

THE HONORABLE HERESY

SEDITION'S GATE

No forgiveness, no respite



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ARTEFACTS

Nick Kyme

‘At the edge of the Ghoul Stars, at the very fringe of Segmentum Ultima, my brother and I united on a mission of mercy. We emerged from warp transit wreathed in tendrils of psychic corpusant that clung to the scarred hulls of our ships - but we arrived too late. We had come to rein in a madman, yet could only bear witness to an atrocity.’

Fire crackled beneath the primarch’s words, though T’kell found it hard to discern if the sound came from his lord’s voice or the flaming torches on the walls. Whatever the cause, the air was filled with the reek of hot ash and cinder, carried along by Vulkan’s deep and rumbling baritone.

‘It wasn’t much to see, though I’m not sure if I expected it to be. So different from our home world, one to the other as night is to day... Nocturne is a terrible place to behold and, though I felt no fear as I emerged from my own capsule into the burning dawn, I could appreciate its feral majesty. Tall peaks of fire mountains, long plains of ash and sun-baked deserts, the stink of sulphur from the oceans - it was

bracing, deadly. From the void, Nocturne is a deep red orb, a blazing iris of fire. His was a dark, unremarkable world. It looked like a black marble, flawed by the grey smog of its polluted atmosphere.’ Vulkan scowled at the memory, as if he could taste those noxious fumes on his tongue. To be able to see it from orbit, those clouds must have been dense, but I am told they hid a plethora of sin. Even so, it doesn’t justify what he did. What we saw him do.’

A shadow passed across the primarch, the encumbent silence that followed this declaration filled by the sound of his heavy breathing. T’kell realised the heinous act that Vulkan was describing had left a mark deeper than any brand - though whether the perpetrator or the act itself was the cause, he did not know.

‘Darkness veiled it, a curse met out by an ugly moon called Tenebor. Its name meant “shadow”, an apt appellation. Here it was literal, for the moon cast a shroud of night over a world desperately in need of illumination. Before that moment, I hadn’t ever seen his home. Now I never will, and I cannot say I’m sorry. By every account I’ve heard, it was a wretched place, without possibility of transformation.

‘It began as a starburst, noiseless flashes in the vastness of space. They came from a dark, dagger-like vessel - his own flagship. At first, I could not quite reconcile what I was seeing with the deed. Great beams of stabbing light and swarms of torpedoes hurtled down onto his dark world. All attempts to hail his ship failed, of course. Our brother was in the mood for vengeance, not reason. He wanted to smite it, he would declare later, and expunge it of all sin in a single, purifying and insane action. The surface erupted in a chain of stark, flaring blooms and for the first time in its long, benighted history the world saw light. But it was the light of ending.’

Vulkan paused, as if wanting to choose his words carefully and recount what he remembered as clearly as he could.

‘You have to understand, my son, because this is the where the real horror of it all lay - there was precision in that orbital

bombardment. He wasn't just venting his wrath. He knew. Some flaw in the tectonic structure, it doesn't matter how or where, was targeted directly. I had thought we were witnessing petulance, the immature act of an immature soul with tragic consequences. But it wasn't. What we saw was premeditated.'

And so it was the perpetrator and the deed that had left the primarch so disquieted. T'kell could not imagine having to accept the reality of that. Vulkan went on.

'Cracks split the outer crust along fault lines, then spread, webbing in all directions. Fire colonised the landscape, virulent as a plague, until the entire surface of the world was burning. Then it was no more. In one cataclysmic explosion, its moon and every minor celestial body in sight of this destruction were gone.'

Lowering his head, Vulkan took a moment to regain his composure. When he looked up again his eyes blazed like the fires he had just described, the physical expression of anger he felt towards his brother for unleashing planetary genocide.

'Debris rained against us, stripping shields and battering the armour of our vessels. We rode the shock waves that emanated from the detonation but emerged scathed in ways that went beyond the dents and scrapes clawed into the ship's hull. An immense expulsion of heat faded and in its wake was dust and floating rock.

'Silence reigned for a while, until Horus conquered our collective sense of disbelief and gave us purpose. He was incensed at what our brother had done. He was also determined to run him down. I gave chase alongside, not knowing that Horus had tasked another primarch to slip around undetected. Between the three of us, we bracketed the world-murderer with our ships. There could be no escape. I thought Horus might open fire and kill him for what he had done, but in fact he was determined to redeem him. I wonder had there been one of us to do that later for Horus, would events have taken a different course now?'

Again, Vulkan paused in his iteration, as if imagining a reality where that was true - Horus the loyal son, instead of the rebel.

'It doesn't matter now. Nostramo died in those moments and though none of us could have realised it at the time, so did any chance for Curze's redemption. It all began with him. I think it will probably end that way too.'

Tkell watched his primarch closely, being sure not to speak until Vulkan had finished. Around them, the atmosphere of the forge was soothing, the heat and the penumbral darkness adding solemnity to the primarch's words. Ash and the smell of warm metal were redolent on a shallow breeze, but the sound of hammer strikes against the anvil was quiet for now; the forge's blacksmith had paused in his crafting.

'I can't fathom what must have been going through his mind, my lord. I have seen destruction on such a scale before, but to turn your guns on your own world with the express purpose of destroying it... We are generationally set apart from our sires, but at least I can understand your motivations'

'But not in this?' asked Vulkan. 'Not in the task I have asked of you?'

'I'll do my duty, primarch,' T'kell answered, somewhat defensively, as though not wanting Vulkan to think he was a poor son.

'But you don't understand the reason.'

Tkell confessed, 'I do not. Not for this.'

Vulkan leaned back in his seat. It was a simple block of stone, carved from the face of the mountain, worn to the primarch's shape by the many hours he had spent sitting and toiling over the artefacts he wrought with his Emperor-given craft. One particularly magnificent specimen was lying on his workbench, now finished. The hammer was a true work of art, and Tkell found his own crafts humbled by the weapon's beauty.

Vulkan saw him admiring it.

'Do you know why my father made all his sons different?' he asked.

T'kell shook his head. His war-plate whirred and groaned in sympathy. He had forged the armour himself, and it was as finely artificed as any suit of ceramite and adamantium in the XVIII Legion. Usually, it was crowned with a drake's head helmet, but T'kell would not dream of wearing that when in conference with his lord. The primarch always insisted on meeting the gaze of his warriors and expected the same in return. He would have reprimanded the forge master if he had hidden his eyes behind retinal lenses.

'I cannot even pretend to understand the depths of the Emperor's design or colossal intellect,' T'kell said humbly.

'Of course not,' Vulkan replied without condescension. 'I believe he did it as part of his vision for the galaxy. Though I know my brother Ferrus would disagree, each of us has an important role to play. Guilliman is the politician, the statesman. Dorn, the keeper of my father's house, and Russ is the dutiful watchman that keeps us all honest.'

'Honest?'

Vulkan smiled coldly. 'A joke that is no longer funny.'

'And Curze?' asked T'kell, his desire for knowledge a symptom of his Martian training. 'What is he?'

Vulkan's faced darkened.

'Necessary. Or so we all believed once.'

Mars was the reason for Vulkan's return to Nocturne and his brief reunion with his forge master. Resupply from the Mechanicum had been sparse and the primarch had been forced to deviate part of his fleet's course to the one munitions store he could rely on - his own home world. The fact that T'kell was stationed there on the fortress-moon of Prometheus only made it more timely.

'And Horus, and you?' T'kell pressed, his eagerness to understand interfering with his sense of propriety.

Vulkan indulged him. 'Horus was the best of us. Although, in our father's eyes, we were equals. I always felt like a child in his presence. Unless you've met him, it is hard to describe but my brother had this... way about him, an undeniable charisma that made you listen to his every word and then believe it without question. Back then, none of us thought anything but absolute loyalty lay in his heart, otherwise we

might have realised just how dangerous his persuasive aura could be.

'His role was leader and once I would have followed him to whatever end and for any purpose. But that pedestal has fallen, and there will be no righting it. As for me...' Vulkan laughed humourlessly, spreading his arms to encompass the forge and the vault beyond. 'I am my father's weapon-maker, but unlike Ferrus or Perturabo, I specialise in the unique.'

Tkell's gaze strayed to the immense vault door that dominated the back wall of the chamber as he recalled the many names and forms of the artefacts within.

'Like the hammer?' T'kell said, gesturing to the workbench.

Vulkan turned to regard it, lost for a moment as he ran his hand across Dawnbringer's head, the haft bound in firedrake hide, the gemstones and the esoteric device he had fashioned into its pommel.

'It is the single finest thing I have ever wrought,' he told the forge master, 'but it was never meant for me. I forged it for my brother, for Horns, and that is another reason for the task I must set for you.'

Vulkan left it alone, but did not avert his gaze from the hammer.

'It was after Nostramo, after Ullanor. My gift to him to commemorate his achievement. With Jaghatai's help we had captured Curze and brought him to heel. You have to understand, my son, nothing like this had ever happened before. For a primarch to act in the way Curze had, to do what he had done...'

The primarch shook his head.

'It was unconscionable. Yet, my brother had a solution.'

'Remake him,' Horns said proudly, and with enough enthusiasm and vigour to make the Lord of Drakes look up from his brooding.

Horns looked resplendent in his armour, a muscular sheath of pale ivory and jet black. It was a suit so fine that even the great blacksmith had to admit his envy of it.

He and Vulkan were alone in Horus's quarters on board the Vengeful Spirit, sitting in companionable silence when the primarch of the Luna

Wolves spoke. They shared a drink together, a heady broth native to Cthonia - Vulkan did not know its name, but appreciated it for its heat and potency.

He swilled the mixture around the cup, looking into the tiny maelstrom he had made, as if the answer he sought might be waiting for him somewhere within its depths.

Vulkan looked up, his eyes glowing as they always did in the dark confines of Horus's

private chambers. 'Tell me how, brother, for no one more than I wishes that to be!

'We can rehabilitate our brother!

At first even Horus's rhetoric could not sway him, and Vulkan looked more aloof than ever, concealed by the shadows. The first primarch's quarters were functional but well-appointed, even opulent. A fire raged in an ouslite hearth, a concession Vulkan felt sure Horus had made to make his guest more comfortable. Instead, the Lord of Drakes eschewed the light and heat of the fire, wondering why he hadn't disabused himself of this conference as Jaghatai had, though his gaze occasionally strayed to the flames.

'After this,' said Vulkan, angrily jabbing a finger towards the empty darkness and imagining the swathe of atmospheric dust that used to be Nostramo. 'How?'

Horus smiled in a way that suggested he already knew this would work, and had but to convince Vulkan of it.

'Each of us shall take him under our wing, nurture him! He gestured with his hands, miming the next part. 'Mould him into the weapon he needs to be, not the jagged implement he is right now!

Vulkan frowned, thinking of the midnight-clad prisoner they held, doubting the sagacity of his brother's suggestion.

'Think of it like this,' said Horus, his optimism unwavering. 'You are a weapon maker, the weapon maker. Curze is but an untempered blade that requires its edge honing. Remake him, as you would remake a broken sword, Vulkan!

There was a vibrancy to his eyes as Horus made his pitch, his certainty for his wayward brother's resurgence becoming infectious.



'I believed him,' said Vulkan, leaving the past behind. 'Curze was to be separated from the bulk of his Legion, in the hope that - free of Nostramo's malign influence - he could change. I would take him first, then Dorn... once he was healed.'

'Healed?'

Vulkan's expression turned rueful. His eyes met the forge master's. 'Curze had tried to kill Rogal.'

T'kell cursed under his breath at this admission.

The Praetorian of Terra?'

'I know of no other,' said Vulkan. 'For Horus's plan to work, it was vital that the relationship between Dorn and Curze be repaired. But after Kharaatan I knew we had erred. I don't know whom Horus had planned to put Curze with next, but we didn't get that far. The demands of the Great Crusade and his new position as Warmaster kept Horus in a distant orbit. I couldn't attend the Triumph at Ullanor, so I had not seen him in person since Nostramo. Years had passed without word between us, but I knew I must disturb him for

this. I had seen what was within Curze's heart. It was nightmarish and broken. I pitied my brother, hated his deeds but not him, and feared what he would do or become if allowed to continue.

'Horus and I met across a lithocast projection. I had already spoken to Dorn, who had returned to Terra by that point, and we were of the same mind. Foolishly, I thought Horus would be too. His initial greeting was warm enough, if a little more prickly than I had once known.'

'Brother Vulkan, what matter of great import do you come to me with that warrants my time and the disruption of our father's Crusade?'

The Warmaster stood amongst warriors on the bridge of his flagship, an array of sensorium and auguries suggested along the edges of the hololith. He wore different battleplate to their last meeting aboard the Vengeful Spirit, repainted in the deep sea green of his newly renamed Legion.

The Sons of Horus.

The undertone of condescension was hard to miss,' Vulkan said to T'kell. 'I have no doubt it was deliberate.'

'I apologise, brother, for taking you away from your duties, but I believe this matter is dire enough that it must come to your attention.'

Horus's eyes widened and Vulkan could not deny the sense that his brother was mocking him.

'It must? Well, then you had best speak of it, Vulkan, so I can gauge for myself just how dire the matter is.'

It was more than just the Warmaster's tone that worried Vulkan - something deeper, implied rather than overtly expressed. Though little of the ship was discernible behind Horus in the hololith, there was enough to suggest that it had been changed. Markings that had not been there before, strange symbols Vulkan did not know the meaning or significance of, were partly visible. At first, he considered they might be lodge sigils, as it was Horus who had instigated these traditions within the Legions. Vulkan had eschewed them, despite his brother's overtures, such bonding rituals redundant in the face of the Drake's own Promethean Creed.

But what he saw did not seem entirely related to lodge culture. There was something else, something inscrutable...

'It was as if another being were wearing my brother's skin,' Vulkan explained. 'Yet even that skin, with all its usual trappings, was a darker version of what I knew.'

'You believed him changed?' asked T'kell.

'It was more than that. I recounted what had happened on Kharaatan - Curze's mania, his suicidal, nihilistic tendencies. Despite the strange mood I had found him in, I expected Horus to be appalled.'

Vulkan paused, his jaw hardening at the memory.

‘But he laughed,’ he said, frowning incredulously. ‘I was angry and confused.’

‘I see nothing amusing in this, brother,’ Vulkan said, wondering what had happened to the noble warrior he had once so admired. ‘We have failed.’

Horus’s mirth turned to serious intensity. ‘On the contrary. You have succeeded.’

‘I do not see how.’

‘Curze cannot be tamed. His is a necessary evil, a monster to help us win this long war and keep our hands clean.’

‘How are they clean? They are tainted just as his, perhaps not with murder, but with complacency in the full knowledge of Curze’s homicidal pathology.’

Horns leaned in, his face filling the grainy hololith.

‘Every general needs a weapon of terror, an instrument to threaten the hardiest of his enemies with. You have sharpened ours well, Vulkan. From what you’ve told me, Curze has turned fear into a blade that I can wield.’

‘This is no weapon we should harness. His mind is broken, Horus. He needs help.’

‘He’s had help. Yours. And I am grateful for it.’ Horus leaned back again. ‘If there is nothing further?’

‘I saw something in Horus,’ Vulkan said to T’kell. ‘Something that stopped me from replying. It made me withhold the gift I had made for him. It made me realise that my pleas would forever fall on deaf ears. It has also driven me to my decision about the vault. Some weapons are simply too dangerous, in the wrong hands.’

Despite everything he had heard, T’kell still pleaded.

‘You are not the leader of a rebellion against the Emperor. It is not your army that we go to censure on Istvan. You are not Horus.’

Vulkan’s eyes strayed to the vault. ‘Why is it so important to you that we do not destroy them?’

‘Because they are your work and legacy. Destroy them and the galaxy will never see their like again.’

‘And would that be such a terrible thing, my son? As weapon maker, I have forged an arsenal that could cause unimaginable death and suffering. That is not a legacy I want.’

‘Then why fashion them in the first place?’

Vulkan leaned forward so he could place his hand on T’kell’s shoulder. The gesture dwarfed the forge master, but was paternal and reassuring.

‘Because it was my purpose, the one my father made me perform, and back then I did not believe any of us were the wrong hands. Through Curze and Horus, I now sadly know different. One maniac in our midst, a tragic error of nurture over nature that

I can understand and accept. Horus is rational. Not only that, he is the very best of us. I would freely admit that it terrifies me to think of him wilfully inciting rebellion. He is an enemy I would not wish to fight on any level, not least of which because he is my brother. And should my craft, what lies beyond those vault doors, be taken by Horus...

I cannot be responsible for that, T'kell.'

Vulkan rose to his feet to declare the matter closed, taking up the hammer Dawnbringer as he did so.

'Come. I'll show you what must be done.'

Together they crossed the smoke-thronged forge, their armour reflecting the lambent firelight, until they reached the door of the vault.

It was immense, as was the vault itself, and Vulkan used an icon he had fashioned as part of his armour to unlock it. The small fuller slipped into a recess wrought into the door's ornate surface. It was difficult to see, and T'kell realised he would not have found it without the primarch to show him.

One twist and the cavernous space was filled with the dull clunk of gears, pulleys and chains - the sound of an old mechanism churning to life. After a few seconds the door began to open, slowly but inexorably. It split down the middle, each half opening outwards and into the forge.

When the gap was wide enough, Vulkan stepped through and led T'kell into the vault after him.

As he passed through this slender portal, T'kell marvelled at how thick the doors were, at the sheer incredible artifice of their construction. Despite their ostensible function, they were as beautiful as any of Vulkan's creations. Had Ferrus Manus made these doors they would be cold, ugly things. Impervious, secure, but ultimately bland.

Where the Lord of Iron was a smith, Vulkan was an artisan, or so T'kell believed.

'You are the first and only one of my sons to see this vault,' said Vulkan. 'Held safe within its walls is every artefact I have ever forged.'

Muttering a word of command, Vulkan ignited the braziers around the room. Flickering torchlight cast the contents of the vault in tones of umber and crimson, filling every recess with shadow. Only hints of the wonders that the primarch had fashioned were revealed.

T'kell recognised some, and knew their names.

Obsidian Chariot.

Vermillion Sphere.

Light of Unmaking.

Some were constructed as simple blades; others were larger, more complex mechanisms. All were named.

Names had power, as Vulkan often said. To name a thing was to give it identity,

resonance. An enemy does not fear a man who wields a sword, but would give pause to one who held the Fang-blade of Ignarak. Such things mattered to the Lord of Drakes and were a part of his teachings.

‘Such wonders...’ breathed T’kell, scarcely able to comprehend his primarch’s magnificent labours.

Vulkan had set the hammer Dawnbringer down amongst the other treasures and was about to reach for his spear when he stopped, fingers poised to wrap around the haft. Sword and spear were his preferred weapons, Thunderhead having been destroyed earlier during the Great Crusade.

‘I hope your indecision represents a change of heart, primarch/’ ventured T’kell when he had recovered his composure enough to speak.

‘It does not. The artefacts must be destroyed. I am bound for Isstvan so cannot do it myself, which is why you must, T’kell.’

Then what is wrong, primarch?’

Leaving the spear where it stood shackled to the rack, Vulkan took up Dawnbringer.

‘I believed I had chosen poorly, although this feels right,’ he said. ‘Fitting. Perhaps its epithet will see my brother illuminated after all.’

T’kell looked on despairingly at the artefacts, desperate to preserve them and his lord’s legacy.

‘Primarch, I beseech you,’ he uttered, bowing to one knee. ‘Please do not ask me to do this. At least save something’.

Vulkan looked down at his forge master, then to the inside of the vault.

There are weapons here that can destroy worlds, my son...’

‘Or save them from destruction,’ T’kell replied, looking up at his lord, ‘in the right hands.’

‘Mine?’ asked Vulkan, meeting the forge master’s pleading gaze.

‘Yes! Or Lord Dorn, or Guilliman. Even Russ!’

Vulkan held T’kell’s gaze a moment longer before turning away.

‘Rise, forge master. I would not have one of my sons beg me on his knees.’ There was a snarl in Vulkan’s voice and for an instant T’kell thought he might have overstepped.

‘I am driven to it, primarch.’

Very well.’

‘My lord?’

Vulkan faced him.

‘I said, very well. Something should remain. If I destroy everything, then I have given up on hope and seeing loyalty and honour endure in my brothers. I won’t do that.’

T'kell visibly relaxed, the relief at his primarch's words evident on his face.

'You are to remain here, T'kell. You won't come to the Isstvan System - your place is now on Nocturne and Prometheus.'

'But, primarch-'

'Do not defy me a second time,' Vulkan warned. 'I am not that tolerant.'

T'kell bowed his head in contrition.

'You shall become Forgefather, and keeper of the artefacts in this vault.'

'Forgefather?' asked T'kell, frowning. 'Am I not your forge master, my lord?'

'Of course. A legionary can be more than one thing, T'kell. I am entrusting you with this duty, just as I entrusted you with the vault.'

'What duty, primarch? Name it, and it shall be done.'

To act as custodian. To swear you will protect these artefacts and should anything happen to me, ensure they are well hidden, far from those who would seek to use them poorly.'

T'kell saluted vehemently. 'I swear it, Lord Vulkan.'

'Good. Choose seven to remain, and only seven. One for each of our realms on Nocturne.'

There are thousands in here, primarch. How can I possibly-'

'Indeed there are,' said Vulkan, tying the hammer off around his belt and reaching for his gauntlet. Kesare's drake scale mantle was already hanging around his broad shoulders.

'Seven, Forgefather, that is what your primarch decrees.' Vulkan was leaving, his mind now firmly on a reckoning with Horus.

'I go to join with Ferrus's fleet,' he called back to T'kell. 'See it is done before I return.'

He walked away bound for the spaceport, leaving T'kell behind.

The Forgefather regarded the contents of the vault, trying to contemplate the impossible task before him.

'Seven...'

THE HARROWING

Rob Sanders

Let it be shown that at elapsid/nullus-beta, Dartarion Varix of the First Hort, Third Harrow and strike commander of the Alpha Legion, allowed his hearts once again to beat to the rhythm of war. Operative-unit 55/Phi-silon observes mission subsequence initiations, while maintaining full noospheric and haptic integration.

Gamma, delta, epsilon... commence.

New target: Mechanicum super-heavy ark freighter Ommissiax, registered out of the Heliodyne shipyards with charters for forge worlds on the Dextura shipping lanes. At the time of action-initiation, the Ommissiax is under the command of Arkmaster Manus Cruciam, with Magos Dominus Oronti Praeda assigned to security measures and Collegium-Mandati Jerulian Hax responsible for temple-freight transportation and ritual observance. Deific-cargo inspected at Heliodyne and logged as Titan Battle Group Astramax of the Legio Perennia, fresh from inception at the Gallileon temple-forge, Bronta-Median.

Worlds sundered in the name of the Machine-God: none.

Battlegroup confirmed kills: none.

Ranking Princeps Majoris Alvar Pallidon of the Warmonger-class Titan Abyssus Edax. Tribute destination recorded at Bronta-Median as the Solar System. Manifests list Ordo Reductor siege machines, two hundred battle tanks and armoured transports of various signification ready for force allocation, as well as five hundred suits of Mark IV Legiones Astartes battleplate, intended for the VII Legion. Newly-appointed Fabricator General Kane to personally receive cargo at Terra. Wayfarage estimated at two solar months.

Transit interrupted twenty-two days into voyage after reception of new orders and subroutines from Gaius Trasq, Fabricator Ancillaris - the Ommissiax and Mechanicum light cruiser escort Dentilicon ordered to break warp at the Gnostica System and report to the garrison world of Callistra Mundi.

