



HAMMER & ANVIL

JAMES SWALLOW

From the *New York Times*
bestselling author of *Nemesis*





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A WARHAMMER 40,000 NOVEL

HAMMER & ANVIL

James Swallow



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Warhammer 40,000

It is the 41st millennium. For more than a hundred centuries the Emperor has sat immobile on the Golden Throne of Earth. He is the master of mankind by the will of the gods, and master of a million worlds by the might of his inexhaustible armies. He is a rotting carcass writhing invisibly with power from the Dark Age of Technology. He is the Carrion Lord of the Imperium for whom a thousand souls are sacrificed every day, so that he may never truly die.

Yet even in his deathless state, the Emperor continues his eternal vigilance. Mighty battlefleets cross the daemon-infested miasma of the warp, the only route between distant stars, their way lit by the Astronomican, the psychic manifestation of the Emperor's will. Vast armies give battle in his name on uncounted worlds. Greatest amongst His soldiers are the Adeptus Astartes, the Space Marines, bio-engineered super-warriors. Their comrades in arms are legion: the Imperial Guard and countless planetary defence forces, the ever-vigilant Inquisition and the tech-priests of the Adeptus Mechanicus to name only a few. But for all their multitudes, they are barely enough to hold off the ever-present threat from aliens, heretics, mutants - and worse.

To be a man in such times is to be one amongst untold billions. It is to live in the cruellest and most bloody regime imaginable. These are the tales of those times. Forget the power of technology and science, for so much has been forgotten, never to be re-learned. Forget the promise of progress and understanding, for in the grim dark future there is only war. There is no peace amongst the stars, only an eternity of carnage and slaughter, and the laughter of thirsting gods.



CHAPTER ONE

The howling sand found its way into everything.

Every crevice in her breastplate, every tiny void in her battledress, every moving part of her wargear. It was almost a ritual on this wasteland world, the daily regimen of cleaning a new sacrament to be performed alongside the usual rites of the convent laid down by the High Canoness. In corridors and rooms, in spaces large and small, the sand would accrete in drifts if not properly dealt with. It seemed that no amount of baffles or electromagnetic fields could keep it entirely at bay.

Sister Elspeth had once joked that perhaps the sand was alive, that it might be some sort of mite-sized swarming animal that craved warmth and shadowed corners. Elspeth was dead now, killed just after matins when the attack came. The sand had been her grave, her life leaking into it from her ragged wounds. Decima held her hand at the end, as the sand drank in all she gave it, the pale orange dust shading slowly into crimson mud.

Decima thought about Elspeth as she struggled across the dunes, hunched forward against the force of the endless winds, the dust dragging at her heels and the gusts jerking the shemagh wrapped around her face. Clever Elspeth, who was good at regicide and games of tall card, pious Elspeth who sometimes mumbled the catechisms in her sleep. But dead now. And killed by something the like of which no Sister had ever seen.

She shivered, despite the sullen, intimate heat of the day. The burden pulled against her arm, the cord around it twisting, and Decima threw a glance back at the container. The metal drum was grey and grimy, and it left a trail vanishing into the sandstorm, a line leading back towards the convent. Decima squinted along the path she had left behind her.

How far was it now? Not for the first time, she cursed herself for leaving in such a hurry, without first securing the helmet twinned with her Sabbat-pattern power armour; the infra-red sensing lenses and preysight mechanisms within the helm would have been of great use at this moment.

But there had been no time. The order came with the demand for instant obedience. *Go now*, the canoness had said, her voice hard and sharp. *Take it and go*.

Decima wanted to believe that it was some spark of courage the senior Sister saw in her that had rewarded the young woman with so important a task, but in her heart she knew it was not so. The role of custodian had fallen to Decima simply because she was there when no other was at hand. She had no high rank, no great sigils of courage to her name, barely a few beads upon her chaplet. Her status might have been far elevated over the ordinary masses of the Imperium, but still Decima was only a line Sister Militant, just a foot soldier in the Wars of Faith.

She dared to wonder; might this moment be the calling of her to greatness? She pushed the thought away. To consider such things was to aggrandise one's self, and that was a sin.

Her lot was to be at the command of He Upon the Golden Throne, the God-Emperor of Mankind whose light illuminated the stars. Decima had been inducted into her order while still a child, recruited like a myriad of other orphans from the schola progenium for the varied organs of the Imperial machine, and like them she knew no life but one of service. Decima and a legion of her kindred were the Sisters of the Adepta

Sororitas, the army of right in the employ of humanity's great church.

What her church needed in so distant and desolate a world as this had never been made clear to Decima, but it was not her place to ask such questions. She was to do as she had been commanded to, and be grateful that she had so clearly defined a purpose in the universe. Others – commoners – were cursed with the need to search for meaning in their lives. Not so for Decima; the church was there to give significance to her as it saw fit. That burden, at least, was lifted from her.

At this moment, her purpose dragged behind her, forming a bolus of sand at its blunt prow, resolutely digging itself in and doubling the effort needed to move it. Decima muttered a sanctioned curse through the cloth covering her mouth and turned back to the metal drum. Her bolter, mag-locked to her backpack, caught on the red cloak over her shoulder, clattering against her black armour. She didn't like the idea of not having a hand free to grab the weapon if she needed to, but the sluggish pace of her encumbrance overcame her concern.

In a moment, Decima had the metal container in her arms, cradling it as one might hold a fat child in swaddling clothes. She tried not to think about what it contained. The emotional weight of her burden dwarfed its physical mass, and it pulled at Decima's heart. It made her fearful, an emotion she seldom experienced on the battlefield. She had never expected to bear such responsibility, but she had been chosen because she was alive, and because Sisters far better trained in the arts of warfare than she – Celestians and Retributors among them – even now gave themselves up to ensure her escape.

Cowed by this thought, the enormity of her duty fully asserted itself, and Decima pressed on with renewed pace. With each footfall she spoke a word from the Prayer of the Released, pacing herself through the sands.

The storm robbed her of all but the most basic senses. A digicompass in the vambrace of her armour was the only thing she was willing to trust. In her time on this world, Decima had learned that the sands and the strange rocky towers they shaped could confuse and disorient the unwary traveller. On the old galactic maps, this ball of stone and dust had been christened after the star it orbited – Kavir – but in the ninth century of the forty-first millennium it went by the unremarkable name Decima's Order had given it. To the Sisterhood of the Order of Our Martyred Lady, this world was known as Sanctuary 101.

It was difficult to reckon the passage of time. Little of the weak light of the yellow-white Kavir sun penetrated through the swirling clouds, so charting the advance of the hours proved fruitless. Instead Decima went on, one foot in front of the other, watching the sand shift beneath her boots. More than once she fell, losing her step as she crested one of the dunes, tumbling, then scrambling after the container when it rolled away, afraid it might split open. But it remained intact; the metal pod was crafted using lost techniques from the Dark Age of Technology, and would have survived a fall from orbit unharmed.

The desert played other tricks on her. At times, Decima thought she saw shapes at the very edge of her perception, ghostly forms close by, but not so close that she could define them. Humanoid shapes? Or was it just the dance of the dust in the wind and her tired mind making patterns where none existed?

She remembered the glimpses she had caught of the things that had come to kill them, the forms that ended Elspeth and the others. In the gloomy corridors of the convent, the attackers had first shut down the fusion reactor and plunged the outpost into darkness as the storm took hold. Decima did not know how, as the power core was locked away behind thick shield doors and protected by gun-servitors. Still, it had been done.

So, in the dark, then. She only had impressions of them, blink-fast moments captured by the cruciform flare of muzzle flashes. Emaciated things that reflected any illumination, like torchlight off tarnished brass or the muddy rainbow of oil on water. A sickly green glow following them wherever they went. Silver cutting blades. Those things, and the screaming. Inhuman sounds of tortured air molecules being torn apart before lances of searing light. Decima remembered the purple after-images burned into her retinas, even as she tried to forget the smell of ancient soil and warm blood.

The sounds of the conflict, the skirl of beam fire and the chattering of bolters, these had followed her out onto the sands as she fled with the burden in tow. The noises were soon swallowed up by the clouds, along with any sight of the convent's central tower, the keep and outer guardian walls. It seemed like a lifetime ago.

She passed beyond the outer markers, skirting the narrow buttes that surrounded the valley where the outpost lay, and went on into the open erg. Decima had never ventured so far from the convent alone and without a vehicle.

As she began to wonder if she was far enough away, the digicompass transmitted a vibrating pulse down to the palm of her glove. Decima hesitated, studying it. Yes. She had entered the canyon at the base of the wind-sculpted towers far to the west, a point of relative calm among the more horrific of the planet's storm zones. The worst could sandblast flesh and strip an unprotected woman to the bone, or bury a stalled transport so it might never be found again. Lives had been lost from the convent's population through both manners of death over the years.

Decima fell into the lee of a tall, spindly finger of ruddy marble and shook dust from where it pooled in the clefts of her wargear, her combat cloak snapping as the wind ran over it. The ground became rocky here, islands of stone protruding from the sand, but in turn the airborne dust was harsher. Fines of powder became specks of flint, and Decima narrowed her eyes, pulling the shemagh tighter.

Working as quickly as she dared, the Battle Sister found a spot out of the weak sunlight and twisted a single grenade into the sand, turning it until it was almost hidden in the dust. She yanked the primer pin and sprinted away to a safe distance. Like the sounds of death and conflict from the outpost, the muffled grunt of the detonation was flattened and consumed by the sandstorm.

Decima brought the container back to the hollow her makeshift demolition had cut and climbed in with it. The grenade had excavated a space large enough to serve as a foxhole, but the woman had other plans. With great care, she laid the metal container at the bottom of the hollow and took a precise reading from the compass; then, using the butt of her bolter as a makeshift shovel, Decima started to bury the pod.

She had only made two or three passes when she paused, her heart tight in her chest. The Sororitas thought about what she was doing, about the priceless value of the object she was consigning to the embrace of the desert, and it stopped her dead. Decima imagined herself like a mother interring the corpse of an infant, suddenly afraid to turn another spade of earth over its face for fear it might suddenly awaken in terror. Was it right to do this? To bury such a treasure in this wilderness where it might never be found again?

The artefact must never fall to the xenos. The voice of Canoness Agnes echoed in her thoughts. *This is my last command to you, Sister Decima.*

Her last command. By now, the canoness had to be dead. The battle had been lost even before Decima had fled. She had known it was inevitable when the order had been given. All human life at the outpost colony on Sanctuary 101 was in the process of being exterminated, and Decima's deed was the final action to be taken.

But what will happen to me? The thought crystallised for the first time in Decima's mind, and she trembled. She allowed herself to think beyond her mission, beyond the collective of the Order's will and to her own survival. She would bury the capsule and then... Return to the convent? Sit atop these rocks and wait to starve? The nearest Imperial colony was months away across the savage currents of the warp. Rescue, if it were ever to come, would mean a long, long wait—

There was motion in the sand near her boots. Something was in the hollow with her, lurking in the gravel. Something like silver or tarnished brass.

Decima exploded from the pit and rolled away, bringing up her boltgun, working the slide to clear it of any fouling by force of habit. Clumps of oily sand puffed out from the weapon as half-glimpsed shapes moved through the veil of the dust cloud, closing in. She saw gelid emerald light burning within iron skulls and limbs made of dead metal.

The bolter spoke, and she made every shot count, blowing open frames that mocked the bone-forms of human ribcages. Others mantled their fallen in silence, drawing a closing ring around her, advancing, inexorable.

Decima killed them – or so it seemed – and they melted into the sand, crackling green fire dissembling them, fading the things from her sight. They resembled machines, but on some level the Battle Sister knew that they were nothing so simple. There was an ephemeral quality about their manner and motion, an unquantifiable something that hinted at a deeper truth. Whatever these things were, a living mind animated them. No machine could ever radiate such malice. This understanding came to Decima like a blow, even as

she knew it would count for nothing.

The bolter ran dry, the slide locking open as the clip was spent, and Sister Decima, last survivor of Sanctuary 101, regretted that she had not saved the final round for herself.



CHAPTER TWO

The noise from the vox was like rainfall.

Imogen remembered the sound from her years as a novice on Ophelia VII, walking the halls of the Convent Sanctorum as grey skies emptied themselves over the panes of stained-glass windows five hundred metres tall. The rain, she remembered, would sluice down the faces of saints as if they were weeping.

None wept now, so it seemed. None shed tears for the mottled orange sphere hanging out there in the distance before her, all surface detail upon it hazed by cloud and distortion.

The Sister Superior stood in silence before the speaker grille, which protruded from the observer's desk in the guise of a cherub's face; in turn, the desk itself lay across the watch gallery below the starship *Tybalt's* keel sail. At this station, a crew serf could stand to take readings with a laser sextant should the whiskered sensor barbs at the cruiser's prow ever malfunction, but most often it stood unattended. The vox-unit was typically inactive, but Sister Imogen's hand had strayed to it when she entered, tracing the sigil of the holy aquila as invocation before switching it on.

Her eyes narrowed, pulling her face tight beneath its frame of rich henna-red hair. She couldn't quite frame the impulse that had made her do it. Imogen had come here to take a look at their destination, just a passing notion to fix it in her mind, and reached for the vox control without conscious thought. The communications system was self-tuning, automatically skipping across standard Imperial frequencies as its simple machine-spirit looked for a signal to lock on to.

The planet gave no purchase. The rain-sound of the static from the brass child-face of the cherub went on and on like a mournful, whispering dirge. If there had ever been any cries into the void from the desert world, then they had long since passed into the blackness. More than a decade on from the day the attack had come, and there remained nothing but the endless hiss of cosmic background radiation, the strange kind of anti-silence that was more solemn than the tranquillity of any sepulchre.

