the depths of the Sanctuary as he and Albard faced each other across the expanse of bottle-green ceramic tiles and sterile steel.

'I suspect father expected me to scream, but I was damned if I'd give him the satisfaction.'

'What do they feel like now?' she said, probing the edges of the sockets in his flesh and sliding her fingers inside, despite her avowed distaste.

So like her to express squeamishness one moment, naked interest the next. She'd been like that the first time he'd taken her to his bed, pleading with him that what they were doing was wrong, but coming back night after night for more of the same.

'They feel like part of me,' he said with a shrug. 'Like they've always been a part of me.'

'Albard's are infected,' said Lyx, rubbing the skin around the neural connector, and Raeven saw her breathing was becoming heavier. 'He has me rub counterseptic poultices on them several times a day.'

'Does he like that?'

She shook her head. 'No, he hates it.'

'Good,' said Raeven, kissing her and feeling her body respond to his touch.

LATER, WITH LYX asleep, Raeven slid from his bed and padded softly across the floor of his chambers. This high in the valley, the air was cold, but thick mallahgra pelts hunted by his grandfather in the jungles of Kush kept his feet pleasantly warm. Sweat cooled rapidly on his skin, and he pulled a sea-green robe edged in xenos fur around his naked body. Beyond the louvres, he could hear the sound of the city preparing for the day's celebrations - the excited hubbub of tens of thousands of voices.

Though Raeven was hundreds of metres above the city in one of the three Devine Towers, he fancied he could still hear the cosmopolitan mix of accents as the people gathered there came from all across the world to honour the Becoming of Lord Devine's sons. Merchants from Loquash would be haggling with the painted men of Aenatep. Artisans of the Clockwork City would unveil their ticking, mechanical marvels - hoping to avoid the attentions of the Sacristan Guard - while the various Houses would no doubt be parading the best and bravest of their knights, boasting of their great hunts and the productivity of their satrapies. And the people of Lupercalia would bear this intrusion of so many thousands to their city with the stoic surety that not one of the newcomers could hold a candle to House Devine.

Raeven pulled back the heavy drapes and pushed out through the louvred shutters to the stone-walled balcony beyond, as though the city were his and his alone.

The stepped expanse stretched out before him, filling the width of the valley from one side to the other and cascading down its length to the fertile plains below. Colourful structures of every conceivable shape, size, height and orientation jostled for space amid streets that bore the qualities of the Emperor's Legions that had brought this world back into the embrace of the Imperium.

Where the Lion had raised the Dawn Citadel in the tapering reaches of the upper valley, the streets around it were rigidly arranged in an unbending grid pattern. And where local geography interfered with that plan, it had been engineered away by the Mechanicum. Lower down, the streets were woven together like intricate knotwork, the free-flowing yet ordered nature of this street-plan said to be a representation of Lord Horus's war-making. The Khan had chosen not to make his mark in stone, and had instead taken himself into the

wild places and high mountains. No one knew exactly what legacy the primarch of the White Scars had left, though fireside tales whispered that he had spoken of secret things to the tribes and noble Houses that existed at the edges of the world.

The one portion of unity amid the chaotic nature of the city's plan was the Via Argentum, a laser-straight processional that climbed the length of the valley from its wide-mouthed opening to the rocky fortress built into the ochre stone of the mountain. Raeven held a hand over his eyes and looked up at the artfully shaped peak, less a geological feature than a man-made statement carved into the face of the world.

Arms slipped around his waist, and Raeven smelled the jasmine oil Lyx liked rubbed onto her skin. He could feel that she was naked, and he wondered if he had time to take her back to bed before his mother came to fetch him.

'Are you nervous?' she asked.

He looked at the marbled dome of the citadel, the early morning sun catching the copper banding between the coffered azure panels. He shook his head, angry that she might think him afraid of what this day promised.

'No,' he said, pushing her away. 'I have been prepared for the Ritual of Becoming since my tenth summer. I know who I am, and I'm ready for whatever happens. If a dullard like father can go through it, then I don't think I'll have any trouble.'

'I heard that the firstborn of House Tazkhar died and that his three brothers went mad after they went through it.'

'House Tazkhar?' sneered Raeven. 'What do you expect from nomadic dung-burners who can't even build a proper city? Some shit-smeared shaman masquerading as a Sacristan probably poured holy naga venom into their neural connectors.'

'You shouldn't get angry,' said Lyx. 'You need to be calm. The Throne Mechanicum imprint is based on your neural state at the moment of connection.'

Raeven rounded on her and laughed. It was a bitter bark of derision.

'And you're a Mechanicum priest now, are you? What other pearls of wisdom do you have for me, or does your insight only stretch to the blindingly obvious?'

Lyx pursed her lips. 'You are in a foul mood this morning.'

'I am what you make me,' he returned. 'I always have been.'

Lyx's hand flashed out to slap him, but gene-manipulation in the male bloodline of House Devine over the centuries ensured that Raeven's reaction speed was far faster than hers. He caught her hand and twisted the arm savagely

around her back. He pushed her back into the room and threw her face-down upon the bed. She turned to face him as he opened his robe, her expression the same mixture of revulsion and devotion she'd worn since childhood.

Before he could do more, the door to his chamber opened and a statuesque woman in a flowing dress of iridescent scales swept imperiously within. She wore a headdress of nagahide, and a number of venom-blinded servants followed in her wake, each bearing a selection of outfits for him to choose from.

'Mother!' said Raeven, planting his hands on his hips and sighing in exasperation. 'Don't you knock anymore?'

Cebella Devine shook her head and wagged an admonishing finger. 'What mother needs to knock at her son's door on the day of his Becoming?'

'Clearly not you,' said Raeven.

'Hush now,' said Cebella, running an elongated fingernail across the sculpted lines of his chest. 'You don't want to be angry with me. Not today, of all days.'

'Spare me, mother,' snapped Raeven. 'Lyx has already given me the benefit of her extensive knowledge on the matter.'

Cebella's expression hardened and she turned to face the young girl on the bed, who stared back at her with withering contempt.

'Get dressed, Lyx,' said Cebella. 'It is inappropriate for you to be here today.'

'Just today?' Lyx laughed.

'If you plan to be Raeven's Adoratrice consort, you need to start acting like one.'

'Like you are to Cyprian?' hissed Lyx, her fingers curled into fists. 'I hardly think so.'

'Get out,' said Cebella, her face a granite mask. 'Albard will be here soon. Take the servants' tunnels and don't let me see you until after matters are concluded.'

'With pleasure,' said Lyx, visibly controlling her fury and gathering up her clothes. She slipped them on with practiced speed and, fully attired, sashayed to Raeven's side to plant a kiss on his cheek. 'Until later.'

Cebella snapped her fingers and said, 'Someone open the drapes. This room smells like a brothel.'

'Well, you're the expert there,' Lyx muttered, throwing a final barb and darting past Cebella to vanish through the door.

'Right,' said Cebella, turning her critical gaze upon her son. 'Let's see if we can make you vaguely presentable.'

SEVERAL HOURS LATER, clothed in expensive silks of green and black, layered sashes of crimson and blue, and tight-fitting cream trousers tucked into knee-high riding boots with tall heels, Raeven followed his mother down the full height of the tower. She was reciting a list of the various dignitaries who were here to mark his and Albard's Becoming. He tuned her out, thinking back to the night he'd spent with Lyx. As always, the memory stimulated a curious mix of shame and pleasurable guilt.

When they reached the grand hall at the base of the tower, his mother turned her matriarchal countenance upon him and said, 'Have you been listening to a word I've said?'

'Not really,' he confessed, hearing the swelling sounds of cheering and celebration from the streets beyond the tower.

Before Cebella could berate him for his ignorant behaviour, a host of armed warriors swept into the hall, heavy brutish men, armed with a variety of ferocious-looking armaments designed to kill in a myriad of painful ways. Leading the warriors was a man clad in a heavy suit of gleaming silver fusion armour - the kind a man five centuries ago might have worn on the back of a horse, had he found one strong enough to bear him.

He was powerful and broadly built, jowly where his youthful physique was finally yielding to his father's genetics. The right side of his face was knotted with burn scars that had healed poorly over the years and his right eye had been replaced with an augmetic implant after a hunt for a rogue mallahgra had ended badly and its furious charge broke open his skull.

Albard Devine, firstborn scion of House Devine, shook his head at Raeven's attire. 'You are not war-clad.'

'Keenly observant as always, brother,' agreed Raeven with a curt bow.

'Why are you dressed like that?' demanded Albard.

His brother formed his words with great deliberation, as the hideous scarring made him sound like a simpleton if he spoke too quickly. Every time Raeven saw him, it reminded him how glad he was to be younger than Albard and thus spared the ritualistic burning of the firstborn male heir's face upon his coming of age.

'I am dressed like this,' said Raeven, 'because it's ridiculous that we need to wear that outdated armour all the way up to the citadel just to take it off again. Those reactors are so old, they're probably leaking radiation into your bones. Mark my words, you'll regret wearing that clanking monstrosity when you're trying to sire an heir.'

'The men of Devine have worn the argent plate since we first rose to rule this world,' said his brother, stepping in close and glaring at him.

'You will not dishonour our father by disrespecting their memory. You will wear the silver.'

Raeven shook his head. 'No, I think I'm fine the way I am.'

Albard's nose wrinkled in disgust as the scent of the flagrant oils worked through Raeven's hair finally reached him. Raeven saw a glint of recognition, and suppressed the urge to gloat at the thought of his brother recognising his wife's oils.

'You smell like you've been out whoring all night,' said Albard, circling around him.

'Well, now that you mention it, there was a lucky young lady...' said Raeven.

His brother's gauntleted hand snapped out to strike him. Raeven swayed aside.

'Come now, brother,' he said. 'You're nowhere near fast enough to hit me anymore.'

Albard looked past him to Cebella, and Raeven hid a smile as he saw the depths of hatred and decades of mutual loathing that passed between them.

'This is your doing,' said Albard. 'Your viper's tongue has made your son a cocksure lout.'