I patrol the vaulted cargo-chamber of one of the ark freighter's many sub-holds. My true name is long forgotten, but my designation is 55/Phi-silon. I am sparatoi, a 'sown man' and agent operative of the Alpha Legion. I adjust my disguise: ocular-mask, tattered cloak, battery-pack and las-lock rifle. I present as a Mechanicum tech-thrall, one of thousands throughout the vast ship, assigned to onboard security and the mind numbing patrol of the vessel's holds.

My enhancements are real. My disguise. My sacrifice. My mind, however, is still my own. The Alpha Legion needs agents who can think for themselves. I was thrall to the XX Legion long before I went under the bladesaws of augurnauts and surgeo-cyberseers, volunteering for the adaptive surgeries that would make my disguise complete.

I kneel before the artistry and craftsmanship of Legiones Astartes battleplate. Rows and rows of paintless suits. Their systems await designation and the honour of Legion colours. They are blisteringly new. Spread throughout their number are suits that still sport their tarps from quality-control and sample testing at Bronta-Median. The fabric flaps in the perverse air currents that afflict a vessel of the ark freighter's size.

The army of empty suits is indeed a wonder. A blessed expression of

the Ommissiah's divine will. To an observer, however, such reverence might appear odd or misplaced in a wretched thrall, which is why I phased the auspex and lonely pict-feed lenses monitoring the deck before re-routing the servitors scheduled to inventory the sub-hold.

'Report,' Dartarion Varix orders.

Like the fifty Alpha Legionnaires of his veteran demi-hort, he is hidden. They are all living weapons, concealed and deadly. Like the fang retracted within the serpent's jaws, they are primed with death, ready to be revealed, waiting for the moment to strike.

That moment is now. One of the tarp-draped suits of powered plate moves.

Then another. Then another.

Not all of the suits are empty. Now that their strike commander has broken dissimulatus, the veteran Alpha Legionnaires of the first Hort, Third Harrow can reveal themselves. Auto-suggestion engages. The implanted sus-an membrane of the legionnaires' transhuman physique responds. Their state of suspended animation breaks. Hearts are allowed to beat once more.

Punctuating the ranks of motionless suits, armoured Alpha Legionnaires begin to move. They tear the tarps from their armoured forms to reveal the indigo blue and cerulean blaze of their plate, the serpentine iconography that coils itself about their power-armoured limbs, and the infernal glow of optics burning to life.

'You have been monitoring, my lord?' this unit asks.

'I have.'

Then you know that our warp translation is complete.'

'I felt it.'

A legionnaire approaches, almost indistinguishable from his brothers.

'Strike commander.'

'Prime,' Varix acknowledges him. Your host is ready?'

'Always, my lord. Permission to secure the sub-hold.'

'Authorised.'

The Ommissiax is passing through a debris field of remnant rock and planetesimals approaching the edge of the Gnostica System,' I report through the modulations of my skull-riveted mask. As I do, the Alpha Legionnaires break formation, spreading out across the sub-hold. Umbra-pattern boltguns and sickle-mags of various ammunitions are handed out from cargo crates, while bulkheads and blast doors are secured.

'Is the system contested?'

'Planet-wide mutiny on Callistra Mundi, the primary world of the system,' I continue. 'Imperial auxilia garrison world and fleet anchorage.'

'Who leads the rebellion in the Warmaster's name?'

‘You’re not going to like it.’

‘My primarch’s objectives have been compromised and my mission parameters expanded beyond the remit of the forces at my disposal. What is there to like?’

‘Long-range voxmissions and noospherics betray encrypted legionary signatures’

‘Alpha Legion,’ Varix confirms.

The strike commander takes this revelation in his stride. Even to my cogitator-afflicted brain, this is a surprise. Have the heads of the hydra become tangled?

‘Perhaps they too are beyond their mission parameters,’ I offer, but Varix has moved on.

‘No,’ he says. This is something else. Status?’

‘It’s a mess,’ I admit, ‘and perhaps as their commander intended. Forces on the ground, in the air and in the void are declaring for the Emperor or the Warmaster.’

The Legion?’

‘No sightings or pict captures reported,’ I tell him. The Alpha Legion on Callistra Mundi have yet to reveal themselves.’

They will,’ Varix assures me. The Ommissiix...’

‘Has been re-routed to deploy its god-machines,’ I inform the strike commander. The battle group is to crush the rebellion.’

‘Well we can’t have that,’ Varix says. His words are laced with a dark humour. ‘We have to at least give my brother-commander a chance. He’s barely begun.’

‘Forgive me, lord,’ I venture, ‘But I am more concerned with our own disposition. The Ommissiix will be met and intercepted. Both traitors and loyalists will seek to harness its apocalyptic cargo.’

‘Well, quite,’ the strike commander says. He is already several steps ahead of me. ‘Is the Dentilicon still with us?’

‘Yes, my lord.’

‘Prime,’ Varix calls.

The Alpha Legion officer acknowledges his commander: ‘Ready, my lord.’

This cargo will never reach the Solar System as planned,’ Varix tells us both. ‘We shall not arrive at Terra, but need is great out here. The battle group will undoubtedly be sucked into the conflict. I’m authorising secondary objectives and initiating proprietary action pseudaspis from a range of forty-four tactically antiphonus responses.’

‘Yes, my lord.’

‘I’m enacting these contingent protocols and pursuing secondary objectives under my own recognisance. These supersede my primarch’s orders. I don’t need your concordance, but for the identic record I want it.’

‘Pseudaspis, aye,’ the prime agrees.

I nod also. The Ommissiax carries a considerable force escort, my lord. We are not outfitted for this.’ Dartarion Varix nods his helm slowly. ‘Plus, loyalist forces have a void presence throughout the system. At least nine cruisers and assorted escorts.’

‘Duly noted, but that will not stop us. The order is given. The ark freighter is to be taken. Activate our agents. All legionnaires are authorised to enact kill-shot protocols. The Mechanicum is our enemy. We shall explain that fact to them with overwhelming force. In one hour, I want the Dentilicon neutralised and both the Ommissiax and her payload in the Alpha Legion’s hands. No one must ever know we were here. There can be no Mechanicum survivors. Is that understood?’

‘Yes, my lord,’ I reply.

His lieutenant salutes. ‘It will be done.’

Then let us begin.’

There are few who have experienced an Alpha Legion assault and have lived to report it. The XX Legion does not leave witnesses in its wake without good reason. A devastating combination of imagination, flawless coordination and calculated cruelty are the hallmarks of their particular brand of warfare. They dissemble. They disorientate. Then, with their foe’s resources and nerve stretched to breaking, they initiate a final attack so overwhelming in sheer force and tactical relentlessness, that their enemies’ efforts to resist collapse like a dying star.

Warfare becomes annihilation. Battle becomes slaughter. Like an algebraic equation that has to be resolved, the Alpha Legion end their opponents to the last man, unless they conceive of some nefarious usefulness for those at their cold mercy.

For the captured, these are often fates worse than a battlefield death.

At elapsid/rho-nu-alpha, for the Arkmaster Manus Cruciam and his Mechanicum forces, the assault begins. By tapping into the ship’s noospheric conduits, this unit deduces that sanctioned scribe Quorvon Krish has just completed echo-plasmic transcription of the astropath Herontius Vame’s latest message from the Fabricator Ancillaris when he feels the excruciating stab of pain in his jaw. As one of Dartarion Varix’s sparatoi agents, Quorvon Krish has suffered an implant in his tooth that receives signals and transmissions in code. Utilising primitive electromagnetic spectrums that have not been employed by the Mechanicum in thousands of years, the transmissions are unlikely to be traced or intercepted. Each jolt of electricity through the bone corresponds to letters of a coded

alphabet, in terms of length and sequence. It is an effective, if agonising, method of coordinating Alpha Legion forces already in situ on board the Ommissiax. This allows for the flexibility required of an Alpha Legion action.

D-R-O-P T-H-E C-U-R-T-A-I-N

Elapsid/sigma-lambda-digamma observes Quorvon Kitrica pull a snub autopistol from his robes, attach a suppressor and riddle Herontius Vame with ragged holes. It must feel good.

Kitrica might allow himself that. He is twice the telepath that the truculent Vame was or ever would be. Lady Gandrella - who is little better - is also met with the staccato of thudding shots, as is Tech-Acolyte Hadreon as he returns from work on the visual logs, and sanctioned scribes Ransistron and Ezrail.

B-R-I-N-G T-H-E S-I-L-E-N-C-E

At exactly the same time, Transmechanic Nedito Orx receives his activation and orders. He strangles his locum with the shaft of a coghammer, and then brains his team of transmat servitors. By elapsid/sigma-pi-epsilon, the ark freighter's long range communications array has been plasma-fused, and the vox-relay is a coghammer-mangled mess.

In the following five elapsids, the Omnissiax suffers a series of catastrophes the like of which its operational history has not known in a thousand years of service.

Radiation leaks erupt on deck four and sub-decks five through eight. Reserve coolant chambers for the ark freighter's plasma drive are evacuated, cold-flooding parts of the engineering section and initiating a sequence of further malfunctions. For a moment the torsion coils, cooling after warp translation, register a Geller field spike so profound that the magos empyr initiates a code-vermillion shutdown of all associated systems and sections. An electromagnetic pulse in the open-core ionisation cell stack causes sporadic power and vox transmission loss throughout the ark freighter, while artificial gravity experiences an unexplained calibration flux and

continues to do so, reducing or intensifying agency by as much as twenty-five per cent in different parts of the vessel. Several exterior voidlocks, situated both port and starboard, are blown, transforming access ways and chambers from a howling maelstrom to a labyrinth of closed emergency bulkheads. Rune banks relay false probabilities, indicating that the hull breach was likely caused by the Omnissiax passing through a particle storm, probably the tail-wake of a traversing comet.

By elapsid/tau-xi-alpha, the priests, engineers and auto-savants rushing about the vessel are officially overreached by the myriad calamities now afflicting their ship.

Logista Minora Auxabel is not one of them. She is doing exactly what she is supposed to be doing under the circumstances - rapidly assimilating the data-storm from her cipher engines and drawing logical conclusions. At elapsid/tau-xi-theta, she transmits her assessment to Arkmaster Manus Cruciam and Magos Dominus Oronti Praeda.

Conclusion: the Omnissiax is under attack.

In such circumstances, overall command reverts to the magos dominus. There isn't even need of a discussion.

In all likelihood the target of the attack is deemed to be the ark freighter's precious cargo, rather than the ark freighter itself, rendering Manus Cruciam's authority superfluous to command priorities. The arkmaster takes his place with Logista Auxabel. Their duty is to get the Omnissiax fully functional, as soon as possible. With the vox transmission and noospherics of all security thralls, gun servitors and roaming servo-skulls patched through the communications of Oronti Praeda's ward force, the enemy's movements are then fed straight

back to the Alpha Legion through their planted sparatoi agents.

Agents like this unit, 55/Phi-silon.

As the strike commander predicts, the magos dominus does not waste time in following his own protocols and taking precautionary measures. Ordnamats are scrambled to the weapons short-decks,

and the ark freighter's meagre complement of defensive cannonry is charged and run out. Security on the bridge is tripled, and the ward force of Collegia temple-thralls, Thallaxii shock troops, Legio Cybernetica battle automata and tech-guard of the Seventh Cell-Sentinel Entropriad are directed with all despatch to the payload sections and the cargo bays. Seeing that they are led by the veteran skitarii Arch-Tribune Dynamus Koda and funnelled through the accessible sections and passageways, Dartarion Varix sends his Alpha Legionnaires to meet them.

Elapsid/omega-xi-zeta sees the first official exchange of gunfire between the Legiones Astartes aboard the Ommissiix and loyal Mechanicum forces. Psi-Sigma IV-of-XI loses his artificially augmented life to Legionnaire Phasal Scolton of the First Hort, Third Harrow. As a living auspex, Psi-Sigma IV-of-XI had been leading advance skitarii squads of the Seventh Cell-Sentinel Entropriad through the crew domiciles. Scolton had ordered flamers used on the quarters before having his legionaries withdraw. As the Mechanicum ward force advances, the intense heat and the flames renders main auspex frequencies useless. The Alpha Legion withdraw within the inferno, their battleplate offering more protection against the flames than their enemies can expect.

Slowly, calmly, Legionnaire Scolton leans around the passageway apex and brings his boltgun level with Psi-Sigma's hooded, optic-bulbous head. By the time the construct is ready to confirm a lifesign, Scoltan's finger is on the trigger.

The blast of bolt-fire cuts straight through the living auspex, before chewing up the Entropriad skitarii behind who shield their vulnerable organics from the flames. The Alpha Legion weave their way confidently through the domiciles in alternating columns, slamming their pauldrons into cover whilst watching over their opposite numbers as they advance. The choreographed tactical advance is a thing of serpentine beauty. Phased plasma fire and las-beams slice through the flames from the disciplined ranks of skitarii, but the Legion will not be denied. Their advance is murderously economical. Every blinding lick of flame and every obstructive piece of cover is their ally.

The Entropriad, undoubtedly veterans in their own class, do the only thing an enemy of the Alpha Legion can do.

They die.

By elapsid/khi-nullus-delta, Arch-Tribune Dynamus Koda has watched enough lifesigns fade on his intracranial display that he orders the Castallax battle automata of the 13th Maniple Proxim/ Mephistra Cohort into the flames.

Several decks below and running parallel to the Phasal Scolton's advance, Dartarion Varix and a squad of the veteran-hort legionnaires wade through coolant on the flooded sub-decks.

I am with them. The syrupy darkness of the fluid cascades down through the levels as maintenance floor-hatch after maintenance floor-hatch is popped, and the Alpha Legion make their way down through the ship.

There are encounters. Servo-drones hurtle up corridors, filling sections with flashing lamps and the wail of klaxons. Groups of gun-servitors march their way past with cybernetic indifference, all unsightly with enhancement and baggy flesh. While canopy formations are maintained and boltguns aimed, Varix has his legionnaires retract behind cover or sink back into the shadows. All constructs on board the Mechanicum vessel will die - the strike commander has so ordered - but the Alpha Legion are not given to moments of rash opportunism. The unplanned end of one enemy might put at risk the meticulously arranged end of a thousand more. There is no glory in the individual death, only the communal honour of a victorious action executed to perfection.

Once down in the bowels of the ship, the ancient sludge of the bilge smearing their armoured boots, I lead my Alpha Legion masters to what on bank schemata is labelled as the fore-keel trunk distribution nexus. On a diagram grid it is nothing more than a 90/120 petawatt power drain associated with a malfunctioning flush drive that was

4,263rd of 16,457 in a rolling programme of maintenance repairs, and scheduled to be addressed post-voyage. Standing before it in the frosted sludge, with methalon gas drifting through their number like a moorland mist, the Alpha Legion find what they are looking for.

A jury-rigged iso-store of ten cryopods. A team of sparatoi agents that they have sown deep within the ship. I get to work immediately, initiating a rapid thaw. There is no standing on ceremony. Varix and his legionnaires also pitch in, disconnecting pipes and cables, bringing their very own Titan crew back from the brink of semi-death.

‘How long?’ Varix demands.

‘Once out of containment,’ I tell him, ‘Princeps Darrioux and his crew are scheduled to have two hours with Abyssus Edax for core cycles, interfacing and spiritual observance.’

‘How long to simply jack the god-machine?’ the strike commander puts to me.

‘What do you need, my lord?’

‘Automotive function and weapons systems only,’ Varix insists.

‘Forty-five...’ The dead-eyed optics of the strike commander’s helm turn on me. I hastily revise my estimate. ‘Twenty minutes, my lord.’

‘Time elapsed since mission start?’

‘Elapsid/khi-rho-iota-epsilon,’ a legionnaire tells him.

With the thaw cycle initiated, Varix and his veteran-hort begin to exit the chamber and push on through the ark freighter bilge.

‘Explain to Princeps Darrioux the new constraints of our situation,’ Varix tells me. ‘As per his original orders, he is to bring his crew up through the forge-temple sump ducts. My legionnaires will engage the temple guard and give him the distraction he needs to get to the

Titan. I want Abyssus Edax operational and ready to enact firing sequences in twenty minutes. Understood?’

‘Yes, strike commander.’

‘When all this is done, bring me the telepath Quorvon Krish.’

With that, Dartarion Varix is gone.

Elapsid/khi-tau-kappa-delta. The Omnissiax is in a state of controlled chaos. Though neither the legionnaires of the XX nor the constructs of the Mechanicum are given to such descriptions, it remains an undeniable fact that the ark freighter is suffering a cascade of malfunctions while being ripped apart from the inside by firefights and explosions moving through the decks.

For Magos Dominus Oronti Praeda and Logista Minora Auxabel the surprise attack is a sudden influx of new data to be addressed within a cold and ongoing assessment. For Strike Commander Dartarion Varix it is satisfaction denied: the promise of victory in every boom and scream. It is the clunk-click perfection of a chambered round, the slick mechanical unity of all parts working together and acting as one. Death premeditated. The sickening realisation of the target in sight. The disorientation of the muzzle’s thunderous announcement. The shock. The pain. The rich futility of the moment in which an enemy knows that they are done. Then, the neatness and artistry of death. Only then does the killing come to an end and the Alpha Legion allow themselves the cool pride - and perhaps even pleasure? - of reporting a mission accomplished.

And so the relentless havoc unfolds. I have sent the Titan crew on with their orders. The telepath Quorvon Krish is by my side. Together we report to our strike commander.

At elapsid/khi-epsilon, tech-adepts of the 13th Maniple Proxim/ Mephistra Cohort report unacceptable losses in the crew domiciles. Later analysis would attribute these losses to a winning combination of Banestrike ammunition, shredding its way through the automata plate and workings, and expert marksmanship. In particular, kill-shots targeted the constructs’ crania-canopy and the vulnerable neural cortex beneath. Arch-Tribune Dynamus Koda is forced to once again plug the gaps created by fallen Castallax automata with skitarii from the Seventh Cell-Sentinel Entropriad. The situation becomes so dire that the Arch-Tribune himself must take up arms. It has been six years, two hundred and fourteen days and twelve minutes Terran-standard since the skitarii commander has personally fired a cybernetic attachment.

He does not receive the honour of doing it again.

Legionnaire Phasal Scolton blows the back of his head out with an economical burst of fire from a concealed position in the dark recesses of a maintenance booth. Skull and fragments of intracranial tech shower the passage. By elapsid/khi-epsilon-kappa-theta, Koda’s own auspectral signature is confirmed lost and skitarii sentinel Inx Voltar is cursorily promoted to the rank of sub-tribune. At Magos Dominus Praeda’s insistence, Voltar’s first recorded act of leadership is to order the Entropriad to withdraw to the forward hold. It is not considered by the sub-tribune to be a decorous act, but he complies with his protocols regardless.

Concurrent with the unstoppable slaughter rolling through the crew domicilia, Logista Minora Auxabel receives a data-confluence of further hostilities. Limited surveillance coverage identifies enemy contingents wearing Mark IV battleplate. Fragmented reports bear witness to rank, insignia and Legion colours. Auxabel calculates for the magos dominus only a thirty-seven point six per cent chance that the enemy belong to the XX Legion. This estimate is based on incomplete capture-testimony, and what little information the Mechanicum runebanks hold on the Legion's operational histories during the recent movements of the Great Crusade. Nonetheless, it is the greatest likelihood at her disposal.

Oronti Praeda demands further enhancement and tactical options but the logista has little to give him. Having fought alongside the Alpha Legion at Cypra Chasmis, the magos dominus knows that the XX favour the long game and calculates that the best chance for the beleaguered Ommissiix is to hit the Legiones Astartes with everything they have in one devastating push.

At Praeda's command, any construct with a martial rating of any description is ordered into battle. They are directed to the emerging hostilities near the temple forge section of the forward hold,

and to the starboard auxiliary gun decks where enemy targets have been observed entering through malfunctioning voidlocks from outside the ship. They are also directed to the portside flight decks where security thralls are being decimated among the skiffs and freight ambulatories, and to the sub-levels where gun servitors and electro-priests of the Battle Group Astramax-attendant 'Grexx Anbarica' hold their ground against targets emerging from maintenance decks. As the firefight rages several levels below their boots, Praeda considers it prudent to despatch a Thallaxii cohort of cyborg shock troops to crush the rising advance.

'What of our own security?' Arkmaster Manus Cruciam asks across the bridge, his voice clearly audible to me through the noospheric link. It is not an unreasonable question. Beyond auspex-drone weaponry, only deck thralls and Praeda's personal ward engines remain.

'Our security,' the magos dominus tells him, 'nay, our survival, depends upon the Ommissiix reaching Callistra Mundi as soon as possible.' Logista Auxabel nods her slow agreement. 'Preoccupy yourself with that, arkmaster.'

Like a ceramite gauntlet, the Alpha Legion have the ark freighter in their grasp. With every bolt-smashed construct and every scoured section, Dartarion Varix tightens his grip. Alpha Legionnaires of the First Hort, Third Harrow weave their way through the expanse of the ark freighter like serpents through the undergrowth. Little stops their advance - not the vessel's soulless thralls, not the battle-automata with their lumbering movements and limited protocols and not the battle-hardened skitarii. Elapsid/khi-phi becomes elapsid/khi-omega. Elapsid/khi-omega becomes elapsid/betakhi-rho. With each passing second, Mechanicum constructs die. Some are blasted apart in showers of hydraulic fluid and shattered components, while others simply thud to their knees as Alpha Legionnaires put single bolt-rounds through skulls and central cogitators alike.

Veterans of First Hort, after exiting the vessel and climbing along the exterior hull, now re-enter through blasted voidlocks. As they

progress through the side of the ship like a burrowing worm, they open bulkheads before them and evacuate entire sections of Mechanicum warrior-constructs, who are dragged and dashed along the trail of howling corridors that the Alpha Legion left in their wake. For these unfortunate servants of the Omnissiah, only the frozen void beckons.

Gradually, moment by moment, even with staid reports of rapid successes pouring in over the vox-channels, this unit deduces that Dartarion Varix begins to feel denied. He misses the screams. The begging seems strangely absent. The blood-soaked intensity, the futility and the desperation that the Alpha Legion creates in enemy forces is found to be lacking in the cold, calculating servants of the Machine-God. Even as Varix and his legionnaires put bolt-rounds through the dead, oil-black eyes of servitors and the iron masks of tech-thralls, the constructs make no sound but the crash of their augmented bodies on the deck. Bolt-blasted battle automata grind to a statuesque halt, while even the psycho-indoctrinated skitarii merely give a grunt as the air of their last breath escapes their artificial lungs. The strike commander is no fear-hungry Nostroman monster, nor one of Fulgrim's deviant Children. The howls and anguish of the fallen are not a perversity to be savoured. For the Alpha Legion, executing the enemy, their mission directives and their duty with peerless skill, the screams of the dying are simply a professional courtesy.

At elapsid/betakhi-rho-gamma-digamma, Alpha Legionnaire Duceus Ladon dies right next to his strike commander. Thrall soldiers on the stairwell part to admit the Thallaxii - cyborg shock troops, armoured from head to foot in powered plate. The crackling arcs of their lightning guns sear down through the stairwell to cook Ladon right there in his armour. Varix snarls. It is a waste. Ladon was an excellent legionary, and had served with him on his last five actions. Varix hears the heavy clunk of the Thallaxii's ambulatory systems as they lock down their position.

It is the first in a succession of losses for the strike commander.

Elapsid/betakhi-rho-omicron-delta sees Legionnaire Argan reported dead in the forward hold, the victim of a skitarii grenade clutch. Elapsid/betakhi-sigma-mu-theta witnesses the passing of Orman Zalco, tom apart by the vice-claws of a Castallax battle automaton. Seconds later, Squad Sergeant Xantina is gunned down by a ceiling-mounted rotary cannon, its auspectral wetware returning unexpectedly to life as engineers in some distant part of the ship begin to repair some of the damage done to the ark freighter's systems.