Imogen switched off the vox and frowned. Soon the *Tybalt* would fire its manoeuvring drives for a close planetary approach and the naval cruiser would settle into low orbit. Even now, the helots and servitors on the warship's command deck were poring over their scry-screens, analysing the returns from the vessel's sensors. Would they find anything that differed from the second-hand readings the Ordo Xenos had given them, she wondered? It was hard to be sure; all the Sister Superior knew was that the Inquisition's data had been heavily censored before the Sororitas had received it. Not for the first time, she asked herself what truths had been edited from those documents before they were passed to the Order of Our Martyred Lady.

She turned her back on Kavir – on Sanctuary 101 – and left the observation gallery. Imogen would see it at close hand soon enough.

The Sister Superior let a conveyer take her up the vertical spine of the *Tybalt*, past the gunnery tiers to the egress decks where the materiel for the mission was being assembled. The last few checks were being made, the final chances for any mistakes to be corrected. Once they nestled into orbit, the next phase of the operation would begin, and with all the sharp precision that the Sisters Militant were known for. Imogen entered the cavernous bay where ranks of Arvus- and Aquila-class shuttles were being attended by

workgangs in leather oversuits and powerframes. The labourers were busy loading cargo pods, and prefabricated Phaeton-pattern construction units that could be assembled into any one of a hundred different modular buildings. They hummed and sang in low tones that resonated off the decks, around them the smell of promethium fuel mingling with sweat and coolants. Some of the helots were commissioned men in service to the Imperial Navy, but the majority were tithed workers bound by oath or deed of penance to the Sororitas. Some were minor criminals working off their debt to society through hard labour, others ordinary citizens who had willingly given up their rights in order to show their devotion to the church. They would be the army of restoration once planetfall had been made, and above them, marching back and forth along a suspended gantry, was the man who they called master.

Imogen inclined her gaze as Deacon Uriahi Zeyn caught her eye and bobbed his head. The priest spared her only a cursory glance, quickly returning to his business of motivation and command. This he accomplished over the workgangers by use of a lengthy electro-whip and an implanted vocoder module in his throat. Zeyn's machine-augmented voice blasted hymnals across the egress bay, punctuated with harsh snarls of oratory drawn from the *Book of Atticus*, *The Rebuke* or other devotional tomes. The whip he used now and then to underline his points, or to give a little discipline to those who tarried. The flashes of blue sparks it left behind illuminated his face.

The deacon was a large, rangy man of pale face and small, deep-set eyes. He had a fierce beard of carrot-red and a halo of wild hair to match. Imogen found him quite coarse, uncouth for an anointed member of the cloth, but she could not deny that he drew great results from his charges. Without pausing to engage him, the Sister Superior walked on, her boots snapping across the iron decks in time to the rise and fall of the songs of the workers.

Canoness Sepherina, Imogen's commander and the mistress of this mission, would want a full and clear-eyed report on the delegation's readiness before vespers, and so as she walked, the Sororitas became watchful. She looked for anything that hinted at a concern, intent that none would be found. The long journey from Holy Terra to the Eastern Galactic Rim was almost at an end, and at this late stage it would not serve Him Upon The Throne to falter.

This would be Imogen's first experience of a re-consecration, and like all her sisters, she understood the great import of such an event. In the Wars of Faith and the Great Service, it was a fact of life that many Adepta Sororitas would be called to the God-Emperor's side as death claimed them. But once in a while, those deaths were of such magnitude and horror that the very ground on which they took place became... *unholy*. In the name of Imperial Truth, it was thus important to sift such earth of its darker resonances and return it by blessing to right and good. Zeyn's workers would rebuild what physical damage had been done down on the planet, but it would be the canoness who would repair the spiritual wounds of the place. Together, the members of the mission would make it whole again.

This was the deed that would be done at Sanctuary 101; but it was not the only one, nor was it the most important task of Sepherina's sacred undertaking. In time, and if circumstances required it, then the full scope of things would be made clear to the rest of the Battle Sisters. For now, it was necessary to keep the secret for the good of the duty. Imogen understood this, and as with so many things in her service, she did not think to question it.

So long a journey to get here; and yet she recalled the day when her orders were cut by the High Mistress of her Order as if it had only been a moment ago.

Imogen had stood to arms in the role of adjutant and guardian to Sepherina at a meeting on Apophis, a repurposed asteroid in high orbit around Holy Terra. The site belonged to the Ordo Xenos, and what glimpses the Sisters had been granted of the complex's interior were fleeting, giving rise to worrisome questions as to exactly what the Inquisition's alien hunters did there. The thought of being in close proximity to anything connected to heathen non-human life made the woman's skin crawl. Sister Imogen had fought the xenos many times, killing ork and eldar, and any number of other nameless things that aped the intellect and perfection of mankind. As they walked through the snaking lava-tube corridors inside Apophis, she had kept one hand close to her bolter, and the other on the chaplet that hung around her neck.

Finally, Sepherina and her party had been shown into a meeting room laser-cut from the dense meteoric stone, and left to wait until the man who summoned them finally graced the Sisterhood with his presence.

Inquisitor Hoth, a male of stocky build beneath a wide-brimmed preacher hat, entered with his own retinue: a pair of gunmen who showed the manner of mercenaries more than virtuous servants of the Golden Throne. The men surveyed the Sisters with eyes that were wary and predatory in equal measure. Imogen had let them look at her, concealing nothing. Better that they see the steel and plate of her power armour, better they know the presence of her gun and blade. She recognised men like them. They understood only crude vectors of approach, force and violence. Eventually, they looked away, and for the rest of the meeting kept their gazes turned elsewhere.

Hoth, on the other hand, radiated a singular air of unconcern that bordered on condescension. He took a seat and busied himself with a data-slate, picking at icons on the screen, moving them back and forth like beads on an ancient abacus. Imogen was uncertain if he were actually working on something, or if he were toying with the device to amuse himself. The man behaved as if he was barely aware of them in the room with him.

Hoth had granted them audience after a long silence. The deposition from the Sisterhood had come in person to ask again upon a request, which had been circling through the vast machine of Imperial bureaucracy for almost seven solar years. Such a period of time was little more than the blink of an eye, when measured against the monumental epochs of officialdom that weighed down most decisions made by the Adeptus Terra and the great organisations of the Imperium. But for the Order of Our Martyred Lady, it had been as if a century passed for each wasted day. Seven years before they met in that stone chamber, the convent at Sanctuary 101 had gone dark, the last communication from it an agonised scream.

As ever, the engine of empire moved slowly, but the Sisters had made ready to set sail for the Kavir system, preparing ships and warriors, only to be prevented from departing by the Ministorum itself. It came to pass that on the advice of the Ordo Xenos and the personal diktat of Inquisitor Hoth, the Sisterhood were denied permission to return to Sanctuary 101 and determine what had happened there.

Of all the Canoness Minoris in the Order, Sister Sepherina had been the most vocal over this insult to the authority of the Sororitas. The Ordo Xenos had no power over the Sisterhood, and yet Hoth had drawn on his own vast web of influence to convince those who did that he, not the Sisters, should be first to Sanctuary 101 in the wake of this mysterious event. The matter had created great enmity between the two organisations, and much in the way of politicking and sharp words, all of them for nothing. The inquisitor was known to Imogen's Order, and his interest – some said *his obsession* – with certain strains of alien life was not a secret. But despite all the entreaties, the requests and veiled threats, Hoth had made sure the order remained in place.

Until that day.

Without explanation, without apology or acknowledgement of the Sisterhood's great pain, he told them they now had leave to return to the planet and lay the ghosts of their dead to rest. '*My interest,*' he said, '*has shifted to other matters.*'

Sepherina exploded with questions and demands as Hoth stood up after making his pronouncement. *What happened at the convent? Did anyone survive? Did you go there?* The inquisitor ignored them all, and finally the canoness was railing at nothing as Hoth crossed back towards the door. It was the first time, in years of duty alongside the other woman, that Imogen had ever seen Sepherina lose her temper.

Seven years of being banned from setting foot upon their own outpost world, with only the vaguest of justifications, seven years of rumours about the invasion of a new kind of alien form, all cast aside in a moment.

And so, in the nine hundred and third year of the forty-first millennium of the Imperium of Man, Canoness Sepherina was empowered to command a mission back to the silent outpost. Even with good warp currents, six more years Terran standard time had elapsed as the starship *Tybal* travelled first to Paramar to equip, and then on to the distant Kavir system.

At Paramar they had taken on the last of what would be needed on Sanctuary 101, the hardware, the building supplies, the workgangs. During their voyage, this need had been communicated to the Sororitas by the Ordo Xenos through the sketchy reports the alien hunters had decided to give up. They supplied recordings of destruction across the entire keep and complex on the outpost planet but with no word of what had caused them or why. Images of fallen buildings that seemed to have been brought down by beam fire or

in some cases, earthquake. The only direct question that the Ordo Xenos deigned to answer was on the issue of the planet's safety. According to them, the so-called 'threat vector' to Kavir was gone, like a passing storm. There was nothing there now, they said.

These words had come to the Sisterhood, and along with them, a new edict.

Inwardly, Sister Imogen chafed at the thought of it. It was not enough that Hoth and his kind had trampled the death site of hundreds of loyal Sisters, doubtless indulging his sickening interest in all things inhuman; no, now the Lords of Terra, in some mercurial wisdom, had granted passage to a party of technologists from the Adeptus Mechanicus. They were led by Tegas, a wiry being of questor rank – Imogen hesitated to call him a 'man', for there seemed to be little of the flesh about him – and like Hoth, he too seemed to be more set on things outside the remit of the mission to reconsecrate the convent.

The Sister Superior had a detail of women she trusted implicitly, each of them appointed to secretly observe Tegas and his small group. They had done this since Paramar, and so far the questor had shown no sign of being aware of the... secondary objective.

Tegas's orders were that he and his team assist the workgangs in the reconstruction on Sanctuary, but such a task was rarely given to an adept of his rank. She knew there was more to the cyborg's company here, and she wondered if the canonesse had been told the true reason. That was doubtful. Sepherina was as pragmatic as she was pious, and it was highly unlikely she would not choose to share this information with her trusted combat commander. Some of the other Sororitas wondered if Tegas might be on this voyage because of some misdeed he had committed, that he was joining them in sufferance and penance. It was as good a hypothesis as any, but Imogen did not hold to it. The oily questor walked like a rat on its hind legs, all snout, spindle and points, and the Sister's instinctive dislike of Tegas made everything he did appear to be untrustworthy.

Imogen dismissed the cyborg from her thoughts as she approached a squad of Battle Sisters of the line, the women drilling in loose formation with deactivated chainswords and bayonet-equipped bolters. They snapped to attention as she came closer, standing ramrod straight and proud, the rich crimson of their combat cloaks and war tabards framing the ebony shimmer of their battle armour. Imogen was not afraid to admit that her heart swelled in her breast each time she laid her gaze on her Sisters. If she ever needed a reminder as to what was right and purposeful, she had only to turn her face to look at these women and know that those qualities were embodied in them. In the ocean of uncertainty that was this dark universe, the Sisters of Battle were the unbreakable bulwark of humanity's faith.

It mattered little to Imogen if men like Hoth or Tegas looked upon them and muttered the word 'fanatic' behind their hands. They did not understand the divine truth that the Sisters of Battle knew in their souls, and they would never know the joy of true betrothal to the greatest creed in human history. The God-Emperor, in all his divine majesty, had made the Imperium to vouchsafe mankind and keep it protected from all threats. The heathen alien, the witch-psyker, the abhuman and the foulness of the mutant, even the sickening monstrosities of the Ruinous Powers – all these forces beat at the walls of humanity's salvation and tried again and again to drag it screaming into impiety and damnation.

None saw this as clearly as the Sisters of Battle. Oh, it was true that they did not fight this tide of enemies alone, but one could not expect the common soldiery of the Imperial Guard to weather such threats. The Inquisition, while companionable in some forms to the work of the Sororitas, often dallied too closely with the very things they set out to expunge. And the Adeptus Astartes, the Emperor's Space Marines... They were a melange of conflicted, tribal warrior bands that embraced undependable psychics and the tenets of transhumanism. A few of their number were perhaps more tolerable than the others, and all were faithful to the Throne in their own crude conduct... But they were never to be trusted.

In a way, Imogen pitied them. They would never understand the *glory* of pure faith, the freedom from doubt it gave.

The Sister closest to her bowed her head slightly and saluted with the aquila, hands folding open over her chest. 'Milady,' she began. 'If I may ask, when will we be ordered to embark?' The woman nodded towards the waiting shuttles.

Imogen studied her and said nothing. There had been other things brought aboard at Paramar, and among them came a contingent of additional Battle Sisters tasked to join the mission after the fact. This one was a member of that group, one of the latecomers who boarded with hospitallers and medicae support staff from

the non-combatant Order of Serenity.

Sister Miriya. Imogen remembered the woman's name. The Sister Superior made it her business to maintain a watchful eye on Miriya. She had heard the barrack-hall rumours about the woman, the tales of a Sister with a wide independent streak and an overly forthright manner. Imogen's gaze dropped to the chaplet around Miriya's neck, and she reached out for it, running her thumb over the golden sigil and the line of adamantine beads it hung from. Miriya did not move.

Each bead represented an act of great devotion to the church, be it the burning of a witch or a victory won. Miriya's line was scuffed and damaged in a manner that could not be traced back to battle wear. It had been quite clearly and deliberately broken, cut short and then re-set. Imogen released the chaplet and let it fall free. Sister Miriya had once been a Celestian, serving as commander of her own squad at the rank of Eloheim, but now that honour was lost to her. Imogen did not know the full details of the incident, but she was aware that the woman had disobeyed a direct order given by Canoness Galatea of the Neva convent. The end result left Miriya reduced in rank to that of an ordinary Sister Militant.

Imogen's lips thinned as she considered her. Surely a Sister who broke the chain of command deserved far more punishing censure than this? Excommunication or even castigation into the ranks of the Repentia, there to self-flagellate and pray each day to redeem herself. Galatea's mercy seemed... *soft*.