'Albard, my son-' began Cebella.

Raeven's brother cut her off with a bark of anger. 'You are not my mother, witch. My mother is dead and you are just the whore that shares my father's bed and gives me unwanted siblings.'

The warriors behind Albard stiffened in expectation of Raeven's response. They knew him well enough to understand that he was not a man to be underestimated. Raeven's carefully cultivated air of urbane condescension and louche behaviour concealed a warrior of considerable skill, and many a foolish noble had only discovered that on the end of a charnobaal duelling sabre.

'Careful, Albard,' said Raeven. 'A man could take offence at such an insult to his mother.'

His brother at least appreciated that he'd crossed a line, but it wasn't in Albard to apologise; another trait he shared with their father.

'Shall we get this over with, then?' said Raeven, marching past Albard and his entourage of heavily armed warriors. 'Father will be waiting.'

Cheering crowds lined the Via Argentum as the carriage drew them higher up the valley. Thousands of men and women thronged the streets around the processional route, and thousands more packed the rooftops and windows

overlooking it. Raeven waved to his people, blowing kisses to the girls and punching the air with his fist for the men. Both gestures were pure pantomime, but no one seemed to care.

'Do you have to do that?' said Albard. 'This is supposed to be a momentous occasion.'

'Says who?' replied Raeven. 'Father? All the more reason for it.'

Albard didn't reply, and remained seated, staring stoically from the open-topped skimmer carriage as it plied its stately path uphill. An entire regiment of huscarl cavalry rode ahead of their floating transport, two thousand men in silver uniforms and purple-plumed helms. Each man carried a tall, glitter-tipped lance in one hand, with a fusil-carbine sheathed at their back. Another five regiments of masked infantry followed behind them, marching in perfect lockstep with glittering silver-steel banners overhead and freshly issued las-rifles carried upon every shoulder.

This was but a fraction of the armed forces commanded by House Devine.

Far below, in armoured stockades, hundreds of thousands of mechanised infantry, divisions of superheavy tanks, batteries of artillery and entire cohorts of battle robots stood ready to obey the commands of this world's Imperial Commander. That someone had seen fit to make Raeven's father that man was just another example of the absurdity inherent in every facet of this new Imperium.

Streamers and banners in black and gold, ivory and sea-green hung from every window, together with the entwined eagle-and-naga banner that had been the adopted heraldry of House Devine ever since the coming of the Emperor's Legions ninety-seven years ago. After a bloodless compliance - thanks in no small amount to the meticulous records kept by each Knightly House - the planet's existing calendars had been scrapped in favour of the new Imperial dating system.

By its reckoning, the current year was '966.M30', and the 'One hundred and Sixty-eighth Year of the Emperor's Great Crusade'. It was a monstrously arrogant means of control, thought Raeven, but one which seemed to suit the emergent galactic empire perfectly.

Numerous heraldic devices proclaimed the presence of other noble Houses, most of which Raeven recognised thanks to years of enforced study as a child, but some he did not. Most likely quaintly provincial Houses barely worthy of the name, who could perhaps boast a single warrior of note.

Raeven sat back on the hard wooden seat of the carriage, basking in the

adulation of the crowds. He knew most of it was for Albard, but didn't care. People liked their warrior kings to look like warriors, and his brother fitted that description better than he.

Yoked to the carriage and grunting with the effort of pulling it was a powerful creature with the wide, beast-of-burden shoulders of a grox and a long neck that reached at least four metres from its body. Atop that muscular neck was a ferocious, avian head with a razored beak and hostile eyes. The azhdarchid was a flightless bird-creature that roamed the grassy plains in small family groupings; comical to look at, but a deadly predator capable of taking down even a well-armed hunter.

Cranial implants drilled into its skull rendered the beast subservient, though Raeven had often wondered what might happen were they to be removed. Could a tamed beast ever reclaim its bestial nature?

Nor was the azhdarchid the only beast to form part of their procession.

Following with lumbering, heavy footfalls was the simian bulk of a mallahgra, one of the few great beasts remaining beyond the high forested mountains of the Untar Mesas highlands. Standing nearly seven metres tall when fully upright, and covered in thick fur the colour of bleached granite, the mallahgra was an incredibly powerful animal. Its short hind legs and long, pile-driving upper limbs were corded with muscle and easily capable of tearing their way through the thickest armour. Its bullet-shaped head was a nightmarish blend of armoured beetle and fang-filled shark maw that could swallow a man whole with one bite. It had six eyes, one pair angled forward like a predator's, one either side of its skull like a prey animal, and another pair set in a ridged band of flesh at the base of its neck.

Raeven's brother knew from bitter experience that this curious evolutionary arrangement made them devils to hunt. Like the azhdarchid, the mallahgra's animal brain was pierced by implants to suppress its natural instincts, and it too had been tasked with a duty in this parade.

The mallahgra wore a tight-fitting set of stocks fashioned from brass and bone. Its clawed hands were locked within, and hung from the wide spar were half a dozen corpses that swayed with the rolling gait of the immense beast. The wind changed and the stench of dead flesh wafted over the carriage. Albard wrinkled his nose and shook his head.

'Throne, they stink,' he said.

Raeven twisted around to observe the corpses. All were naked, and wore boards nailed to their ribs that proclaimed their crime. Only one transgression

merited such punishment: heresy.

'A price to be paid, I fear,' he muttered.

Albard frowned. 'What do you mean?'

'The followers of the Serpent Gods are trotted out any time an act of ceremonial obeisance is to be undertaken,' said Raeven. 'After all, we must make a show of willingness to embrace the new order of the galaxy and demonstrate that we're doing our bit to purge the planet of the old ways. The Imperial Truth demands it.' He grinned. 'A century ago, it could have been you and I hanging from the mallahgra.'

'House Devine gave up belief in the Serpent Gods over a hundred years ago,' said Albard, as the huscarl cavalry began peeling off in pre-determined patterns.

'Lucky for us, eh?' said Raeven. 'What was it mother said? Ah, yes - *treason is merely a matter of dates.*'

Albard's head snapped around at the mention of his stepmother, but Raeven ignored his brother's hostility.

The Citadel reared up before them, a solid mass of stone carved from the mountain by Mechanicum geo-formers. Raeven hadn't even been born then, but he'd seen the picts and read the accounts of its creation - garish hyperbole about continents cracking, worlds being reshaped by the will of the primarchs... *blah, blah, blah...*

As a piece of architecture it was certainly a striking edifice, a monument to the fortress-builder's art, where no expense had been spared and no opportunity to add yet another defensive bulwark had been missed. Thick walls of ochre stone, high towers, a singular portal of silvered adamantium and cunningly-wrought approaches ensured that only a madman would dare assault its walls.

Standing before the Argent Gate was Cyprian Devine, known as 'the Hellblade' to his enemies and as the Imperial Commander to his subjects.

Raeven knew him as *father*.

Lord Devine stood ten metres tall in his Knight Seneschal armour, a towering construction of technologies that predated the Imperium by thousands of years. Hunched over as though about to charge, their father's mount was all cruel curves and brutal lines. Its legs were piston-lined and looped with vapour-wreathed cabling, its black and green carapace segmented and overlapping like that of a giant swamp chelonian.

The entwined naga and eagle was represented on fluttering banners hung from the gimbal mount of their father's signature chainsabre and the twin barrels of his turbo lasers. As their carriage approached, the helmed head canopy split apart

along a horizontal seam and lifted open, drizzling coolant fluid and vapour like gouts of hot machine-breath.

Strapped into the pilot's seat and hardwired into the mechanisms of his armour, the legendarily powerful figure of Cyprian Devine looked down on his sons as the cheering of the crowds rose to new heights, echoing down the valley sides like thunder. The two great beasts flinched at the noise, the mallahgra shaking the bodies hanging from its stocks and the azhdarchid letting loose an angry squawk. Gunfire salutes added to the cacophony and the music of a dozen colours bands swelled in anticipation as Albard and Raeven stepped down from the carriage.

Lord Devine's sons were to undergo the Ritual of Becoming, in order to take up their birthright as Knights of Molech.

Such a moment in history was worthy of celebration.

THE CORRIDORS OF the Sanctuary were polished steel, laid down over a thousand years ago by the first settlers to come to this world, so legend told. Lyx could well believe it. The deck plates, the iron-braced girders and hissing steam pipes that ran the length and breadth of the structure, were redolent with age. So distant was their construction that they didn't even have the appearance of having been built by human hands.

If she concentrated, she could feel the ever-present hum of the colossal generators buried in the rock of the mountain, the glacial heartbeats of the dormant engines in the vault below, and the distant burr of a million voices that echoed in every chamber when the nights grew long and the shadows crept out from hiding. Lyx knew that she wasn't the only one to hear them, but she suspected that she was the only one who knew what they really were.

She passed a few servants, huscarls and men at arms, but none dared acknowledge her.

Lyx had a temper, they said. She was unpredictable, they said.

Volatile was another word that they might use.

Lyx didn't think she'd ever killed anyone, though she knew of at least one serving girl who would never walk again and another that she'd blinded with scalding tisane that hadn't been sweetened to her exacting specifications. One footman had lost his hands after he had brushed past her in the stables and allowed his fingers to touch the bare skin of her arm. Raeven had crippled him in a monstrously one-sided duel, taking his fingers one at a time as the boy pleaded for his life with his arms upraised in supplication.

The memory made Lyx smile, and she was beautiful again.

All trace of her late night assignation and hasty exit from Raeven's chambers had been thoroughly expunged by her handmaidens, who knew better than anyone how to conceal the evidence of her behaviour. Dressed in an appropriately archaic dress of copper panels, woven lacework and a plunging mallahgra-bone bodice, she swept through the darkened passageways like a ghost. She wore her hair in a glittering auburn cascade, threaded with silver wire and mother-of-pearl, carefully arranged to hide the serpent tattoo behind her ear.

Lyx appeared every inch the Adoratrice consort she ached to be.