The Mechanicum are unleashing everything they have in an effort to stop the Legionnaires in their tracks. Dartarion Varix expected as much of their commander. Indeed, he is relying on such a strategic response. Warrior-victims of Alpha Legion assaults were like traditionally tormented, wild beasts - wounded and disoriented, they were most dangerous when they were near their end. Varix allows a thin smile to find its way across his face. Actions speak louder than words. He can suddenly see the suppressed emotion of the Omnissiah's servants in their tactical responses. They are losing their ship and becoming increasingly desperate. They are no longer safe in their data and equations. They entrust their survival to gambles and risks - even if they are calculated ones.

'Armoured targets,' Varix announces over the vox.

Immediately, sickle clips are exchanged in boltguns; Banestrike bolts will make short work of the armoured Thallaxii. In the bloodshot gloom of the stairwell with klaxons blasting and emergency lamps flickering on and off, Varix takes cover as streams of lightning blast down past him. The Thallaxii are not moving.

The cohort's orders are clear: hold the Alpha Legion on the sub-levels. The same is being reported across the Ommissiax. Alpha Legionnaires held at choke points and gauntlets. Mechanicum forces are bedding in, establishing heavily defended positions. It would take more than a demi-hort to work their way through such a

nightmare, especially upholding the kill ratio that the Alpha Legion had come to expect. Like a regicide player, Varix has always thought little of sacrificing individual pieces as part of a strategy to win the game. This, however, would be wasteful slaughter. The Mechanicum are no longer intent on destroying their attackers. Such a strategy has cost them. They had been caught up in the slick machinery of the Alpha Legion's relentless onslaught. Now their intention seems to be to jam that machinery and hold out for the reinforcements that they are sure to find at Callistra Mundi.

Dartarion Variux cannot allow that. Besides, the assault is about to enter its final stage.

By elapsid/betakhi-epsilon-gamma the decision is made, the order given.

'All legionnaires,' he calls across the encrypted channel, 'call in the location of sighted enemy contingents and then hold your own position.' As the lightning rages about him like the judgement of an angry god, the Alpha Legion strike commander listens to the squads and coordinates coming in. Varix retracts a gauntlet as crackling impact energies reach out for him across the grille of the stairwell. 'Darrieux, tell me you have that.'

He does. The data has been relayed. His voice reaches through the chaos, almost drowned out by the relentless storm of anabarcic streams coursing down through the stairwell.

'Abyssus Edax online,' I tell him from the command deck of the colossal Warmonger Titan. 'Moderati Tessera has a hololithic fix on received coordinates. Confirm - request for fire support received. Stand by, ten seconds.'

'Be accurate,' Varix orders. 'Be devastating.'

With bolt blasts and lightning streams exchanged about him, Varix pauses. He undoubtedly enjoys the promise of what is to come, the power of the god-machine at his command. It is elapsid/betakhi-epsilon-xi exactly - the assault about to reach its climax.

Dartarion Varix switches back to the open channel. 'Incoming...'

The Titan opens fire from its berthing damps and the ship's torment can be felt immediately. The Ommissiax trembles with the devastation unleashed within it. The sound is excruciating. Decking. Superstructure. Hull. Metal blasted to shrapnel. Ancient architecture twists and warps before the onslaught. Gaping holes and paths of destruction cut through the ark freighter's interior. Even at a distance, the sound of the god-machine's weaponry is a horrific boom. Through passageways, chambers and sections, the rhythmic thunder of the Titan's colossal gatling blaster reaches the Alpha Legion. The rate of fire is staggering - literally. The decks shudder beneath their boots. Huge calibre shells rip up through the ship,

decimating entire compartments and the Mechanicum constructs holding position within them. Skitarii soldiers, thralls and automata are blasted into oblivion as the wrath of the god-machine chews through the ark freighter.

Around Dartarion Varix, the ship feels like it is dying, like some great, mortally wounded beast.

Then he hears the Titan's quake cannon.

The deck bucks and even the strike commander almost loses his footing. Like a gargantuan gut-punch delivered amidships, the ordnance rockets through the vessel, destroying everything in its path. Again and again it fires, punctuating the almost constant roar of the gatling blaster.

'Boots,' Varix calls as one of the quake cannon shells blasts a path out through the ark freighter's hull. Engaging the mag-lock anchors on their armoured boots, the Alpha Legionnaires hold positions as air, debris and the ragdoll bodies of thralls and servitors howl past them, sucked through the labyrinth of passageways and out into space. Dartarion Varix slams my thrall-form into the wall and anchors me there. Quorvon Krish receives similar treatment.

In the vacuum I can hear nothing. The klaxons are silenced, but the emergency lighting still flashes, bathing us all in a bloody twilight. I can barely imagine the reaction on the bridge, and the data - or the lack of it - that must be greeting the strike commander's Mechanicum opposite. Their great push to meet their enemy head

to head and pin them down in gauntlets and bottle necks has rapidly evolved into a catastrophe. While the Alpha Legion contingents hold the safety of their reported positions, Abyssus Edax has decimated the Mechanicum forces despatched to hold them in check. Already stretched by the diversionary calamities unleashed by the sparatoi agents and then forced to repel a Legiones Astartes assault from within the very ship they were garrisoning, even the cold constructs of the Machine-God might be tempted to lose their nerve. Perhaps even their faith?

That is not enough. Not for the XX legion. Not for the strike commander.

The hydra's heads must strike in unison. The mission cannot be declared accomplished until a disorientated enemy, hit from all sides simultaneously and bereft of hope, falls to the final bolt-round. As the howling evacuation becomes an eerie silence and the reverberating cacophony of titanic gunfire dies away in the void, Varix nods to a nearby legionnaire who closes the bulkhead behind them.

'Report in,' the strike commander calls.

One by one, legionnaires from across the ark freighter announce themselves. With air pressure re-establishing itself in the sealed section, Varix has one of his warriors check that the Thallaxii holding the stairwell are no more. This is swiftly confirmed. The floors above are a mangled mess of twisted metal and blasted bodies.

The strike commander nods, satisfied. 'All units converge on the command decks,' he voxes before turning to me. Then he makes an unusual request. 'Find me prisoners. There

must be something left alive on this wreck.'

Liapsid/betakhi-sampi-koppa-beta. Magos Dominus Oronti Praeda slumps into the command throne of the Ommissiix. Constructs stand around him in grim silence. The air is thick with expectation. The loss of so many servants of the Ommissiiah and the turning of their own god-machines against them weighs heavily, even upon the more

detached Mechanicum priests. But they are not done. Not yet.

The Dentilicon?'

'As predicted, magos,' Logista Minora Auxabel informs him. 'Our sudden vox-silence and hull damage is drawing her to us. Her shipmaster probably assumes we have suffered some sort of accident or malfunction, and is offering support as a courtesy. We have no way of warning them otherwise. Steps must be taken, magos. Even Arkmaster Cruciam concurs. The Ommissiix and her deific cargo cannot be allowed to fall into the Archenemy's hands.'

Praeda's cogitator burns hot with the possibilities.

'So ordered,' he tells them, finally.

The logista nods to Praeda's personal ward engines, who exit the bridge by the command deck elevators. For a while, no construct communicates on the bridge by any means that this unit can monitor.

Rune banks spark and smoke. Deck servitors go about their business with ghoulish obliviousness. Manus Cruciam says nothing. He fastidiously adjusts settings on nearby rune-screens. Collegium-Mandati Jerulian Hax is similarly silent. They are constructs without purpose. Hax's Titan payload is already in the hands of the enemy, and the arkmaster now commands a floating wreck. They watch the lancet screens. The Ommissiix glides through the thin belt of colossal rubble and debris that encircles the Gnostica System like a belt. In the dull glow of the system's star, Cruciam spots the tiny speck that is the contested world of Callistra Mundi, where Battle Group Astramax were to prove their worth. Instead, the god-machines are tainted with the blood of their loyal Mechanicum creators. He fancies he can see sparks of ship-to-ship combat about the world.

The light frigate Dentilicon has made its turn and is returning to the slowing ark freighter it escorts. The light cruiser runs alongside the Ommissiix in the hope of offering some kind of support.

At elapsid/gamma-khi-omicron-zeta, the command deck elevator announces its arrival. Deck thralls train their weapons on the

opening doors, but it is only a group of horrifically damaged servitors. The constructs limp onto the command deck. They seem confused and agitated. A lexmechanic demands their identifiers.

Their stumbling silence draws the attention of the bridge crew. The lexmechanic approaches. As she does so her optical relays inform her that the servitors have objects wedged between the gleaming white ceramic teeth of their mouths. Her auxiliary cogitator tells her that there is an eighty-two per cent chance that those objects are grenades.

She turns to warn the arkmaster and magos dominus, but she doesn't get the chance. The servitors detonate in unison, tearing up the command deck and blasting the equipment and constructs on bridge with splintered frag.

Magos Dominus Oronti Praeda is knocked from the command throne. As he shakes the functionality back into his cogitator links, he hears the heavy metal thud of armoured enemies dropping down into the elevator carriage from the roof hatch. Space Marines in the colours of the Alpha Legion sweep forward through the smoke, their boltguns aimed and ready. The brief gunfire is precise and economical. Deck thralls that yet live are executed where they stand. Drone weaponry is blasted to uselessness and even Jerulian Hax's armed cherubim escort is put down with a single shot to its angelic head.

Strike Commander Dartarion Varix and the veteran legionnaires of the First Hort, Third Harrow have taken control of the bridge and, by extension, the Mechanicum ark freighter Omnissiax. Varix removes his battle-helm to reveal the bronzed skin of his shaven head, the dark disdain of his primarch's echoed features.

'Report.'

Oronti Praeda goes to make a proud retort, but instead Logista Minora Auxabel replies.

'All goes according to plan, my lord,' she tells her strike commander. The Dentilicon is pulling alongside and sending skiffs across to us.'

'What are you doing?' the magos dominus manages. Cruciam and Hax similarly stare on in disbelief at the logista.

'But the magos dominus has despatched his ward engines to the engineering section, my lord,' she continues. Their orders are to detonate the plasma drive and destroy the ship.'

Dartarion Varix nods before raising his eyebrows at Oronti Praeda.

'Nice try,' Varix tells the magos dominus. Then to Auxabel, he says, 'Have Phasal Scolton and his unit divert to intercept the ward engines.'

Very good, my lord.'

'Our defensive capabilities?' Varix asks with a thin, ironic smile.

'Port and starboard short-batteries charged and run out as a precautionary measure,' the logista tells him.

'Have the bridge inform the masters of gunnery decks that we continue to be under attack. Use the magos dominus's authorisation codes. The batteries are ordered to fire as they bear.'

'As you command.'

'Auxabel...' Praeda says. He looks from the logista to Quorvon Krish and myself. From my thrall form he moves the disbelief of his optics on to the strike commander. 'Please, have mercy-'

Varix raises one armoured finger to silence him.

There it is,' Varix says, pointing at the magos dominus's stricken face.

As the Alpha Legion strike commander and the Mechanicum magos regard one another, the meagre cannonry of the ark freighter fires. It is a ragged salvo, but it serves at point-blank range to blast the shieldless Dentilicon into fiery void-scrap.

As shattered sections of the escort fall away, floating before the viewscreens of her larger charge, Dartarion Varix tells Praeda, 'The desperation. The overwhelming hopelessness. The pleading - perhaps not for your life, tech-priest, but for the lives of others. There is proof that our work is its own reward.'

Then the strike commander nods to his warriors, and the bridge flashes briefly with precision gunfire. At elapsid/gamma-khi-sigma-lambda-delta, the enemy commander, Oronti Praeda, dies. As do Manus Cruciam and Jerulian Hax.

Varix turns to Minora Auxabel. 'So, you got my message.'

The sparatoi agent taps the implant in her tooth by way of a reply.

'Good work,' Dartarion Varix tells her. He nods also to me and Quorvon Krish. 'Logista Auxabel,' Varix calls, playfully using the agent's assumed name. 'Do we have steerage?'

'Barely, my lord.'

'Well, use what we have to get the Omnissiax system-bound. Has contact been established with the Alpha Legion commander?'

'Legionary signatures have been traced,' I inform him. 'Harrowmaster Armillus Dynat in command.'

'Armillus Dynat,' Varix repeats. 'The uprising?'

'Spreading to the surrounding moons,' Auxabel tells him. 'It's being reported as a rebellion, but the outbreaks are systematic and betray highly coordinated patterns. The precursor to a planet-wide anni-hilatory action, I suspect, my lord.'

'The Legion reveals itself,' the strike commander confirms. 'If Armillus Dynat commands from the surface, then he is likely to have three to four battalions of legionnaires at his disposal, plus sparatoi support structures. There are likely more forces en route. Astropath?'

'Three Alpha Legion heavy cruisers confirmed system inbound,' Quorvan Krish offers. 'And the battle-barge Omicron emerges from the Byssda-Escona Deeps, carrying further reinforcements.'

Varix nods with approval.

'Master Krish,' he tells the astropath, 'I wish to send a message to Harrowmaster Dynat.'

'The content, strike commander?'

'Tell the Harrowmaster that the Mechanicum forces and Titan battle group re-routed to crush the rebellion on Callistra Mundi have been neutralised. The god-machines and their transport are in Alpha Legion hands. Inform him that his action has forced a deviation from our mission directives, but that secondary objectives have been met with... Elapsid?'

‘Elapsid/gamma-khi-sigma-omicron-zeta,’ this unit reports.

‘With five minutes to spare,’ Dartarion Varix finishes. The Ommissiix is en route to assist him, and my veteran hort wait on his pleasure.’

‘We go to Callistra Mundi, my lord?’ I ask.

‘We do,’ Dartarion Varix confirms. ‘My brother-commander wishes there to be a Harrowing.’

‘My lord,’ I acknowledge.

A Harrowing.

It is more than just a word.

My internal data-banks mark it as a signifier. A stratagem.

It is an expression of the XX Legion’s art of war. An experience, as both prosecutor and victim. Confusion. Disorder. Betrayal. Panic. Horror. An enemy force chasing phantoms. Our foes at war with themselves. We watch as they expose their vulnerabilities. As they make their way from desperation to annihilation. We bring them to the boil. Then, when they can take no more, as they lie across the altar of our tactical perfection, we sacrifice them to inevitability. A storm of coordinated attacks. Alpha Legionnaires appearing from every corner, from every shadow, from behind the face of every seeming friend and ally, boltguns blazing.

It will be a decimate wonder to behold.

The Harrowmaster calls on the legionnaires of the Twentieth,’ Dartarion Varix tells us, ‘for he wishes to murder this world. My brothers, we are to be part of something very special indeed. The Harrowing of Callistra Mundi begins.’



Every day he would wake and think he was on Prospero again.

His chamber’s chime would sound at the start of each diurnal cycle, dragging him from sleep. For a moment then, lying in the dark, he would taste the crystal dust. He would look up, expecting to see the scud of charcoal clouds and the capillaries of lightning.

Then the chamber’s lumens would glow into life and he would see the painted walls, the weapon racks, the empty incense burners.

He never used those burners, even though menials provided him with fresh vials of oil at

regular intervals. He wouldn't have known how to do so properly.

The Swordstorm was the flagship of another Legion. Everything about it - its smells, sounds, the tang of its air and its myriad customs - was unfamiliar. He'd never been on a White Scars vessel before. He knew of no one who had.

His hosts had been solicitous. They seemed to know more of his Legion's peculiarities than he did of theirs, which was a minor irritant.

He learned quickly, though. He studied them as closely as they studied him. When it didn't feel invasive, or if he thought it would go unnoticed, he employed his cult discipline's arts, gently prying open the paths of the past and the future. That helped him. He understood more.

Using those same arts on Prospero had been dangerous in the last days. The ghosts that remained there had been drawn to him, so he had learned to associate the exercise of gifts with peril. It was hard to let go of that association, especially when the dreams were still so vivid.

But as time passed, as the Swordstorm ran through the deep void and put more distance between him and the world of waking dreams, it became easier. Yesugei helped him. The Stormseer was a sympathetic guide. It came back, bit by bit, and with it the sense of pleasure in command.

He was returning to himself. Revuel Arvida, of the Fourth Fellowship, Corvidae, was remembering what he had been, and giving thought to what he might become.

At times, in his mind, he still trod the vitreous rubble of Tizca, searching for something - anything - amid the slumped heaps of ashes.

In the real world, though, he had escaped.

'Did you know Ahriman?' asked Yesugei.

Arvida shook his head. 'We spoke, a few times.'

'He was respected? I assume so.'

Arvida found the questions uncomfortable. The XV Legion was not one of the largest, but there had still been tens of thousands of warriors in the ranks. Yesugei seemed to expect him to know everything about every fellowship.

'He had the primarch's ear. Few others did.'

Yesugei sat facing him, dressed in white Stormseer's robes. Candles were set about them in the modest chamber, and they burned

brightly, illuminating long paper strips daubed with calligraphy.

Arvida could sense the quiet power cloistered within the warrior opposite him. It was not at all the same as his, but it was still potent. Warp gifts were like accents - the language was the same, but the treatment varied. Arvida guessed that Yesugei didn't have the full range of command available to a Magister Templi, but there was no shame in that. The capabilities of

the Stormseers felt somehow... shackled, as though self-imposed bonds had been placed around the action of drawing from the Great Ocean.

Strange, to limit oneself. Then again, in the light of events, perhaps just prudent.

'I liked him,' said Yesugei. 'Had hoped that-

That he'd been down there, rather than me?'

Yesugei returned a smile. Arvida could appreciate the benign temper of the V Legion. Yesugei, for all his evident deadliness, wore the mantle lightly.

'Am glad one of you survived. That is gift.'

Again, Arvida felt a twinge of discomfort. What did Yesugei want from him? What did he expect now?

'We have been divided,' said the Stormseer. 'Like all Legions. We purge spoiled blood from our ranks. We need new start. The Khan presides. We will be purified before we fight again.'

'So I hear.'

Activity had been frenetic on the Swordstorm ever since leaving Prospero. Tribunals had been arranged. The word was that those who recanted their support for Horus would be offered some sort of absolution - the chance to serve on forward missions, taking the war directly to enemy-held targets.

They were near-suicidal strikes, many of them. Arvida guessed that was the point.

'It occurs to me, when I think on this,' said Yesugei. 'Your Legion gone. You are all remains. We are wounded. If you wish to serve, you could. We take you.'

'I am XV Legion,' said Arvida. 'I took vows.'

Yesugei nodded. 'Understand. Do not wish to coerce you. But consider it - you are welcome here. Once, brotherhoods served with fellowships. Not so strange, doing again.'

Arvida looked away, and his gaze ran to the calligraphy strips. He could appreciate the artistry in the soot-ink swirls. No doubt Yesugei had made the devices himself, and no doubt they had some hidden meaning. Perhaps, if he concentrated, he could unearth it. There was a time when such a task would have been trivial. Now, still weak from his ordeal, he knew that it would not be so easy.

'I knew I would not die on Prospero,' he said, 'but I had no visions of where fate would take me. I still feel blind. You know of Corvidae-sight? It is hard to lose.'

'Will come back.'

'Maybe. Until then, do not ask me to make choices.'

'Of course. Work to do. But think on it, yes? We can speak again.'

'We will.' Arvida found himself wanting to change the subject. 'So what of those coming before the tribunals? Will they all be pardoned?'

'Is for the Khan to decide. He will rule. Some knew more than others. Hasik... I do not know. It is painful.'

Arvida could still sense the lingering bewilderment among the Khan's warriors. They had prided themselves, as so many of them had told him, on harmony. It was bad enough to contemplate bringing bloodshed to other Legions. It was almost unconscionable that it should take place within the ordu.

'What if they don't recant?' Arvida asked.

'Some will not. They made tsusan garag. Blood oath. It binds them.'

They didn't know what they were swearing.'

Yesugei gave him a wry look, as if to say you know what the warp thinks of pity.

'Does not matter. Is done. They will be offered chance, but will not take it.'

Then what?'

'The Khan will release them. That is all.'

Release them. The phrase was unusually euphemistic.

'Seems a waste,' said Arvida.

'We bring these customs up into void,' said Yesugei. 'We carry weapons of Unity and wear badges of Imperium, but the plains are still in our soul.' He was thoughtful. 'I think it will get worse. We will remember old savagery. There is bitterness running in brotherhoods, now.'

He looked back up at Arvida.

'You could help us,' Yesugei said. 'I see Ahriman's gifts in you.'

There it was again. The Stormseer was certainly insistent.

'I'll think about it,' said Arvida, but didn't meet his eyes.

IN HIS DREAMS, he went back.

Lucid dreaming, they used to call it - being aware of the deception. But that was only half of the truth. Part of him knew he remained unconscious on the Swordstorm. Another part stalked the ruins unwittingly, still searching.

He'd tried to leave Tizca in the early days, thinking - correctly - that the city's warp-burned shells would harbour abominations. For a few days he'd taken a hard path, out and up into the highlands in search of cleaner air.

Somehow, it was worse up there. The skeletal stumps of firs stood like sentinels across barren hillsides, barring a starless sky. From the heights, he could see the devastation in panorama, and there was no escape from the vastness of it. Tizca's lightless sprawl ran away to the northern horizon: an immense black scar on the face of annihilation.

The air remained foul, even when the gales shook the brittle tree carcasses. He tasted toxins through his vox-grille, and knew that they would overwhelm his system sooner or

later. He exhausted himself walking, and that alarmed him: he should not have been exhausted by anything, not with a physiology like his.

At times, Arvida cursed Kalliston for bringing him back. He howled out his grief. He started to hunt, to chase down any sign of enemies. When he loped back into the city, hugging the shadows and searching out targets, all he met were empty echoes. He began to doubt everything that had happened since making planetfall.

The ghosts came soon after that. Kalliston was the first of them, whispering in the carbon-dark. Arvida saw him several times - standing atop isolated towers, silhouetted against the night. At first he tried to reach him. He only gave up after the fourth attempt, when he scaled the flanks of a burned-out cupola to find nothing but thick dust at the top. No bootmarks disturbed the layer of glistening ash.

Other ghosts were less benign. The spirits of slain Wolves still slipped through the dark, snarling in broken, breathy hatred. Forgotten Prosperine creatures, their bodies etiolated into glassy sacs of aether-spume, rose from the unquiet earth and hunted him. He learned how to drive them off, but every exercise of power drained him a little further.

He began to starve. Waking and sleeping merged. He found no flesh-and-blood enemies, just spectres and emanations.

It was then, in order to stay sane, that he started to look for the relic. He didn't know what it would be, but anything would do. It would have to be solid, a part of the old light-filled world. Not a weapon, but a fragment of something loftier. The libraries and the repositories were all torched, though he guessed that even the Wolves must have left something.

For a long time, all he found was more dust. He drew closer to the centre, where the broken-backed mass of Photep's Pyramid still reared, sensing a flicker of energy amid the broken flags. Some of the observatories still retained their copper domes, albeit scorched black.

He broke into them all, kicking aside barriers that would once have barred entrance save to the elect of the cults. He waded through wind-scoured dunes of rubble and pushed his gauntlets deep into backed-up detritus. His fingers scrabbled, searching out something, scraping through the sedimentary layers of misery.

It was just as his gauntlets finally grazed against something hard-edged, buried deep, that he lurched awake.

Arvida opened his eyes and saw the lumens of his private chamber flare into life. He saw the weapon racks and the incense burners. A soft light pulsed by his bunk - Yesugei had summoned him again.

He pushed himself up, shedding the spun-wool blanket in a rumpled heap. His primary heart was beating hard.

He raised his right hand, the one that had brushed up against the edge in his dreams. He turned it in the light - the flesh was pale, blotched with red spots. As he looked at it, he felt the itch again, like insects crawling under the skin.