'You will be told when it is time, and not before,' Imogen snapped. She did not like Miriya, the way she held herself or the way she presumed to speak without first asking leave to do so. The Sister Superior studied her dark shock of ink-black hair, the scars that marred her face and the blood-red fleur-de-lys tattoo upon her cheek, searching the other woman for the air of defiance she knew hid beneath them. Had the choice been hers, Imogen would have refused the Sister's petition to join the *Tybal*'s mission, but Spherina had ideas about *leading by example*. The canoness spoke of offering Miriya a place where she could touch upon her fealty to the God-Emperor, a role where she might find renewed purpose. Imogen had little time for such things. She believed in firm acts of piety and a constant, unchanging devotion. There was no place for the uncertain or the free-thinker here.

The matter was not helped by the arrival of two other Sisters from Miriya's former squad, who had also accepted reduced rank – the tall and muscular Cassandra, and the younger one, Isabel. The latter bore scars that were still new, and sported a pewter augmetic eye that had yet to lose its sheen. Whatever injuries these two had suffered, it had apparently hardened their bond with Miriya rather than weakened it; and even though their former commander was now their equal in rank, they still showed her an undue degree of respect, deferring to Miriya almost by force of habit.

Imogen had watched them perform fight drills and it could not be denied that Sister Miriya and her cohorts had ample combat skills. But it was becoming increasingly clear that she would need to break them of their past patterns of behaviour, if they were to be of proper service during the mission.

The former Celestian did not reply to Imogen's words, but she did not look away either. The air of subtle defiance in the other woman was not undimmed. Miriya would never seek to challenge her openly, Imogen knew that. She was not a fool. But if the Battle Sister believed she would be able to erode Imogen's command status in any fashion at all, there would be a reckoning.

'Canoness Spherina will address the ship's company personally,' continued the Sister Superior. 'There will be a sermon and a hymnal of dedication before we set off for Sanctuary 101.'

'We will be ready,' Miriya replied, even though Imogen had not asked the question.

She leaned closer to her subordinate so that when she spoke again her voice remained unheard to all the others around them. 'The last word here is always mine, Sister Miriya. I would remind you never to forget that.'

By reflex, Miriya opened her mouth to say something, but then she thought better of it, and at last lowered her head with a shallow nod. *A start*, Imogen told herself. *Perhaps this one can be properly disciplined after all.*

It was then she noticed the slim, winsome woman in duty robes of earthy brown, watching her from across the bay with something bordering on an accusatory gaze. The girl was one of the hospitallers, and she had a streak of annoyance in her expression. She clearly objected to Imogen's mordant manner towards Miriya.

With that realisation, the Sister Superior placed the pretty young girl's face. Verity Catena, of the Order

of Serenity. Her name and her details were known to Imogen from the same records that had spoken of Miriya's misdeeds on Neva. Verity had been involved in that situation as well, the non-combatant swept up in the melee of a secessionist rebellion that ended in the burning of a city, and purges on every level of a planet's hierarchy. As she understood it, the woman had been kindred to a Battle Sister who died in service to the Throne while under Miriya's command.

Did Verity blame the other woman? Imogen considered the question for a brief moment. Was the death of her sibling the reason why she had chosen to join this mission, to find a way to renew her faith? There were rumours that the Neva incident had been rife with all kinds of witchery and unbelief, enough to be deeply troubling to one not hardened to the extremes of the God-Emperor's great duty.

Still, Imogen recalled a complimentary letter appended to Verity's records from one of the senior Battle Sisters involved in that brief conflict, according her respect for her courage under fire. The Sororitas of the non-militant orders, the hospitallers, dialogous and famulous, had some education in use of weapons and the like, but they were not fully trained in the ways of war like their combatant Sisters. It was rare to see someone from an Order outside the sphere of conflict given such a citation.

But that did not mean, therefore, that Verity had tacit permission to show disrespect to one of her betters. Imogen turned the full chill of her icy gaze on the hospitaller. 'You are restless,' she began, staring directly at Verity but speaking to Miriya and the rest of the assembled Battle Sisters within earshot. 'This journey has been lengthy and it has tested your patience. There is only so long a Sororitas can sharpen her wits and her blades before they begin to dull from inaction. Only in the rigid application of our martial faith can we do what were born to.' Imogen walked slowly through the ranks of the women, approaching Verity with every step. The hospitaller paled slightly. 'Each of you believe you are worthy in the Light of the God-Emperor. Each of you believes that you are ready, that you have been *tested*.' She gave the last word hard emphasis, and broke Verity's gaze.

The Sister Superior gave a solemn nod. 'The women who stood beneath the Kavir sun on Sanctuary 101 believed that as well. But now they are dead, their lives crushed beneath the heel of an uncaring and hateful universe. They have gone to His side at the foot of the Golden Throne, blessed be their memories—'

'*Blessed be their memories*,' chorused the Battle Sisters, their voices like the rush of waves on a shore.

'And now we come to take their places.' Imogen nodded again. 'We must be ready, kindred. For even if the fate that destroyed them is truly passed, know that behind it lie a thousand more aching to end us. We are like a candle blazing against the vacuum, struggling to remain alight in the airless void, fighting for what we know to be right. For our faith.' She glanced around at their faces, ending with Miriya. 'So we must remember our duty, our place in the scheme of things. None of us can presume to know what lies before us. We can only hold fast to our belief.'

In the silence that followed her words, a stocky Battle Sister with skin like weathered teak and tight curls of black hair dared to raise her hand in question. Imogen decided to grace her with her attention. 'You have something to say, Sister Ananke?'

'We were told this world is bereft of life, Sister Superior.' Ananke's manner was clipped and brisk. 'Is that not so? Will we meet an enemy at the gates of the convent? Will there be a battle to retake what belongs to our Order?'

Imogen detected the faintest traces of hope in the other woman's words. Ananke wanted her to answer in the affirmative, voicing the same sentiment that others on the mission shared. They wanted to exact revenge on whoever had dared to attack Sanctuary 101.

Such impulses were useful, but if not controlled they could become self-destructive. The Sister Superior was not ready to let the rule of the women fall to their baser instincts. 'There will be duty, Ananke,' Imogen said firmly. 'That should be your only concern, whatever your task, be it soldier or otherwise.' She glanced back to Miriya and then to Verity once again.

When the hospitaller retreated into the shadows of the landing gantries, the Sister Superior smiled thinly.

The insect was an arthropod as large as a man's arm, its jointed body shiny and a shade of green so dark as to almost be black. Minute hairs coated its legs and torso, evolved to trap moisture from the dry atmosphere of the desert planet and serve as sensory addenda to the large palps that moved about its head. Long, multiple-jointed legs slid carefully over the side of the powdery dune, the body of the creature slung

between them. The insect sampled the cold night air, and felt the perturbations of it for signs of other life. It was a predator, feeding on smaller varieties of its own phylum and the flying mites that bred in the lee of rocks or other wind-traps.

It hesitated on a patch of sand, considering as best the cluster of nerves that were its brain would let it. It sensed a level of warmth above that which should have existed here. This was enough to make it pause.

The top of the dune burst beneath it. In the fractional moment before the insect's skull case was crushed by rough, malnourished fingers, it flailed and tried to bring up its stinger; but another hand was already ripping the barb out with manic, fearless strength.

The displaced sand went away on the constant wind, and the human figure clad in rags it revealed pulled wildly at the corpse of its prey. Dust trailed off in lines, returning to the desert underfoot, as fingers twisted off the insect's legs. These morsels were first sucked dry of fluid and then crunched down through cracked, blackened teeth, the dark chitin splintering and cutting greyed gums. Careful not to lose too much of the arthropod's thin blood to the ever-thirsting sands, the ragged figure dropped into a settle, and proceeded to dismantle it with ichor-stained hands. This was a female, a large one, and it was fat with unlaidd eggs. They were easy to swallow, soft and salty. The memory of any gag reflex at the foul taste was long gone.

++You are revolting++ said the Watcher. *++Everything about you is foul++*

The figure had been listening to the voice in the air for so long that it considered itself to be the Watched, although it did all it could to make sure the Watcher never really knew where to find it. Instead, it concentrated on savouring the kill. It was a good one, tasty with it. Something to be enjoyed.

Eventually, though, as always, the Watched responded. Wiping greasy matter from a dirty face, a question emerged. 'Why observe me, then? Why keep looking at me through my eyes? Go. Go away. I don't like you. Don't need you.'

++Perhaps I already have++ said the Watcher. *++Perhaps I stopped speaking to you a very long time ago, and what you hear inside that ruined meat you call a brain is your madness leaking out++*

The Watched did not like it when the ghost-speaker played clever word games like this, and screamed in annoyance. The ragged figure picked up the discarded stinger and ran the barb over the bare skin of one arm, following the healed lines of scars where this had been done dozens of times over. The insect poison burned against the sunburned flesh and the agony was sweet and powerful. It made the hateful, callous voice from the air go silent for a while.

But only for a while.

++You should not stop next time. Dig the venom head in. Then you will die and this will be done++

'I refuse to die.' The reply was supposed to be strong and defiant, but it came out sorrowful and broken. It was difficult to speak sometimes, as if the ability to form words and release them into the air was somehow degrading with the passage of time. Perhaps it was the metals and the stones embedded beneath the flesh of the Watched that did that. It was hard to be certain. 'I am waiting.'

++You are dying. Your mind is like a broken tool. Useless++

The Watcher was going to say more, the ragged figure knew it. But then something among the bowl of stars overhead made all voices go silent. There was a new sight to see beneath the dull reflected glow of the mismatched asteroidal moons.

Looking, peering, daring to hope, the Watched saw new dots of diamond-hard light moving against the path of the turning of the world, passing close to the dull glow of the Obsidian Moon. It could only be a starship.

'It could only be.' The words crumbled like ancient paper and at first the Watcher did not respond. 'No more waiting.'

Down on the surface of the desert world, the revenant in torn pennants of blackened cloth stood atop the dunes and let out a wordless cry, empowered by an emotion that had no shape or name.

But eventually, like the turning of seasons to winter or the fouling of meat not eaten soon enough, the Watcher decided to speak.

++Waiting for what?++ it asked, knowing full well that the Watched had long ago forgotten the answer to that question.



CHAPTER THREE

Harsh dawn light refracted through the atmosphere, drawn into streaks through the high clouds. Like rods of dusty gold, the rays of the Kavir sun warred with the ceaseless churn of sand. As the heat of the day began its slow approach, the land would warm and the storms would begin anew. The cycle of hot and cold, of wind and abrasive dust, had carved the landscape of the colony in exotic, unearthly ways. Towering buttes of rust-coloured rock rose from the sands here and there, uncapped mountains with flat, cracked plateaus atop them. Twisting arroyos once cut by running water were now howling passages where the dry winds played. Stone sculpted by forces of nature loomed in spheroid or wavelike forms, resembling great off-cuts from the workbench of some mythic artisan deity.

With the dawn came a flock of landers, metal birds and winged tugs bearing the first of the missionary parties. Screaming through the air on plumes of fuming exhaust, the flight circled the wide misty plain of the great erg before angling in towards the narrow valley to the east. Signals sent to autonomic defence batteries were not replied to, but the pilots were still not so foolish as to fly in high and visible. Despite the assurances of the Ordo Xenos that this site was not dangerous, the Adepta Sororitas were unwilling to take that fact on bare trust; it was all too possible that the machine-spirits of the convent's weapons were still active, perhaps damaged or even corrupted. It would not do for the Order of Our Martyred Lady to have their shuttles shot down by their own guns.

They went in as low as they dared, the heavy Arvus-class transports disappearing into puffs of powder thrown up by ground-effect, lagging behind the swifter Aquila shuttles. One of the bird-like ships blasted over the top of the convent's central donjon at zero height, but there was no answering blaze of laser fire. The defence cannons were as dead as everything else.

Sister Verity heard the command as it was relayed back through the chain of landers, and the Arvus lurched as it turned sharply. She and a handful of her fellow hospitallers were crammed in the back of the cargo shuttle among storage pods filled with emergency supplies, portable field wall emitters and other hardware. At first Canoness Sepherina had been reticent to let them travel with the initial landing party, her military adjutant Sister Imogen citing the need to place combatants on-planet as higher than that of other Orders. Verity had not allowed the wintry Sister Superior to sway her, however; instead she stressed the importance of having medicae staff to hand in this uncertain environment.

Imogen had a harsh, brittle laugh that was as cold as she was, and Verity recalled it. Imogen mocked the hospitaller, suggesting she was foolish to think that anyone might have survived down here to be in need of an apothecary's attention. All thermographic and scry-scanning passes over Sanctuary 101 had shown no evidence of life among the stony ruins. But in turn, Verity's reply gave her pause. There was no telling what hazards lay down on the surface. Was it not better to have a nurse immediately to hand if some danger were to waylay a Battle Sister?

Sepherina accepted her logic and gave the Order of Serenity leave to join the landers. In irritation, Imogen had ensured they rode in this, the least comfortable of the cargo transporters.

Supporting herself on a dangling tether, Verity crossed to one of the small portholes in the hull and

peered out through the armoured glassaica. The other Sisters were content to stay where they were, strapped to the deck, engaged in a litany round as they prayed for a safe landing. Verity mouthed the words as well, touching a finger to her lips and the Imperial sigil engraved into her duty armour. Like the rest of the hospitallers, Verity had changed into a stripped-down version of a Battle Sister's combat rig. It wasn't the Sabbat-pattern power armour the militants took into war, more like carapace kit of the common Imperial Guard, but it was protection enough for auxiliaries like them. Verity had been told it could absorb the power of stubber bullets or an indirect las-bolt, but she had no wish to test the veracity of that claim.

Peering through the portal, she saw the endless sand and then caught her first glimpse of the place they had come to rebuild.

Ahead, the dark walls of the outpost emerged from the haze. The outermost embattlements were intact in some places, in others nothing more than broken rockcrete, and beyond the inner wall and the great keep were visible. Both still stood, but like the outer ramparts, they were dead, silent and in disarray.