Not to the brutish Albard, but to Raeven.

The fates had chosen a different path for her: a repugnant, hateful path, but the voices still promised her that her fate could yet be changed. And if some societal norms and mores of convention had to be flouted in order to achieve that, then so much the better.

She climbed the last iron-grille stairs to the upper levels of the Sanctuary, knowing that Albard and Raeven would soon be making their way to the great citadel.

All the more reason to hurry.

At the top of the stairs, another metallic corridor curved around the circumference of the building, but it was to the first door that Lyx made her way. She knocked tentatively and swept inside the moment it was opened.

The room belied the Sanctuary's outward appearance of age, filled as it was with gleaming banks of complex machinery, groaning pipework, crackling glass orbs and throbbing generators. The man she had come to see closed the door, turning his fretful gaze upon her with longing and zealous heat.

'Were you followed?' he asked, breathless with anticipation.

'Of course not,' she snapped. 'No one but you would willingly follow me.'

The man's mouth opened and closed like that of a landed fish, and it repulsed her that she had given him leave to touch her. Sacristan Nadezhda was a slender man of middling years, whose face was half human, half machine - one of the artificer class who maintained the towering Knights at the heart of the Sanctuary. The human part was partially obscured by the tattoo of a serpentine naga that coiled around his eye socket.

Not quite Mechanicum, but not wholly human either.

But just human enough.

'No, I suppose not,' he said, his relief evident in the relaxing of his permanent frown. 'But they don't know you like I know you. They don't see the softness you

try so hard to hide behind that patrician demeanour.'

She wanted to laugh, but matters were afoot that kept a rein on her desire to mock him.

'No one else gets to see it,' she said, running a teasing finger over the swell of her plunging neckline. 'Just you.'

Nadezhda ran his paper-dry tongue over his lips, staring with undisguised hunger at her décolletage. 'Do we have time for one last... you know, before Lord Devine's sons arrive?'

Lyx felt a pressure build behind her eyes that made her want to pluck the concealed bone-blade from her bodice and plunge it into Nadezhda's throat, over and over again. She quelled it and let out a soft sigh. Nadezhda took that as affirmation and fumbled with the belt of his crimson robes.

'Yes, my love,' said Lyx, biting her bottom lip to keep the revulsion from showing. 'But then I need you to do something for me. Something to prove just how much you love me.'

'Anything,' said Nadezhda.

'I'm so glad you said that,' she purred.

ALBARD AND RAEVEN marched side by side towards their father and, despite himself, Raeven had to admit that he felt somewhat underdressed. He hadn't been about to wear the old suit of fusion armour set aside for him since his tenth year, but he wished he'd at least strapped on a sword belt or a holster. Even from here, he could see his father's anger at his rich clothing.

Assuming he survived the Ritual of Becoming, he would be made to answer for it.

From a distance, Knight armour was impressive. Up close, it was terrifying.

Raeven had never seen the god-engines of the Mechanicum, but couldn't imagine that they would be any more fearsome than this. He knew that they were bigger, of course, but in the archive records he'd watched, they were giant, lumbering things; mountains in motion that won battles through sheer scale of firepower rather than any tactical finesse.

A Titan was a war machine, where a Knight was a warrior.

Raeven's teeth itched at the presence of the Knight's ion shields and, even from below, he felt the heat of his father's displeasure.

Though he projected an insouciant air of disinterest, Raeven had studied the elaborate protocols and observances of the Ritual of Becoming closely. He knew there would be lengthy catechisms about duty, honour and fealty to be recited,

and mnemonics to aid in the bonding process and ensure a perfect conjoining with the suit of armour he would pilot after a successful imprinting.

Only now did it dawn upon Raeven that, after tonight, he would no longer be the same man. Bonding with his armour would change him forever, and a sliver of doubt oozed into his skull, like a worm through a rotten apple.

Albard dropped to one knee before Lord Devine, his fusion armour's servos whining with the movement.

Raeven hesitated, but before he could mirror his brother's movement, he heard screams behind him. Shots were fired, followed by what sounded like the detonation of a grenade. He spun around in time to see a man sprinting from the crowds, his long robes billowing behind him like a cape. His face was partially augmented, a coiled tattoo inked around the skin of his left eye. Men and women lay dying behind him, scattered by an explosion that had blown a hole in the barrier separating the crowds from the Via Argentum.

The man ran towards Cyprian Devine's mount, and Raeven saw something strapped to his chest like cross-wise bandoliers - a series of wired black boxes and rows of what looked like miniature generators. Shots from the House guard streaked the air, bright las-bolts and solid slugs, but the man led a charmed life as every shot sliced past him without effect. Raeven ducked behind the still kneeling Albard as a bullet whined past his ear and another tore up a chunk of the roadway at his feet.

'The Serpent Gods live!' screamed the man as he reached the carriage, depressing a home-made trigger. Raeven felt a moment's disbelief as he saw something familiar in his appearance, but before he could register what it was, a huscarl's bullet finally took the man's head off just as the device upon his chest detonated.

The blast lifted Raeven from his feet, but the man hadn't been wearing a bomb in the conventional sense - the chemical sniffers would have detected that long before he'd gotten this far. It was something far more dangerous: a powerful electro-magnetic pulse expanded in a dome of deadening force, shorting out every technological device within a hundred metres.

The skimmer carriage slammed down onto the road, lasrifles flatlined and energy cells were discharged in an instant.

And the cranial implants of the mallahgra and azhdarchid blew out in twin showers of sparks.

Raeven blinked.

The mallahgra loosed a wet bellow and tore the stocks from its neck with the

ease of a man removing a loose necktie. It hurled the brass and bone contraption into the crowd, the corpses flying off with the force of the throw. Nictitating membranes on its multiple eyes flickered, as if the beast had only just awoken from a long hibernation to find a rival in its feeding grounds. The azhdarchid reared up, clawing the air with its poleaxing wings and screeching in anger to find itself yoked to a lump of dead metal.

'Get me up!' grunted Albard, straining under the weight of his armour.

Raeven stared stupidly at his brother, 'What are you talking about? Get up yourself. You're the one in armour.'

'Fusion armour,' pointed out Albard, and Raeven suddenly understood.

'You can't move,' said Raeven. 'The systems are fried.'

'I know, damn you,' hissed Albard. 'Now help me.'

Raeven looked up, and the mallahgra roared as it saw an object against which it could direct its anger. Mounted huscarls charged the beast, las-lances dipped, crackling energy arcs dancing over their conductive tips, but the beast smashed them aside as it charged with a knuckle-bounding lope. Men and horses flew through the air, broken in half and turning end over end.

Gunfire stitched across the mallahgra's hide, setting light to its fur but unable to penetrate its rugose skin and the ultra-dense layers of muscle tissue beneath. Raeven turned to see what in the name of all things wondrous was keeping his father from the fight - of all the weapons here at this moment, a Knight was the one thing that could conceivably kill an angry mallahgra.

Cyprian Devine's Knight armour fizzed and crackled with arcing trceries of angry lightning, its onboard systems fighting to keep themselves alight. The Knight had been at the very edge of the blast, spared the full force of the electromagnetic pulse. But it hadn't escaped completely, and its systems were struggling to reset.

'Typical,' said Raeven. 'Just when I need you most...'

He dragged Albard's sword from its heavy scabbard, but cursed when he realised it was an energy sabre, and therefore now useless. The blade didn't even have an edge, relying upon disruptive energies to cut through an opponent's armour.

With a crash of splintering timber, the azhdarchid finally tore itself free of the yoke securing it to the skimmer carriage.

'Hurry, Raeven!' pleaded Albard. 'Help me!'

His brother's eyes were filled with fear. Albard could hear the mallahgra - its bloodcurdling roar and the thump of its clawed hands powering it forward - but

he couldn't see it, and that fear of the unknown had unmanned him. He'd already lost an eye to a beast like this and was in no hurry to be standing in the way of this one.

'Sorry, brother,' said Raeven, still clutching the impotent sword.

He stood, but before he could turn and run, the mallahgra was upon him.

Its multiple eyes were bloodshot and confused, which was no surprise, but it knew flesh meat when it saw it. A three-clawed hand swiped for him, but Raeven's honed reflexes carried him out of the way. He dived and swung the sword, the blade bouncing from the monster's thick hide without effect. It roared and snapped its segmented, sharklike head toward him. Serrated teeth sliced through his thin clothing and tore a deep furrow across his chest and shoulder. He cried out in pain, rolling beneath its slashing paws.

More soldiers were coming forward, shooting from the hip at both beasts. The azhdarchid met their charge, its heavy wings slashing out like bludgeoning clubs and dewclaws tearing through half a dozen men with every arcing sweep. Its razored beak bit armoured warriors and their mounts in two with each bite.

Raeven scrambled to his feet, running towards the Citadel and hoping that someone inside would have the presence of mind to open the damned gates. He pulled up short as a whining, screeching steel leg stomped past, almost slamming into him as it went. The wake of the Knight's passage spun Raeven around, and he fell as the energised force of the ion shield pushed him down. Sparks and breached fuel lines drooled in the wake of the Knight's steps.

The mallahgra launched itself at Cyprian, throwing both its arms around his mount, but Raeven's father was in no mood for a close-quarters brawl.

Turbo lasers blitzed with killing fire, punching bloody craters deep into the beast's chest and ripping scorched chunks from its back. It bellowed in anger and pain, but its stunted nervous system would take more punishment before it would drop. A thundering blow slammed into the Knight's canopy - which Raeven saw had remained stubbornly open - sending blades of broken steel stabbing inside.

Its jaw closed on the Knight's head with a throaty bellow, but the teeth slid clear, chewing silver gouges in its armoured carapace. Scads of torn armour plating fell around Raeven, and he jumped aside as heavy lumps of chewed metal slammed down. The turbo lasers blazed again, and this time the mallahgra knew that it had been hurt.

Sticky blood rained down as Lord Devine freed his chainsabre arm and its internal generator finally overcame the effects of the electromagnetic pulse.