He clenched his fist and the irritation eased a little. He got up, rolling his shoulders and flexing his arms.

'Ready?' asked Yesugei over the comm.

Arvida looked at himself in the mirror over his wash-stand. Was it fatigue that gave him red lines under his eyes? Or was it really spreading that fast?

'Ready,' he confirmed, pulling on his robes and heading to the armoury.

He wore his armour for the drills. Several times, V Legion artificers had offered to take his crimson battleplate down to the forges. It was in bad shape and they were keen to treat him as an honoured guest.

He had always refused. His armour was what had kept him alive, so he tended to it himself. The most help he accepted was the loan of tools and menial attendants; everything else, from the core maintenance to the gradual removal of ground-in filth, he did alone.

He held a short-bladed sword in his right hand but was otherwise unarmed. Yesugei stood before him with a similar weapon. He, too, wore full armour. The chamber around them was white-walled and capacious, with a floor of polished rockcrete and multifaceted lumens suspended from a mirrored ceiling.

This was the third time that he and Yesugei had sparred together. The White Scar had won the previous bouts easily but the gap had been closing. Arvida swung his blade lazily through the air, swiping around himself in a loose figure of eight.

'How are you feeling?' asked Yesugei, remaining perfectly still.

'Good.'

'I could send you to spar with any warrior of Fifth Legion.'

'I know.'

'Then why I choose to best you myself?'

Arvida smiled. The gentle goads were all part of the process - to rouse him, to get his blood flowing again. You wish to observe.'

Yesugei raised his sword - a curved blade with a single cutting edge, inscribed along its length with Khorchin runes. Neither weapon was powered, but they were still deadly enough at close range.

'Then we begin,' said Yesugei, moving into guard.

Arvida let his body relax. This was not a true test of his physical recovery - that was complete. Nor, despite the props, was it a test of weapon skill. He knew what it was and why the Stormseer went to such lengths. It was touching, in a strange way.

Yesugei came at him fast and low, leading with a sharp jab to the chest. Arvida responded, noting the false slowness of the move and adjusting for the parry. The two blades locked, screeching briefly as the edges ran down one another, before breaking away.

Then it was all about movement. Yesugei, despite his greater bulk, was swift and skilful. There were no poor swordsmen in the White Scars, and he employed his gifts with imagination. As so often before, Arvida was pushed back, retreating across the empty chamber in a blaze of sparks.

The pace picked up. Arvida worked his straight blade two-handed, spinning it before him in a glittering defensive figure. He missed nothing. lively blow was met with a counter, and his defence stayed solid.

But that was not what Yesugei was testing.

The Stormseer maintained the pressure, altering the angle and pace of his strikes. He probed relentlessly, aiming for Arvida's weak points. One of those was his right pauldron, damaged on Prospero so that it fitted poorly with his upper cannon. A stab there, thrust with perfect precision, would bite deep, and they both knew it. So the duel had a centre of gravity to it, a fulcrum around which they both worked.

In the end, it was an error that made the difference. Arvida was driven further back by a sequence of rapid cross-wise slashes and found himself running out of space as he approached the wall. He pushed back, trying to rotate the angle of the combat and break out into fresh ground. His left boot slipped, just by a fraction of a centimetre, but it was the kind of minuscule flaw that settled such duels.

Instinctively, Arvida knew that his damaged pauldron was exposed. His mind, working in milliseconds, perceived the danger and he tensed to block the inevitable attack.

But then he saw it, for the first time in months. Yesugei's body-outline ghosted into fragments, and a faint impression of a sword-arm flickered out in the other direction, away from the pauldron to stab out at his twisting torso.

That was it, the merest blink of time's eye, but it was enough - the future, perceived at the heart of the duel's whirl and sway.

So Arvida did not move to protect his exposed pauldron, but sent his blade jabbing up the centre towards Yesugei's breastplate. The Stormseer's arm duly moved to where the ghostly image had been, allowing Arvida's sword to slip past. The straight blade bit deep, carving into a gold dragon's-head decoration just below Yesugei's gorget.

They both froze. The point of Arvida's sword rested under Yesugei's chin, angled upward.

Yesugei started to chuckle. He let his own weapon fall.

'You saw!' he said, delighted. 'I feel you do it.'

Arvida broke away. Despite himself, he could not pretend that he wasn't pleased. The sight - the Corvidae-sight - had returned.

'It was just a flicker.'

Yesugei clapped him on the shoulder. 'But will return. You know it.'

'Perhaps. You fight well, for an old shaman.'

Yesugei laughed, and pulled back, raising his blade again and falling into a combat stance.

'Then we do it again,' he said.

The duels lasted for six more hours before Yesugei let him rest. By that time, Arvida's body was drained and his mind numb. He limped from the sparring chamber, feeling the old wounds flaring and old exhaustions returning.

Yesugei came with him. Arvida was glad to observe that the Stormseer was at least breathing heavily - the pain-giving had not been entirely one-way.

'How many times?' asked Yesugei, following Arvida out into a wide corridor.

Arvida shrugged, still walking. 'Maybe three times. They were just fragments.'

'But that is start.'

They walked down a long corridor. Serf menials in white tunics shuffled past, hurrying from one task to another. They all saluted - at Yesugei with joy, at Arvida with a wary curiosity. As ever, the Swordstorm was bustling with movement and energy, like a great beast coiled for the pounce.

'You still have not told me where the fleet is heading,' Arvida remarked.

'Yet to be decided,' said Yesugei. 'Legion is not yet ready, so we remain hidden. Will not be long now. The Khan will extend his fingers, seeking out enemy, and then the ordu will be summoned.'

The enemy will find you, if you don't move soon.'

'He knows,' said Yesugei.

The spaces around them began to open up. They were heading towards the more populated zones of the flagship, and great lumen-chandeliers hung overhead, making the gilt and marble of the corridor walls shimmer. They entered a long hallway lined with mirrors, over which ten metre-tall calligraphic scrolls hung. Arvida had begun to recognise what some of the texts indicated, even if he couldn't translate them. Some were records of battles fought and won, others were lists of Legion personnel, perhaps lost during the Great Crusade. Some of the largest and most prestigious scrolls seemed to contain - Arvida guessed by the layout and the decorative borders - poetry.

Ahead, at the far end of the hall, a squad of White Scars came marching towards them. Unusually, they were wearing their helms and carried blade weapons unsheathed in armoured hands.

Yesugei saw them and a flicker of unease passed across his scarred features. A second later, Arvida saw why.

In the centre of the squad, walking along with them, was a lone legionary. Unlike the others he wore no armour, only a white shift. His hands were bound at the wrists in adamantium shackles and some kind of tore had been placed around his neck. His tunic bore a single rune daubed in red on the linen.

Yesugei stood aside to allow the squad to pass; Arvida did also. The escorted warrior did not make eye contact with anyone. He stared straight ahead as he was marched along, saying nothing, his shoulders proudly pushed back.

Arvida couldn't take his eyes off the legionary's face. The warrior wore a curious expression - dejected, beaten, yet resolutely defiant. There was no self-pity in that face, nor was there any fear, just a bleak kind of certainty, as though his body were no longer truly his own and he was now being dragged along by the currents of fate.

No son of Prospero would ever have looked that way. Magnus's sons had a different temper, a belief that all situations could be overcome with the application of wisdom, and that the laws of men were subordinate, should conflict arise, to the law of reason.

We were a reasonable people, Arvida thought. We were never zealots. And yet for this, the fury of the universe was unleashed upon us.

The tribunals?' Arvida asked, once the squad had moved out of sight.

Yesugei nodded. 'I knew him.'

'What will happen?'

Yesugei did not answer but started to walk again. They went on in silence until they reached the Stormseer's private chambers.

Once inside, Yesugei went over to an iron-bound chest and withdrew a package wrapped in cloth. It was large, heavy, and he held it in both hands.

This was first day,' he said, handing it to Arvida. 'First day remembering your sight. From here, you will be restored.'

Arvida took the package, and pulled back the cloth. Underneath was a pauldron, newly forged and painted in dazzling white. The armoured rim was crimson and the device on the face was something he had never seen before: the serpentine star of Prospero set atop the lightning-strike of the Khans.

'I had it made,' said Yesugei. 'Your shoulder guard is your weakness.'

Arvida held the new pauldron up, rotating it in the light. It was well-crafted, just as all Legion wargear was well-crafted. The sigils were subtle and drawn in the free-form Chogorian style, ringed by immaculate Khorchin lettering.

It was a beautiful thing. Arvida already knew that it would fit perfectly with his own battleplate, completing his protective shell and making him whole again. There could be no complaint with its substance.

'What you think?' asked Yesugei.

Arvida studied it carefully. It was a fine gesture from one Legion to another. He did not need to ask how much care had gone into its creation, for the quality was evident.

His eyes flicked up at Yesugei's expectant face. The Stormseer was looking back at him eagerly, his thoughts unhidden.

A new Ahriman, Arvida mused. A new axis to replace the old.

He pulled the cloth back over the surface of the plate, obscuring the hybrid Legion symbol.

'It will take some getting used to,' he said, truthfully enough.

At first, all that he pulled from the rubble was worthless. A few scorched trinkets, their beauty melted. He doubted the Wolves had looted anything - the destruction they brought was too complete, and in any case they were not robbers, just murderers.

There was no sunrise and no sunset, just a blank screen of darkness broken only by the faint muttering of ghosts. As his body weakened, it became hard to know what was real and what was imagined. His future-sense atrophied and every exercise of cult powers brought pain.

He kept searching. The quest for a sliver of the past became the one fixed point for him and he pushed on, rooting through every library and archive until his eyes were red with fatigue and his fingers trembled.

He couldn't get close to the heart of the old city. It was plagued by the revenants of psychneuein, swarms of them, and for every one he warded off with fire, another five homed in on him. They were protecting something, or perhaps just hovering around it. But whatever it was, Arvida no longer had the strength to penetrate their cordon to reach it.

He turned to the lesser spires. Most were husks, hollow like storm-blown trees, blown apart by incendiaries and then stripped bare by ravening infantry packs. One, though, set further out from the haunted Occullum Square, had survived partially intact.

Arvida climbed a long, winding spiral stair to reach the summit. He entered a circular chamber, open to the elements and with its ruined walls poking up like broken ribs. Lightning seemed drawn to it, and arced around the jagged crown in a lattice of silver.

He stalked through the remains - a splintered desk, scraps of flaking parchment, and cracked and headless statues. He kicked aside

heaps of refuse, exposing an elaborately tiled floor. He saw sigils glimmer in the flashes of light. There were idealised serpents, and the ubiquitous eye of knowledge, and the symbols of the Enumerations, and esoteric images from a dozen worlds tracing a ceremonial line back to Terra.

He brushed aside the dust from a stone door lintel, revealing the raven's head of his order engraved there. In an instant, he remembered the place as it had been, lit with candles and smelling of book-leather.

Ahriman's library.

He had only visited it twice, and only once in the presence of its master. Ahzek Ahriman had been the head of his cult discipline but not his military commander, so their links were not close. Arvida remembered a smooth, pleasant face animated by intelligence and a ready, eager appetite for wonder.

Presumably Ahriman was dead, as were Amon and Hathor Maat and all the others. He had not seen their ghosts, though. Why was that?

Prospero's crystal dust lay in clumps, just as it did everywhere. He pushed it aside, watching the black spores clot against his gauntlets. As he moved, his right shoulder guard clicked again - the armour-seal had broken and every movement levered the gap a little wider.

He hunted through the library's remains diligently, but after an hour or so he began to lose hope. There were a few of the familiar bits and pieces, but nothing suitable. Beyond the skeletal chamber walls the wind picked up, hot and bitter.

He was about to turn back, when his trailing hand caught on something buried in the ash flakes. It felt oddly warm, as if powered by a heat source, but when he picked it up he realised that that was not possible.

It was a tin box, battered and scratched, and with the last remnants of a fabric binding clinging to the hinge-line. Sheltering it in his cupped palm, Arvida carefully prised it open. A faded figure

stared back at him - a lady, dressed in robes and carrying a rod of queenly office, her face smudged.

Manipulating the contents was difficult in his gauntlets so Arvida moved over to the desktop and gently tipped them out on to a cleared area. It was a pack of card-wafers. Shielding them against the wind, he ran his eyes over the pictures on each card's face. He did not understand most of them, but some were vaguely familiar. They were crude depictions, their colours bleached by time, but the poses and configurations were suggestive.

Why this? he found himself thinking. Of all the treasures, all the riches, why this?

It was one of Ahriman's amusements, no doubt. A fortune-telling deck, tainted with a little warp-wisdom, or possibly just very old. He had seen similar things in his time, and had always found them unimpressive scrying aids. Far better to tap the Great Ocean directly, plugging into the heartblood of the empyrean.

That is not yours,' came a voice from behind him.

Arvida whirled to face it, clamping his palm over the cards to prevent them from gusting away. He had already drawn his bolter with the other hand.

A Space Marine stood before him, his face exposed. He was a White Scars legionary, one of Jaghatai's savage mystics. He wore the same strange, dejected expression that he had done on the Swordstorm.

It was then that Arvida realised he was dreaming again, and that even the solid things around him were memories, and the ghosts in the wind were memories of memories.

'I am the last,' Arvida replied, slinging his bolter and collecting the cards up again. 'It is as much mine as anyone's.'

This world is cursed,' said the nameless White Scars legionary. 'Leave it. No good can

come of it.'

Arvida felt his damaged pauldron click as his arms moved. 'Leave it? That is what you would recommend. You're uncurious, the lot of you.'

'Put it back.'

Arvida laughed at him, though it made his parched throat flare with pain. 'What does it matter? I will die here. Permit me one last remnant to hold on to before the end.'

'You will not die here.'

Arvida stopped in his tracks. Of course he wouldn't. He'd always known that, even during the darkest moments. Why did he even say it?

He looked up at the legionary again, intending to ask why he was there and what he portended but, with a dreary predictability, there was now no sign of him. The bitter wind swirled around the remains of the library, whipping up the top layers of dust and driving them in eddying patterns.

Arvida took up the tin box, sealed it again and locked it securely at his belt.

'One last remnant,' he said to himself, making for the stairwell.

'You should let me see it,' Arvida had said.

'You will not be admitted,' Yesugei had replied.

'Why not?'

'For the Legion only.'

'But I am of the Legion,' Arvida had countered, pointedly turning his shoulder to reveal the hybrid pauldron that he now wore. 'That is, if you still wish me to be.'

Yesugei had smiled, recognising the trap he had set for himself. He had left then and did not return for some time, no doubt making representations in the places where representations needed to be made.

Two days later, he came back. By then, Arvida's sight was almost as acute as it had been before Prospero's destruction and he sensed the Stormseer's arrival at his chamber several minutes before he actually arrived.

'It is time,' Yesugei announced. He was wearing ceremonial robes of white linen, lined with close-written Khorchin picked out in gold. His shaven, amiable head gleamed under the light of the lumens, exposing every tattoo and scar.

Arvida was helm-less, though still in armour, fresh from a punishing practice bout with the cages' automata. The star-and-lightning sigil was on his right shoulder guard; the new pauldron had already proved its worth and saved him from taking new wounds.

'Then it is permitted?' Arvida asked, reaching for a cloak to drape over his battleplate.

'The Khan ruled,' said Yesugei. 'He remains grateful.'

Arvida followed Yesugei out of his chamber. 'Do I need to prepare?'

'Just observe, since you wish to see it. But are you wounded?'

Arvida turned slightly, hiding his neck where the rash had grown worse. It was no true wound, though it itched madly. His hands, too, fizzed hotly under the skin.

'It's nothing,' he said. 'Let's go.'

They walked for a long time, passing through parts of the ship that Arvida had not been shown before. Gradually, the proportion of human serfs fell away, until they were surrounded only by fellow Space Marines. The White Scars were decked out in robes similar to Yesugei's. Some wore armour under them but most did not.

They assembled in a steep auditorium set high up in the Swordstorm's command nexus. A semicircle of seats rose from a marble stage marked with the symbol of the Legion. Battle standards hung down over the wall behind it, many scorched around the edges or punched through with charred bolter wounds. Arvida scanned the banners. His Khorchin was still elementary, but he knew enough of the characters to read the names of planets: Naamani, Wahd Jien, Magala, Eilixo, Ullanor, Chondax.

Several hundred warriors took their places. Arvida found a seat near the top rows, accompanied by Yesugei. Two stone lecterns faced one another on the marble floor, both empty, both draped in Legion colours. Once the audience had settled in position, the doors to the auditorium clanged shut. Artificial lights dimmed, replaced by bronze bowls with tongues of yellow flame.

Silence fell, broken only by the crackle of the coals. No warrior spoke. The atmosphere became tense.

After what seemed a very long time, double doors set into the rear wall unlocked and swung open. The same warrior that Arvida had seen earlier was escorted to one of the lecterns. He looked much as he had before, both in real life and in Arvida's dreams.

He was no longer shackled, and his arms hung loosely by his sides. His shoulders were still set back, his expression still unyieldingly proud.

That has always been the weakness of our kind, thought Arvida. Magnus most of all, but none of us are free of it.

The condemned warrior stood at the lectern and his guards left him.

A few moments later the doors opened again and one of the eighteen most lethal individuals in the galaxy took his place at the other lectern.

The primarch was arrayed in what Arvida guessed was traditional dress from his home world - leather jerkin, fur-lined cloak, knee-length kaftan of spun gold, and metal-tipped riding boots. Illuminated screeds hung from his shoulders and a bejewelled and curved scabbard had been threaded through his wide, bronze-buckled belt.

His head was bare, save for a slender circlet of gold set about his forehead. His long hair had been gathered into a topknot, revealing a harsh, spare face of sun-hardened skin. He bore himself with the unconscious poise of a plains-warrior, though the cultivated dignity in his mien spoke of a more profound heritage.

The Khan. The Khagan. The Warhawk.

He seemed to occupy more space than he should, as if his soul pressed up against its physical boundaries too hard. Arvida had seen him fight on Prospero, taking on the Death Lord Mortarion, and it had been the most complete display of swordmastery that he had ever witnessed. Even out of his armour-clad finery and set in the mundane surroundings of a court of enquiry, the raw danger of his presence could not be extinguished.

There was nothing surplus about the Khan. He was as pure and elemental as a flame, a force of eternity set loose in a universe of petty souls.

He did not look up at his assembled warriors. His expression gave almost nothing away, save for a vague sense of distaste at what he was being forced to do.

‘So,’ he said, his great voice reverberating around the chamber like the soft, dour threat-growl of a tyger. ‘Let us begin.’

The tribunal was conducted in Khorchin. Arvida and Yesugei had both known this would be the case, and so they had made arrangements. As the participants spoke, Yesugei translated into Gothic and the words appeared in Arvida’s mind just as if the speakers had placed them there. The process was not entirely passive, though, as Arvida used his own future-sense to pick up nuance and inflection from the original utterances. The result was a kind of amalgamated thought-speech, almost indistinguishable from listening to the real thing.

Arvida found the exercise taxing, but it was preferable to having Yesugei whispering in his ear the whole time. He also suspected the Stormseer of using the thought-speech to test how quickly Arvida’s precognitive abilities were recovering.

‘State your name,’ said the Khan, though his lips formed different word-forms to Arvida’s eyes.

‘I am called Orzun, of the Brotherhood of the Hooked Blade.’

The condemned warrior looked directly at his primarch, neither cowering nor insolent. The disparity between them was evident, though the similarity was, too.

‘State your crime.’

‘I listened to the lies of the Warmaster’s servants and joined myself to those who planned to subvert the Legion. I was swayed by the words of Hasik Noyan-Khan. I killed brothers of the ordu on the attack frigate Ghamaliz when resistance was encountered and only ceased my insurrection when we were shown that the Noyan-Khan had been laid low and the Khagan had returned.’

The Khan’s gaze never wavered. It was steel-hard, as if by relaxing it a fraction he would allow the doubts back that had crippled the Legion’s resolve.

‘And what is your allegiance now?’

To the Khagan, to the ordu of Jaghatai and, through him, to the Imperium of Mankind. In my pride and folly, I erred.’

‘For what reason?’

‘I was told that the Emperor had forsaken the Great Crusade to commune with xenos. I believed the Warmaster’s grievance was just. I believed that you and he were brothers in arms and that our movement would ease the passage towards your alliance.’

You did not seek the gifts of the yaksha, nor those of the zadyin argaV

Orzun shook his head vehemently. ‘I did not. I am a warrior, a bearer of the guan dao. I only wished to see the blades of the Khagan and the Warmaster wielded side by side.’

‘Others did what you have done. Where their faith was good, and where the blood-crime was not grave, they have been allowed to serve again. They have become the sagyar mazan, and have taken vengeance to the enemy. Should they live, they will return to the Legion, their crimes dissolved. I have studied your case, Orzun of the Brotherhood of the Hooked Blade. That path stands before you, should you wish to take it.’

‘With regret, Khagan, I cannot.’

The Khan’s face remained stony, as if inuring himself to impending grief. ‘Tell me the reason why.’

‘I swore the blood oath.’

A low murmur ran around the auditorium. So, Orzun was one of them.

You choose death, when life is offered,’ said the Khan.

‘I swore on the Path of Heaven, and called on the eternal void to take me and devour my soul if I reneged on my vow. I followed the rite of the tsusan garag and committed myself to the universe’s

binding. The choice was wrong but the oath remains, as does the fate of the oathbreaker, just as it has been since we walked the endless grass.’

This war is different. Greater powers than you have already proved faithless.’

Then the void will damn them also.’

‘I can release you. I am the Khagan, the giver of the law. You do not need to do this.’

Orzun’s face, for the first time, flickered with uncertainty. He looked up at the warriors around him, then at the emblem of the Legion, then finally back at his primarch.

‘I have sworn it,’ he said. ‘It can never be taken back. Not even by you, lord.’

The Khan held his warrior’s gaze for a few moments more, scrutinising him for any chance of a recantation.

‘You were a fool, Orzun,’ he said. ‘Even if I had joined fates with my brother, I could never have tolerated this vow to persist. The blood oath is sacred, presided over by the zadyin arga and reserved for the settling of vendettas. You allowed them to trick you, to make it a sordid mockery. You have destroyed yourself, and at a time when I have need of warriors like never before.’

Orzun remained implacable as his master spoke. He knew it, just as every soul in the chamber knew it. That would not change his mind.

'This is the final time of asking,' said the Khan. 'Will you renounce what you have sworn?'

Orzun's reply was instant. 'I would have fought with you until the gates of Terra, lord. I would have died there with a smile on my lips. But I will not become like those who ruined me. I will not speak falsely, not to any man, nor to the old gods, and I will not break an oath. I no longer deserve the life I was given.'

'Then you know what must be done,' said the Khan, drawing his sword.

He stepped down from his lectern and paced towards Orzun.

The warrior stiffened, but did not move. The Khan stood over him, angling the point of his blade at Orzun's unprotected chest.

'Of all the treacheries my brother set in motion,' he said, 'this is the worst. He has corrupted that which was once whole and turned our sharpest blades against us. I wish you had not sworn, for you are worth a thousand of every traitor who broke his own vows. You could have fought with me at Terra. When I am there, your name will be engraved on my own armour, as will the names of all others who would not damn themselves by revoking the tsusan garag. I will use those names to bring malice to my sword-edge, and so even in this you will still serve.'

Orzun never looked away.

'If I may ask, lord,' he said, his voice still firm. 'How many have renounced?'

The Khan shot him a wintry smile, as if the question itself were ridiculous.

'None,' he said, and pushed the blade through Orzun's heart.

'How many are there, like him?' asked Arvida afterwards.

'Not many,' said Yesugei. 'Even Hasik did not swear the blood oath, they tell me.'

'Then the Khan has not wounded the Legion overmuch by ending them.'