Their shuttle was the last in the line of ships to touch down, joining the other craft in a semi-circle inside the main compound. Verity glimpsed the beetle-black of armoured Battle Sisters moving to take up a perimeter as the Arvus landed, the undercarriage grunting as it kissed the ground. She bowed her head and gave a breath of thanks to the transport's machine-spirit just as the aft drop ramp cracked open and fell away. Heat and airborne fines of powder assailed her, blowing into the compartment on a ragged gust of wind. Verity scowled and fumbled for the goggles in a pouch on her hip and settled them into place, but the corners of her eyes already felt itchy.

She lowered her head to exit the cargo shuttle, and her first step onto Sanctuary's soil was not an elegant one, but a half-stumble. The gravity here was slightly less than Terran standard. Verity recovered, pausing to adjust her eye-shields. All around her, servitors were moving back and forth, swift and purposeful with their work. Sepherina wanted the craft unloaded immediately so they could climb back into orbit and recover the next supply load from the *Tybalt*. The engines of the shuttles keened as they idled, blowing the harsh scents of ozone and promethium across the massive courtyard.

The convent appeared as if it had been derelict for centuries. Sand of differing hues along the red end of the spectrum was heaped in drifts, collected at the feet of the watchtowers and in the shadows of support braces. In places, she saw airlock doors yawning open and blackness beyond them. Verity walked away from the Arvus, taking it in.

Sanctuary 101 was a moderate-sized outpost, and built from the same kind of Standard Template Construct design that characterised a million other edifices used by the Sororitas. She spied pre-fabricated bulwarks stamped out of steel from some world a thousand light years away, alongside laser-cut walls made out of the local rock. This was no transient base designed to last a few months; the Sisters had wanted this place to be a permanent site, to stand proud against the sand and the wind for hundreds of years to come. To see it like this, untended and deserted, was saddening.

Verity crossed close to a metallic bollard protruding from the dust-covered floor. It resembled a stubby tree made from junkyard pieces, all cables and ceramite discs instead of leaf and branch. There were dozens of them circling the edge of the keep.

'Ethereic coils,' said a voice behind her, and she turned. A Battle Sister cradling a bolter walked past her, tossing her head to push tails of stone-grey hair over her shoulder. 'Keeps the sand out when it works. Gives off a hum that'll make your teeth itch, though.'

The woman was Sister Helena, one of Imogen's Celestians, an imposing warrior with laughing eyes in a face tattooed with a rain of silvered teardrops. 'It doesn't seem right,' Verity offered, the thought forming into words before she could consider its meaning. 'All this.' She gestured around.

Helena glanced at her. 'You've seen battlefields before.'

Verity nodded. 'Aye, Sister. But not like this desolate place. It is like a picture-puzzle with a missing piece. It feels... *incorrect* here.'

The other woman frowned. 'It's the dead,' she told Verity. 'That's what is wrong.'

'What do you mean?'

Helena walked on, her expression grim. 'Do you see any bodies?'

The servitors marshalled the off-loaded gear in the middle of the courtyard, building a rectangle of

containers on a mound of dark earth. Judging by the surround of a low ornamental wall around it, this had once been some sort of devotional garden, but flames had come and burned it black. The Sisters Militant stood sentry in a wide combat wheel, holding station as the emptied shuttles began to rise back into the air. Verity watched the ships go, the low clouds enveloping them as they raced away towards orbit. They would be back within the hour and the unloading cycle would begin anew.

There were just three of the other hospitallers with Verity, and they did their best to stay out of the way of the Battle Sisters as they moved around, setting up perimeter sensors, fixing devotional wards to the low walls and the plinths that marked out a grid in the middle of the open space. Boots crunched on drifts of sand, and as she studied the surroundings, Verity realised that whatever statues had once stood on those pedestals were missing like the corpses of the dead. She saw untidy heaps of rubble scattered around, and was briefly startled to see eyes looking back at her from one of them; the face was made of sun-bleached marble.

‘They smashed all the statues,’ said Zara, one of the hospitallers. ‘Who would do that? *Why* would they do that?’

‘Hate takes many shapes.’ The answer came from the frost-white lips of an imposing woman who resembled the marble more than she did true flesh and blood. Verity and Zara bowed slightly as Canoness Sepherina walked past them, the woman’s heavy Aspiriate cloak leaving a trail through the drift-sand behind her.

Sepherina had no hair upon her head, but her scalp was heavy with lines of detail and electroos that spelt out lines from the Litany of Saint Katherine, just visible beneath the ballistic-cloth coif she habitually wore. The gold-rimmed gorget of her battle armour framed a face that was lined with age and war-scars. The canoness radiated a stony kind of authority that was effortlessly intimidating, even towards veterans with decades of experience in the Order. She was poles apart from the acid, often waspish nature of her second-in-command, Sister Imogen.

A party of armed Sororitas were moving with the canoness, wary and prepared for anything. Among their number, Verity spotted Sister Miriya and the two of them shared a brief nod of acknowledgement.

Almost three years had passed since the day they had crossed paths, at the funeral of her blood sibling Lethe on the planet Neva – and in that time much had happened. Verity considered the Battle Sister to be a trusted friend, having long since absolved her – as Lethe’s former commander – of any responsibility for her sister’s death. Their shared trials on Neva had forged a bond of comradeship, but Miriya had made it difficult to maintain over the last few months of the *Tybalt*’s voyage. It was as if the closer they came to Sanctuary 101, the more withdrawn the Battle Sister had become. Even her compatriots Cassandra and Isabel had seen it, but there seemed little they could do to draw her out. Perhaps now the mission had truly begun, Miriya would find her purpose refreshed... And yet, as Verity considered this desolate place, she felt her own spirits diminish. There was something ephemeral in these ruins, like a radiation of despair. The dead convent seemed to reek of human anguish.

Sepherina appeared to sense the same thing, and the canoness turned. ‘This place...’ she began. ‘This place was once full of life and faith and the Emperor’s Light, and it will be again.’ The woman’s voice carried across the courtyard. ‘We will see to it. I shall not delay in that responsibility.’

Her hand disappeared into the folds of her cloak and returned with an iron torch-rod, at the widest end bearing a brass basket shaped like a crown. Sepherina touched a control on the side of the rod and a puff of bright fire ignited among the brass splines. Verity had seen such firebrands before, carried by preachers as symbols of human faith.

‘His Light has returned to Sanctuary 101,’ she told them, emotions warring across her expression. ‘Come see it with me.’

‘Milady.’ Sister Imogen was approaching. ‘We should wait, the scouts have yet to be certain that this place is safe—’

Sepherina cut her off with a gesture. ‘No. We will not tarry, Imogen. The Sororitas have been made to wait long enough, do you not agree?’

Imogen was chastened, but she continued on. ‘The questor and his party will be aboard the next flight of shuttles. He will expect to be met.’

Sepherina gave a sharp nod. ‘He will be, then. By *you*.’ The canoness turned. ‘Sister Miriya. You and

your squad will accompany me.'

Miriya nodded. 'Aye, mistress.' She glanced at the women standing with her and they stood to attention.

Verity looked back to find the canoness studying her. 'And the hospitaller shall come along as well.' Without waiting a moment longer, Sepherina led the way across the quad, towards the oval doors that passed through the inner walls to the keep proper.

Verity fell in behind the lines of Miriya's unit, keeping pace with Sister Ananke at the rear. She chanced a look back over her shoulder and saw Imogen watching them, an unreadable expression on her alabaster face.

Inside, the oppressive sense of gloom was stronger, but the canoness braved it with the torch in her hand, casting it this way and that as they moved deeper into the building. The jumping flames cast their glow across walls coated with a layer of powdery mineral dust that glittered like sunlight off snow. Emergency illuminators powered by chemical reactions were still active, but after a decade they were little more than waypoint markers that gave some measure of the distance the Sisters travelled.

Miriya kept her focus clear and steady, holding her Godwyn-De'az pattern bolter across her chest in a combat-ready carry, her finger resting on the trigger-guard. Despite her personal feelings towards the Sister Superior, Miriya found herself agreeing with Imogen. Sepherina was the highest ranking woman of the mission, and it was flirting with danger to allow her into a zone where the nature of any threats was still to be confirmed. It bordered on recklessness, and it seemed uncharacteristic of the canoness.

Or was it? Miriya had to admit that in the older woman's place, she would have done the same thing. In a way, this gesture on her part, this defiance of the fates and ready danger, was the impulse lying at the core of this entire mission. Others might have allowed Sanctuary 101 to return to dust after it was attacked, perhaps written it off as a sad loss and moved on to other, easier places to find purchase.

That was not the way of the Sisterhood, however. Some might mock them for it. Miriya knew that many common soldiers considered the Adepta Sororitas to be the living model for the trait of dogged bloody-mindedness, and there was truth in that. But this was what they did.

If a Sister is knocked to the ground, yea, will she not gain her footing again, stand and fall and stand again? Die upon her feet for her Emperor? The words were from Alicia Dominica herself, the first Sororitas. Thousands of years after they had been uttered, they still rang true.

Sepherina's defiance went beyond simple reason. She was leading by example, daring an uncaring universe to come again and strike at their faith.

Miriya remained silent as they went on, passing from the entry cloister and through into one of the wide radial corridors that led into the central keep. The building was modelled after the great Convent Sanctorum but on a far smaller scale. The sand was here too, years of it blown in through open doors, making the air dry and cloying. In the light from the torch she saw the way ahead. The sand lay in uniform ripples where it had been deposited by waves of wind, and there were no visible footprints like those the Sisters left behind them. If anything did live in this place – be it an enemy or just some example of local wildlife – then it had not passed this way for some time.

The convent was a shambles. It was not the broken and destroyed remnants of a battle fought and lost, but rather the aftermath of some great act of nature. It did not look like vandalism, more as if a hurricane had been let loose in the corridors and allowed to tear down the tapestries and devotional works hung upon the walls. Through open doors into rooms they passed, Miriya glimpsed collapsed bookcases, their texts spilled out across the floor. More than once, Canoness Sepherina hesitated at these sights before moving on.

She heard Ananke speak in a low, guarded voice as they passed a choke-point where the corridor narrowed. 'This is the fifth defensive post we have passed since entering the building. None of them show signs of having been manned.'

Cassandra answered. 'I have yet to see a single corpse.'

'Look sharp,' Miriya muttered, and from then on no one spoke again. But she knew that all the Sisters were thinking the same thing. *Where are the dead?* Miriya had not been privy to the documents given to the Sororitas by the Ordo Xenos and she wondered what they said about the bodies of her comrades. Had the enemy taken those who were killed, or was it the work of some other agency?

They skirted the chambers of the central keep and followed the mistress towards the core of the massive

donjon. Even as they approached the tall steel doors to the central chapel, Miriya felt a curious tingle of anticipation run through her. It was not quite fear.

Sepherina slammed the doors with the heel of her hand, and on groaning hydraulic pistons, they slowly inched open. Air, cold like a tomb's breath, issued out and made the torch flame crackle and writhe.

The Great Chapel of Sanctuary 101 was a hexagonal space, each of the six walls rising several stories high to support a dome of dark stone. Light fell into the massive chamber from glassaic discs set in the roof. There was one for each of the Orders Militant Majoris, each inlaid with stained panels that formed the shape of their sigils: a heart upon a *crux maltese*, roses in white and blood red, a death's-head, a chalice. These five lay around the largest in the centre of the dome, and it should have exhibited a crimson inverted cross topped by a white skull – but the glassaic had been brutally shattered and only a shaft of weak, dusty light was visible. The fragments of the Order's symbol lay in pieces across the broad, ornate altar in the middle of the space.

The group moved in, past lines of tipped-over pews cut from red woods shipped in from some far distant forest world. Six marble pillars supported the roof and the Battle Sister saw impact points in the dimness where stray gunfire had kissed their surfaces. Low dunes of sand deposited through the broken windows slowed their progress. Relicals full of prayer-books and minor devotional shrines were half-buried in the drifts, emerging from the mounds of dust like the wheelhouses of sunken ships at low tide.

Here, more than any other sight that had greeted them at the outpost, was desolation and emptiness. The chapel of an Adepta Sororitas convent was meant to be a place of safety and contemplative piety, warmed by the constant glow of electrocandles, tended by servitors. There, a Sister of any Order could come and kneel at prayer, and know with absolute certainty that she was a part of something far greater than herself, far greater than individual human life. It was meant to be a place of transcendent unity.

This was a shadow of that ideal. It was as if the very heart had been ripped out of the convent. The faces of the Saints and Honoured Palatines on the friezes around the pillars and the walls seemed infinitely sorrowful, and for a moment Miriya shuddered at the thought of what horrors they might have witnessed in this place.

If only there was some sign, she thought, *some idea of it*. Even that would be better than the not knowing.

In the very centre of the Great Chapel a circular dais made of white marble glowed in the faint light, and atop the altar there were the statues. The smaller of the two, at a scale twice human size, was a rendering of Saint Katherine. She was depicted as she had been in the days when their sect was known as the Order of the Fiery Heart, as the hand of the church's vengeance. It was her murder at the blades of the long-destroyed Witch-Cult of Mnesteus that had led Miriya's sisterhood to rename itself the Order of Our Martyred Lady, and even now as she looked upon the stone face of the statue, the Sororitas veteran felt a familiar sensation of ingrained sorrow.

Towering over Saint Katherine was a giant bent down upon one knee, one hand reaching out to her like that of a parent protecting a child. Made of the same white marble as the altar, the statue of the God-Emperor of Mankind was shot through with platinum and gold detail that even a thick patina of dust could not completely dull. Like the friezes, in this dark place the image of the statues appeared to convey a very different message than the one they were meant to instil. It almost seemed as if the statue of the Emperor had been frozen in mid-motion, as He tried to protect Katherine from some unseen force come to destroy her.

The squad were, for a moment, distracted from their duty as they shared the same thoughts, and only Canoness Sepherina moved, approaching the foot of the dais. Miriya saw her run her hands over a missing stone in the altar.

Then Sepherina bowed her head and began, very gently, to weep.