Raeven dropped Albard's sword as the enormous chainsabre roared to life and the spinning teeth, each larger than a man's forearm, revved up with eye-blurring speed.

The screaming blade plunged into the mallahgra's gut, tearing up into its heart and lungs and exploding from its shoulder in a welter of shredded bone and meat. The beast howled as Cyprian wrenched the madly revving sabre from its body, and its arm and most of its right side peeled away from its spine.

Rightly was Cyprian Devine known as the Hellblade.

Finally accepting that it was dead, the mallahgra slumped to its knees, its remaining arm falling limply to its side as it slid down the front of the blood-spattered Knight. The carcass fell onto its side and the noxious stink of it mingled with the burnt electrical smell of the wounded machine.

Cyprian rotated the body of the Knight to look down at Raeven. Blood covered his father's features, and Raeven saw two spars of steel impaling his body - one through the stomach, the other through a shoulder.

The Knight's armoured frame sagged in sympathetic pain, but Cyprian Devine wasn't about to let potentially mortal wounds slow him down.

'Get your brother into the Sanctuary,' he ordered through gritted teeth.

With the immediate danger over, Raeven stood and wiped a hand across his face. '

'You can't mean to go through with the Becoming?' he said. 'Not after all this?'

'Now more than ever,' snapped Cyprian. 'Do as I say, boy. Both of you must imprint with your armour tonight. The suits have been consecrated and prepared, they are awaiting you in the Vault Transcendent. If you do not bond with them now, they will never accept you.'

Raeven nodded as his father turned the Knight and set off with a lopsided stride after the rampaging azhdarchid. Its screeching, hooting cries came from farther down the valley, where Devine soldiers were still trying to bring it down.

A slow smile spread across Raeven's face as he realised the people around him were cheering his name, but it took him a moment to understand why.

He stood beside the corpse of a gutted mallahgra with a blade in his hand, a blade that now began to spark into life and blaze with violet energy. It didn't matter that he hadn't killed this beast, only that he'd stood against it.

He raised the borrowed sword and yelled, '*Devine!*'

TWO REGIMENTS OF Dawn Guard awaited them within the citadel, but whatever ceremonial splendour had once been imposed on their ranks had been shed the

moment word came through about the assassination attempt. Officers and soldiers discarded high-fluted helmets, fluttering pennants and gilded breastplates of ornamented gold and silver. They wanted to march out to fight alongside their lord and master, but their duty to Lord Devine's sons kept them within the citadel.

Raeven felt a twinge of regret that the mallahgra's attack had robbed him of this chance to parade in front of these men on his way to the Sanctuary, but contented himself with the crowds cheering his name from beyond the walls.

'If I was a superstitious man, I'd be inclined to think that this attack was a bad omen,' he said.

'If I believed in omens, I might agree with you,' said Albard, wheezing and breathless with the effort of walking in bulky fusion armour with a fried generator and no motive power.

'Did you see the size of that mallahgra?' said Raeven, letting out a pent-up breath as the sliced meat of his arm throbbed painfully. 'Throne, I thought that brute had me.'

'We almost died out there,' Albard gasped, his scarred features ashen and his eyes wide.

'I nearly died,' corrected Raeven, holding out his bloodied arm and doing his best to hide just how much it really hurt. 'That beast wasn't looking at you like you were its next meal.'

'You're lucky to be alive,' said Albard.

Raeven dropped into a fencing stance and held out Albard's sword. 'Me?' he said with a wide grin. 'It's the mallahgra that's the lucky one. If your sword hadn't shorted out, he'd have seen my angry side.' 'Lucky for it then.'

'If father hadn't intervened and given it such a swift death, I swear I'd have cut it apart, piece by piece.'

The twin-drum fusion generator on Albard's armour sparked with alarming bangs of overloaded control mechanisms and hissed with venting gasses. Irreparably damaged electrical systems leaked blue-tinged smoke.

'Help me get this damn suit off,' snapped Albard, and the fleeting moment of fraternal bonhomie was snuffed out in a heartbeat.

Raeven backed away from his brother as a piercing whine built from the generator. He knew from long years of training in a similar suit that the archaic systems of fusion armour were dangerously temperamental. Only the Mechanicum priests had the knowledge required to maintain such outdated technology, but they had little interest in servicing family heirlooms.

'I'm not your damn squire,' said Raeven. 'Do it yourself.'

'Hurry, before the fusion reactor burns through the plates.'

Raeven shook his head and waved forward a trio of Sacristans who awaited his leave to approach. 'You three, get him out of his armour. Quickly! Before the fusion reactor burns through the plates.'

The red-robed men ran to help Lord Devine's eldest son. A Sacristan with a bulky, hazard-striped cylinder strapped to his back attached cables to inload deactivation codes to the reactor core and frost-lined pipes to inject coolant fluids. The remaining two deployed power tools to undo bolts, remove locking clasps and peel rapidly-heating plates from Albard's body in smoking lumps of silvered metal.

As Raeven watched them work, he had a sudden flash of memory, recalling the man who had detonated the electro-magnetic pulse on the Via Argenturn.

'He was a Sacristan,' he said.

'Who was?' said Albard.

'The bomber. He was wearing a Sacristan's robes.'

'Don't be absurd,' said Albard, glancing down at the men working to remove his useless armour. 'What possible reason could a Sacristan have for assassinating father?'

'Trust me, he's an easy man to dislike.'

The bomber was a Sacristan, and he was a Sacristan Raeven had seen before. En route to a clandestine rendezvous in Lyx's bedchamber some months ago, he'd seen the man loitering in the upper chambers of Albard's tower. Wanting the Sacristan gone, he'd chastened him for his tattoo's resemblance to a Serpent cult icon. Bowing and scraping, the man had promised to have it removed, and Raeven had put the matter from his mind.

He'd put the Sacristan's presence down to Knightly business, but that seemed an unlikely explanation now.

Albard shrugged off the last of his armour and stepped away from its smoking remains as though it were a pile of xenos dung, or a petitioning freeman.

'Thanks for nothing, Raeven,' said Albard, staring at the ruined plates.

'I told you it was stupid to wear-'

'What did you just call me?' said Albard, leaning in close with a threatening scowl.

If Raeven's brother thought to intimidate him with scholam-yard theatrics, he was even more foolish than he'd taken him for.

'You were going to have to take it off at the Sanctuary,' said Raeven. 'After

tonight, you'll never wear it again anyway, so why do you care?.'

'It is a priceless relic of our family's legacy,' said Albard. 'And it's ruined. I was to pass it to my firstborn upon his coming of age, and he to his.'

The inevitable escalation of their squabbling was averted by the arrival of an officer of the Dawn Guard and a mismatched squad of troopers.

Some still wore portions of their ceremonial armour, and they looked like a troupe of comic actors playing soldiers.

'My lords,' said the officer. 'We need to get you out of here right now.'

'What for?' said Raeven. 'The mallahgra's dead, and if the azhdarchid's hasn't been killed by now I'll be very surprised.'

'True, my lord' answered the officer, 'but from what I understand, a Serpent cultist detonated an electro-magnetic bomb on the Via Argentum.'

'And he had his head blown off,' pointed out Raeven. 'So he's probably not too much of a threat now.'

'It's unlikely he was working alone,' replied the officer. 'He will have accomplices.'

'How can you know that?' demanded Albard.

'It's what I would do if I was planning to assassinate Lord Devine.'

Raeven slapped a hand on the officer's shoulder and grinned at his brother. 'Good to know we're being protected by men who're thinking of ways they might kill us, eh?'

The officer blanched. Raeven laughed.

'Lead on, my good man,' he said. 'Before the Serpent cult sees us all dead.'

ESCORTED BY THREE hundred heavily-armed soldiers, Albard and Raeven made their way through the fortified precincts of the Dawn Citadel. What should have been a measured, triumphal approach to the Sanctuary was instead made in haste, with every man alert for the possibility of another treacherous attack. They traversed three more gates, each opened just wide enough to permit their passage before being slammed shut.

At the heart of the citadel was the Sanctuary.

Where the rest of the Dawn Citadel was built from the same ochre stone of the mountains, the Sanctuary had been constructed by Molech's first settlers, and its structure bore little resemblance to the fortress raised around it.

That it was ancient beyond imagining was clear, its circular plan evident in the geodesic dome that had clearly once graced the hull of a starship. Almost the entirety of the Sanctuary's structure had once been part of an interstellar vessel -

its structural pylons scavenged from the ship's superstructure, its walls from exterior hull plating and its towering black and silver gates from some vast internal chamber.

This was the gateway to the Vault Transcendent. When the Knights of Molech rode to battle, they sallied forth from this portal.

The Sanctuary had been added to and embellished over the millennia since its construction, and what might once have been functional and drab was now garlanded with colourful banners, steel-formed gargoyles and bladed finials. An Imperial eagle banner streamed from a spired cupola at the dome's centre, with flags bearing the heraldry of the various Knightly Houses arranged around it on a lower level. The symbolism of the banners' arrangement was obvious, and Raeven marvelled at its lack of subtlety.

When the Emperor snapped his fingers and called the people of Molech to war, they had no choice but to answer.

Was it just him who was angered at the dominance evident in the way every element of Imperial iconography was elevated beyond that of Molech? Surely he couldn't be the only one to see it, but it appeared he was the only one who cared.

Grand processional stairs of black iron began at either side of the main gateway, circling around the building before meeting above it at a smaller circular entrance - one more suited to the scale of mortals.

This upper entrance irised open and twin columns of red-robed Sacristans emerged, descending the stairs to bring the sons of Lord Devine to their Ritual of Becoming. Raeven put aside his resentment towards the Imperium as he imagined riding through the Transcendent Gate, hardwired into his own suit of Knight armour.

He glanced over at Albard, expecting to see the same flush of excitement in his scarred features as he knew must be evident on his own.

But his brother's face was deathly pale and a sheen of sweat coated his skin.