'Not the Legion,' said Yesugei. 'Himself, though, I think very much.'

Towards the end, the storms worsened. Arvida became aware of the great aetheric barrier smouldering above the clouds. It had ringed the planet, carried like the aftershock of a nuclear detonation and enclosing the world in a seething curtain of warp matter.

It would have been easy to lose hope, then. He could sense well enough that no ship could penetrate such an aegis and that his escape from Prospero was therefore impossible.

But certainty never left. He eked out his dwindling strength,

hunting fruitlessly for food or water, warding off the attacks of the translucent psychneuein whenever they drew close. The rhythms of survival took over, punctuating his peripatetic existence.

He kept the cards safe. Every so often, when the lightning was vivid and he could see

them more clearly, he took them out and shuffled the deck. No pattern emerged for him to interpret - he would see the number cards alternate with the pictures of kings and scholars and claw-footed devils. If it had once had the power of divination, that power had gone.

Or perhaps the cards still told true, and he could no longer see what he was being shown.

He couldn't remember when he had last slept. He walked the ruins endlessly, occasionally talking to himself to remain sane. The only other sounds were the crack of thunder, the muffled crash of falling masonry and the half-heard susurrations of the ghosts.

For some reason, he was drawn back towards the centre. Despite the danger, his meandering course took him ever closer to the origin. He saw the immense hump of the Pyramid of Photep and spent hours just watching it. The Occullum Square was close by, shimmering with the phantasmic dance of its strange guardians.

'What are you waiting for?' asked the White Scars legionary.

Arvida looked up at him. He knew his name now - Orzun. The warrior's skin was bone-pale, and he had a fatal wound in his chest.

'I don't know,' Arvida replied.

'You took the cards.'

'I did.'

'Leave them.'

'Why do you want me to leave them?' Arvida smiled dryly, aware of the lunacy of talking to a shade. 'Why do you want anything of me?'

'All these things are sent as lessons,' said Orzun. 'Here is the pattern and we are the brush-strokes.'

Arvida ignored him. He wasn't really there. Neither of them were.

'What are you waiting for?' asked Orzun again, repeating himself as if on a vid-loop.

'I don't know,' Arvida replied, just as before.

Then, far away to the north, where the old Warhound corpse lay and where the armour of his fallen brothers was still scattered in the dust, Arvida felt a tremor. His head snapped up. He stood, peering out into the murk.

He saw nothing, not with his eyes, but he did feel the world's warp-skin briefly pierced. Somewhere, out in the ruins, something had changed.

He started to move, already plotting a course towards the disturbance. He would have to go warily. Whatever had the power to break the aegis might well have the power to break him, too.

'Just what do you expect of them, brother?' called out Orzun, already fading into the gloom behind him. 'Salvation?'

Arvida didn't reply. He kept walking.

‘They might take you in,’ Orzun went on, ‘but then they will turn you. They have their own war now, and you are just a weapon in it. Why do you think they will be any different to the ones that came before?’

Orzun’s voice was becoming lost in the howl of the wind.

‘And what of the flesh-change, brother? When will you tell them of that?’

By then, though, Arvida wasn’t listening. He had no idea what had broken into his solitary world, but at least it was something. For the first time in a long while - and he had no means of knowing how long - he was not alone.

When Arvida woke, he knew what he had to do. He looked around his chamber on the Swordstorm for a final time then started to don his armour. As he did so, he saw the extent of the discolouration on his hands. It had spread during the night, welling up under the skin. He could sense the completeness of his psychic recovery, for Yesugei was a skilled tutor, but the Stormseer knew nothing of the

XV Legion’s long-dormant curse. When he twisted his helm into position, the air-seal pressed painfully up against the swelling on his neck.

Just before leaving, Arvida opened a metal drawer under his bunk and retrieved the small box. Then he activated the door controls and slipped into the corridor outside.

The Swordstorm was in its nominal nocturnal period and the lumens were set low. Though thousands of the crew still worked, there were slightly fewer moving from deck to deck, which made his task easier.

Arvida went stealthily, treading in the manner he had learned when eluding the ghosts. As he crept along, he opened his mind out ahead of him, tracing future paths like branches of coral.

He saw others moving before they knew it themselves and used that knowledge to stay unseen. He would wait until the way ahead was clear and then hurry down it, already detecting the other souls who would be hard on his heels soon. He watched will-o’-the-wisp outlines of future-bodies moving in a mist of possibility and plotted his course to thread through them all.

Despite this skill, it was not possible to remain entirely undetected and so he was forced to disable some who came across him. He did not kill them - they were all mortals, and so were easy to render unconscious. The trail of bodies, though, limited his time to act. They would be discovered quickly, the alarm would be raised, and more formidable guards would be roused.

Arvida went up the decks, one by one, until he reached a pair of locked doors. He reached for the box, took it out and rested it against the join where the doors met the deck. Then he was off again, head low, picking up speed.

Down, this time - first via the lifter shafts and then using the manual stairways. His future-sight was not perfect. He ran across a group of four menials and nearly let one escape before he was able to immobilise them all.

He went more quickly after that, knowing the danger but unable to risk wasting any more time. He reached his destination, one of the dozens of void-hangar decks, and activated the security doors. The passcodes came to him easily as soon as he touched the keypads, the last thoughts of the previous operator swam into his mind.

He nearly made it out onto the deck without being seen, but the White Scars vigilance was not as casual as it had once been. With the airlock doors looming, alarms started to sound. He heard the thud of boots on the levels above and immediately sensed the numbers coming after him.

He pushed on through the airlock, sealing the doors behind him and depressurising the chamber. Air rushed past, drawn through grilled vents and diverted back into the rest of the ship. The sounds around him sucked away into a numb silence. Ahead of him lay an antechamber filled with racks of maintenance equipment and bulky fuel stations. Beyond the next doorway stood the void-deck, where his target rested.

Arvida hurried to the final rank of door controls, security-locked just like the others. He stumbled on the first attempt to enter the code, his thoughts distracted by the growing clamour in his mind. He sensed pursuers enter the corridors he had just run down, envisioned them discovering the bodies of the human serfs, and imagined them drawing their weapons.

He entered the code again, correctly this time, and the doors slid open. He locked the portal behind him, hoping his immediate hunters were from a different detail and that it would hold them up for at least a few seconds.

The system-runner Tajik stood on the wide deck before him, just as he had foreseen that it would. It was primed for launch, having docked only eight hours previously. Like all such vessels, it was kept in a state of constant readiness in a hangar open to the void. It was small, with a normal complement of only twenty, but it had the crucial feature he required - speed.

Just as he ran towards the ramp, he caught sight of a second set of blast-doors opening on the far right-hand side of the hangar. He swung around to see a lone White Scars legionary charging across the apron, his bolter already firing.

Arvida threw himself to the deck, sensing the bolt-rounds whistling across his back. He scrambled forward, gaining his feet again and bursting up to meet the warrior coming at him.

Arvida fired, hitting his enemy in the arm and sending his bolter tumbling from his grasp. Without missing a beat, the legionary switched to his tulwar blade, and brought it scything for Arvida's torso. Arvida evaded the strike, but only barely, twisting awkwardly as the metal edge scraped across his armour.

At such range his own bolter was too clumsy, so he reached for his sword. The two of them traded blows in rapid succession, sending showers of armour-flakes bouncing around them on the iron deck.

Arvida sensed peripheral movement - another door had been opened - and felt the presence of at least a dozen souls milling behind the thick bulkheads.

There was no time. He increased the intensity of his swordplay, desperately seeking any

way to disable the warrior before him. For a few moments, his opponent gave him nothing, and they remained locked in an evenly matched struggle.

Then, just as he had done with Yesugei, Arvida saw the path of the future unroll. The White Scar's intentions revealed themselves in shimmer-outlines, betraying his movements and opening up his defence like a book.

Arvida reacted instantly, swiping his enemy's blade from his hand. It hit the vacuum-silent deck five metres away and skittered harmlessly across the metal plates. Arvida's next blow punched through the legionary's armour, piercing his secondary heart and ending the contest. Polyps of blood spurted out, globulous in the vacuum.

It took two more strikes to stop the warrior from getting up and coming after him, by which time more hangar doors were opening. Weapons-fire lanced across the open space. Arvida saw projectile-paths searing ahead like tracer fire, and had to sprint hard to avoid being hit.

He made the Tajik's assault ramp and clattered up inside. As soon as he reached the controls, he locked the ship's hatches, powered up the drives, and keyed in the launch sequence. He could hear the zing and whine of more impacts on the pressurised ship's hull, and detected heavy outer armour-plates descending beyond the hangar's void-exit.

Soon they would have the Swordstorm's shields up. Either that or the armoured screens would close, or his pursuers would disable the Tajik on the deck, or a kill-team would force their way in.

Arvida knew, though, that there would be time for none of those things. As he settled into the cockpit and clutched the control columns, he saw the void glinting back at him through the open exit.

He was out. He was free, evading them just as he had evaded every danger amidst the ruins of Tizca, and there was nothing they could do to catch him now.

Yesugei looked down at the battered tin box. He held it up to the light, running his eyes over the scratches and bum marks. The box itself was not old. Perhaps, in the past, its contents would have been housed in other more elaborate receptacles, like a saint's bone in a reliquary.

He opened the box, spilling the cards onto the desk before him. One by one, he leafed through them. They were of Terran origin, he could tell, but beyond that he had little idea what their significance was. There were cards decorated with cups, swords, rods and coins. Some showed images of humans, others mythical beasts. As he cycled through them, he felt a faint heat from their surfaces - not physical heat, but the after-image of some psychic inferno.

That did not surprise him. Anything taken from Prospero would have had such a signature.

Yesugei studied the cards for a long time. He spread them out before him, rearranging them into whatever patterns felt appropriate, before pushing them back into a heap. Then he replaced them carefully in the box.

‘Why you do it?’ he asked.

Arvida, who sat opposite him across the desk, stared down at his own clasped hands. ‘I thought I could get out.’

The ship you took would not have cleared fleet. What were you thinking?’

There would have been a way.’

Yesugei shook his head, mystified. ‘But you change your mind. You never take off. Why?’

‘I was running. Orzun did not run.’

Yesugei’s brow creased in a frown, distorting the tattoos across his dark skin. ‘I do not understand.’

‘I am not Ahriman. You see that? I don’t have his power, and if I did then I would not use it in the same way. I am grateful - believe me, very grateful. But you’re trying to recreate something that no longer exists.’

Yesugei looked surprised. ‘I never-‘

‘Yes, you did. I could feel it. You wanted to bind me to your Legion. In the end, you would have had me clad in white, with a curved sword and a skull-topped staff, and soon I would be speaking Khorchin just as you do.’ Arvida smiled dryly. ‘Just because my brothers brought ruin down on themselves does not mean I can forget them now.’

‘No Legion left on Prospero, Revuel. No cults now.’

‘Does it matter? Would it matter to you, if Chogoris had been burned and you were the last one left? I don’t think so.’

Yesugei tilted his head, acknowledging the point. ‘I was there, you know, when Magnus and the Khan and others make their pact. I thought it can come back, even if your primarch is gone. Perhaps not.’ He looked up, fixing Arvida with his golden eyes. ‘So you will go? You will leave us?’

Arvida nodded. ‘I have to. Just not yet, and not like that. It would have been... discourteous.’

‘See? You are already half White Scar.’

Arvida laughed. ‘Not really.’

‘Where you will go?’

‘I see portents, here and there. Beyond these moments, nothing.’ You are legionary,’ said Yesugei. ‘Not designed to fight alone.’

‘I was alone for a long time.’

Yes, and nearly killed you.’

‘I will know the moment when it comes. You, of all of us, should understand that.’

Yesugei picked up the box again and looked at it thoughtfully. You left this for me.’

‘It was Ahriman’s. As far as I know, it’s the last thing of his intact in the galaxy. I thought you should have it.’

Yesugei toyed with it. ‘Do not know. It has strange shadow.’ Then he smiled, guiltily, as if chiding himself. ‘But it is fine gift. I will keep it. Who knows? Perhaps one day it will find way back to owner.’

‘Only if it can cross the veil. Ahriman is dead, just like the rest.’ ‘We must assume so. But there are days when I cannot believe it.’ Yesugei stowed the box away. ‘I hope you can stop running, brother. What is left to run from? All is in the open.’

Arvida looked wary then, as if that were not entirely true.

‘No more running,’ was all he said.

The tribunals drew to their conclusion. Other defendants did not survive the judgement, either because they had committed crimes against the Legion’s codes of war, or because of the blood oath. The majority were inducted into the sagyar mazan, the bringers of vengeance, and were deployed in fast attack squadrons and given coordinates for immediate launch.

The rest of the fleet was instructed to form up for void-passage, and movement between vessels was curtailed. The time that Yesugei and Arvida had to spend in training ran out, and the Stormseer was increasingly called upon to perform other duties.

On the last day before the Swordstorm powered into the warp, Arvida made his way down the ship’s vast forge-levels. The level of industry there was intense, as the metal-beaters churned out weapons in a ceaseless stream. No one was under any illusion that they would not be needed.

He found the master of the forge, a hulking Terran named Sonogei. He withdrew the wrapped pauldron that he had carried down with him and pulled back the fabric covering it.

‘It is not one of ours,’ said Sonogei, staring at the crimson plate.

‘It is Fifteenth Legion,’ explained Arvida, showing him the raven’s head device set within the star. ‘The one I used to wear. Can it be mended?’

Sonogei took the pauldron and hefted it expertly, running his eyes down the lower-edge connectors. His servo-arms whirled, producing a scanning augur-needle, and a glowing green line slipped across the pitted surface.

‘It can,’ he said. ‘If you give me your connecting cannon assembly and breastplate, I can make it slot as smooth as oil. But you are the sorcerer? I have already made a shoulder guard for you. The zadyin arga ordered it.’

‘I still have it. It is a fine piece. But, forgive me - this armour kept me alive for a long time. I would wear it again, whole.’

Sonogei looked at him sceptically. Arvida stepped closer.

‘I would not ask if it were not important.’ He took the pauldron back, and held its insignia up to the light of the furnaces. ‘You see this? The emblem of my order. I took vows, when I joined, just as you did. I know you understand that. I’ve seen the proof of it.’ Arvida thought back to Orzun, and the final look of triumph on his dying face. ‘I am not a legionary of the White Scars. In truth, I do not know what I am anymore, but I will keep the old icons until I find out.’

Sonogei shook his head unhappily, but eventually took the armour piece back. ‘Bring me the rest,’ he said. ‘I’ll see what I can do.’

Arvida bowed. You have my thanks,’ he said.

He walked away. As he did so, the itch started up again, more vigorous than before. Arvida resisted the urge to scratch.

I knew Prospero would not claim me, he thought dryly, but this? After all I endured, to be eaten by our oldest curse?

He looked back to where Sonogei lifted the pauldron clear into the air. He briefly saw the star of his old Legion, bathed blood-red in both ink and forge-glow, and proud against a backdrop of flame.

It still stirred his soul. Even now, after all that had happened, he could not forget the oaths that he had made to that sigil.

It will not claim me, not yet. There will be a path, one I shall tread as a legionary of the Thousand Sons.

His confidence grew as he thought on it, just as it had done during the terrible days in ruined Tizca. He would find a way to elude it. There would be a cure, somewhere.

I will endure. I will remain. The last, the undefeated.

Then Revuel Arvida, of the Fourth Fellowship, Corvidae, ascended the stairs leading away from the forges. The Swordstorm’s warp drives thundered into life, taking him back to war, to the enemy, and a future that he had not yet learned to see.

THE LAUREL OF DEFIANCE

Guy Haley

They called him the killer of Titans.

Lucretius Corvo did not care for the title. He was captain of the 90th Company of the XIII Legion. That was honour enough for him.

In Martial Square, Corvo stood with the veterans of the Shadow Crusade and the atrocity at Calth. Ten files of thirteen: officers, battle-brothers and neophytes ordered without deference to rank. They were joined by brotherhood of a kind that transcended the boundaries of Chapter, station and company.

Inhumanly large and resplendent in their battleplate, they scintillated in the bright sun of Macragge, their badges of service and recognition crisp with fresh paint. Many times Corvo had stood in noble assemblage with his brothers, but never in one quite like this.

Once uniform in everything, the hammers of war had wrought the Ultramarines variously, beating out a different tune on each of them. Armour of differing marks mixed in their ranks and within individual sets. Battle salvage and worn elements had been lovingly restored by the Legion artisans rather than replaced. Commendation

studs, non-regulation weaponry and unique war-plate revealed the identity of their wearer for all to see. Personal foibles sanctioned and let speak of victory, victory, victory!

They bore the marks of their actions proudly. They had prevailed against all odds, and they were to be honoured for it.

Amongst this august company, Corvo nevertheless stood out. He was taller than many of his gene-kin - that was a factor, yes, as was the massive suit of Mark III armour that singled him out as a void-war specialist. But it was the unique nature of his colours that set him truly apart. The cobalt-blue of his plate was quartered with bone-white. His personal banner, hanging from a pole mounted on his power plant, was likewise divided. It bore the emblems of the Ninth Chapter and the 90th Company. In the top left field was a spiked, hollow circle: a dark blue starburst.

This was not of Legion origin.

Serried ranks filled the rest of the square, representatives of every military force currently on Macragge - three Legions, the Imperial Army, and others. At the north and south, a pair of Warlord Titans stood sentinel. The eyes of millions of citizens watched the ceremony, hundreds of thousands in the vast crowds beyond the square alone. They were quiet. All of Macragge listened respectfully.

Three primarchs occupied a grand dais beneath the massive Pro-pylae Titanicum.

Sanguinius stood forward and centre as befitted his status as Imperial Regent. He shone with his customary radiance, but appeared troubled even so. He said little, and the enigmatic Lion El'Jonson even less. Today was their brother Roboute Guilliman's day - the master of Ultramar and the XIII Legion. Today the sacrifices of his realm, his people, were to be remembered. His words boomed out across the square - dozens of names, dozens of victories, dozens of heroes born from the horrors of defeat.

Guilliman honoured the unenhanced first, scores of mortal men and women who had

defied the traitors, whether by lasgun and

blade, or through acts of less obvious heroism: a scholam mistress who had led three hundred children to safety, a fabricatory adept who had worked for ten days without rest when his fellows had fled, and the sole survivor of a hundred port workers who had marched their industrial loaders into the enemy.

The Legiones Astartes waited motionless in the sun. Hours passed. The bulk of the southern Titan draped Corvo in welcome shadow for a while, but soon enough he was in the sun's full glare again. Half the standard humans had yet to be feted.

The sun was westering when the last bowed before the giant lords of men and walked away. A scroll was unfurled by Guilliman's equerry. Now it was time for the Ultramarines to pay respect to their brothers.

These were the champions of Ultramar.

The first name was read out. Honours were stated and bestowed. Short words from the primarch. The receiver renewed his oaths of loyalty. He was only the first to do so.

Corvo's hands twitched.

The night before. With Guilliman there was always a night before, or a night after. Feasts and parties went with his honour-giving like bolts went with boltguns. He held it important for his sons to mingle with the citizens, another chore in preparing themselves for peaceful duties once war was done.

It was clear now that those days would never come. Corvo expected ambivalence at the thought - he was made for war, after all - but found melancholy instead. Guilliman's dream was fading.

The whole of the Regia Civitata had been given over to the function. Inside its baroque halls, the one hundred and thirty mingled with the common mortals of Ultramar. The Space Marines stood like adults in a room of children, but the two strands of humanity were, for the most part, at ease with one another. The primarchs were absent from the pre-feast socialising, a calculated decision on Guilliman's part.

Corvo wore a simple, formal uniform, like all those who were to be honoured. Even so, he carried his gladius and bolt pistol on a broad belt. Events of the last few months had taught the XIII to be cautious. Members of the Invictus Guard stood garbed for battle at the main entrance. Around the perimeter and on the roof, the Prae-cental Guard and legionary brothers of the First Chapter patrolled. This heightened security saddened Corvo further. As much as the captain disliked company, Guilliman did not. It was important for his lord to be comfortable among his people. Distance was growing between the shepherd and his flock.

A woman was talking to Corvo. He reminded himself to pay attention to her.

'So much heroism,' the woman was saying.

'War breeds heroes,' said Corvo, and immediately felt foolish. 'The larger proportion of them perish uncelebrated.'

The woman was not fazed by his bluntness. She's used to this, he thought. Some women enjoyed flirting with legionaries, though he could not fathom for what reason. Women had been a mystery to him before his ascension to the XIII, and they only seemed more obtuse afterwards. She was very beautiful, and finely dressed. It did not matter to him.

Theoretical, he told himself, you're behaving like an oaf.

Practical, he added, you are an oaf.

'Something amuses you?' she said. An ironic smile played on her lips, a smile that seem to say: where is the power if there is no potency?

'No, no. A memory, that is all.'

She looked at him expectantly.

'It would not translate well,' he said awkwardly. By the old gods, he wanted to get away.

Corvo held out his glass, an oversized thing made for his oversized hands. A server stopped - his ewer was fit for men, but Corvo's glass was fit for the sons of demigods, and the server used his full measure in charging it. The liquid ran up the side as it flowed into the bulb, the thick swell of it trailing a lesser curve of clear alcohol as it found its equilibrium.

Not at all like the wall of blood that burst from the coffin ship. Not like that in the least.

That is some drink,' said the woman. 'If I were to drink it, I would not wake for a week.' She was trying for levity, Corvo supposed. She was not intimidated by him.

'Our lord is still at pains to make us feel part of humanity,' he said. 'A lesser amount would have no effect upon me whatsoever. We are supposed to be enjoying ourselves.' He tried to hide his irritation, unsuccessfully.

He sipped the drink. There was a hard burn to it. A good, strong Macragge pine brandy. Very fine vintage.

'Will that help you to enjoy yourself, good sir?'

'Only if I drink a lot, and quickly,' he replied.

The woman cradled her own glass in both hands, the drink untouched. 'Does it work then? All this, talking to the little people. Does it make you feel like one of us?'

Corvo looked over the gathering of humans and transhumans. They ignored the monster outside as they conversed and pretended that the sky was not red. They acted as if the galaxy had not been ripped asunder by fratricide, as if the order of all right things was not upset. If they could just pretend all was well, then all would be well. It was as much a pantomime as serving humans and giants from the same jug, or of pretending that their chairs were of equal size because they were made in the same style. He looked down upon the woman. She was so tiny, so frail. Of course it didn't work.

'I am one of you,' said Corvo, and tried his hardest to believe it. 'It is better not to forget our humanity in the first place, rather than seek to remind ourselves. That is my opinion.'

'We have all heard what you did at Astagar. I doubt any human soldier could have done as

you did.'

Corvo's smile became fixed. She sensed his irritation, and formed an expression of concern. 'Oh no, no! Not just the Titan, sir. I do not talk of that - no doubt you are sick of it.'

She was right.

'I talk of your efforts in the rebuilding. I have family there,' she explained.

Corvo dipped his head in gratitude. 'If only I could have seen it to the end. I was recalled for this ceremony. One week to destroy Eurythmia Civitas, and two years later it is still not set right. And I fear it never shall be.'

'He is right, our Lord Guilliman.' She cocked her head, appraising him. You are as much an asset in peace as in war.'

'We strive to be so,' he said. 'Now, if you will excuse me, mamzel?'

'I am Medullina,' she said with a slight curtsy.

Well then, Mamzel Medullina, I bid you enjoy the rest of the evening.'

Corvo dipped his head to her and made his way through the crowd of worthies. He was courteous enough to move with purpose, as if he had somewhere else to be, though he did not. He headed for solitude, offered by the tall doors leading out onto the balcony. It was hard to navigate such fragile beings without damaging them - not a consideration he'd had in some while.