Miriya frowned and turned to Cassandra and the others, gesturing with quick flicks of her hand, sending the women off to make a circuit of the chamber. They did as the veteran commanded, using the pin-lamps beneath the barrels of their bolters to peer into the shadowed corners of the chapel nave. Verity remained, hesitating, then stepped forwards. Miriya came in step with the slight, auburn-haired hospitaller as she approached the canoness.

'Milady,' Verity began. 'I fear there are none in this place who need me.'

‘I was once a novice here.’ Sepherina turned to face them and the older woman’s aspect had changed. ‘Sanctuary 101 was where the God-Emperor first spoke to my spirit.’ The distant, steady aspect Miriya had come to know during the journey from Terra had slipped away. In its place, the canoness seemed suddenly more human as the tears lined her cheeks. Miriya was surprised by the surge of empathy she felt for her superior officer. ‘I feel as if this is my failure.’ She gestured around, her voice quiet and fluid. ‘I was meant to return to this outpost. Circumstances prevented it. Otherwise I, not Sister Agnes, would have been canoness here on that day twelve years ago.’

‘What could you have done differently, mistress?’ Miriya asked. ‘You would have suffered the same fate as our lost Sisters.’

Sepherina looked away, back at the strange gap in the altar’s surface. Closer to it now, Miriya could see it was a compartment of some kind, concealed in the structure of the carved stone. It was quite empty. ‘I do not know. I only wish I could have stood here at that moment and had the opportunity.’ She sighed, and to Miriya it seemed as if the woman was bearing a great weight upon her.

Verity saw it too; the hospitaller was as perceptive to the nature of wounds on the soul as she was to those on the flesh. ‘But there is more that troubles you.’

The canoness nodded. ‘Aye, Sister.’ She nodded towards the drifts of sand. ‘I know many things that have yet to be said. I know why there are no bodies here.’

‘The enemy...’ Miriya began, but fell silent as Sepherina shook her head.

‘They were not taken by the aliens that defiled this place,’ she retorted, some measure of her former manner returning. ‘The Ordo Xenos... Inquisitor Hoth himself... He removed the corpses of our kinswomen.’

Verity could not mask her shock. ‘*Why?*’ she demanded, aghast. ‘Why would the Inquisition do such a thing? Why would you *let* them?’

Sepherina’s expression returned to its stony neutrality at the accusation in the hospitaller’s voice. ‘Consider your tone, Sister,’ she warned. ‘I know you think of the dead here and remember the loss of your own sibling, but that does not give you the right to speak out of turn.’

The other woman nodded woodenly, her cheeks burning. Miriya, however, was not so easily silenced. ‘Verity’s point is valid, mistress.’

‘Aye,’ repeated the canoness, wearily. ‘And it is one that has tormented me throughout this journey. But it was the price the Order had to pay. Hoth played his games and made certain that we would not be granted permission to return here by the High Lords of Terra.’ Her lips thinned. ‘I was on the verge of launching a mission to this planet, sanctioned or not, when he relented. The bodies of our dead were the fee, curse Hoth for his avarice.’ She sighed. ‘The inquisitor has promised that those we have lost will be returned to us in due course... After he has completed his study.’

‘Our war dead are not playthings for the Ordo Xenos,’ Miriya grated. ‘What can a man like Hoth hope to learn from them?’

‘A greater insight into the alien threat that swept across this world,’ said Sepherina, clearly repeating the poor explanation she had been given. ‘For the good of the Imperium of Man. And by the word of the Ecclesiarchy, we are bound to honour his agreement.’

‘We have come all this way,’ said Verity, finding her voice once more. ‘And still no one has voiced the name of whatever malice overcame this outpost—’

‘I know its name,’ Sepherina told them.

She would have spoken again, but Sister Ananke’s shout echoed across the chapel. ‘*Milady!* Your attendance, please! There is something here!’

Miriya heard the danger in the other woman’s tone and brought up her bolter to the ready.

They found Ananke standing near a cluster of fallen support struts brought down by a blast shock. Helena and Isabel were already there, weapons at their shoulders, aiming into a pile of rubble.

‘What is it?’ demanded Sepherina, any trace of her moment of emotion now vanished.

‘Keep back,’ warned Ananke. ‘It may be a trap designed to draw in responders.’

Miriya looked in the direction that the dark-skinned woman was pointing her gun and saw the cloudy glint of something metallic among the broken stones. She looked at the fallen struts again, casting a

soldier's eye over them. 'This looks like damage from a krak grenade detonation.' She shook her head and indicated one of the big marble pillars nearby. 'Poor weapons discipline. They could have brought one of the columns down with it.'

'They were desperate,' offered Verity, her gaze momentarily losing focus as she imagined the moment of terrible concussion inside the chapel's confines. 'Fighting with all they had...'

The Sororitas hoisted her boltgun over her shoulder and snapped it to the mag-plates on her backpack. Miriya was about to advance across the rubble pile when she paused; taking the initiative was something a Sister Celestian was allowed to do, but she wasn't that any more. *You are only a Sister Militant now*, she chided herself, *remember that. You are a line soldier in the church's wars*. Taking a breath, she turned to the canoness. 'Milady, with your permission?'

'Proceed, Miriya.' Sepherina gave her a nod in return.

She was aware of the other women drawing back a few metres as she slowly and carefully picked her way over the debris towards the object Ananke had sighted. The other Battle Sister remained where she was, her weapon trained and rock-steady.

At first Miriya thought it was some variety of prayer box, for such things were commonplace in the chapels of the Sororitas. Perhaps it had been caught in the grenade explosion, landing amid the rubble. Then she saw how very mistaken she was.

The object was angular and clearly machined. It appeared to be steel, but the surface was heavily tarnished and pitted with tiny dents. Intricate etching, too fine to be seen at anything beyond arm's length, covered the surface of it. Miriya saw an infinity of symbols all made from the same collection of lines and circles, engraved into the metal in ordered rows; they made her think of mathematical formulae she had studied as a girl in her classes at the schola.

There were two large pits in the surface of the artefact, and Miriya gingerly inserted her fingers into them. The object moved in her grip and she pulled. The rubble and the sand resisted for a moment, unwilling to give up the prize; then it shifted and came away.

It was twice the mass she had expected it to be, more than half of it hiding under the broken stones. The Battle Sister turned it over in her hands and went cold with a shock of sudden recognition.

The object wasn't a realistic rendition, not with human proportions – indeed without those of ork, tau or any other alien she recognised – but it was very definitely a skull made of heavy, silvered metal. It had a drawn, long chin, a slit of a mouth and dead sockets where Miriya had put her fingers. Wisps of hair-fine cable dangled from where a neck would have been, and there were clear signs of heavy damage on the obverse surfaces. This was no strange piece of artwork or abstract statuary, it was a factory-built thing, and old with it. She looked at it and a shadow settled over her thoughts, a monstrous antipathy that was as difficult to place as it was powerful. Fragments of recall, things from vague mission briefings and half-remembered rumours, accreted in her thoughts. *This is a xenos thing*.

She looked up to see Sepherina coming closer. 'Is this what killed our Sisters, mistress? Is this the face of it?'

The other woman nodded. 'I know its name,' the canoness repeated, 'and now, so do you all.'

'*Necron*,' whispered Verity, her voice carrying through the sudden silence.

In the next second, the snarl of thrusters sounded overhead and shadows crossed the jagged rent in the dome, as the second flight of shuttles and landers dropped towards the courtyard.

With a sudden sneer on her lips, Sepherina reached out and snatched the machine-thing's skull from Miriya's hands and turned on her heel, her cloak snapping.

Tegas descended from the Aquila shuttle as if he were on rails, travelling without moving, the train of his rich brick-red robes pooling around him. To an outside observer, he would appear to drift to and fro without the crude piston-like actions of organic locomotion, but the keen-eyed might spot the momentary flicker of tiny spidery limbs along the line of the ground, forever concealed beneath the hem of his robes. If one could get close enough to look, they would have seen a vast legion of insectile mechanisms propelling him forwards. Tegas had been made of metal from the waist down for the last one hundred and eight years, and he was working on the upper part of himself all the time. He had used his voyage to Sanctuary 101 on the *Tybolt* for just such a thing, replacing some fleshy elements in the pieces that remained of his intestinal tract

and painstakingly refurbishing an eyeborg module.

He let his mechadendrites wander a little, sampling the aura of the planet. He drank in the air and the temperature level, let his digital senses taste the gravity index and parse the radiation count. He looked with thermographic and etheric-trace vision clusters, taking in gigaquads of raw data on the physical make-up of the world.

The Adeptus Mechanicus had arrived, and now things would get done. He teased himself with a program that synthesized the effect of excitement, then dumped it and returned to his standard operating mode. The mundanes all around him, the women in armour and the lackey workers of either gender, they talked and he recorded it all. Tegas heard them saying things about the deadness of the planet and he mocked them in binary. They saw little with the crude jelly of blood vessels and nerves in their heads, crude in comparison to the questor's superlative multi-sight. This world was alive on the microwave, ultraviolet and phototropic level in ways they would never be able to know.

Tegas sent burst-transmission orders to his retinue. There were eight in the party, five of them minor adepts the questor had chosen for their combination of pliancy and intelligence, the others carefully disguised combat skitarii that would pass as non-military Mechanicus helots to all but the most invasive of scans. They formed a cyberconcert and began to create a communal data pool for all the party members. Tegas left them to that chore and continued to glide around the landing pad. He used an encrypted vox-feed to tap into the virus program he had injected into the *Tybalt's* machine-spirit back at Paramar, and sifted through the vessel's orbital scans of the local continent.

As such, he was partly distracted when a mid-frequency noise sounded close at hand, and Tegas had to pause to remember it was the sound of his name being uttered at volume. He turned to the source of the voice, attempting to calculate its stressors and emotive index.

The canonesse Sepherina approached him, her face locked in an expression of irritation. It was not the first time Tegas had seen it. Others from the Sororitas party were with her, skirting the unloading in progress all across the makeshift landing field. Tegas added identifier flags to his visual field so he could remember which of the females was which with a glance.

'Esteemed canonesse,' he began, pre-empting her words with his own, each digitally modulated to project an air of concern and a non-threatening manner. 'It is rewarding to be here at long last, is it not? I—'

'What else have you kept from us?' she demanded, cold fury in her gaze. 'It goes without question that you conceal. It is what your kind do, questor, with your infinite assurance in the perfection of your machine intellects!' Sepherina shook her head. 'But this goes too far.'

Tegas decided to continue as before, and consider the woman's discontinuous statement as he did so. 'I am eager to begin our survey of this planet, praise be to the Ommissiah for guidance protocols.' He was aware of the adepts in his party watching intently. 'I have not kept that wish a secret, milady.'

'What is it you told us you were looking for?' The question came from the female-designate Sister Imogen, and it was like the bark of a canine to him. A moment of emotion-analogue came and went. The name of it was *exasperation*, he seemed to recall. 'Relics from before the fall of Old Night?'

'Enough subterfuge,' Sepherina snapped, drawing something up from the folds of her battle-cloak. 'You're here for this, aren't you?' The woman's hand blurred and she threw something in Tegas's direction. The closest skitarii moved like lightning, racing to intercept on autonomic protection principles, but the questor belayed the order with a beam code pulse and snatched the object from the air with his serpentine manipulators.

He felt the thrill-program activate by its own volition and run swift. The relic held before him was a piece of xenos technology, of pure necrontyr origin, rad-scanned to an age of several million years, quite badly damaged but still relatively intact.

Tegas had to make an effort to stop himself from locking into a work-loop and losing himself in this glittering prize. He looked away, carefully ensuring that the metal skull was handed off to one of his subordinates. 'How interesting. Thank you for this fascinating artefact, canonesse.'

'Necrons,' said Sepherina, with open loathing. 'What the Abbess and the Prioress council suspected is true, then. They destroyed this place.' She stabbed a finger at him. 'And the Adeptus Mechanicus knew all along!'

He allowed his shoulders to slump in an approximation of a human gesture of defeat. 'We suspected,' he

admitted, altering the tone of his voice-synth to something less arch, more regretful. ‘Inquisitor Hoth gave little information about what might be found in the Kavir system... To both of our organisations.’

‘We should have been told.’ The female advanced on him. ‘You should have spoken of this. It changes everything.’

‘Does it?’ He asked the question innocently. ‘The dead are still dead, the convent still in need of our cooperation to rebuild it. And this world may hold relics of a more human nature, ones that may have incalculable value.’ He cocked his head. ‘More than some piece of alien scrap.’

The lie was delicious; in truth he would have blithely sold the life of any one of the Sisters for such a thing.

Sepherina made a disgusted noise and folded her arms across her chest. ‘It becomes clear to me that you and your party will require more supervision on planet than I first expected. Until I say otherwise, you will do nothing and go nowhere without a Sororitas escort.’

‘That is unacceptable!’ In his affront, Tegas suddenly forgot his voice-modulation protocols. ‘The Adeptus Mechanicus is not under your authority! You have no right to give such an order.’

‘The Adepta Sororitas serves as the martial contingent in this mission,’ she replied. ‘And as military commander, it is my estimation that you will not be... *safe*... unless you are closely escorted.’

Was that a threat? Tegas could not be certain. He had lost the ability to measure the subtle tones of emotions in unmodified humans years ago. It was part of the reason why he disliked being forced to associate with them. ‘Canoness, I must insist that you—’

But once more she was speaking over him. Sepherina addressed the rest of her troops and the members of the workgangs. ‘Before all other requirements, before even our food and water and shelter, there is a deed that must be done in this place. A duty that has lain incomplete for over a decade. This night we will see to it.’ She shot an acid glare back at the questor. ‘No one leaves the convent. That is my decree, and it will be obeyed.’

A dozen different phrase-strings and sentence constructs presented themselves to Tegas, but he nulled them all. There was no point in talking; that was clear even to him. Better to humour the female for the moment and continue on as planned beyond her sight and her histrionics.

‘Of course.’ He bowed low, his hydraulics whining. ‘By your command, milady.’