THE CHAMBER OF Echoes was not named for its acoustic properties, though they were impressive enough. Raeven's booted footfalls rang from the distant ceiling, a suspended canopy of thick cables and hissing pipework like jungle creepers or an impossibly vast nest of snakes. The floor was a patchwork of steel grilles, deck plates from the forgotten starship that had been cannibalised to create the structure of the Sanctuary.

A dim ultraviolet light shone through the pipes above, and flickering electro-flambeaux burned in iron sconces that had once been the piston covers of an

engine housing. Two enormous mechanised thrones stood upon an elevated rostrum at the heart of the chamber, arranged so that those who sat upon them would be facing each other.

'The Throne Mechanicum,' said the acolyte who had led them within, 'through which you will each bond with your armour.'

They made several circuits of the internal structure of the Sanctuary, shedding their accompanying Sacristans as the robed acolytes of the Mechanicum took up positions throughout the building in preparation for the ritual. Eventually, only one was left, a shaven-headed drone who normally attended their father.

Without needing to be told, Raeven knew which of the Thrones was his, and he climbed the iron steps of its heavy, drably functional machinery to sit down. No sooner had he done so than heavy steel bands snapped into place at his ankles and wrists. A silver cowl rose from the rear portion of the throne and slipped smoothly over his head. Raeven felt the heat of electrical contact as whirring cable plugs slotted home in the input sockets bored into the back of his neck and spine.

The sense of invasive penetration was sharp and cold, but not unpleasant.

With connection established, Raeven blinked as he heard a susurrations of half-heard voices around him, as though an invisible host of distant observers had silently entered the chamber to witness his Becoming.

'My lord,' said the Sacristan, gesturing to the throne opposite Raeven's.

Albard nodded, but made no move to climb the steps to his throne.

'What's the matter, brother?' said Raeven. 'Nervous?'

Albard shot him an angry look. 'This isn't how it's supposed to work,' he said. 'The catechisms, the words we are to speak. This isn't what I expected.'

The Sacristan nodded. 'Given the unfortunate incident before the Argent Gate, Lord Devine has instructed us to dispense with much of the formal ritual associated with the Becoming.'

The Sacristan's tone left no room for doubt as to what he thought of that particular instruction. Like their Mechanicum overseers, the Sacristans were great respecters of tradition, ritual and dogma.

'But that's to help us bond with the Knight armour,' protested Albard.

'Lord Devine felt you would be more than capable of establishing a connection without it,' said the Sacristan. 'He was most insistent.'

Albard swallowed hard, and Raeven savoured his brother's discomfort. Normally as brusque and arrogant as their father, to see him so obviously frightened was a rare treat.

'My lord, if you please,' said the Sacristan.

'Alright, damn you,' snapped Albard, finally climbing the steps and sitting upon his throne.

The restraint mechanisms fastened around his brother's limbs and the silver cowl rose to envelop the upper portion of his skull. Albard jerked as the communion umbilicals slotted into his body, grimacing as their whirring mechanism scraped the infected skin around his input sockets.

Raeven's eyes met Albard's, and he allowed himself a moment's satisfaction as he saw the weakness deep within his brother - buried, and all but invisible to most people who knew him. But it was there now, horribly exposed and glaringly obvious.

'Ready, brother?' said Raeven.

Albard said nothing, his jaw clenching and unclenching in fear.

Satisfied that both men were secured within their thrones, the Sacristan leaned down and whispered into Albard's ear. Such were the perfect acoustics of the chamber that Raeven heard every word, and his eyes widened at the look of horror on his brother's face.

'The Serpent Gods live,' said the Sacristan.

DAWN WAS MAKING its way up the valley as Cebella Devine watched Lyx climb the steps to the high walls overlooking the scene of the previous day's carnage. Cebella's huscarl bodyguards were keeping a respectful distance, and she felt her heart race as Lyx approached.

'Is it done?' asked Cebella, without turning to face the girl.

'It is,' confirmed Lyx.

'And?'

'There were... complications,' said Lyx, clearly relishing the look of irritation that flitted across Cebella's face.

'Don't draw this out, Lyx. Tell me.'

'Raeven imprinted successfully. His Knight is a colt in the stable, wild and strong.'

'And Albard?'

Lyx paused, her face a mockery of loss. 'It grieves me to say that after the incident on the Via Argentum, Albard's mind was unprepared to endure a night in the Chamber of Echoes.'

'Does he live?' asked Cebella.

Lyx nodded. 'He does, but his Knight refused to bond with him and the bio-

neural feedback from that rejection has irreparably damaged his mind. I fear he is lost to us.'

Cebella finally deigned to face Lyx and the two women shared a look that an outsider might have mistaken for shared grief, but which was in fact a shared complicity.

'Your pet Sacristan made quite a spectacle of himself,' said Cebella at last.

'A man will do foolish things for the sake of lust,' agreed Lyx.

'But he failed to kill Cyprian,' said Cebella. 'Impaled twice and the cantankerous old bastard still breathes. I almost admire him for that.

Almost.'

'Yes, Cyprian still lives, but look at what Raeven achieved,' pointed out Lyx. 'The people say they saw him stand and fight a mallahgra with only a powerless sword. From such tales are legends born.'

'Do we have need of legends?'

'We will,' said Lyx, as a momentary dizziness swept through her and she blinked away the image of a fiery amber eye and a sweeping storm that stretched from horizon to horizon.

'Another vision?' asked Cebella, extending a hand to steady her.

'Perhaps,' nodded Lyx.

'What do you see?' demanded Cebella, keeping her voice low.

'A time of great change is coming to Molech,' said Lyx. 'It will be many years from now, but when it comes, a terrible war will be fought. House Devine will play a pivotal role in it.'

'Raeven?'

'He will be a great warrior, and his actions will turn the tide.'

Cebella smiled and released Lyx's arm. She looked up into the lightening sky and pictured the worlds over which her son would claim dominion. Lyx was not the only Adoratrice to have the sight, but her secret powers waxed stronger than any that Cebella had known before.

'You have grand ambitions for your twin brother, then,' said Cebella.

'No more than you, mother,' said Lyx.

LORD OF THE RED SANDS

Aaron Dembski-Bowden

THERE IS ONLY one thing worth fighting for.

He knows this, while his father languishes in the ignorance of false righteousness; while his brothers play gods to a godless universe; while heartless weaklings claim to be his sons, walking the coward's path over the way of the warrior.

But he knows - even if no one else will listen or understand - that there is only one thing worth fighting for.

He crests the barricade, the axes howling in his hands. The dead city sends its finest against him time and again, and time and again the dead city's finest fall back in screaming, hewed chunks of flesh and ceramite. Some wear his brothers' colours - the royal purple of preening Fulgrim, or the drab, pale hues of cadaverous Mortarion. They charge, dreaming of glory, and they die knowing nothing but pain and shame.

Some of them wear the filthy white of his own sons. They die no differently from the others. They bleed the same blood, and cry the same oaths. They stink just the same when their bodies are ripped open, organs bared to the cold air.

Flashes of insight come to him in the storm of swords - a name etched upon white armour seems familiar for the span of a heartbeat, or the angle of an axe reminds him of another fight, back in the age of the burning sun beating down upon the red sand.

He kills every warrior that rises before him, and chases those wise enough to retreat. The former he breaks open with single blows from his straining axes. The latter he hunts in leaping pounces, the way arena beasts once hunted starved men and women.

Glory?

Glory is for those too weak to find inner strength, leaving them hollow

parasites, feeding on the affection of even lesser men. Glory is for cowards, too afraid to let their names die.

He stands upon their bodies now, grinding bootprints into their breastplates as he adds to their number. A monument to futility rises at his feet: each death means that he has to climb higher to welcome fresh meat. The hammer-blows of gunfire keep on pounding into his back and shoulders with bestial kicks. An irritation, nothing more. Scarcely even a distraction. This battle was won the moment he set foot in the dead city.

He buries an axe in the chest of another son, but feels it slip from his blood-slick fingers as the warrior tumbles back. The binding chain at his wrist pulls taut, preventing the weapon's theft, but he sees what they are trying to do - three of his own sons shouting, scrabbling to cling to the axe they stole, even as the blade is buried in one of their bodies.

A warrior's ultimate sacrifice, trading his life for the chance to disarm an enemy. Their united strength drags at his arm, turning his panting breath to a wet snarl.

He does not pull back and resist. He launches into them, shattering their armour with foot, with fist, with his dark metal teeth. Their cunning sacrifice avails them nothing but death by bludgeoning rather than the shrieking blade of a chainaxe.

Their bodies are added to the corpse monument. Every movement is pain, now. Each breath comes from ragged lungs, through bleeding lips.

There is still time, still time, still time. He can win this war without his brother's guns.

Conquest?

What tyrant first dreamed of conquest and clad violent oppression in terms of virtue? Why does the imposition of one will over another draw men like no other sin? For more than two hundred years, the Emperor has demanded that the galaxy align itself to his principles at the cost of ten thousand cultures that lived free and without the need for tyranny. Now Horus demands that the stellar nations of this broken empire dance to his tune instead. Billions die for conquest, to advance the pride of these two vain creatures cast in the shapes of men.

There is no virtue in fighting for conquest. Nothing is more worthless and hollow than obliterating freedom for the sake of more land, more coin, more voices singing your name in holy hymn.

Conquest is as meaningless as glory. Worse, it is evil in its selfishness. Both are triumphs only in a fool's crusade.

No. Not glory, not conquest.

He follows the blood to his prey. The warrior slouches on the ground, with his back to the wall, his armoured thighs decorated with a sloppy trail of innards. Blood marks his face. Blood marks everything on this world, but the centurion's face is a reflection of the battle itself. Half of his features no longer exist beyond bare, cracked bone - ripped away by the primarch's axe. The officer's remaining eye is narrowed by the preternatural focus necessary to remain alive, without screaming, when your intestines have been torn from your body.

He should not be alive, and yet here he is, lifting a bolter.

Angron smiles at the man's beautiful defiance and slaps the gun aside with the flat of his still revving axe.