The greatest luxury in Corvo's recent life had been preparedness. He only heard the true, appalling scale of what had happened at Calth later, but by the time the enemy approached Astagar he was at least aware of the treachery. Corvo set the operational mark running as soon as the Word Bearers and World Eaters translated in-system, and his erstwhile cousins were met with a wall of fire.

Why they even attacked Astagar was beyond Corvo, his incredulity at the waste of resources vying with the outrage of betrayal. It made no sense. Astagar had little strategic or symbolic value. He had not known then that wanton destruction was the traitors' main intent.

The force that attacked was commensurately small: five battle cruisers and attendant support - enough to ravage a lightly defended world, no more, no less. Good theoretical, perhaps, but the enemy's intelligence was lacking. They reckoned without him.

Corvo was not supposed to be there. He was en route to the muster at Calth but had been diverted by a malfunctioning warp engine on his command ship. Call it fate. Call it luck. Corvo believed in neither. He was there, and that was all that mattered.

The manner of the enemy's approach told him they were intent on a ground battle. So be it. He landed his own men and ordered his fleet to run out ahead of the enemy. A raid cost

the foe five Army transports at minimal damage to Corvo's ships. Satisfied that the enemy would thereafter have one eye over his shoulder, Corvo had his fleet withdraw. He would save the ships, if nothing else.

Astagar's modest orbital defences accounted for a portion more of the enemy's strength before being overrun. Light bombardment of the principal habitation zones opened hostilities on the ground. Corvo was appalled at this prioritisation of civilian targets, but had had the presence of mind to send the population to the shelters away from the city. When the enemy commenced orbital insertion over Eurythmia Civitas it was empty but for six hundred Ultramarines and the seventy thousand men of the Astagarian Light Rangers.

All this was in his report. Corvo was diligent. He put everything into the report, even the parts that he didn't believe.

Corvo was granted a brief respite. The balcony was typically grand in the Ultramar style, running all the way around the top of the Regia Civitatis's extensive arcade. Intimate groupings of couches were dotted about, coloured lanterns and braziers of cheerful coals at their centres to blunt the bite of Macragge's night. There were few people seated near them. Guilliman's attention to detail in all things extended as far as ensuring that light pollution from the city did not drown out the stars, and the sky should have been ablaze with distant suns.

It was not. It glowered a dull red. Only a single star burned beyond the lights of the orbitals and ships at anchor, and that was false - the Pharos, xenos technology illuminating Macragge from afar.

Corvo walked to the balustrade and looked out. There were only a handful of cities so perfect. There were prettier, certainly, and definitely livelier ones. None, however, could match Magna Macragge Civitas's perfect marriage of form and function.

He breathed deeply. The sight of such order gave him pleasure.

The entire galaxy should have been like this.'

Titus Prayto of the Librarius joined him at the rail. He wore his full plate, his head shadowed by an ornate technological cowl.

'Librarian,' said Corvo.

'Captain.'

'And what is your role in this charade, Prayto? Do you not undo our lord's intentions, alienating the people as you stride about with witchfire in your eyes and your body cased in ceramite?'

'An assassination attempt by the Alpha Legion. Konrad Curze so recently at large, here in the city. The creatures from beyond the veil embraced and welcomed by our kinsmen? Alienation is the least of concerns.'

'You are another watchdog then.' Corvo offered his drink. Prayto took it carefully in his gauntleted hand. His armour whined softly as he lifted it to his lips and drank half of it down.

He handed it back.

‘Call me that, for that is what I am. My talents and those of the rest of the Librarius help to safeguard our lord and his brothers. There are three of the Emperor’s loyal sons here, together. Such a target. The Pharos lights the way for our enemies just as it does for our allies.’ They looked up at the Pharos shining in the red sky. ‘And what horrors I look for...’

‘You will find none in me.’

‘I will not?’ asked Prayto.

‘Surely, you have looked.’

Prayto gave a little laugh. He did not take his eye from the Pharos. ‘I have. You are what you say you are, a loyal son of Ultramar.

You do not say much, though, and you are hard to read. You are a closed man, Captain Corvo.’

‘I find chatter tiresome,’ he said. ‘I prefer to leave talk to those who enjoy it.’

‘You put me in mind of the Lion.’

Corvo shook his head. The Lion is a master of secrets. It is in the nature of the secretive to hold their own thoughts mysterious, yet to demand the revelation of the thoughts of others. I care as much for secrets and revelation as I do for conversation.’

This gathering is a chore for you, then.’

‘It is.’

‘Each to his own. Be careful you do not appear too aloof or ungrateful.’

Thank you, centurion,’ said Corvo. ‘I am always mindful of that. It is the burden of those who share my mindset. Talkers talk, and they do not understand those who do not feel the need to speak. To sidestep their concern, we are forced to perform against our inclination, engaging in pointless discourse, while they prattle on and do not listen to what we have to say anyway.’

The Librarian laughed again, louder this time. ‘A joke from you, Corvo?’

‘I am not without humour.’

‘No, no.’ Prayto was silent a space. He pressed his hands onto the balustrade twice. The metal clicked on the stone. ‘I will not detain you.’

‘Speak what is on your mind. I do not have your gift, but I know you did not follow me out here to talk of man’s temperament.’

‘I did not,’ he agreed. ‘I came out because I have a sense of what you intend to do tomorrow. I would give you some advice, if you’d take it.’

Corvo looked out over the city. Warning lights winked on cranes over the Via Decmanus Maximus. There, a new proscenium was being raised. He wondered what kind of victory it was for Ultramar, when more than a hundred worlds had died.

'I am not surprised you sense my intention,' he muttered. 'It is at the forefront of my thoughts. What is this advice you have?'

'I urge you to reconsider.'

'I will not reconsider,' said Corvo. 'Our lord will understand.'

'Of course he will!' Prayto exclaimed. 'But your peers will likely not.'

'My deeds speak for themselves.'

'Our deeds do not always speak the truth for us,' Prayto countered.

Corvo downed his drink and left his glass on the stone rail.

That is not my concern. Only the truth is true, whether people believe it to be so or not. That is all I care for. Good evening, brother.'

He went back inside.

The coffin ship was hit several times and came down trailing fire, damaged braking thrusters on its port underside guttering. A lance beam slashed down from orbit, missing the craft by a hundred metres and demolishing a tower block. The shock wave staggered the lander, huge though it was, and it yawed dangerously, functioning jets shooting intense bursts of flame. It struggled upright, drifting out over the Via Longia toward the city centre, where the buildings were densely packed.

It was coming down too fast. Corvo didn't think that it would manage to land intact. True enough, when it hit, it levelled entire civic blocks and sent out a wash of gritty dust that billowed through the dying city's streets.

'Report hard landing of enemy war engine transport.'

'Acknowledged, Sergeant Phillipus,' said Corvo. 'I'm looking right at it.'

The coffin ship's scorched umber bulk reared up over the buildings of Eurythmia, battered but still whole. Lighter enemy landers were following. Streaks of fire crisscrossed the smoking sky, more coming down now than going up. Corvo's interdiction emplacements were being picked off. He tracked the assault crafts' vectors, calculating where they would land.

Tertiary group, divert to Mnemysne district, south side. Looks like a major landing. If engaged, hold and await further orders. Do not advance, or they will be coming down on top of you.'

Acknowledgements snapped back at him. The vox was still crisp, but that wouldn't last.

'Squads four, seven and nine with me. Crassus, bring up the Shadowswords. Let's see what we've got here. If there's anything in that coffin ship still alive, let us ensure it does not remain so.'

'Theoretical, captain,' Lieutenant Apelles voxed to him from inside the command tank. 'You are in overall command, you should remain here, with me.'

‘Practical,’ Corvo responded. ‘I want to kill some of these bastards myself.’

No one argued with that.

‘Redeploy Apelles, take the remainder of the men with you. Await my order.’

‘Yes, sir.’

There was movement in the rubble and shattered buildings. Half of Corvo’s total company strength was there. The thumping growl of multi-fuel engines roared up behind. Corvo’s Land Raider pulled back, turned and headed away. Several squads of Space Marines followed it. Three super-heavy tanks in cobalt-blue moved forward when it was clear, their tracks grinding rubble to dust and tearing up the road surface.

Corvo’s group set out.

The Space Marines scouted ahead, moving fast. Quiet fell for a few minutes, the space between the last weapon-strike and the first real ground assault. It didn’t last. More and more craft streaked through the air. Plumes of dust rose where they landed.

‘I don’t understand this,’ said Sergeant Crassus from atop the lead Shadowsword. They are not establishing proper beachheads. They’re coming down all over the place. Where is their discipline?’

‘Same place as their honour,’ cracked Brother Ligustinus, squad nine’s resident wit.

Corvo was also astounded at the sloppiness of the assault. He followed pict-feeds from the first dropzones - World Eaters rushed from drop pods as soon as they touched down, not waiting for their fellows, while the ragged Army units supporting the traitor legionaries seemed little better than a mob, pouring out of their transports right into loyalist gunfire. For now, this worked to Corvo’s advantage. His lieutenants directed XIII Legion response teams and local Army to where the enemy was most numerous.

He had to leave them to it. He had the situation on the ground and in orbit to monitor. And now this possibility of war engines...

Vox traffic increased exponentially, until it chattered incessantly at him: casualty reports, the constant repositioning of his mobile command centres, the status of refugees in their shelters. He dearly wished to mute most of it, sticking to the close-range squad bands, but he had to see it all. His visor was so crowded with tactical information that he was left with only a small, clear space to look ahead. His bodyguards Glabrio and Aratus recognised his distraction, and walked close by him in support as his eyes and ears.

A tangle of wrecked vehicles, burning trees and collapsed city blocks forced Crassus to take the Shadowwords a longer route. After a moment’s consideration, Corvo had his men clamber through the ruins, heading right for the Titan lander.

‘Sergeant Crassus, find a good firing solution for the Shadowwords. Squad nine, stick with them.’

Voxed assent. Fifteen of his men peeled away, falling back to join the tanks. The Titan-killers rumbled around on the spot and lurched off down a clearer street.

Corvo came onto the Via Longia, Astragar City's main avenue. The Mechanicum ship had landed perpendicular to the line of the city grid, its kilometre-long bulk scoring a fresh street through at least

five blocks. The prow sat on the pavement of the Longia, atop a fan of shattered stone. Its high, humped back was crooked. Landing on such a surface without control had broken its spine.

The battle was becoming more fierce. A number of feeds went dead.

A moment later, Lieutenant Apelles's voice crackled on the vox. 'I've lost contact with Verulus. Fighting's fierce in the northern deme. He's probably dead.'

'Acknowledged,' said Corvo. 'Assess situation there. Take command of his forces.'

Two command tanks left. Was it good theoretical to abandon the command bunker in favour of mobile targets, he wondered? This tactical situation was unexpected. No pre-existing theoretical told of how to slay one's own legionary kin. He was forced to innovate.

They moved up to the coffin ship cautiously. 'Be advised, Crassus, Apelles, approaching Mechanicum lander. No sign of enemy activity.'

They crept down the Via Longia, right up to the steaming flank of the vessel. After a moment's consideration, Corvo chanced crossing the front with a squad of his men.

The ship leaned ten degrees out of true, its hull battered by atmospheric re-entry and weapons fire. Flames flickered in the buildings and rubble around it. It was quiet there, the crump of explosions and howl of landing jets muted by the high buildings around them.

'Perhaps the war-engines are destroyed,' said Glabrio.

'I doubt it. I saw the same thing happen in the Coralan compliance,' said Aratus to the younger warrior. Glabrio had not been with the Legion as long as he had. 'Ships all smashed to wreckage, and the Titans came out anyway.'

'I don't see any sign that the doors are-'

Corvo held his hand up. His men froze, dropping into cover. 'Hear that?' he said.

A banging sounded from inside.

Theoretical - the doors are jammed,' said Aratus. 'No Mechanicum support. The only practical for the engines is to batter their way out.'

'Crassus, get ready,' voxed Corvo. 'Are you in position?'

'Via Macraggia is blocked, sir. We're having to push directly through the buildings fronting Platea Lata!

'You are heading for the Agora?'

'Yes, sir. Should get a good line right down the Longia once there!'

'Be quick,' said Corvo. 'Do not leave yourself exposed. There is not much cover there.'

'Sir...' said Aratus.

The coffin ship's doors vibrated as something pounded at them from within.

'Fall back,' the captain ordered.

They dropped back squad by squad, retreating down the Via Longia. Away from the crash site the city was dusty, the glass from broken casements slippery underfoot but otherwise oddly untouched. A roar, like that of a trapped animal, rumbled in the guts of the downed transport.

'That's not normal, is it?' asked Glabrio.

'Tricks. Psychological warfare,' said Aratus. 'Some of the Titan Legions do it on compliance actions. Growls rather than war-horns. Scares the hell out of the natives.'

'Get back,' said Corvo. 'Crassus, are you getting a good line here? Can you hear it? Something about this is not right.'

The clanging from within grew to manic levels. With a grinding of torn metal, a giant chainfist emerged from the doors. A spray of sparks and red liquid came with it.

Glabrio gasped. 'Is that...?'

The doors were wrenched apart. A torrent of blood poured from the interior of the ship, slopping up the buildings on the opposite side of the street. A wall of red seven metres high bore down the Via Longia in both directions, staining the walls almost to the second storey. Fierce, animalistic howling rent the air.

The Ultramarines ran. Corvo was bowled over by the sheer weight of the flood, his men scattered.

The red wave subsided as quickly as had come. Space Marines were sprawled across the road, all of them coated from head to foot in slippery blood. Corvo wiped at his helmet lenses, his armoured fingers clattering off the conductive crystal. Red smeared his vision.

'Squads! Report!'

'By the Throne!' said Glabrio.

The shattered frame of a Reaver engine tumbled out of the door, its cockpit smashed, limbs lifeless.

And then its killer came.

Whatever the monster was, it was no longer a Titan. Terrible modifications had been inflicted upon it. The cockpit had become a brazen skull. Long horns swept back from its brows over the lower edge of the carapace. It moved with a sinuous grace alien to its machine body. A long, articulated tongue of metal probed the air between sword-long teeth, a tail of similar material curling around its legs. The Warlord, if that was what it still was, crushed its mangled sibling beneath heavy feet as it struggled out onto the street. It wrenched itself free of the broken doors and staggered into the buildings opposite, bringing them down in a cascade of rubble and dust.

‘Crassus!’ cried Corvo.

‘I’m still not in position, sir!’

The Titan’s head moved back and forth, for all the world like it was scenting the air. It hit upon something, let out an unearthly, blaring howl from its war-horns, and smashed its way through the ruins, heading west and away from the downed ship.

Corvo, sprawled in the gritty gore of the Titan’s afterbirth, watched it go.

‘What have those fanatics done?’ asked Aratus in disbelief. ‘What are we fighting?’

CORVO MOVED AROUND the function - room to room, hall to hall - as if he were clearing a building in a firefight. Dancing was underway in the ballroom. In others, large tables were piled with food. More Ultramarines were to be found there than in the dance hall,

as was to be expected. His brothers knew him by reputation if not in person, and greeted him briefly and respectfully. It was some time yet to the feast and the arrival of the primarchs. He engaged in polite conversation with the unaltered where it was unavoidable.

‘They say you killed a Titan,’ they would declare.

‘Not I. My men. It was my men. And it was no Titan.’

Many of his interlocutors left disappointed. He would not be drawn further on the event. Let others tell their stories. He had no stomach for boasting.

He caught sight of Captain Ventanus - the Saviour of Calth and Guilliman’s new favourite - attentively conversing with some functionary or other, a broad sash across the Space Marine’s chest thick with fresh honours. His adjutant, a sergeant by the look of him, was engaged with another group of humans close by. Adoration and laughter rose around him. Corvo wished that he shared their facility for small talk.

He found a server and took both of the jugs of brandy that he was carrying. He consumed them as quickly as decorum allowed, enjoying the faint buzz of mild intoxication for the few minutes before his transhuman metabolism purged it from his body.

‘Brother-captain,’ said a Space Marine he did not know. The rank marks on his collar marked him out as a sergeant.

‘Brother,’ said Corvo.

The other legionary held out his hand. ‘I am Sergeant Tullian Aquila, 168th Company.’

‘Lucretius Corvo, 90th Company.’ He grasped Aquila’s forearm in a warrior’s handshake.

‘I know who you are, sir. I just wanted to come and greet you. I was caught in an engine battle at Ithraça on Calth. What you did greatly impressed me. Your action on Astagar is the talk of my company, or what’s left of it. It would have been good to have you with us. If there were only more of you and Captain Ventanus’s kind...’

Corvo held up his hand. ‘Please, you embarrass me. We all march for Macragge.’

‘We march for Macragge,’ Aquila replied automatically.

'If you are here, then you too must have performed well.'

'So they say,' said Aquila.

'You do not seem convinced.'

Aquila looked pained. 'I fought hard enough, but I doubted we would survive. I almost despaired. That is not what the primarch taught us.'

'We all despaired, sergeant. What else could we have done?'

Aquila shrugged. 'But tomorrow, I will be honoured for my doubt as much as my achievement. It leaves a bad taste in my mouth.'

'If Lord Guilliman has chosen you for honour, then be assured - you are deserving,' said Corvo.

'Perhaps. But the doubt came first.'

'Without doubt, how can we construct a foolproof theoretical? Without doubt there is only arrogance.'

Aquila was mollified by this. Tell me sir, did you ever doubt?'

Corvo gave stared back, stony-faced. 'In truth? No. Not for a second.'

THE MARK WAS a little over six days. Facing stiff resistance from Corvo's forces, the traitors had laid siege to the city. Why they had not ended it with a single, decisive orbital strike was a matter for conjecture, but still they did not. Instead, probing assaults searched for the Ultramarines' weaknesses. They displayed none.

Corvo's subordinate officers gathered around the table of an empty bunker. Dust sifted down from the ceiling with each artillery hit above, covering everything in a grey shroud. Cogitators were choked with it, hololiths sparked and would not cast their images properly. The Space Marines were forced to rely on paper maps.

'Theoretical? Anyone?' asked Corvo. 'We have no engine support, and our heavy armour can't catch it.'

'It is wary of the Shadowswords,' said Apelles.

'And well it might be,' snorted Aratus.

'They will soon be occupied elsewhere,' said Lieutenant Sextus. He spoke to them via vox, since Corvo would not gather all of his

command assets into one place. 'There are signs of an imminent enemy armour attack. Since Verulus fell, they've been bringing their heavy landers in unopposed. They are mustering to end the siege and crush us.'

'I do not understand why they did not wait to land this engine until then,' said Apelles. 'Why send it in first? It is vulnerable.'

'Is it now?' said Corvo softly. 'It moves faster than any war-engine I've ever seen. And it seems... indiscriminate in its slaughter. The enemy, my brothers, are not playing by the

rules.'

Their muted laughter was cut short by a particularly loud detonation on the surface. Debris pattered on the table. Eyes flicked upwards to stuttering lumen strips.

'If we can't get the Shadowswords into range, how do we kill this damned Titan?' asked Corvo.

'It is hardly a Titan,' Sergeant Domitian muttered. 'Not any more.'

'Whatever they have done to it,' said Glabrio, 'it behaves more like a beast than a machine.'

'He is right,' said Aratus. 'Perhaps we should divert our efforts to tackling the Seventeenth Legion. Let's take our chances that the beast is too stupid to act in concert with them. Kill them first, bring it down later when it is alone and vulnerable.'

'What did you say?' asked Corvo.

Aratus was taken aback. 'I meant no...'

'No, no, about hunting.'

'He said it's like a beast, sir,' said Glabrio.

Corvo nodded. He brushed grit from the map. 'We need to fell this Titan. It is a focal point for their forces - not tactically, but emotionally. It is a kind of idol, I think, to those Seventeenth Legion fanatics. I am certain we can lure a portion of their forces into the city to save it, should it come under threat. Once they are inside we shall destroy them. As to the Titan's destruction, we are plotting practicals from the wrong theoretical position. This is not a machine, Aratus has that right. Not like any we have faced before.

But we have fought beasts. And if it is a beast, then so shall we trap it like one.'

His finger creased the map at Konor's Forum.

FELGHAAAAAAAAASSST!

The pretence of its war-horns had been cast aside. The Titan had a voice. Diabolic, but a voice nonetheless - a deafening whisper, the rush of stale air from an opened tomb. The name it uttered was not the one on the Titan's identification plaques.

'Now,' Corvo ordered.

He watched his Rhino's vid-screens as Astagaran troopers broke cover and fled before the beast. Each sprinted eighty metres or so before diving out of sight; troopers further ahead taking up the flight. The Titan's head swung round, attracted by the movement.

'Go, go, go!' ordered Corvo. 'It has the bait!'

FELGHAAAAAAAAASSST!

The corrupted Titan levelled its giant Ias-blasters at the fleeing troopers. Deafening thunderclaps rolled out as focused light cleaved the sky. Repeated shockwaves of superheated air blew out windows and flipped the wrecks of groundcars onto their sides. A handful of

men were caught and incinerated. Others were thrown aside, organs pulverised by overpressure.

‘Come on! Come on!’ said Domitian, stationed in the forum some four kilometres down the road.

‘It will come,’ said Corvo. ‘Patience.’

A half company of the XVII and a selection of mismatched armour followed the thing. The droning chants of the traitors set Corvo’s teeth on edge. The sound was pervasive, coming from everywhere and nowhere.

But their fanaticism had made them predictable. Half of them broke off to engage the Shadowsword detachment. This time, Corvo had the tanks remain in place. The enemy would find themselves walking into an ambush.

His plan was working. Eager on the hunt, Felghast broke into a run, outpacing its supporting armour and infantry.

‘Sir, it’s moving too fast for the men.’

‘All troopers, stand down!’ voxed Corvo. ‘Fall back to muster points! Stand by to engage supporting ground forces. Strikeforce Alpha, prepare to assault siege lines at quadrant three.’ He turned to his driver. ‘Ready, Crassus?’

‘Ready, sir.’

Corvo watched as the Titan pounded down the street. A thousand metres, seven hundred...

‘Now!’ he roared.

Crassus slammed the Rhino out of its hiding place in a demolished shop front, cracked columns bouncing off the tank’s glacis as it careened onto the street. Corvo went out through the gunner’s hatch and aimed the Rhino’s searchlight at the creature’s face.

‘FELGHAAAAAAAAASSSST!’

The Titan let off a rattle of inaccurate fire, smashing buildings into ruin.

‘We have its attention, sergeant!’

Crassus was the finest armour specialist under Corvo’s command. He was a master of all aspects of tank warfare, but he was also a particularly gifted driver. He accelerated the carrier to maximum speed.

Ultramar streets ran long and straight, but slumped buildings had narrowed the Via Palatine. Wrecked civilian vehicles cluttered what space remained. Corvo was slammed into the hatch rim as the Rhino burst through the shell of a burnt-out tram. Colonnades crashed down as Felghast spat fury all about them.

The fog curled in vortices around the pursuing Titan. It was gaining.

A missile hammered into the road. The Rhino slewed along the blast front as Crassus

fought for control.

Konor's Forum lay ahead, a large market square paved in marble now thick with dust. Great idealised statues of the long-dead Battle King stood at each corner.

Ramps led down underneath, where the streets intersected the square. If Felghast had been behaving to tactical norms, it would never have ventured into the forum.

But Felghast was not operating to tactical norms.

A spear of light slashed into the Rhino as it entered the square, sending it spinning across the pavement. It crashed to a halt in one of the arcades running around the edge.

The Titan roared and then slowed, approaching its prey.

Corvo cursed. He dropped back inside the tank. Fire licked out of the driver's cabin. Crassus was clutching at his neck and moaning.

'Release your belt!' said Corvo. 'Squad seventeen, lure it in. Lure it in!'