CHAPTER FOUR

The preparations had been completed just before the planet's short, eighteen-hour day concluded, and the canoness made demand to the captain of the *Tybalt* that the flights of the last few cargo shuttles be halted for the duration. She made it clear she would brook no interruption of the service.

Miriya stood at attention as Sepherina used her firebrand to light a ceremonial brazier, and in a steady, careful voice, the older woman read a passage from the *Dominican Tracts* on the importance of sacrifice and fealty.

All the Battle Sisters, the non-militants, the workgangers, even Tegas and his party, had been gathered to witness the moment, although the Sororitas had no doubt that the questor was disinterested in the event at hand. Tegas and his serviles became like statues, staring blankly at the stone walls behind the canoness, each of them ignoring this moment of human remembrance for some other kind of bland mechanical communion.

Are they inside their own heads, talking without speaking, mocking us? She imagined it was so. It was said that many of the Adeptus Mechanicus possessed the ability to communicate via wireless speech, as a telepath could voice from mind to mind. Miriya wondered what she might hear if she allowed the vox-module in her armour to seek their frequency.

She dismissed the thought and looked away. As Sepherina reached the end of her reading, Sister Imogen took up a place at her side, a data-slate in her hand. In the gloom, Miriya saw the glow of lettering across the face of the slate: lines of names. It was the roll-call of the dead, the missing.

Once again Miriya considered the actions of the Ordo Xenos. It sickened her to wonder what men like Inquisitor Hoth would want with the corpses of their departed Sisters. Did he have a pact with Tegas, using agents of the Magis Biologis to pick over the dead women's remains, even now? Probing old wounds and pallid corpse-flesh for some vague inkling as to the function of the weapons that had killed them? The thought left a foul, ashen taste in her mouth.

Sepherina made the sign of the Imperial aquila, and then raised a hand to point into the sky. 'There,' she said, her voice husky with controlled emotion. 'That distant light is Holy Terra.'

The assembled Sisters glanced up to see, but there were a million stars in the night overhead, and they showed nothing to distinguish one from another. Miriya did not question, however. She took it as an article of faith that the canoness's indication was true.

'For all the darkness that has touched this world, the God-Emperor's Light has never left it. The breath of His divinity has not ceased, even in the blackest of times. We are the manifestation of that truth.' She took a breath. '*A spiritu dominatus. Domine, libra nos.*'

The words in old High Gothic were the opening phrase of the Fede Imperialis, the great battle hymn of the Sisterhood. Normally sung with full voice and to greater glory, this night they joined to speak it like a litany.

'From the lightning and the tempest, Our Emperor, deliver us.' Miriya knew the words by heart, and closed her eyes as she became a part of the refrain. 'From plague, deceit, temptation and war, Our Emperor, deliver us. From the scourge of the Kraken, Our Emperor, deliver us. From the blasphemy of the Fallen,

Our Emperor, deliver us. From the begetting of daemons, Our Emperor, deliver us. From the curse of the mutant, Our Emperor, deliver us.'

On they went, their utterances in unity, the poetry of it echoing off the walls and out into the windblown night. Miriya picked out Isabel's steady tones, the hard edges of Ananke's declarations and, nearby, Verity's gentle voice.

'*A morte perpetua. Domine, libra nos.* That thou wouldst bring them only death, that thou shouldst spare none, that thou shouldst pardon none.' She opened her eyes to say the final line, an ember of vengeance as yet unfulfilled stirring deep in her chest. 'We beseech thee. *Destroy them.*'

Only Sister Imogen had not joined in the chorus; instead, as they had spoken the words of the hymnal, the canoness's second had begun a litany of her own, reading out the names of the dead in a low monotone.

'We will remember them all,' said Sepherina, stepping towards a metallic cargo crate. 'The Emperor knows their names.'

The canoness worked a latch on the box and it fell open, revealing rack upon rack of identical porcelain statuettes as long as a woman's arm. Each was a machine-carved image of the Saint Katherine, knelt in a memorial pose. Sepherina bowed before the container, picked up the first of the statuettes, and carried it away to an area near the storm wall. The servitors had cleared the space before sunset, baring the ground in preparation for the ceremony.

Miriya watched her walk reverently to a point tagged on the dirt with a dye marker and erect the little cenotaph with quick, careful motions. As it settled in the dirt, an illuminator within the carving activated, giving off a soft, yellow glow. Sepherina bowed once again and walked away.

One by one, in orderly fashion, by rank and by squad, the Sisters went to the container and each took a stone icon, carried it to the open space and duplicated the actions of the canoness. Slowly and surely, the memorial garden began to grow, as line upon line of the figures spread across the ground. There was one statuette for every life lost on Sanctuary 101, and with the light from within, the etching of their names upon the face of the stones could be seen.

Miriya took her carving, and placed it as she was bid to. The name on the stone glittered briefly before her eyes.

Decima.

The Sororitas bowed her head and gave a silent prayer to the God-Emperor, hoping that the soul of her lost sister was now safe and eternal at His right hand.

When she rose and turned back to rejoin the others, she saw Tegas staring impassively back at her, his jewel-like eyes glowing red in the shadows of his hood.

The questor was elsewhere. His husk, the proud machine and slow meat of him, stood silently in the vast quad, but his consciousness was in another place, a stream of flexing data in the shared information pool that writhed invisibly between the other members of his party.

All of them were here, all engaged in the connectivity of it. They shared the responsibility of processing the pool-data between them, utilising a variant form of swarm logic to bounce the cloud of information back and forth. Through machine-code and binary lingua, they communed by use of laser beams, each tuned to be beyond human sight into the far ultraviolet ranges.

The data they shared had many overlaps. The basic factual information about the planet, the environment, the numbers of the mundanes and the materials they had brought down with them, all that was affirmed and filed away. Other matters, like snatches of overheard conversation, were being parsed and edited together to provide a full surveillance of the day's proceedings. These things occurred on a secondary, almost autonomic level of processing that to the adepts was as unthinking as breathing in and out.

What floated at the top of their data stacks was the discourse about what was to happen next. In strings of ones and zeroes, sometimes with hexadecimal epithets and complex octal-layer nuances, Tegas conversed with his operatives.

They shared questions and dismissals of the need for such activities as the memorial service. Of course they understood the call for such societal constructs, the sense of closure these rituals brought and so on – but they had no empathy for it. The funeral was a pointless thing, celebrating nothing, meaning nothing. It

could not be compared to the importance of, say, a rite of activation upon a sacred device or the anointing of holy mech-oils upon an augmentation. What the Sisterhood engaged in was little more than the flailing of uneducated children, an attempt by the inept to catch the attention of beings far greater than themselves. The Adeptus Mechanicus, on the other hand, knew exactly how their rituals affected the matrix of the universe, down to the last piconeper. They measured and collated their prayers to the Ommissiah, encoded them on punch-cards and magnetape. Each entreaty to the Machine-God was precise and controlled, laid out to a flawless standard.

What Canoness Sepherina was doing here was little more than *noise*, like trying to liberate hydrogen and oxygen from water by singing to it. Tegas shared with the others a complicated logic train in an old programming language, which when run revealed a mocking comment on the Battle Sisters. The adepts devoted a single clock cycle to an amusement simulation and then deleted it.

The matter at hand occupied them now. All of them felt the same emotive analogue that Tegas had originated. They chafed under Sepherina's overly strict dictates, her commands that the group remain within the walls of the convent and effectively under guard by the Sororitas. Even now, they were kept from their own resources; up on the *Tybalt* was a self-contained portable laboratory unit, a rare example of an STC construct built for the Mechanicus's use. Normally, it would be one of the first pieces of hardware deployed to a planet's surface, but the canoness had ensured it would not arrive until the last flight of cargo shuttles. It was the latest in a long line of indignities the questor's party had been forced to suffer.

This was not a tenable state and Tegas's group could not be expected to remain so corralled. Every moment that the Mechanicus team remained at the site, they squandered the most valuable of resources – *time*.

The questor wanted to be gone from this place and his analysis of the canoness's behaviour – backed up by referent studies from his cohorts – made it clear that the woman would not alter her orders any time soon. Thus, logic dictated the consideration and implementation of an alternative process. One that risked censure and perhaps even open violence.

The cargo shuttles had brought down a number of small ground vehicles, including Rhino transports for the Battle Sisters and more general all-terrain rovers for use where the heavy APCs could not venture. One of the skitarii had already observed and marked the location of an unarmed Venator-pattern scout car that would serve their needs. Tegas would have preferred a contra-gravity craft like a land speeder instead, but there was no other choice.

In the space of a few seconds, they assembled what data they had on the probable patterns for the guard patrols, the weather forecast for the next few hours and a rudimentary route map for their exit route.

Comparing the typical sleep patterns of the Sororitas with the biorhythms of females of their body mass provided intelligence on the optimal moment for the group to move. Unaugmented humans were prey to fatigue and distraction in a way a cyborg could never be. It was simply a matter of predicting a moment of inattention and exploiting it. The plan accreted in the data pool and became solid.

Tegas saw the program of it unfold in his enhanced mind, rendered like a thought-experiment simulacra. At a time index exactly four-point-two-six hours Terran from now, they would assemble at the Venator, where the vehicle's engine spirit would be lulled into temporary quietus; then, in silence, the skitarii would manually propel the scout beyond the fallen quadrant of the southern wall and into the lee of the prevailing winds. Once into the haze of the storm front, the Venator could be driven at speed and the Sisters would never hear it. Probability percentage of successful egress without detection eighty-seven point six-six recurring. *Adequate odds*.

Across the courtyard, Sister Imogen continued to drone on and on. Used to processing communications at great speed, to the questor the vocalisations of the Battle Sister seemed infinitely slow and tedious in the extreme. In that way, she resembled much about the unimproved mass of humanity that Tegas found so tiresome.

Somewhere in the data pool, an errant voice floated the question of the legality of what was being done. After all, Canoness Sepherina had not lied when she spoke of her Sisterhood's military authority here.

The dissenting voice was noiselessly shouted down. To underline the point, Tegas briefly switched back from millisecond-fast machine code to the laborious configurations of actual human language. Using the archaic dot-dash forms of orskode he broadcast to his assembled group. *'The Order of Our Martyred Lady*

have been allowed to believe that they are in control of Sanctuary 101 because it is expedient to do so. But that mistaken belief will not be allowed to prevent our mission from being fulfilled.'

There were no other arguments. Instead, Tegas opened up the sealed info-philes buried in his cortex processor for just this moment, and shared them. The data within revealed advanced topographic reports and an understanding of the planet's geography, details rendered so finely that they could only have come from observers who had spend months – if not years – on the surface of Sanctuary 101.

The maps were just one piece of the knowledge Tegas had that the Sisters did not, and he had no intention of revealing any of it to them.

++*Why are you here?*++ said the Watcher.

The revenant did not answer, instead remaining motionless against the curvature of the tall pillar of red rock. Pressed flat into a cleft in the dark-coloured stone, it was possible to remain hidden and still observe most of the keep and the walls down in the shallow valley. Soft droplets of yellow light were appearing inside the broken walls, breathed into being by the motion of figures in dark cloaks. The lights slowly formed a grid, dots making lines.

There was meaning in them, but it escaped comprehension. The ragged figure peered out of the darkness, owlish and frustrated. Understanding refused to surrender itself.

++*Answer me*++ demanded the Watcher. ++*Answer me*++ ++*Answer me*++

The reply fell away into the night. 'I am doing what you do. I am watching.'

++*Why?*++

'Stop asking me questions you know I cannot answer.' The Watched slapped at the skin of a dirty, malnourished face. 'You are in my head, so you see the holes in it. Stop trying to make me fill them with your lies.'

The Watcher went quiet. Perhaps it was ruminating on that thought, or perhaps it had merely become bored. This sometimes happened. There were times when the voice went away for a long time, a long time indeed. Even moments when it seemed like the revenant would be free of it.

It came back each time, though. In a way, it was like one of the parasite ticks that dug themselves into the fur of the burrower rodents that lived to the north. It was in too deep to ever fully be excised. And cutting it out would likely kill the host.

Eyes that were exhausted and hollow turned back to observe the motions of the ritual being performed inside the tumbledown ruins. Figures clad in shining black armour moved back and forth, red cloaks glittering under the cold stars. Every few moments, when the breath of the winds shifted and dropped, sound carried over the dunes and the rocks to the hiding place. Voices, but not harsh and judgemental like the one that came from the air. Soft and gentle tones, resembling things buried deep in old memory. Things that swam disconnected from the here and now, searching for meaning, finding ritual shapes.

Ritual...

The word carried weight for a reason that did not seem immediately clear. What did it mean? Probing at the thoughts it brought with it was like pulling at the tap-roots of a complex cactus bed. They came away in clumps, tugging on one another, ripping and tearing, spilling precious moisture, wasting it.

But instead of water, there was a swelling of something else. *Emotion*. A gasp escaped into the night air, dragging up a horrible dark tide of sorrow with it. Fingers clenched and limbs trembled, a shockwave of feeling resonating through them. Shifting like a collapsing dune-front, the Watched experienced particles of what could only be memory, but they shimmered so fast that they were gone before they could be focussed upon. Torn away. Disintegrating.

++*You do not understand what you are doing*++ said the Watcher, the discordant words melting out of the gloom.

The Watched tried not to listen, tried to focus on the figures in the ruins. This was important. It meant something special, something that could be understood if only the right words were found to explain it, the right sense to frame the emotion.

Those things were missing, however. Those things had fallen into the holes in the revenant's head, vanished into black and distant voids.

++*You disgust me*++

The trembling hands, cracked by age and the tribulations of survival in the arid desert, rose up and touched the dirty flesh about those fatigued eyes. They came away moist; streaks of wetness flowed over cheeks, cutting lines down through years of ingrained grime.

The Watched blinked and vision blurred. ‘What does this mean?’

The voice was cruel. ++*It means you are weak and you should die*++

Verity arose with the dawn to find her fellow hospitaliers already at work in the temporary pergolas set up in the courtyard, preparing a field medicae clinic for the members of the mission. She gave morning prayers; her internal body clock was having difficulty synchronising with the Kaviran day-night cycle, and months living in shift-patterns aboard the *Tybalt* had not helped smooth the transition.