'No,' he says, savagely kind. This warrior and his doomed brethren fought well, and their father is careful to offer no humiliation in these last moments.

His other sons, those loyal to him, are chanting his name, shouting it through the ruins. They chant the name his slave-handlers gave to him when he was Lord of the Red Sands. *Angron. Angron. Angron.* He does not know what name the Emperor had intended for him. He never cared enough to ask, and now the chance to do so is denied to him forever.

'Lord,' The dying centurion speaks.

Angron crouches by his son, ignoring the nosebleed trickling down his lips as the Butcher's Nails tick, tick, tick in the back of his brain.

'I am here, Kauragar.'

The World Eater draws in a shivery breath, surely one of his last. His remaining eye seeks his primarch's face.

'That wound at your throat,' Kauragar's words come with blood bubbling at his lips. 'That was me.'

Angron touches his own neck. His fingers come away wet, and he smiles for the first time in weeks.

'You fought well.' The primarch's low tones are almost tectonic. 'All of you did.'

'Not well enough.' The centurion bares blood-darkened teeth in a rictus grin. 'Tell me why, father. Why stand with the Arch-traitor?'

Angron's smile fades, wiped clean by his son's ignorance. None of them have ever understood. They were always so convinced that he should have been honoured by being given a Legion, when the life he chose was stolen from him the day the Imperium tore him away from his true brothers and sisters.

'I do not stand with Horus.' Angron breathes the confession. 'I stand against

the Emperor. Do you understand, Kauragar? I am free now. Free.

Can you not understand that? Why have you all spent these last decades telling me I should feel honoured to live as a slave, when I was so close to dying free?'

Kauragar stares past his primarch, up at the lightening sky. Blood runs from the warrior's open mouth.

'Kauragar. Kauragar?'

The centurion exhales - a slow, tired sigh. His chest does not rise again.

Angron closes his dead son's remaining eye and rises to his feet.

Chains rattle against his armour as he takes up his axes from the ground once more.

Angron. Angron. Angron. His name. A slave's name.

He walks through the ruins, enduring the cheers of his bloodstained followers - warriors concerned with glory and conquest, who were born better than the aliens and traitors they slay. Fighting their own kind is practically the first fair fight they have ever endured, and their gene-sire's lip curls at the thought.

Before he was shackled by the Emperor's will, Angron and his ragged warband defied armies of trained, armed soldiers on his home world.

They tasted freedom beneath clean skies and razed the cities of their enslavers.

Now he leads an army fattened by centuries of easy slaughter, and they cheer him the way his masters once cheered when he butchered beasts for their entertainment.

This is not freedom. He knows that. He knows it well.

This is not freedom, he thinks as he stares at the World Eaters screaming his name. *But the fight is only just beginning.*

When the Emperor dies under his axes, when his final thought is of how the Great Crusade was all in pathetic futility, and when his last sight is Angron's iron smile... Then the Master of Mankind will learn what Angron has known since he picked up his first blade.

Freedom is the only thing worth fighting for.

It is why tyrants always fall.

ALL THAT REMAINS

James Swallow

THE DECK TILTED under my feet until I was walking like a crab, one foot on what used to be the floor, the other on what was the starboard-side wall. Gravity had become unusual, and it spread itself in peculiar patterns throughout the ship's corridors.

Some strange artefact of the malfunctions, perhaps? I didn't know enough to tell. It's not where my expertise lies, but I imagined that if I could have seen it, the gravity would pile like drifts of snow blown into odd corners. Snow like we had at home, on Nomeah, before the melts and the ending.

Flicking that thought away, I used the sconces in the walls as handholds, taking care to first beat out any flickering electro-candles with the butt of my lasrifle. The others kept pace behind me, and I could hear them all labouring their breaths in the cold, heavy air. I didn't need to turn to see the aura-light around their heads. I knew it would be unchanged: anger-red and terror-black.

Without the ship's internal illumination, the only way we could navigate was by the sullen glow from the chamber at the far end of the corridor. Long shadows reached toward us, inky and fathomless. I felt as if I were some parasitic thing crawling up the throat of a dead host animal, questing for the open, fanged mouth.

The noise of slow-twisting metals surrounded us as the ship was continually stressed and relaxed. I was no void-born, but I had ridden in starships on many occasions and I knew what sounded wrong. I knew the sound of something tested to breaking point. Something that was going to die.

The thought fatigued me and I stopped to rest. I felt heavy and damp, as if I had been dragged through ice water; uniform, war-cloak, pack and all. The lip of a jammed hatch served as a temporary halt, and the others accepted it readily.

Dallos sat closest to me and immediately had his cards out, his spindly pink

fingers going over them. He worked the careworn rectangles of plas-paper with the rote deftness of a gambling sharp. The cards glinted, the print across their faces worn away in places where he had dealt and re-dealt them a thousand times. I could make out the faint numerals and the abstract geometric shapes of the suits.

'Four of Emeralds,' he muttered, unaware of himself. Two of Hammers.'

Dallos's face was half-hidden under a mask of dirty bandages. A monster had burned him, so I'd learned. The nimbus of a bolt of spewed fire had passed close to his unit, enough to torch the rest of the men in his mortar crew but not enough to kill him. What I could see of Dallos's face was pink like his hands, where he had beat out the backwash flames - as raw as his aura, and just as bright.

Not a one of us was what you could call *able*. I think even the most generous of observers would have considered us to be a sorry collection of souls. Six men, clad in uniforms of the great Imperial Army, a scooping of poor bloody infantry from half a dozen different battalions all across the front line of the insurrection. We were the canis-facies, the sons of worlds ground up into chum by the inexorable machine of this new war. I think we all had badges of differing rank and status, but the memory evades. On the ship, it never mattered. No one was in charge, there was no chain of command. We simply were. Any intentions to salute or to snap to orders seemed pointless. A lot of things seemed pointless after all the horrors we had witnessed.

But so we were. I had lost fingers on my fight hand - my off-hand, and so somehow I interpreted that as lucky - and taken shrapnel in my torso and thigh. The pieces were still in me, needles pricking me with each step I took. The small pains made me fired as much as they kept me awake. Dallos, as I said, was the burned man. Breng, with his skin the deep ebon of varnished wood, he showed the puckering and scarification of a gas attack victim. It was agony for him to speak, the poor fool's throat now a ruin, so he communicated as much through tilts of the head and hollow glares as he could. I think LoMund might have been an officer once, back when it mattered. That would explain the long white hair and the regal cut of his face, perhaps. That bit of him was broken, though. He had been belly-cut and spilled on the mud, saved only because blind panic and adrenaline had made him cup his own innards in his hands for long enough to stagger back to a safe zone. Then Chenec and Yao, each sallow of flesh with perpetually hooded eyes, both from the same world and both having been near-killed by claws and stubber fire.

We were a small pack of walking wounded. I had not seen an uninjured man -

and we were all men, for there were no females on this vessel - since we had disembarked from the rescue boat that bore me from Nomeah. The closest thing I had come across to the hale and whole were the lobotomised medicae servitors that prowled the ward decks, tending to the injured. If there were actual medics and surgeons on board this hulk, then they had not cared to turn their attention to us.

There were so few of us, but what took my pause was that the ship was still full. The holds carried *children*. Refugee boys out of ruined families or from bombed-out scholaria, war orphans by the dozen. Sometimes we heard them crying for their parents, for answers, for anything. It burned me, in a way, to admit that I was as lost as they were.

This was one ship among several, or so I thought. In truth, I hadn't seen a porthole since we jumped into the screaming madness of the warp and fled the perfidy of the whorson Warmaster. Whether or not the other craft were still out there, I didn't know. A few gunboats protecting bulk carriers packed to the gunwales with injured, our pathetic little convoy stopped here and there to pick up other contingents of the similarly injured. I had heard that some of the other vessels carried wounded Space Marines; was such a thing possible, I wondered? It seemed fanciful that any of the Imperium's immortal champions could ever suffer something so mundane as a mere wound.

And so, in time none of us had the first clue as to where we were or to which points of the aetheric compass we were headed. The only constant was the lamentation of the almost-dead echoing through the cavernous wards as they fought nightmares in their sleep. That, and the sound of the engines.

But after a time, I began to notice patterns. That's what I'm good at.

I can *see* things.

I don't speak of it much because it can frighten an unwary soul, and anger others into rash action. People don't like what they cannot understand, and they tend to react with violence over all else. In the ranks of the Imperial Army, that violence can come by blade or las-bolt, so it is conducive to a man's wellbeing not to go looking for it.

The patterns - on ships like this, there's always a mix of the wounded, from those sad cases who would be better given the Emperor's Peace to the ones who are little more than malingerers. Not on this vessel, though. I saw that the injured here were all souls who could, if care were given, make it back to the front lines. In all the passage through the ship's labyrinthine interiors, I had not come upon one that could not have been healed to fight another day. Those more needy or

less likely to survive had been transferred off when we docked or made rendezvous with other medicae ships in deep space. The ones who replaced them had faces of familiar cast.

You could see it in the eyes. Dallos and LoMund and the others here, every man we met along the way - I saw that same look staring back at me from the mirror. Not just the thousand-yard stare of a soldier, not just that. A shared burden that none of us could talk about, because we had all spent our lives denying it. Hiding it.

'S-Six of Crosses,' Dallos stuttered, working the cards into a blur of movement. 'Ace. The Ace of D-daggers. The other ships are gone.'

We had been climbing for the better part of a day, up from the amid-ships levels where the radiation shielding was heavy and immovable, locking us in. The lower decks, the engineering spaces, weren't connected to the wards, and there seemed little reason to seek a way to reach them. We numbered few and those of us who were mechanically savvy were far from engineers. Breng was the closest thing we had to a technologist, being a ship hand and pilot-savant.

It seemed more logical to head up, to find the flying bridge and command tiers. At first I insisted that we look to the youths in the other compartments, perhaps to lend them some courage... but there seemed little point to that. We had none to spare.