Corvo kicked the side door open and pulled Crassus free. Felghast looked down at them, looming out of the fog like a monster of legend. Old gods help him, if Corvo didn't actually see the metal nose snuffling.

A beam of ruby las-light connected with the Titan's void shields, sending up an oily flare. The beast swung around to find its source, already firing.

Corvo dragged Crassus into the lee of a toppled column.

The giant foot of Felghast moved over the square, throwing it into shadow.

'Now,' voxed Corvo.

Explosive plumes ripped up the sides of the plaza. A rain of shattered ferrocrete pinged off his armour. He held his head down, shielding Brother Crassus. His body shook as a large piece of stone clanged off his armoured backpack. Warning indicators on his visor display climbed to critical, alarms sounded in his ears, but he blink-dicked them to silence. His power plant was compromised. Coolant jetted from the cracked left exhaust, and the bars indicating its level dropped dangerously low.

The rain of debris stopped. Corvo raised his head.

Felghast's uncanny war-horns blared in alarmed tandem with its voice. Machinery squealed as its torso twisted, trying to arrest its progress. Walking was little more than controlled falling - now

that there was nothing solid to place its foot upon, Felghast fell uncontrollably.

The stacked layers of the subterranean spaces beneath Konor's Forum were open to the air, and the Titan's foot plunged into the hole. It roared in anger, its awful brazen jaws clacking. Weapons discharged furiously, pulverising the grand Administratum buildings around the ruined square.

Slowly, it toppled.

Corvo watched tensely.

The metallic tail of the Titan lashed backwards and forwards, sweeping up a storm of rubble as it raked the ground. With a whip-crack, the thin end of it wrapped itself around the pediment of the statue of King Konor closest to Corvo. The whole structure held, though it shifted at this new load.

Felghast hung over the precipice, and then it began to haul itself back upright. A daemonic laugh rumbled out from its engines.

‘Stay here!’ Corvo ordered Crassus. He mag-locked his bolter to his hip. ‘Heavy support squad Calorem, hold. Stand ready to execute. Anyone else, with me!’

Space Marines came running from cover. To their rear, up the Via Palatine, gunfire rattled. The supporting units of Felghast were nearing, fighting running battles with the loyalist forces set to catch them.

To the statue! To the statue!’ Corvo roared.

He sprinted, his body and armour working as one to propel him at speeds that his bulk would suggest impossible. He charged at the pediment without slowing, slamming into it. The impact made his visor display fizz. Alarms sounded again as his suit’s ruptured coolant system struggled to keep the temperature of his labouring power armour down. He ignored it, trusting to his superhuman metabolism to save him from heat exhaustion.

‘With me, brothers!’

Others crashed into the statue. They pushed at it, grunting in effort, armoured boots skidding on the rubble at the square’s edge. Brother

Vestorius drew his gladius, leapt up, hooked his arm around the tail and hacked at the ribbed flesh-metal as he hung there. Molten metal spurted from the wound and splashed on his visor, but he did not stop.

‘Heave!’ cried Corvo. ‘Heave!’

More Ultramarines hammered into the statue, but there was no space for anyone else. The newcomers pushed against their fellows’ backs or dropped broken slabs underfoot, giving purchase to sliding feet on the treacherous ground.

‘Heave!’

Small arms fire came in, pinging off their battleplate, followed by the deranged howls of the XVII’s supporting Army units. Bolter fire barked in return as Corvo’s rearguard squads moved up to engage from neighbouring streets. Popping bangs rattled around the dusty fog as mass reactive projectiles detonated. The intensity of the firestorm suggested a larger force of traitors than he had anticipated.

‘Heave!’ shouted Corvo.

The statue jolted, spilling Space Marines onto the ground. ‘It’s going! It’s going!’ shouted

someone at the back of the group.

Corvo's vox was a torrent of feeds coming at him from all quarters. He had no effort to spare for their ordering.

'Heave!'

The defiled Titan was still trying to drag itself upright, its foot pawing at the air, seeking solid ground. They did not have much time. His men brought up a girder, and rammed it into the widening gap, levering the pediment upwards.

'Heave, brothers!' yelled Corvo. 'Heave!'

The statue lurched. With the sound of grinding stone, the pedestal came free of its foundations and toppled over. King Konor slid from his perch and shattered upon the flagstones.

Felghast gave out a withering howl as it fell. Its void shields breached themselves on the jagged lip of the pit, bursting in a storm of lightning that ran sparks over the Ultramarines power armour. It crashed down through the open sub-layers, bringing its armoured torso to ground level and jamming its weapon arms wide.

The Titan was down. One leg was splayed behind it, wrenched at an awkward angle, the other buried hip-deep in the hole. Machinery protested violently as it tried to drag itself up, but it could not. Its tail cracked back and forth in anger, catching three Space Marines and sending them crashing into the ruins.

The tail! Get clear of the tail. Stand ready to repel ground forces.'

Shapes were coming up through the dust. Enemy armour. Corvo dismissed them - in the choked avenue they posed little threat. Poor theoretical, worse practical and XVII Legion idiocy as they raced to save their downed idol. In confirmation, a loud whoosh and clang heralded a rocket going into the side of one of the enemy tanks. It stopped dead, hatches blown, further blocking ingress to the forum.

There were other shapes in the mist. Power armoured. Legionaries. These did cause him concern. Still, if they were in the city, then they were not outside it, waiting them out. Corvo's plan was working. He had drawn the enemy in.

'Calorem, execute! Execute, now, now, now!'

At the other end of the downed daemon-machine, the heavy support squad advanced out from the shelter of a courtyard. Armourglass eyes caged by sloped brass brows stared hatred at the Space Marines as they approached the Titan's head. Carapace guns swivelled hopelessly. Its jaw clacked on the ground, seeking to bite. Heavy melta cannons were arrayed by the Space Marines, five of them, and set to maximum power.

The roar of the fusion weaponry was audible on Corvo's side of the square.

The Titan screamed. They fired again.

That is not the cry of a machine,' said one of his men.

The scream trailed off. Felghast writhed in its pit, the crashing of its death throes drowning out the sound of battle.

Corvo blink-clicked his way into Squad Calorem's helmet feeds. He saw a cooling puddle of molten brass where the Titan's head had been.

There was no sign of a princeps or moderati within what remained, nor any indication of a cockpit cavity - only a fibrous, organic mess shot through with bands of distorted metal. He clicked off.

'Good work,' he said, drawing his gladius. 'Move up to square east side. Prepare to engage Seventeenth Legion elements. Strikeforce Alpha, commence assault. We march for Macragge!'

'CAPTAIN LUCRETIVS CORVO! Ninetieth Company, Ninth Chapter. Step forward!'

Corvo approached the dais. Corvo knew no fear, but this convocation of demigods gave him pause. Sanguinius's glorious visage in particular was hard to look at up close.

He came to the end of the carpet, to the top of the steps, and knelt before his lord.

'Look at me, captain.'

Corvo forced his eyes upwards.

Lord Guilliman looked upon him benevolently, as proud a father as ever there was.

'For you, my son, there is great honour.'

He held out a hand. A man came forward, bearing upon a velvet cushion a laurel wreath, so cunningly wrought from metal that it looked as though it were fashioned from fresh-cut leaves.

'The Laurel of Defiance!' called out Guilliman. He held up the award for all the world to see. 'One of our Legion's highest honours. For the Titan killer, for the saviour of Astagar, for Captain Lucretius Corvo!'

Corvo bent his head. The primarch placed the wreath. It clicked as it mag-locked itself around Corvo's helm.

'The honour was my men's, not mine alone, lord,' said Corvo.

'You led them well, captain. By honouring you, we honour them all.'

An expectant air formed. An uncomfortable silence followed.

The Lion spoke. 'Are you not forgetting something, captain?'

'Am I, my lord?' said Corvo.

'All others honoured here today have renewed their oaths to your Legion, and to the Imperium. Will you not do the same?'

'No, my lord.'

There was a sound akin to a soft wind, the sound of a world gasping.

The Lion's face hardened. Sanguinius looked to his brothers.

'Are you a traitor, then?' asked the Lion.

Corvo drew his gladius. The Space Marines on the dais brought their weapons up, but Guilliman stayed them with a hand. Corvo held the sword high above his head, blade flat upon his palms.

'I do not renew my oath, my lords, for the oaths of an Ultramarine are forever binding. I am not like my traitor kin to renounce their solemn promises. I have sworn already to serve the Imperium, the Emperor, the Legion and all of mankind, and through those oaths my lords have my sword until death takes me. You ask me to renew that which needs no renewal, for the oaths of an Ultramarine are eternal. To speak them again implies a weakness inherent to them. And there is no weakness. Not in my arm, nor in my mind, nor in my word. I am an Ultramarine. I march for Macragge and the Emperor for evermore, as I have pledged. I need not do so again.'

A slow, gauntleted clapping broke the silence.

Guilliman. Guilliman himself applauded his words. 'Well said, my son, well said!'

'Insolence, brother,' muttered the Lion.

'Honour,' Guilliman corrected him. 'Captain Corvo, put away your sword.'

Corvo did. His primarch's hand fell on his shoulder.

'Stand, my son. Stand and face your brothers.'

Corvo turned, and saw the Legions arrayed in the square as the primarchs did. Behind the expressionless visors of his brothers, he knew that some faces would show displeasure. Prayto had been right. He did not care.

'Do you hear his words, warriors of the Thirteenth?' said Guilliman.

'Listen, for he speaks the truth. The honour of our Legion is unimpeachable! We march for Macragge!'

The response rumbled out from the square, heavy as thunder.

'Return to your brothers, Lucretius.'

'Wait!' said the Lion.

Corvo paused.

Tell me, I understand it the custom in the Thirteenth to allow captains to modify their heraldry, but yours is a bold departure. Might I ask why?' asked the primarch.

At this, an image flickered through Corvo's mind. The eidetic memory of the Legiones Astartes was a great gift, but carried a high price. It made all recollections that came before its bestowing pale and unreal in comparison. Another irony in a life of ironies, that every image of death seen by his transhuman eyes remained sharp, that every privation could be recalled

and felt anew in painful clarity. He fought for humanity, while his own youthful experience of being human was reduced to sun-bleached flashes, opaque moments of dreamlike quality that could not be trusted.

He treasured them all the same.

This was what he remembered.

The forecourt of his father's house one hundred and twenty years ago. Bone-white flags snapped in the breeze bearing the badge of the Corvo line - a hollow, spiked circle. A stylised sunburst.

His father was the last to fly that flag. There were no male heirs beyond Lucretius.

Natural memory was imprecise but in its looseness was found the miracle of evocation, and it was far more emotive than the cold exactness of his Legion-gifted mind. Lucretius again felt his hair stir, he felt the goosebumps rise on his bare arms. Autumn was chill that year, and already the wind had turned to come down from the mountains. There was something invested in this recollection, so deep and fundamental to who he was as a human being, not as a Space Marine. Something that he had almost forgotten

how to feel, and struggled daily not to forget.

His father knelt before him, the proud scion of an old and powerful house. Corvo had never seen him kneel before. Not even in the old pics from when Sulustro was taken back into the fold of the Five Hundred Worlds.

'My son, Lucretius,' he had said. 'You go from us, and for this I grieve.' He grasped his son's shoulders. His voice was unsteady. I am proud of you. The Corvo name will die with you, and still I am proud.'

Corvo could not speak. What could he say? How could he be strong for the Emperor if his father - the strongest man he knew - was not?

Corvo's father searched his eyes for a glimpse of the man he would never know. They stayed like this, his father's hands warm on his shoulders, the wind cold on his skin.

He embraced his son and stood. 'Go now, Lucretius. Be proud of what you are to become, but never forget who you are or what you were!

'I swear, father,' said Lucretius. 'I swear I will not forget!

His father smiled. Corvo had never seen a sadder sight, before or since.

The memory faded. He was with a different father now.

It was hard to hold the Lion's eye. Perilous, even. But Corvo did.

The Lion glanced at Sanguinius. They seemed amused.

'Well, captain?' said the Lion. 'What is the significance of your colours? Would you care to explain?'

'It is simple, my lord.'

Yes?’

‘I made a promise,’ said Corvo. He bowed from the waist.

They were calling out the name of the next hero as he walked away.

SERMON OF EXODUS

David Annandale

THERE ARE VOICES and words in the echoes. Some of the words are spoken by the voices, but not all. There are words born from no tongue. They are heavy with dark meaning, sharp with truth and coiling with toxins. And there are voices that say nothing, yet howl the void of madness. So many echoes shatter against each other, slithering down the slopes and bouncing off rocks with predator leaps. They do not travel on the wind. They are the wind.

And some of them have come for him.

Tsi Rekh stands on a bluff. He has left his acolytes at the camp. Before him is the plain. It is a vast expanse of dry, cracked mud. It looks like the flaking carcass of Davin itself. In the centre, half a day’s march away, a single conical peak rises - the Mount of the Lodge. Its silhouette darkens with the falling night. It becomes a shadow, one that reaches out to him with its absence and echoes.

The echoes are everywhere on Davin. It takes skill and faith and sacrifice to hear them, to draw their scattered force into knots of prophecy and revelation. They touch even those who cannot hear.

The truths of the gods are not limited by distance. To parse the truths, though - to sift through and truly understand them - that is a gift. It is the province of the few. And the closer one comes to the source of their propagation, the greater the density of the echoes.

Is it clarity that Tsi Rekh hopes to find? Revelation, certainly, but that is not the same as clarity. Revelation can strip the flesh from the soul. Mysteries can step out from the night. They can descend from on high with fury. To witness them is to be laid bare before something far more terrible and powerful than simple clarity.

He is so close now, so very close. So close to the source. So close to the Lodge of Echoes.

Close enough that the voices are so numerous, they must weave and tangle and entwine. Fragments and laughter, secrets and cries, the screams of torn vision and worse truths are gathered together. From their midst, they select a single thread for Tsi Rekh alone. It is

gossamer venom. It will not speak its revelation, but this echo will speak to him. He closes his eyes. He opens himself to its touch.

He does not presume to take the thread. He lets it circle around his skull. Thin beyond vision, coiling, sharp as darkness, it reaches into his ears.

This is his echo. This is his truth.

A mouth that he must never gaze upon begins his word. A single sound.

Mmmmmmmrnmmm...

That is the gift. That is the echo that has come for him.

Mmmmmmmmm...

Beneath sound, beneath bone, as great as a continent's stone.

Mmmmmmmmmmm...

The promise of more, if he proves worthy, if he passes the test.

And he will. This is his vow. He will hear the full expression of the echo that is his destiny.

Mtnmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmm...

✠ ✠ ✠

...Memory.

His tent, the flaps parting to admit Akshub. She is alone, this high priestess of the Serpent Lodge. The old woman is half Tsi Rekh's size and many times his age. Thin. Bones in her hair, older bones beneath her flesh. Age is everywhere upon her. His tribe, stronger in weapons and armour and body than the vermin who live in her camp, could slaughter all her kin. He could kill Akshub with a single blow.

The half-formed thought is terrifying. Why? Because he would be dead as soon as he raised his hand. Because he would anger the gods.

Banishing the idea before it takes hold. Listening to Akshub open the doorway to destiny.

'On this day, the Lodge of the Hound has the favour of the gods,' she says. To the Serpent Lodge fell the honour of turning the Warmaster. His change is the work of my lodge. It is our serpent that whispers in his heart. He walks from us to bring the fire to the stars.' She grins. Insects crawl over her teeth. 'But you, priest, have a great claim too. You will hear the sacred from the source. You will touch it. You will be it. It is time to proclaim your right.'

'My right to what?'

He knows. He understands the meaning of the word source. He must hear her say it, though. Akshub's voice will make it law.

The Lodge of Echoes.'

Sighing. Glory, a burning coal in his chest. 'We have tried before.' As have all the lodges.

Older memories, transmitted memories, the lore of Davin: the Lodge of the Serpent, of the Bear, of the Hound, of the Hawk, of the Crow, all - all, all - have sought to own the Lodge of Echoes, the first lodge, the lodge that precedes and surpasses all animals.

All - all, all - have failed.

Has any worshipper ever even crossed the plain? No answer. Not one has returned. The mountain, always a distant and forbidden marker of power.

But Akshub's voice comes, cracked and insistent. 'Go, priest. Cross the plain. Climb the mountain. Open the doors.'

The gods will permit it?'

The gods command it. Go and meet destiny.' She stretches out a hand and jabs a hooked fingernail against Tsi Rekh's chest. 'Open the doors,' she says again.

'And why does the Serpent give this honour to the Hound?'

Insects and smiles. 'I give nothing. I am the messenger. I am the opener of ways, but it is not for me to travel them.'

And Tsi Rekh to the dark mountain has come.

He OPENS HIS eyes. The memory burns off like mist before the magnificence of the present. The shadow of the mountain has almost reached the bluff. The details of the plain have vanished. There is only the dark. The loam of whispers.

The last of the light is fading, its lie stabbed to death. This is how it has always been on Davin. There is no rebirth at dawn - there is only the primal sacrifice of nightfall. With every sunset, the gods reassert their rule with sacred murder. The shadow draws closer yet, then closer: a shadow with mass, strength and will. It reaches the base of the bluff. Minute by minute, it climbs higher. The tide of dark reaches for Tsi Rekh. He watches. He will not blaspheme by looking away. He will see the very second that marks his fall toward apotheosis.

The shadow reaches him. It touches him.

It is more than cold. It is a freezing agony, as though his limbs were being severed one by one. He welcomes the shadow and its will. And so much more than cold, more than pain. This is a test.

Then, through the act of his welcome, it becomes a claim. It is ownership. It is a grasping. In the echoes, he hears nods. He has been found worthy.

'Now!' he cries.

'Now!' he calls.

'Now!' he thunders.

His voice is picked up by the echoes. It too has been welcomed by them. They carry it before him, across the plain, bringing his ferocious joy of worship to the mountain. They carry it also behind him, to his followers, and beyond. Because he is blessed, because he is

chosen by the Lodge of Echoes, his voice has joined the dark chorus that rings the planet. On the other side of the globe, sorcerers of the lesser lodges will hear his voice amidst the fragments that come to them, and they will wonder at the summons.

Does he feel power now?

Yes. Yes.

Wait, say the echoes.

More, say the echoes.

Mmmmmmmmm... says his fate, growing louder, stronger, on the verge of transformation.

He waits, motionless, arms outstretched, staring into the rich darkness. His followers arrive from the camp. They number thirty-one. With him, their party is thirty-two, a sacred grouping: the eightfold path of Chaos multiplied by the will of the four gods. They are rabble and they are faithful, sacrifices to be used without thought and martyrs to be praised for their willingness to die. Like him, they bear weapons and armour. They are powerful amongst their fellows. They come from the Lodge of the Hound and that is enough, whether they are alive or dead, to make them supreme over all other Davinites.

Tsi Rekh walks into the shadow. They follow. They descend the slope. The ground of the plains is uneven, jagged. Some of the pilgrims are barefoot, and before they have gone many steps they leave a trail of blood behind them. They do not light torches. They march into the very origin of night. They cannot see where they walk. Tsi Rekh strides with certainty, guided by the pull of destiny. The others do not have an echo of their own to sustain them. They stagger. They trip. They fall. They do not cry out but Tsi Rekh knows that there is pain and the ruin of flesh. Beneath his feet, he can feel the squirm and crunch of insects. They scabble out from the cracks. They are thirsty for the wounds of the faithful.

All is as it should be. His chest swells. He could swim through the dark to the mountain. But he will walk with his acolytes and bring them to whatever role it is that awaits them. They are elevated, because the Lodge of the Hound has been, but they are not chosen.

Unlike him.

Always chosen.

The wait of years.

A stirring in the depths of his mind. Thin as hair, jointed, with a scorpion's sting. What is it? He cannot grasp it. It grows stronger, more insistent as they walk through the night. In the hour before dawn, when at last they reach the foot of the mountain and begin to climb, the thing blossoms. The moment he touches the sacred rock, the coiled irritant strikes.

MEMORY AGAIN. DIFFERENT. Older yet new. The event forgotten, erased from his consciousness. Born-reborn-exulting only now, answering a moment in time.

Tsi Rekh is a child. He is very young, a few years old. Can he speak yet? Barely. Can he understand? Yes. That is important.

Inside a tent. Whose? He can't tell, because that is not important. Akshub is there, the witch seeming old even then.

She has always been old.

Two other adults are there. His parents, speaking with Akshub. Why her and not an elder of their own lodge? Her presence is its own answer. She is that powerful, often transcending the lines between lodges.

His parents' attention goes back and forth between the witch and their son. He stands in the centre of the tent. Circles drawn in salt surround him. There are designs between the circles. The child does not know what they mean but they frighten him. The adult Tsi Rekh tries to read them in this new-old memory. They defy him. They keep shifting. They twist, they slither. They are serpents, and they are language. They are envenomed meaning.

'Hail,' Akshub is saying. 'You are blessed among our people. You have found favour with the gods' She looks at Tsi Rekh. 'He will be the passage. He will be the way.'

His parents laugh with pride. Their pride sounds like the squealing of rats.

'Stand over him,' Akshub instructs.

They take their places inside the circles. Facing each other with Tsi Rekh in between. He looks up at these giants, his mother and father. This is the first time the adult priest sees their faces. Two more of the faithful, bearing the scars and damage of worship.

Strangers. They mean nothing.

Yet they mean everything, because they are the instruments necessary to achieve his glory.

Looking down at him, still laughing.

Still squealing.

Akshub's movements are a blur - graceful in their perfect brutality. His parents still stand but their throats are slashed wide by the old woman's knife. Blood falls in torrents onto his upturned face. A cataract, a flood, a rising sea. He is drowning. There is no tent, no ground, no air, only the blood.

The blood and the circles.

And the old woman's voice. 'Listen,' she hisses. 'Lisssssten!'

The drowning child obeys. The echo speaks to him for the first time then. Into his ears comes a whisper. It is a name. The memory loses definition there. He cannot be told the name yet. But now he knows the nature of the revelation, and the name with the great hum.

Mmmmmmmmmmmmm...

And then.

Now. Outside the memory. Climbing the mountain. The echo, the word, the name, so vast and terrible that minds cannot hold

it, begins to take shape. After the hum that is the thunder of earth comes the choir of dead stars.

Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa...

'Light the torches,' Tsi Rekh says.

It is done, and the torches are strapped to leather harnesses on the acolytes' backs, to burn high above their heads. The worshippers can climb with both hands. So there is light now. Smoke, too, and a stench. The heads of the torches are wrapped in cloth dipped in human tallow.

As the climb begins, Ske Vris, the most promising of Tsi Rekh's acolytes, stops, her hands frozen where they first touch the mountain.

'I cannot,' she says. She struggles, but a greater will holds her. 'I am forbidden.'

Tsi Rekh nods and leaves her. It occurs to him that she is being spared. Sacrifice, then, is ahead. He has no fear that it will be his - the end of his path is still as distant as it is grand.

So he leads the climb up the steep face. There are many handholds. There are also many shadows. They cannot always be distinguished from one another. The mountain's jaggedness exacts its tribute of pain. With every injury, the victims scream their gratitude to the gods. That there would be a price was a given. It would be blasphemous to wish things otherwise. Victory without sacrifice is meaningless.

The closer they come to the peak, the greater the agony. The handholds are the edges of blades. Blood is the key to elevation, and Tsi Rekh is bleeding too. Hands, arms, legs all robed in crimson. He feels the honour of the pain. It spurs him to greater speed, to hurry to his appointment.

Almost at the end of the climb now. There is a wide ledge coming up and perhaps a route into the complexity of the peak, which appears to twist like a nautilus shell.

Beschak climbs to Tsi Rekh's right, one respectful handhold behind. He has been Tsi Rekh's chief acolyte for years. Akshub

presented him to Tsi Rekh when the follower was a child.