A pair of workgangers were the clinic’s first visitors. Both men were marked with whip-wounds from Deacon Zeyn’s flail, having been beaten hard for some minor infraction. They were edgy and eager to return to their detail, fear riding high in them that Zeyn would be less forgiving the next time.

The hospitalier had fallen asleep to the sounds of the deacon’s exhortations to his serviles. He seemed tireless, burning with a zealous frenzy that made itself known through barked hymns or the snapping tip of his electro-whip. Verity made her excuses and left the pergola, crossing the quad to observe.

Zeyn was there, shouldering away a massive piece of fallen masonry, singing harshly as he did so. All around him, vacant-eyed servitors and sweating, red-faced workgangers toiled in the growing heat. They were in the process of clearing the rubble from the foot of the southern wall, in preparation for repairs to the fallen section of battlements.

In other circumstances, the chants Zeyn led – The Emperor’s Prayer, Holy Terra We Beseech Thee, Praise For The Throne, and all the others – they would have given Verity a swell of pious love. But somehow, when the words were spat from the deacon’s mouth like a spray of bullets, they became hard upon her ears and her heart. The duality of the thought made her uncomfortable; and then it became of no consequence as the noise of the singing was lost in the shriek of thruster noise as the last sortie of Arvus lighters and Aquila shuttles dropped into the valley.

She looked up, shielding her eyes. Two of the boxy lighters carried a complicated rig of cables between them, and caught in its cradle was a long, slender capsule made of dull steel. It resembled the fuselage of an aircraft or a vast shell casing, and Verity saw ports in the hull where armoured windows nestled next to thick airlock doors. The construct bore code symbols that did not quite resemble numbers. The only recognisable sigil was a disc that bore the cyborg skull and cogwheel device of the Adeptus Mechanicus.

The lighter pilots brought the module down towards the courtyard, and the pod extruded a series of skeletal support legs as the ground approached. But the moment the steel feet touched the surface, there came a great howling thunder from the earth beneath the hospitalier’s feet.

Verity stumbled against the sudden earthquake, falling against a stand of cargo drums. She saw the ground under the pod crack and give way. The stones there, already weakened by whatever battle had swept through the convent in the past, were stressed past their limits by the weight of the module.

The engines of the Arvus transports keened, the support cables twanging as they were pulled tight. The Mechanicus’s laboratory module swung wide like a massive demolition ball, clipping a tall plinth and shattering it. Verity ducked by reflex as it thrummed over her head, the wind of its passage pulling at her wimple.

Where the pilots had tried to put it down, a sudden sinkhole appeared, and through it could briefly be glimpsed the structures of the convent’s myriad underground crypts and passageways. Verity heard screams over the roar of the engines as hapless workgangers too slow on their feet were knocked aside and to their deaths in the spaces below.

The courtyard resonated as the laboratory was finally deposited on the stones a few metres distant, and by the Emperor’s grace the ground there was firm and unmoving. Gathering herself, Verity ventured forwards from behind the cargo drums, gingerly peering into the cracks. She heard Zeyn exhorting the workgangers to leave those of their fallen number to their fate.

‘Hospitalier.’ She turned to see Sister Imogen crossing the quad. ‘Stay back. This area is unsafe.’

‘There could be wounded–’

The Sororitas spoke over her. ‘This may be deliberate sabotage.’ Imogen stabbed a finger at the

laboratorium, where a group of Battle Sisters were taking up positions around it, boltguns at the ready. ‘Stay back,’ she repeated.

‘I do not understand,’ said Verity. ‘This is an accident, nothing more. The convent grounds are known to be unstable. How can—’

Once more Imogen ignored her words. ‘Questor Tegas and his retinue have vanished. Something is afoot, nursemaid.’

Verity went cold. Vanished? Did she mean abducted, or killed?

The other woman must have seen the question in her eyes. ‘We have been played for fools,’ she snarled, marching onwards.

The chamber had formerly served the convent as a tertiary mess hall for the novices of Sanctuary 101, but for the moment it had been repurposed for Canoness Sepherina to use as her interim command post. The electrocandles hanging by votive chains from the walls were still twitching from the aftershock of the collapse in the courtyard, throwing shifting shadows in the places where the daylight did not reach.

‘The casualty report is still being collated, mistress,’ said Miriya, with a bow. ‘But Sister Xanthe reports we have lost several of the workers.’

Sepherina accepted her account with a vague gesture of her hand, without turning away from the vox-unit on the stone table before her. ‘You heard that, captain?’

‘Aye, milady,’ came a tinny reply from the vox’s speaker grille. ‘*I think this may just have been an unlucky coincidence.*’ The voice of the *Tybolt*’s commander was riddled with feedback and static, his words becoming echoes as the starship continued to move further out of planetary orbit.

‘I do not believe in such things,’ Sepherina insisted. ‘This happens now, at the very hour when your obligation to the Order is at an end? I suspect cunning in it.’

‘*With all due respect,*’ said the captain, ‘*these issues are now yours to deal with, canoness. The Imperial Navy has its own timetable to keep to and the Emperor’s summons waits for no man. My ship is urgently needed in the Cynnamal system to reinforce the line against an ork incursion. Tybolt’s shuttles are in recovery, and we are preparing for warp translation.*’

Miriya saw Sepherina’s mailed fist tighten. ‘Tegas did this deliberately,’ she went on. ‘He knew your schedule. The questor has defied me and stolen away into the night. A rover was taken, and we do not know as to where.’

At first, when the discovery had been made just before dawn, Sister Imogen had aired the thought that the Mechanicus party might have fallen victim to an outside force. However, it had soon become clear that Tegas had absconded with the vehicle for reasons known only to the adept. The Battle Sisters on guard duty had already been chastised and given over to Deacon Zeyn for reprimand, but the damage was done.

‘If you cannot remain to assist me in this matter, then I ask you to grant me one request before you depart,’ said the canoness. ‘Your vessel’s scry-sensors. Make a cast over the surface in the sector surrounding the convent. Tell me what you detect.’

‘*I anticipated your request, milady, and this was done,*’ buzzed the captain. ‘*A datum transit of the scan is now in progress, although I warn you it will not be pleasing.*’ Miriya heard the chatter of a typehead as a slot on the bulky vox mechanism began to spew out a thin streamer of paper. ‘*I put it to you that Questor Tegas has allowed his enthusiasm for this mission to outstrip his good sense. If I were you, I would allow him to exercise it and let the man be damned for any hardships it brings to his party. Ave Imperator, canoness.*’

‘*Ave Imperator, captain.*’ The vox-speaker bubbled static and finally went silent. Sepherina snatched at the paper strip and threaded it through her fingers, her expression stony.

Miriya glanced over her shoulder as Sister Imogen entered the chamber. The Celestian gave her a dismissive glance.

‘Report,’ said Sepherina, without looking up.

‘I sent out a squad of scouts and they tracked the Venator’s path to the edge of the valley, but there the sands become unreadable. We could follow no more.’

The canoness nodded once. ‘Tegas appears to have masked the rover’s locator beacon. According to the *Tybolt*’s sensors, the vehicle was moving southwards when it was consumed by a magnitude seven

sandstorm. Energetic interference prevented any further tracking.’ She let the paper strip fall from her slender fingers. ‘He knew that would happen.’

Miriya swallowed. ‘If I may,’ she began. ‘A small party in another of the rovers might be able to pick up some traces after the storm passes.’

Sepherina and Imogen shared a look that Miriya could not read, and then the Celestian answered for her commander. ‘No. Let Tegas go. He has cost us one Venator already, more than likely got himself buried under ten metres of sand by the drifts out there.’

The canoness nodded again. ‘If the adept wishes to perish in the desert, I see no reason why we should not allow him to do so. I will take the advice of the good captain. We have far more important deeds to do here in the convent. The reconsecration has begun. I shall not see it abandoned because of one foolish man’s recklessness.’ She brought her hands together. ‘We complete our sacred deeds first, and perhaps then we will consider sending out a search party.’

Imogen turned to Miriya. ‘Gather a tactical squad and assemble at the gates of the central keep.’

‘If it pleases the Celestian, may I ask why?’

The other Battle Sister eyed her. ‘We do as the canoness ordered. We go to secure the lower levels of the convent.’

‘Be careful down there,’ added Sepherina. Miriya sensed the caution carried more meaning that she could see, but the fullness of it escaped her.

They gave Sister Verity an illuminator rod and a portable narthecium pack, and ordered her to assemble with the Battle Sisters. She shared a wary greeting with Ananke and Cassandra, both of whom were armed for combat. Without explanation, Sister Imogen arrived with Miriya at her side and they entered the great donjon once again.

This time their route took them around the circumference of the keep, presently to a chamber where the floor had collapsed into the lower level, becoming a series of broken ramps. Verity thought about the catastrophic moment of subsidence she had seen in the courtyard and tensed. The motion of earth and rock like the waves of an ocean brought back memories she wanted to forget, of the planet Neva and the close press of danger.

They descended carefully into the crypt levels, where the convent’s honoured dead were interred, past murky storage spaces packed one atop the other. Up above, the damaged rooms of the keep seemed strange and ghostly. Down here, it was an altogether different shade of gloom.

Verity had seen the plans of the convent before they arrived on the planet, and she recalled the shape of the underspaces; they were radial arms extending out from beneath the keep, corridors fanning off into clusters of cell-like antechambers.

Several of the passageways were impassable, clogged by stone and sand. They encountered three of these, and at each occasion Verity observed a flicker of distress on the face of Sister Imogen. Each time, the Celestian gathered up the data-slate she carried and made a series of notations. Her grim features were reflected in the glow of the device’s screen.

They divided into smaller parties of three and swept all points of the compass. Verity went with Miriya and Cassandra, keeping out of the way of the two warriors as they picked their way up the length of a dusty corridor. And at last, she could hold in the question no longer.

‘What are we looking for?’

Miriya halted, her boltgun’s muzzle dropping, the beam from the lamp slung beneath the barrel hanging like a solid spar in the mote-filled air. ‘That has not been made clear by the honoured Celestian.’

‘I imagine we’ll know it when we see it,’ Cassandra added, sarcasm colouring her tone. ‘As if there are not enough uncertainties about this mission as it already stands.’

Miriya opened her mouth to speak, then thought better of it and said nothing. Verity saw her do so and touched her arm. ‘You have more to say on this.’

They exchanged a loaded look. The two women, as disparate as their disciplines were, had been through much together. The bond of shared past hardships overcame what reticence there was in the Battle Sister. ‘Sepherina is keeping something from us.’ The reply was low, almost a whisper. ‘Imogen knows. There is more to this mission than just the return of Sanctuary 101 to the God-Emperor’s Light.’

‘You believe Tegas’s unscheduled excursion is part of it?’ said Cassandra.

‘No.’ She frowned. ‘I saw the canonesse’s face when she heard of that. Whatever the questor is doing, he has his own agenda.’

Cassandra sighed. ‘You make the waters muddier, Sister. Clarity fades even more.’

‘Aye,’ agreed Miriya. ‘And I dislike it. This smacks of subterfuge, and that is not the way of our church.’

‘I am sure the canonesse has her reasons,’ offered Verity, but the conviction of the words was absent.

Then without warning, the corridor was suddenly echoing with the flat concussion of gunfire.

Miriya did not think; she only *reacted*.

Her combat cloak crackled as she spun and raced back down the stone corridor, back towards the junction where they had broken off from the rest of the group. She did not need to look over her shoulder to know that Cassandra was on her heels, and Verity a few steps behind. The hospitaller was sensible and would remain out of harm’s way, but Miriya knew her well enough that she wouldn’t run and hide at the first sound of battle. The winsome young woman was strong that way, in a manner that many did not see on first meeting her.

She ran into the cries of her Sisters. The crash of low-gauge bolt-rounds rumbled around the stone walls and muzzle flashes blasted staccato shadows across her sightline. Miriya heard the hiss and whine of heavy ballistic rounds coming up the tunnels from the far shadows.

She glimpsed a crumpled figure lying in the dust, shrouded by a snarl of crimson cloak and tabard. The face was turned away from her, but the woman’s chest still moved; alive then, for the moment.

Miriya dropped into cover behind a pillar and found Helena reloading her weapon. ‘What is it?’

‘Automata,’ snapped the other woman. ‘We came across a pair of them further down one of the radials. They failed to respond to voice commands, then opened up on us.’

Chancing a look, Miriya bobbed her head out of cover and got shot at for her trouble. ‘Those are Sororitas issue gun-servitors. Our own machinery, trying to kill us?’ Even a glimpse had been enough to spot the familiar fleur-de-lys on the torsos of the war machines.

‘Malfunctioning,’ Helena corrected. ‘Their machine-spirits are unhinged.’

‘Return fire!’ Miriya turned at the sound of the shout and saw Imogen and a few of the other Sisters laying down an arc of shots, but the rounds did little but chip away at the layers of armour-plate of the mobile gun-slaves. Sat atop heavy tracks like miniature tanks, they were mobile turrets controlled by the remnants of human helots wired into metal bodies. But something had gone wrong here, and whatever defensive program they had been fed was still spooling through their broken minds. She wondered how long they had been down here, waiting since the convent’s fall for something new to shoot at. They were the first sign of life any of the Battle Sisters had seen on Sanctuary 101, and they were trying to kill them.

‘Rot these things,’ spat Imogen, her fire team pausing to reload. ‘We need a heavy cannon down here!’ She muttered something into the vox pick-up at her neck.

Miriya’s lips thinned as she weighed their tactical options. The gun-servitors were making a slow but steady advance, and the women would be forced to fall back long before a Sister Retributor could reach them with a heavy bolter or a multi-melta; by then it would be too late for the injured Sororitas lying across the stone floor. The corridor was too enclosed to trust a flamer to do its work, and after seeing first-hand how fragile the stone walls here really were, grenades were out of the question. A close-in attack was the only option.