Recall that I spoke before of the constants of sound, the moaning and the engines; I had woken the day before from a fitful sleep full of dream-colours, to a reality of cold silence from the warp motors. Without explanation, we were suddenly adrift. Malfunctions came soon after. Power gave out in sudden falls of darkness and creeping waves of hoarfrost. Air fouled and became still. Worse were the doors that fell like great blades guillotining down across the corridors, sealing off sections of the ship without warning.

There had been nothing to suggest collision or impact by enemy weapons. After a few hours, when we were still alive and the corridors were not crawling with blood-hungry xenos, murderous traitors or... the other things, we drew plans to investigate.

I saw patterns, but I hadn't seen any sign of this one forming. That's why I volunteered - that and the fact that I could hold a gun. The few that we had liberated from an emergency armoury, we clutched to us like talismans of protection. If the new enemy was out there, of course, I wondered how much use the guns would be to us. At best, they were a comforting illusion of strength.

I remembered the streets of Nomeah running red. I remembered the giants

slaughtering all who dared to stand or who did not flee fast enough. I remembered the horrors, but only as blurs of meat and talons and blood, as if my mind had smudged out the memory of them rather than know it with any clarity.

I looked down at the hand with the missing fingers, and the echo of stark pain was there, cold and quick.

'Hecane?' Yao was the one who eventually spoke. 'We move on?' He gestured towards the dim light ahead, asking the question of me, of all of us.

I nodded. 'We move on.'

I KNOW WHAT kind of war this is.

I've fought on a dozen worlds in the Akarli Cluster and far beyond, on deserts and in oceans, through cloud-reaches and mountain passes, but Nomeah was my home. We always seemed to come back to there. A rough rabble of people we had been called, and that was right. Constantly infighting, each of our tribes nurturing grudges against the others like they were our offspring.

What can you say of the Nomeahi? That we know how to hate. That we can find an insult in a bouquet of roses. Those things are true.

But it is also true that we love our Emperor and we are proud of our Imperium. Perhaps that is why our petty little differences were tolerated by the bureaucrats of Terra - they let us bloody each other in our small rivalries because they knew that when the call came, we would pick up arms and march side by side without hesitation. All enmities forgotten for the moment, in the Emperor's name. Our contentious nature makes us good warrior stock. I'll point you to a dozen planets brought hard into compliance by regiments born of worlds in the Akarli sector. We did our part for the Great Crusade, that was never in question.

Of course, in recent times, we started to trickle home and fight amongst ourselves once again, but never enough to make it an issue beyond our own borders. But then the change came, the rebellion, the insurrection - the *heresy*, as some of the more histrionic called it. Many didn't understand at first, and then they were dead. But I understood. I find patterns. I know betrayal when I see it.

It runs like lifeblood through the veins of this war. It is what powers the will of the traitors, and the men who foolishly think that they can ride the edges of the bastard Horus's cloak. This war is not being fought for desire of power. It is not a just revolution against the yoke of an oppressor. Materiel and territory? Those are objectives of passing interest. No, what we face here is treachery for treachery's sake. I think I knew that from the first, but it is only now that I have the words to express the thought. Now that I have had the time to think on it.

Horus, may he die a thousand deaths, is the very definition of traitor. The purest evolution of that idea made manifest. He's a son hating the father, a citizen betraying his state, a patriot burning his flag, a commander killing his soldiers. For all his gene-engineered origins, Horus is a human sacrificing humanity. He is the worst of us.

I know this, not because I have seen the Warmaster, or spoken to him or anything like that; I know it because I have seen with these eyes the horrors that he has called to battle in his name.

And fate take me, in my dreams I have stood upon the edge of the crumbling abyss that he seeks to plunge us into.

IT WAS PERHAPS a day later when we finally made it to the command tiers. Many corridors up there were sealed by those thick drop-doors, and the ones with glassy portals allowed me to look through and see vacuum-bloated corpses in the compartments beyond, drifting in null-gravity. More life support failures, more unlucky dead, young and old alike.

'Didn't live this long to be killed by bloody machines failing,' Chenec grated. 'Not burning my luck now!' He fingered a chain habitually worn around his wrist, a line of metal beads dull with age. I think he could hear something in the way they rattled, but if that were so, Chenec never sought to talk about it.

I was going to answer him, but then I saw LoMund and Breng bringing up their guns. A heartbeat later, footsteps were coming toward us.

I listened. You learn quick when the horrors are abroad. You learn how to hear for talons scraping and bones dragging. This was just the clatter of boots on metal plates, but I wasn't about to be casual. I've seen things that will look like men to your eyes, but with auras belonging to monsters that only the insane could imagine.

A youth stumbled around the corner and we nearly shot him for his temerity. He saw us and almost fouled his britches in shock. 'Don't shoot!' he cried. The boy was barely a teenager, shaven-headed and dirty.

'Who the blades are you?' demanded LoMund, pointing with his laspistol. 'Talk!'

He did, collapsing and babbling all at once. He told us his name was Zartine, a foundling boy from a city orphanage on Zofor's World, bold enough to slip out of the lower wards to explore the ship and now regretting it. He was utterly terrified, and not just of us. I could see his colours flashing orange, out of control.

I helped him up. 'Calm down, lad. What are you doing up here? Do you know what happened to the ship?'

'I know!' Zartine snapped back. 'It's worse than you think. They're here, don't you see? Can't you hear them?' He waved at the air, hands clutching at nothing. 'Space Marines!'

Breng made a noise like he was hawking up phlegm. 'No legionaries here.'

'Wrong!' shouted the youth. He pointed over his shoulder. 'Down there. *Saw him.*'

'He isn't lying.' It was a second before I realised that it was Dallos who had spoken. I turned and found him with the damned deck in his hands again, his rifle stowed.

'Eight of Hammers.'

He held up the worn card to show us all, as if it were a warrant of absolute truth.

All of a sudden, I was incensed at his moronic little game, and I crossed the distance to Dallos in a rush, slapping the cards out of his grip with a savage backhand. 'You don't know!' I snarled, fighting back a surge of panic. 'You can't know that!' Dread coiled inside me, icy and thick.

Dallos wailed and immediately dived at the deck, snatching up the cards where they had scattered. He seemed so hurt by my action. My anger was strangled and guilt washed over me. Guilt and fear.

LET ME TELL you how it happened on Nomeah. Let me show you the little war of my life, the microcosm of the greater treachery that even now writhes across the stars, writing itself into our history.

You would think that because of who we were, the conflict would have come in blood and thunder from the outset. Man against man, neighbours fighting neighbours. Well, all that did come, but not at first. The start of it was insidious, and for that I hate Horus all the more. He didn't come to our worlds with warships and guns; he didn't even consider us worthy of those things. Nomeah and the worlds of Arkarli were set upon the path to dissolution and ruin by a handful of perfidious agents, less than a platoon's worth. Fifth columnists, interlopers and sneaks who turned us against ourselves.

We gave them fertile ground, idiots that we were. A web of old jealousies, lines of distrust that were ripe for exploitation. Where the Emperor's light of illumination had united us, the Warmaster's shadow divided.

And the cleverness of it was the perfect, fractal nature of the deceit. It scaled

up and down, using the same tools to embellish ingrained hatreds between whole worlds, nations, cities. All the way down until it was street against street, house against house, brother against brother.

We all hated so very well on Nomeah and, directed by callous hands, that hatred ripped us apart.

But not all at once. It was subtle, *careful*.

I remember with blinding clarity the day when the poison of it bubbled to the surface in my platoon. Note that we were nothing special - just a division of riflemen with no great laurels and banners to carry before us. No impressive name or clever sobriquet. There was a force number attached to our division and nothing else. In the scheme of the Emperor's Great Crusade, we were quite ordinary. But that was not enough to protect us.

For months, almost a solar year, things had been changing at far distant command. Directives would come to Nomeah and we would be told that new rules were in place. Each was presented to us like a gift, not as a demand, but if one resisted then the velvet fell away to reveal iron beneath. Refusal was not encouraged.

Soldiers and officers alike were simply told that *things had changed*, that *this was the way of it now*. As much as we grumbled and sneered, as much as those angry thoughts became angry words, nothing was undone. Piece by piece, the line of loyalty began to move. We tipped towards the edge by degrees, though the motion of the gradient seemed insignificant each time.

The observance of a festival day was cancelled. Weapons of a certain type were recalled. Uniform colours adjusted. Liberty rearranged. Regulations altered in subtle ways with the core purpose left unclear. One tiny thing after another. Each of small weight of consequence, so much so a man might feel almost churlish to question each openly. But measured again in their collective...

Imagine the navigation of a sail-foil flyer in the cloud-reaches. She moves under the breath of wind toward tree north, straight and true.

But the hand upon the tiller turns a degree off the line. The sails are angled, oh-so-gently, first by one turn and then another. If no man watches the path of the suns over the bowsprit, in time the flyer finds herself turned to due south and into the teeth of an oncoming storm. And all escaping the notice of the crew asleep below decks.

I recall the day when the words were finally said out loud. *'Today we affirm our loyalty to his highness the Warmaster Horus, in defiance of an aloof and uncaring Terra.'* They never used the words *Emperor* or *Imperium*, because to do

so would confuse the people they sought to assimilate into their acts of treason. I watched the new flags unfurl, the noble aquila replaced in favour of an unblinking, slitted eye.

We knew it was coming of course. In the barracks, after lights out, it was all that men spoke of. In those hushed conversations, there was much talk of defiance. I wonder where it went in the cold light of day.

Here then, was the moment of both my greatest courage and my greatest stupidity. When the words were said, I spoke out - and when I looked across the hall to find the faces of my comrades, the ones that I knew agreed with me, there was only silence and eyes turned away. Dark auras burning in my gaze.

I knew then the true nature of this war, and the lifeblood of it.

THERE WAS A lot of talk about what we would do. We had come a long way, too far just to timidly retreat back to the ward decks and wait for an uncertain fate. Don't mistake what we did for courage, though. I think all of us were long past those kinds of ideals. I learned that we shared... *things*, all the adults on this barge. Not just our shared secrets, but a shared experience.