'The boy is important to you;' she had said. 'Prepare him. Make him ready for the moment.'

'How will I know when it comes?' Tsi Rekh asked.

'He will know.'

Beschak grabs a spur of rock with his left hand. He hauls himself up. His feet lose their purchase. He slips. Clutches the spur hard. A blood-slicked palm slips.

Tsi Rekh stops to watch.

Beschak's eyes shine in the light of his torch. He looks at Tsi Rekh. 'Now?' he asks.

Tsi Rekh says nothing. He waits to see.

The spur crumbles to dust, as if it had been nothing more than crusted sand. Beschak laughs and falls.

In Tsi Rekh's ear, in his mind, in his soul, he hears the echo's ecstatic Aaaaaaaaaaaaa...

And new echoes. Granted to him alone? He would think so. Ancient ones, so forgotten that they can no longer reach much beyond the mountain's peak. Given strength at the moment of Beschak's shattering.

Tsi Rekh pauses. These echoes are startling. He did not expect this.

Images. They must be of another place. This cannot be Davin.

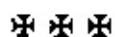
No, no, there is certainty. This is Davin. Of another time, buried beneath millennia of savagery and blood.

Images of cities, of soaring structures, of proud light.

Tsi Rekh's lips curl in hatred. He wants those towers brought low. So does someone else, the being to whom these memories and this hatred belong.

The echoes fade. That which is dead is less important than that which will die. There is work to be done.

A name to be spoken.



Tsi REKH CLIMBS again. He reaches the ledge. It is a path, sloping up and curving into the rock. It will lead him into the nautilus. He waits for his acolytes to gather behind him and then starts forward.

The path itself is a coil. The sides of the rock fissure are barely wide enough to permit passage. The light from the torches feels weak, as if the rock absorbs the shine. The pilgrims walk into the spiral of midnight. Then there is a sharp turn, and they are out. They stand in the interior of the peak. Perhaps the mountain was once a volcano. This might be a crater. If it is, then the volcano has been extinct for a very long time.

'Put out the torches,' Tsi Rekh says, obeying not an instinct but a command. He hears it in his head, and the voice belongs to Akshub. Another memory. She gave him the command forty years ago, then buried it.

The acolytes do as he says. The fires die but the light does not. There is a wash over this space. Grey of mould, green of rot and white of hate. It roils and shifts, it turns, it—

It looks. The light sees.

And it is bladed. A beam glances over the ground, sweeps over the pilgrims. One, Hath Khri, reaches up with her arms in ecstasy and the light cuts through them. She falls, blood spouting from stumps below the elbow. She gasps her praise to the gods.

Movement must be earned, Tsi Rekh thinks. It must be understood as a gift. It must be presented as a form of worship.

Hath Khri turns toward him. She smiles before she dies, bleeding out onto the cold rock.

Like Beschak, this was her moment. All in the service of the path Tsi Rekh must walk.

Mmmmmmmmmmm...

Aaaaaacaaaaaa...

There are ruins everywhere. They are low, broken, vague. Impossible to tell what they had once been. Tsi Rekh sees the trace of walls, the gaps of doorways. Nothing else. Simply the ghosts of history, a

phantasm of a time when the Davinites built something more substantial than yurts.

There are other echoes of this time, of course - the lodges themselves. And in the centre of the hollow peak rises the Lodge of Echoes, the greatest of them all. It is the source of the light. This light, Tsi Rekh realizes, is another manifestation of the echoes. If he had the skills, perhaps he would see more than the glow of thought's decay. He is humbled by the revelation of how far he has yet to go.

The Lodge of Echoes is suspended above the ground by eight huge pillars. They are squat, wider than they are high, though they are five times taller than Tsi Rekh. The structure they support is vast, monolithic. Its side walls are vertical, smooth as glass, regular as iron, but they are stone. The four corners are turrets but the towers bend in at sharp angles to point towards the centre of the roof like clutching talons.

The front of the lodge is different. This wall is not smooth. It is a complex of whorls, depressions and protuberances. The glow dances over the shapes, revealing and concealing details, creating shadows and meanings that shift, slippery, into something new before they can be understood. The wall is disease. It is song. It is the echoes given shape in stone, and it is their medium. It is the agent of their transmission to the whole of Davin.

And inside? Inside is the origin of the echoes. Inside is Tsi Rekh's quest. Inside lies his destiny.

Inside is what he must accomplish.

He must open the way.

But there is no door. He has stood before the gates to the Temple of the Serpent Lodge, where Horus was given the truth. Those gates are majestic in size and power. They are masterpieces of art, their engraving of the serpent-entwined tree beyond anything the Davinites could accomplish today, and greater even than those of the Lodge of the Hound. No amount of pride can deny that it was right that that particular ritual should take place in the home of the

Serpents. The gates might as well be the work of the gods themselves.

Here, gripped by holy awe, Tsi Rekh has the sensation that the lodge might be a god. How should he presume to bend it to his will? He cannot even see how to reach the height of the temple. The pillars are too high and too smooth to scale.

He moves forward, wary of the lethal light. His disciples fall into line behind him. He can

feel the caress of edges against his limbs, against his throat. Hath Khri's propitiation has been sufficient. They approach without harm. No other blood is drawn. For the moment, at least.

As they walk through the ruins, Tsi Rekh feels the thrum of the structures' ghosts. There are flickers of the earlier vision at the edge of his consciousness. With them arrives understanding: what is important is not what was destroyed, but the fact of its destruction. That is the gift that fell upon Davin. It is the gift that is now being renewed. The gift that is travelling the galaxy.

The ruins end outside a circular space surrounding the Lodge of Echoes. There is nothing between this perimeter and the lodge except blackened stone. Tsi Rekh stops. He pulls his serpent-headed staff from the leather straps holding it to his back. He holds it high in response to the prickling he feels on the back of his neck. There are eyes nearby.

They are not divine. They are human.

One by one, from widely separated points along the edge of the ruins, come the other priests, and with them are their followers. The priests hold up their staffs too. There are different heads upon each: bear, hawk, crow, wild cat, hound, wolf, wyrm, rat...

They are all here, all the lodges of Davin. The priests regard each other with hatred.

We have all been drawn here, Tsi Rekh thinks. He wonders if Akshub visited every clan, whispering words of prophecy and fate. Were they all lies? Is there no destiny here for him? No echo that is his and his alone?

Thrum and choir surround him, Mmmmmmmmmmm... Aaaaaaaaaaaa...

and his fears vanish. He would not have been bred from childhood for a pointless game. He sweeps his eyes over his approaching rivals. He suppresses a smile, though a sharp lower canine pokes out from his lip. These others are not his peers. Some do not wear armour, and he towers a good head over most of them. His weapons transcend the crude blades he sees in the hands and hanging from the leather belts of these people who walk beneath the banners of lesser beasts. The priests' staffs alone are the equal in workmanship to his own, but they are all holy relics, passed down through the millennia.

Behind Tsi Rekh, there is the sound of weapons being drawn. He brings the tip of his staff down hard on the rock. The crack is sharp, startling. Its echoes do not vanish. The physical sound goes on too long, grows louder than the original noise, then is incorporated into the ocean of psychic whispering.

'State your business here,' Tsi Rekh commands.

'State yours,' says the priest of the Wild Cat. He steps forward as chief rival. His armour is as elaborate as Tsi Rekh's. Crimson metal bands circle his torso and limbs. His pauldrons are horned. A great furred pelt hangs from his shoulders. The fingers of his right gauntlet extend into iron claws as long as his forearm. In his left hand is a curved, serrated blade. His boots, too, are clawed. He is ready to challenge, eager for battle. He believes himself superior to Tsi Rekh.

What an illusion. What ignorance. He will be taught.

They all should know. They all should know their place.

'I am here to open the Lodge of Echoes, and to claim it in the name of the Lodge of the Hound,' says Tsi Rekh.

The priest of the Wild Cat glares. His mane of hair appears to bristle. Behind him, and to his right, stand followers of the Lodge of the Serpent. The new priestess, some acolyte of Akshub, wears armour of long, curved, warding spikes on her shoulders, and her robe is finer than the rags worn by her followers. Her face is unreadable. Tsi Rekh wonders if she knows about her mistress's contact with the Lodge of the Hound. Does she know that the next phase of destiny has passed

from her lodge? Is she foolish enough to think Akshub disloyal?

No. No one is that mad. There can be no challenge to Akshub. Davin has never had a prophet of her like.

A whisper echoes in the depth of his mind. Not since...

Not since when? Why, for the first time in his life, does he believe there was another?

Memory. A new one. Fresh. From the night before he set out, yet Akshub had buried it for him too. Uncovered now, words of prophecy: I am the opener of the ways. He is the walker of the ways. You will be the way.

Knowledge without understanding, promises couched in riddles.

Tsi Rekh swallows his impatience. Revelation will come. He smiles, taking pride in that certainty.

The priest of the Wild Cat sees the smile as an insult. The Lodge of Echoes is not for the likes of you,' he says. 'It has been promised to me.'

'Who made you that promise?'

The gods granted me a vision.'

Tsi Rekh continues to smile. Oh, the lesson that is about to descend upon this pretender! How weak a claim. Tsi Rekh is not here because of a dream shaped by his own desires. He is here by the command of the gods.

But why are all the lodges here?

He dismisses the question and the doubts. The answer doesn't matter. Only the prophecy is important. Only his destiny. Unalterable and glorious.

'Leave or die,' he says, but the choice is a lie. He has already begun the attack.

He does not move. His acolytes charge past him, hissing wrath. The followers of the Lodge of the Wild Cat rush to meet them, their priest remaining just as motionless. He and Tsi Rekh stare at each other. Between them, the butchery begins. The killing is an extension of their wills. Their underlings might as well have no volition of their own. They are their masters' instruments as

much as the weapons they hold.

Blood splashes on the ground. People die in violence and hatred. And the light changes. It absorbs the blood. It shifts towards the crimson. It grows stronger. Patterns on the face of the Lodge of Echoes twist. Lines appear. The echoes grow louder, more eager. More death, more blood, and the lodge feeds. Tsi Rekh can feel the touch of the light upon his skin. It is cold, dry, and it grips like victory.

Understanding. Revelation.

He and the Wild Cat look at each other. Their antagonism evaporates. They know that they are instruments. They know what must happen. So do all the other priests. And so, thanks to their faith, do all the assembled acolytes. Without needing an order, they run to the slaughter. The priests step back to give them room and gather together at the edge of the ruins.

In the empty ground before the lodge, hundreds of worshippers fall upon each other with blades, fists and teeth. The battle is savage. It must be. The massacre must be total and it must be bloody. This is not about victory. There is no attempt to triumph. There is only the need for pain, for the rending of flesh. Blood everywhere, slicking hands and faces and bodies. And all the time, joining in the exultant, gorging echoes, the songs of dark praise. The acolytes know that they have been blessed. They have lived this long to give their lives to the gods now, in this place, for this purpose. They bleed for this purpose. They will not live to see it fulfilled, but they die in the certainty that their sacrifice will lead to the deaths of entire worlds.

If something greater did not await him, Tsi Rekh would envy them.

The light is still dry, a caress of scales, but the air is humid, redolent with the heat of opened bodies, the stench of bowels, the slick of gore. The lodge feeds. From deep within its walls, something begins to sound, huge and earthshaking.

Heartbeat, drumbeat, and the hammering of a fist upon a door.

The lines on the wall lengthen and join. They outline an opening, one that has not existed since the lodge was completed and its sole occupant entered.

Occupant.

How does Tsi Rekh know this? Because as the door comes into being, and the slaughter reaches its completion, the visions and the echoes shout to him, teach him, seize him. His knees buckle. For a moment, he is not outside the lodge. He is not Tsi Rekh. He is inside, surrounded by the all the shapes and jaws and the gibbering of darkness. Inside, watching the door arrive. Inside, the walker of the ways, ecstatic as the great promise at last comes to pass.

The beat of the lodge is in the special echo too - Tsi Rekh's echo. The name so large it must be carved out of the spirit one sound at a time. A great hammering caesura strikes the choir.

Mmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmm...

Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa...

D-D-D-D...

Tsi Rekh, back in his own being, back outside, claps a hand to his head. The stuttering D, a short, sudden shatter, threatens to crack his skull in half. The name has a form. It is incomplete, but he can begin to pronounce it with his tongue. He dare not, for fear of angering the power. He will not insult it with a half-name.

He blinks back the pain and rises to his feet again. He will stand as the door opens. Is he the only one to be afflicted? Are none of the other priests struggling? Perhaps they are. He cannot tell. He cannot look. His gaze is held by the lodge, by the formation of the door.

By the opening of the way.

The walker of the ways is coming.

The door is complete. The pounding from the interior is also coming from the ground, from the air, from behind Tsi Rekh's eyes. The pulse of the Lodge of Echoes and the battering against the walls of reality are one and the same.

And now the glory. The door opens.

The grind of stone, crackle of energy and a sigh from a bladed throat. Two massive slabs on the façade have come into being, and they open outwards. Echoes, long contained, fly out from the dark interior, louder than ever, crowing victory.

A ramp emerges, stone deploying as though it were articulated metal. It stretches down to the blood-soaked earth. For a minute, there is nothing more, nothing except the ecstatic, mad choir of the echoes.

Then a figure appears in the doorway.

A silhouette first. Big. Ill-defined, infected by the shadows of the lodge. Now clearer, the truth of the form announcing itself. The declaration is fearsome. The walker is twice the size of the Davinites. It walks on two legs. One is thick, hoofed. The other is a jointed arachnid limb. The being's syncopated gait should be clumsy, a broken limp, but it moves with grace and the suggestion of barely restrained speed. The torso wears a robe... No, Tsi Rekh realizes. That is no robe. It is flesh, this being's own flesh. It hangs from the torso, sickly white, dropping away from exposed bones, transformed into a long sheet, marked by runes of blood and tattoos that blink and mutter. The exposed sections of skeleton look blackened by fire, but glint with coils of barbed iron. The arms have been denuded of all flesh and their joints have multiplied. They resemble long spinal columns, ending in long, elegant hands that gesture with the care of knives.

The head.

The face.

Tsi Rekh revels in the debasement of the human. It is part of his life's mission, but his throat goes dry before this sight. He has never seen the transformative art of disfigurement taken so far. There is no doubt that this being was once human - there is just enough recognisable in the face to mark the beginning of the walker's journey. This wonder, this

transcendence, was once as Tsi Rekh is now.

Such a miracle.

The face.

The skull has grown, bulbous encrustations of bone swelling in many directions. A horn sprouts from just above the light

cheekbone. It curves upward then branches into two, the extremities sharp enough to cut dreams. The lower jaw juts forwards, as long as Tsi Rekh's forearm. Some of the teeth are still human. Others belong to an ancient carnivore. At the tip are a serpent's fangs. The upper jaw starts wide but then narrows to a point. It is a black beak. Lips hang, torn, on either side of the jaws. All the flesh of the head is in tatters, strips and strings of muscle. The forehead, the bone masses and whorls mirroring the patterns on the lodge, is filled with eyes.

The human is long gone, but it was there, once. Its banishment is a gift beyond measure.

The miracle walks down the ramp, its gestures flowing. It will tangle all that is real in its dance. It stops midway and sweeps its many eyes over the priests. It pauses for a moment when it comes to Tsi Rekh.

...blind another's eyes another's thought an immensity waiting at the other end of the way learn its name its name its name...

New sound, new signification, after the hum, after the choir, after the stutter, the wail.

Aaaaaaaaaaiiiiiiiiiiii...

Tsi Rekh blinks. He sees again, in time for the next wonder.

The being spreads its arms. It speaks. How can it speak, with that mouth that is not a mouth, those lips in two parts, with the serpentine tongue embedded with bone shards? It speaks because it must, because the time has come at last for its voice to be heard. It speaks with the echoes. The legion of voices and memories and crimes are one, the instrument of a single will. The voice booms. Tsi Rekh shakes. The air shakes. The mountain shakes.

'Children of Davin,' the being says. 'Children of the gods. My children. I am Ghehashren.'

Ghehashren. The night writhes beneath the force of the name. Ghehashren. The prophet who first brought the word of the gods to Davin. There was a Davin before his revelation and Tsi Rekh understands that this was the Davin in the dead fragments of dreams he saw before. And there was a Davin afterwards, the Davin that built the lodges as its last act before the great fall. Ghehashren is the father of all that Davin has become. His memory has sat enthroned in the Lodge of Echoes, governing all others. He is Davin's beacon. He taught the people how to worship, and when the Lodge of Echoes was complete, he disappeared into it to walk the ways.

Tsi Rekh knows all this now, because the prophet of the warp has returned, and with him has come clarity for his children. Before this moment the name was holy, its teachings followed, but its legends as vague as the echoes themselves. Now Ghehashren is here and all will be revealed. The time of prophecies is over. The time of their fulfilment has begun.

Ghehashren leans back. He looks up at the sky as if to pronounce its doom. His arms embracing the whole world.

And then he shouts. For the whole world.

‘Gather!’

AND DAVIN GATHERS. The summons is heard around the globe - not just as a stronger echo, not just as a voice in the soul, but as a sound. There is no escaping it. There is no disobeying it.

And so the people come. They begin walking the very second the word reaches them. The migration of millions begins. The prophet has called.

Ghehashren climbs to the outer rim of the peak. He carries with him the light from the lodge. It pulses and flows from him, a liquid illness, coating the mountainside. The realm of endless night becomes a beacon of diseased illumination. The prophet stands there, visible across the plain, and waits.

The priests wait too, in silence. They will not speak until he gives them leave. All language belongs to Ghehashren. There is no meaning except that which he creates, and so they wait. They survive by eating the bodies of their acolytes.

Seven days pass and then Ghehashren calls to them. They file out through the spiral path in the rock and take their places on the ledge below the father of Davin.

As the seventh day ends, hundreds of thousands of worshippers throng the great plain, with more arriving all the time. Seeing the multitudes, Ghehashren opens his mouth and teaches them, saying, ‘Blessed are the cruel, and the carriers of plague. Blessed are the driven, and the killers, and the defilers of order. Blessed are they who hunger and thirst, who rage and curse, who stand with me before the gods, for the death of the galaxy will be theirs!’

The people cry out to the glory that stalks the peak. Their adulation is added to the echoes and Ghehashren thunders ever louder. Davin vibrates with his tones.

But Tsi Rekh, through his awe, feels a lack. There is an echo missing. His echo. It is not a part of Ghehashren’s tapestry of meaning and it does not speak to the priest any longer. Absence. A fault in his soul. It has abandoned him at the penultimate moment, when it was about to grant him its full name, and so reveal his destiny. Where has it gone?

Bereft...

How did it go?

The hum... How...

No. He cannot even find that.

There is Ghehashren’s sermon, and that is enough. It is more than enough.

But still...

Ghehashren says, ‘Think not that I am come to destroy the universe of law. Nor have I come to fulfil the prophecies. That is for you. You, my children, shall be that fulfilment. You

will carry the flame to bum the galaxy. I have come to charge you with your great task. I have walked the ways of the gods, and you see my blessings. I have travelled between the stars, and touched the worlds of the enemy. Now you will follow in my footsteps. You have waited and served on this planet. That wait and service are at an end. Now is the time to leave the cradle of Davin and spread the truth of the gods. Now is the time of exodus!’

He pauses. ‘You will travel. How will you travel? In the guise of sheep.’

He brings his hands together. They compress space between them. He sinks his claws into the air. Tsi Rekh’s eyes widen as he bears witness to the tearing of the flesh of space. Ghehashren clenches his fists, and the vertebrae of those serpentine arms flex. He tears the real open.

The rip shoots up, a wound of blood and flame. From within, a deeper night appears, the night of the void. The rip spreads wider as it reaches up. The low clouds are torn asunder. The sky peels back. The materium shrieks, and from the warp comes a fleet.

At low anchor over Davin are ships of every description. Tsi Rekh should not be able to see them so clearly, but the rip summoned by Ghehashren makes them appear as close as if they were in the lower atmosphere.

Or if he were suspended on the edge of the void.

Merchant. Military. Colony transport. Tsi Rekh understands the broad types of the ships, but only at the most basic level. The vessels are ancient. They are battered, worn, and the warp has gnawed at them, leaving the marks of its teeth. The longer Tsi Rekh looks up, the closer his perspective comes to the ships. He can now pick out individual details. He focuses on one freighter. He marvels at its size. He wonders how many thousands it might carry. But none of them has ever set foot in a starship. He will not question Ghehashren, but cannot understand how the prophet expects the people of Davin to get aboard. And even then, how are they to pilot these vessels? He sees within the bridge now. It is massive.

He is on the bridge. Surrounded by the control surfaces. Fie is standing beside the command throne. A frayed mechadendrite coils beside him. He reaches out. He grasps the limp cable. He can feel

the metallic ridges against his palm.

He gasps.

He is back on the mountainside, blinking, stunned by awe and terror. In his hand is a piece of the mechadendrite. He stares at it, then looks up at Ghehashren. Some of the prophet’s eyes have turned his way. Ghehashren’s mouth is not capable of expression, yet the beak and the jaw are parted slightly, as if in a smile.

‘Do you see?’ Ghehashren asks. The voice is soft, for Tsi Rekh alone.

The priest nods.

He knows of Akshub’s ability to travel behind the barriers, to arrive in an instant anywhere on Davin. How much greater the prophet’s power must be, after walking so long

in the realm of the gods. Thousands of years in the Lodge of Echoes, long enough for the old Davin to pass away, long enough to become the marvel of horror that strides along the ridges of the peak. The scale of what Ghehashren will accomplish staggers him anew. The prophet will transport the people to the ships. Will he or some other power guide them to their destinations? That truth is hidden.

But this truth is upon him: the walker of the ways will be the Exodus.

The people are shouting, crying, screaming in the ecstasies of faith. They praise Ghehashren, they praise the gods. There is a massive surge forward towards the base of the mountain, where the rip waits, in blood and darkness and the torment of light. But Ghehashren holds up a hand, and the surge stops in an instant. The thousands upon thousands see and hear and obey.

The prophet looks down upon the priests.

'All lodges are one,' he declares, and Tsi Rekh can see the truth of that pronouncement. The masses below are a unity, fused together by the fire of their mission, and by the thunder of the Lodge of Echoes. Ghehashren continues, 'But the followers of the one will need voices of guidance. My journey is not with you. And so I shall give each of you charges.'

Serpent and Wild Cat, Wolf and Bear, Wyrms and Rat, they all

face each other with new purpose. Rivalry died in the sacrifice of their followers. They are tiny instruments in the hands of the Ruinous Powers. What wars and schisms may wage in times to come are not for them to decide. The greatest of them all has spoken. The honour of their task and the promise of infinite corruption is all they need.

Tsi Rekh needs more. He hides his anger. He will never disobey the commands of the transcendent being who has come among them, but he will not be robbed of his destiny.

Where is his echo?

It can be in only one place.

The other priests descend from the mountain, and the great partitioning begins. The masses know by instinct whom they are meant to follow. Destiny has come to all. Ghehashren speaks the will of the gods, and his thunder guides the preparations.

Tsi Rekh dares the great forbidden. To pass one more time through the cleft in the mountain. To spiral through stone. To stand before the Lodge of Echoes. Alone.

To mount the ramp.

He will find his destiny. It must be here. The echo will come back to him. It will complete the lesson that was intended for him and no other. Fate has called him this far. It cannot have been a trick. Not with the name so close to revelation.

The ramp is not stone. It is bone, and the marrow of compressed echoes. Whispers move under his feet. For the first time in his life, Tsi Rekh knows fear untouched by the conviction of faith. He fears punishment but he walks on. He reaches the entrance to the lodge. He must not pause.

WARHAMMER
40,000