Not one of us had been spared a brush with the horrors. Some had fought them, most had run from them. All knew that whatever they were, wherever they came from, the monstrosities that Horus had unleashed upon the galaxy were unlike anything we had ever fought before. In a way, we were all caught by our own natures; the pure animal part of us wanted to flee from them, while the rational, hateful, *human* part would have given anything for a weapon big enough to kill those fearsome things.

And so we went on, Zartine joining us, trailing at the back with Yao. The boy might have had some kind of gift too, I think. He kept talking about music when no one else could hear it.

At last we reached the great crenellated entrance vestibule to the ship's command centre, and Breng gingerly worked the controls to retract the hatch. For a moment, nothing happened, and then, in the blink of an eye the great iron door dropped open, slamming into the deck.

A hard-edged shadow, so large that it filled the open hatchway, loomed inside. I think that if I had been quicker of mind, I would have run. Instead, I raised the lasrifle as the shape shifted its bulk to pass through a gap built for men of my stature.

Into the light it came, and Zartine was proven right.

A single warrior of the Legionones Astartes came out to meet us. Heavy boots of

ceramite clanged against the deck plates, making the floor jump beneath our feet. In aspect, the Space Marine was a giant: I saw a broad chestplate emblazoned with the Imperial Aquila; arms thick as the trunks of great trees; a scowling, beaked helmet that resembled the skinned skull of some giant raptor. The eyes in that face glowed red with combat auto-senses, auspex returns and scrolling data feeds. The warrior's armour was strangely bereft of any iconography, plain in a hue alike to cut slate. He moved with a fluidity more akin to an apex predator than anything born of humanity.

At his back, a hood-like construct framed his helm, built more to resemble the archway of some long-lost devotional chapel than any battle mechanism. It was dark, heavy iron studded with crystals that burned with blue light. It drew my sight like gravity pulling upon me, and I glimpsed an aura there made of colours that did not exist in the common world. For my sins, I had seen those shades before.

The warrior was armed with a massive boltgun, but it remained maglocked to a holster pad on his thigh. In his other hand he held a staff of polished, flawless silver. I remember thinking that it seemed an odd affectation. With his free hand, he reached up and removed his helm, pressure seals hissing into the cold air.

A war-god looked back at us, scalp shorn of hair, tattoos of intricate nature adorning his cheeks and throat, scars like red trophies upon his flesh. His eyes - his true eyes - startled me with their jet depths. I saw something in them, something I had often seen in the mirror.

Our weapons were aimed at his chest. He did not order us to lower them, but passed a solemn, measuring gaze over each man before him.

The muzzles of the lasguns dropped away without a spoken word.

When his gaze reached me, I knew that he was taking my measure with senses that I could only guess at. Secretly, I had always thought myself special, better than the rest because of my dash of the sight. I believed that things were open to me in subtle ways, things that ordinary men could not perceive, but now I understood that what I lauded in myself was a fraction of what this giant could call upon.

'Ruafē Hecane,' he intoned, his voice low and booming. 'You have come a long way.'

He knew my name. He knew us all, every single man on the ship, I have no doubt of it. I opened my mouth to speak, but then he raised his head and there I saw the twinned sigils branded into his flesh.

On one side, a design like a scarab beetle. On the other, a circular star

surrounded by a nimbus of rays.

The grey armour did not hide his true nature from me. The legionary that stood before me was a warrior of the Thousand Sons - the sons of the mage-king Magnus. He was the scion of a *traitor* Legion. The last time I had seen his kind, their wargear red as madness, it had been at the head of an army of horrors laying waste to my home world.

THE SOLDIERS I had called my comrades did not turn to Horus's banner from cowardice, know that. The reasons are far more complex. They all turned upon pretexts that to them seemed reasonable. I do believe this. There was no mass mind control, no drugging and warping of self. That happened later, with the arrival of the horrors.

I had time to think on that while I waited in the brig, imprisoned there amongst the others who had been too slow to agree or too forthright to cover their doubts. Looking back, I was furious with myself. How had I ever been so naïve to think that I could foster rebellion in that moment? I am no eloquent speaker who could rally men with a stirring speech. I was just a fool who disagreed openly, and paid for it.

They were going to execute us. That was part of the new orders, but they found it hard to carry out the command. I think that was the last part of whatever resistance they had, slowly withering and dying beneath the Warmaster's eclipse.

At first I was frustrated and impotent with my anger. I cursed them all a hundred times for their weakness and trite duplicity, but eventually that rage was spent and I could do nothing but ruminate. Don't assume that I came to forgive my former squad mates - far from it - but I did come to understand them.

The young lieutenant who was the son of a great general, he who was always a friend to the line-officers like me, who never wore his braids with arrogance but managed to be one of the common men even though he was not like the rest of us - he said he would oppose, and yet he did not. Of all of us, he had the best chance to rally the men, but he kept his silence. He had so very much to lose, after all. He would have fallen so far.

The braggart sharpshooter who always had the answer to any question, cocksure and handsome, never fazed by any challenge or upset. He carried himself with such utter confidence that I couldn't believe he wouldn't slice

through any draconian edict like a sword point. He stood meekly, becoming a different, smaller man when the order came.

And then the bluff sergeant who always raged louder than I ever could, her jacket scarred by the number of times her rank had been broken and then earned anew. Her voice was strongest by any lights, but silent too in that moment. She was a crèche-mother, with two battle orphans as her charges, and I think she saw their faces that day, feared how life would go for them if she were gone.

It wasn't hard for my comrades to find an excuse to hate me. By accident of birth, I had already given it to them. A handful amongst the platoon - the sergeant and sharpshooter included - knew I had a touch of the sight on me. In combat, you come to learn such things from the soldiers who fight alongside you, whether you want to or not. Before, I had seemed like a lucky charm to them, some of the men even coming to me, secretive and hushed, to ask for a look-see over their aura. I couldn't work the gift like my mother had, but I tried, and it had been enough. In return, they had kept my secret from the Black Ships.

But now it was the reason to disown me. Someone whispered the word 'witch', and I knew that I would be executed first. All my life I had lived with the fear that the Silent Sisterhood would come to spirit me away, but now I saw that death would be the more likely outcome.

That night, I escaped the stockade with six others, and we found the resistance a day or two later.

'YOU WANT TO kill me,' he said. There was no judgement in the words.

'Yes,' I could not, *would not*, lie. 'Your kind brought horrors to my world. You destroyed everything I-'

I ran out of energy, and clutched the lasrifle to my chest. A boiling, churning hatred rose through me, and it made me feel strangely free.

The warrior smiled thinly. 'Not I, Ruafe Hecane. Those who did those things are oath-breakers, and my brothers no more.' He glanced at Breng. 'You. You know ship-tech, yes? Your skills are needed.' He walked back into the command centre and we followed him.

The dead were everywhere here, suffocated by the decompression. I saw where a viewport had been blown out, now made safe by a blast shutter. Too slow to save the bridge crew, it seemed.

Out of the windows there were alien stars and infinite blackness. Dallos's cards had played true after all - our ship was alone.

The legionary directed Breng to work at the drive control. 'Your vessel

suffered damage in warp transit. The rest of the convoy left you here, becalmed. I was summoned to see you complete the rest of your voyage.' Again, there was the smile. 'This ship carries precious cargo. I would warrant that none aboard know just how important you are.'

'We're just soldiers,' offered Yao. 'Soldiers and whelps. Fodder for the guns and cubs to be culled.'

A shadow passed over the face of the Thousand Son. 'Never say that. No one who fights in the Emperor's name is without worth.'

I glared at him. 'The sons of Magnus march with Horus. I saw it. I saw the fiends and the freaks that your brethren conjured, the-'

'Daemons?' His utterance of the word seemed to instantly drain all heat from the chamber. 'Yes, you saw those things. All of you have seen them.' He shook his head, regretfully. 'Do you not yet understand, soldier? You see patterns. Can you not see this one?' He pointed with the silver staff, taking in all of the men. 'Each of you has the beginning of a greatness. You may call it a sight, or a gift, even a curse.' He walked forward and deftly plucked Dallos's cards from the man's trembling hands. 'You know the touch of the warp. This is what makes you valuable.' He glanced at Zartine. 'That, and one other attribute.'

'We have all seen them,' said Yao. 'The... *horrors*.'

'Every wounded man on this ship has,' said the warrior. 'Why else do you fear sleep? But that fear can be taken from you, in time.'

Breng stood up, nodding to the drive console to show he had done all that he could. 'Ready.'

'The Navigators still live, safe in their isolation.' The legionary pointed out toward the ship's bow. 'We will set a course. The Regent of Terra, Lord Malcador himself, has need of those aboard this ship. He prepares, and you will all be part of his design. You... and the children waiting below.'

'How?' I asked, even as the pressure of an answer built itself in my mind's eye. 'What good are broken soldiers and war orphans to the Sigillite?'

'Your wounds will be healed. Those fit enough, young enough to bear the glory, may aspire to see their bodies remade, as I once did.' He touched his chest. 'You... we can be reborn in new purpose.' 'But why us?' asked Dallos, his hands knitting.

'You know why,' said the legionary, his gaze returning to me.

I don't know if the words that came next were from some place in my own thoughts, or if the Thousand Son made me speak them for him, but they were true and undeniable. 'Horus has brought a new kind of war to the galaxy. Bolters

and lasguns won't be enough to end it. A different kind of weapon is needed.'

'Aye.' The great figure nodded gravely. 'And those who do not perish in the tempering will be those weapons. You, and hundreds of others - lost child, common man and legionary alike, gathered in silence and secreted aboard ships like this one. Each soul in this room, aboard this vessel, has been declared dead. The lives you lived before this are as dust. Malcador has commanded this. So shall it be.'

Zartine was pale. 'Wh-where are we going?'

The legionary strode up to the navigation controls and laid his great hands upon them. 'A moon orbiting a ringed world, in the light of Great Sol itself. A place called Titan.'

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