‘Hold this.’ Miriya glanced at Verity and thrust her bolter into the other woman’s hands.

‘Sister, what are you doing?’ asked Helena.

Miriya reached over her shoulder and pulled at the grip of her combat blade. The long, blocky shape of her chainsword fell easily into her hands. The power rune on the hilt showed ready and she gave the throttle bar a quick squeeze. The tungsten-carbide teeth of the blade whirred, drawing Imogen’s attention from across the corridor.

‘Mistress,’ she told the Celestian, ‘if you will draw their fire...’ Miriya ended the sentence by hefting the sword.

Sister Imogen was going to deny her request, she saw the emotion immediately in the other woman’s eyes. But then the Celestian paused, and nodded. ‘Show me,’ she told her.

Miriya saluted with the chainsword and burst from her cover.

Imogen's orders were a cry of anger far behind her, and she was dimly aware of a hail of bolter-rounds shrieking through the dusty air as the Sisters opened fire. The closest of the automatons reacted sluggishly, soaking up the salvo as it dithered between targets, unsure if it should aim at her or at the ones pouring shots into its armour. Miriya ignored it and charged on towards the second gun-slave, which had no such doubts. Instead of human arms, it had gimballed frames that housed a pair of autocannons, each crested with an ornately machined drum magazine. The maws of the guns traversed to find her, stuttering as they went. The servitors stank of rust and decay. They had not been properly maintained in more than a decade, left to rot down here in the dry air, lubricants and unguents cooking off in their artificial veins.

The guns discharged at full power; one of them locked up almost immediately, a brass cartridge lodging to cause a stove-pipe jam. The dead cannon gave off a whining, grinding sound, and it made the gun-servitor shudder as if it were about to retch and vomit. The other gun worked flawlessly, however. It punched holes in the air where Miriya moved, lashing at the tips of her combat cloak as it tried to rebalance and strike the centre of her mass.

The Battle Sister fell into a kick slide and rolled, faster than the helot could traverse. Putting her free hand at the guard along the backside of her chainsword, she rose back up and slammed the bare teeth of the weapon across the armoured plate of the fleshy thing inside the gun-servitor. Pulling the trigger bar, the chainsword's throttle brayed and it bit deep. Miriya leaned in, pressing her full weight into the attack, and felt the sword cut into the ablative sheets, throwing out great streamers of sparks.

Then there was blood and organic matter, and the chugging fire from the active cannon became more sporadic. Acting quickly, she hurdled the dying machine and shoved it across the corridor with all her might, spinning it as it went. The autocannon blew fist-sized holes across the stone walls in a line of peaks and troughs. Miriya brought it to rest on the torso of its armour-plated companion and watched the dying helot blow the other gun-slave off its treads. The Battle Sister drew back her chainsword and drove it point-first into the entry wound she had made. A mixture of gore and oil bubbled up and frothed. The servitor fell dead.

Across the corridor, Sister Imogen strode to the fallen machine and placed her boltgun to its braincase, executing the slave with a single point-blank shot. Cordite smoke wreathed the air, the acrid smell souring.

'They were protecting something,' said Helena, stepping up as Imogen advanced past the destroyed cyborgs.

Miriya went to the fallen Sororitas and found her still breathing, although her torso was a red ruin. 'Sister Thalassa, do you hear me?' That earned her a weak nod. 'Emperor's Blood, she lives still. Verity! We have need of you!'

The hospitaller raced to the injured woman's side and set to work without hesitation. Miriya looked up and watched Imogen ignore the moment, proceeding instead to the mouth of the radial corridor that the gun-servitors had been guarding.

She rose to her feet, a grimace etching her features. 'Is this what you brought us down here to find, Celestian?'

Cassandra pointed her torch-light at the doorway; like the others, it was filled with fallen stone. 'There is evidence of explosives use there.'

'They sealed the corridor deliberately,' said Imogen, but the words were more her thoughts voiced aloud than an answer to any question. 'This was the entrance to an egress tunnel. They didn't want anyone to follow.'

'Follow what?' Miriya demanded.

When the Battle Sister turned back to face her, her gaze was icy. 'Gather up the casualty and fall back. There's nothing here.'



CHAPTER FIVE

Human eyes would have seen nothing.

The tide of the sands, endlessly roaring across the ranges of the landscape, reduced visibility down to less than an arm's length. Crude organic optics would only have perceived the wall of razored dust, filling everything, and if an unprotected human had dared to stand here, their skin would be scoured from their bones, their lungs clogged with gales of particle matter forced down their throats.

To be in this storm and to be of flesh was death, but Tegas and his party were not so weak. Even the least mechanoid of them possessed little more than forty percent crude organic content, and all that lay beneath thick lamellar hoods or metal implants. To the servants of the Mechanicus, the lowing maelstrom of dust did not stop them from viewing the contours of the landscape in terms of thermal change, magnetic texture and radiation level. These modes of sight made the journey across the desert as clear to them as if it were a cloudless day. Electrostatic discharges presented the only real hazard of note, the frequent flashes of stuttering micro-lightning arcing through the haze or buzzing against the hull of the Venator scout. At one point, Adept Lumik had taken a discharge to the skull and zeroed out for a few seconds; an issue that would have been easily manageable if not for the fact that Lumik had been driving the vehicle at the time. Fortunately for Tegas and the others, the sand had slowed them to a halt before they could veer off the dune-tops and into the ravine below. Lumik seemed to be functioning adequately now, but the questor had already filed a notation in the communal data pool to have her placed at the head of the next maintenance rotation.

The Venator bounced over a rocky rise and began to descend a shallow ramp of orange sandstone. Tegas gave a portion of his thoughts to the digital map, drawn from the sealed data-files implanted in his brain back on Paramar. They were close now, and even as the realisation formed, a long, slow pulse of ultraviolet laser light flashed across his vision quadrant. Judging by the attenuation and frequency shift, the beam had been fired from an emitter less than a kilometre distant. The questor snaked one of his mechadendrites – the one with a lasing diode in the tip – up through the scout car's canopy and flashed back a response pulse. If Tegas had still possessed a mouth, he would have smiled.

They dropped into the sheer-sided vault of an arroyo cut from dark, streaked basalt. The wind and the ceaseless storm faded a little, becoming irregular twisters of dust dotted here and there instead of constant humming sandblasts. Shapes made themselves better defined as the rover closed in on its target waypoint. Among the wind-carved rock that reached out with sharp-edged, blade-like layers, there were other things that seemed foreign among the smooth, rounded surfaces. Nothing in the rocks of this planet appeared with straight lines, all of it was turned or curved. One could think of it as chaotic and unchangeably natural, if one were so inclined. Thus, when shapes made of harsh geometric angles appeared, it was almost shocking.

Stone, or something like it, of a viridian hue so deep it was almost black. It resembled slate or some variety of great metallic crystal, huge vaults of it growing storeys high. In a way, Tegas mused, it seemed invasive, almost like a cancer that had metastasized inside the planet's crust. What was most curious was the manner in which the sandstone seemed to have grown around it, as if attempting to absorb a foreign object.

He glimpsed flickers of dull light and adjusted the range of his optics. There were figures up on one of the flat surfaces, a trio of worker helots in the red tunics of the Adeptus Mechanicus, scrambling about a platform that appeared to be affixed to the dark stone face by blobs of thick adhesive. He measured the radiant index from the muzzle of a meson cutter. They were taking samples of the material, or at least making the attempt. Tegas looked away. He knew from experience that the helots were wasting their time. Nothing could cut that stone; Ommissiah knows, he had tried to do the same at other times, on other worlds.

Presently the rocky ramp flattened out and they approached the encampment. Fences made of cutwire ringed a perfect formation of laboratoria modules, generator units and habitat pods. The camp backed onto a sheer wall of dun-coloured rock that went up to the desert surface, and picked out across its face were vents cut into the plane of it. Strings of lamps were visible, disappearing into the tunnels beyond.

The fence rolled back to give the Venator entrance and Lumik brought the scout car to a juddering halt.

On the ultrasonic, Tegas heard a scalar tensor of greeting codes being broadcast as he stepped from the rover and let his robes flutter in the breeze. He bowed slightly to announce his arrival.

The camp looked busy, and that pleased him. He had half expected to find it as dead as the Sororitas outpost, but instead the place seemed the model of efficient Adeptus Mechanicus operations. He turned in place, a slow three-hundred-sixty degree rotation, making a recording of all he could see. As he turned back to his starting place, he heard a familiar series of interrogative codes.

‘Tech-priest Ferren.’ There was something impressively formal about using words to make the greeting, and Tegas saw no reason to do otherwise.

Ferren bowed, the hisses of his leg-pistons breathy and wet. ‘Lord questor. When we detected the ship in orbit, we knew you had come at last. It has been too long.’ Like Tegas, the priest was a near-humanoid shape beneath red robes, although he lacked the runic trimming of his superior’s garb and the signifier plates bearing the sacred equations of rank. Beneath the robes, Ferren resembled a collection of cables and thin piping that had been tied together to form the shape of a man, in the manner of a rustic corn-dolly. Multiple eye-clusters moved back and forth across his head, circling the equator of his scalp at different scan rates. He had once been a trusted adjutant to the questor like Lumik and the others, but Ferren’s cleverness had made it clear he could better serve the Lords of Mars elsewhere. Tegas felt a moment of pride in the fact that his protégé had flourished in what others might have thought was a makeweight assignment.

‘This site hides you well,’ Tegas replied. ‘Even the *Tybalt* could not detect you from orbit.’

‘We went dark,’ Ferren demurred. ‘And the composition of the stone and the... the artefacts here do much to cloak us. It is quite remarkable.’

‘I have no doubt.’ Tegas sensed Lumik approaching; she had developed a limp, doubtless from the shock-effect.

‘There are... many here...’ she clicked.

‘Fifty-two servants to the Ommissiah’s glory,’ Ferren replied.

Tegas cocked his head. His records showed that sixty-four souls had set out on this clandestine endeavour. Ferren anticipated his question and transmitted a tight-beam data packet to him, within which was an updated crew complement document. Those listed as missing or deceased had only the most cursory of loss reports. Tegas filed this away for later address.

‘We have made much progress since our last communiqué,’ continued the tech-priest, allowing marker-echoes of satisfaction to filter into his vocoder’s speech patterns. ‘You will be pleased, my lord.’

‘I expect no less,’ said the questor. ‘After twenty months of sifting through the sands here, I will be most dismayed if our agreement with Hoth has rewarded you with nothing of merit.’

Ferren had a group of demi-adepts come and escort Lumik and the others to a refurbishment post in the habitat cluster, where they could see to the sand clogging their gears, while the questor went with him directly to the primary laboratorium station.

Once they were alone, it was only nine point four minutes before the tech-priest asked the question Tegas knew he was desperate to voice. ‘What of the Ordo Xenos’s involvement in our endeavour? We have heard nothing since our arrival. Have they kept their side of the bargain?’

Tegas glanced at him. ‘You are here. I am here. For now that seems as we agreed it to be.’

‘But the Adepta Sororitas have come with you.’ Ferren’s metallic hands knitted in a nervous, human gesture. ‘How many Battle Sisters did they bring?’

‘A sizeable military force. Enough to kill us all, if they wished it.’ Tegas said the words without weight, leaving the stark declaration hanging as a test of Ferren’s courage.

‘Our tech-guards are formidable. They would find it a hard-fought battle.’

‘It will not come to that.’

‘It may come to *something*.’ Ferren offered him a capsule of libation, which the questor accepted and injected into a port in his cheek. ‘What we have unearthed here in the shifting sands... If the Mechanicus wishes to fully exploit it, we will need Sanctuary 101 turned over to us.’

‘The Sisterhood have prior claim. Don’t you think that if we could have taken this world so easily, we would have? But voices in the court of the High Lords of Terra speak strongly about the sanctity of the Sororitas colony...’ Tegas made a negative noise. ‘And for now we must show at least the pretence of concord with them.’ He helped himself to another capsule, enjoying the pleasing rush of the chemical’s effect. ‘Hoth is working to the same endgame as we are. And he has the ears of men of power on Terra and Mars.’

‘The Sisters of Battle will not go quietly,’ insisted Ferren. ‘Not when they learn what we have learned.’

‘And what is that, my student?’ Tegas slid across the floor towards him. ‘Would it be something to do with this?’ The questor produced a cloth bag from within the folds of his cloak and tossed it onto a nearby workbench.

Ferren’s mechadendrites picked at the sack like snakes striking at a prey animal, and removed the object within. Light glittered off the necron skull and the tech-priest emitted a sound that resembled a gasp of pleasure. ‘Where did you find this?’

‘Canoness Sepherina discovered it inside the convent. Apparently the inquisitor’s sweep teams were not as diligent as he claimed.’

‘And she just... *gave* it to you?’

Tegas chuckled. ‘The woman was desperate to be rid of it. I think she was unsettled by the presence of the thing.’

The adept turned the metal form over and over. ‘I am detecting major internal damage within this module. Breakage of core hyperdynamic spatial linkage arrays, phase-effect nulls... That would explain why this piece did not deresolve with the rest of the corpse-metal when the unit was destroyed.’ He carried the skull reverently to another bench, where the torso and helmeted head of a helot was surgically implanted into the workstation there. The servitor awoke with a jerk and took the alien item from him.

Ferren hesitated, and Tegas sensed he was not yet willing to let his concerns be so easily distracted by this new gift. ‘The women in the convent...’ He made a gesture in the air with his clawed hands. ‘In truth, my lord, it is not their discovery of this dig site, or indeed how long we have been in secret violation of their colony that concerns me. It is the Ordo Xenos that I fear. We are very far from home out here, and their reach is long. Since we have been on the surface, there have been anomalous sensings of objects at the edge of the system. I suspect they are probes.’

Tegas gave a nod. ‘Sent by Hoth or his agents, no doubt. I don’t blame him. He wants to keep an eye on his investment. I imagine that he already has a covert operative embedded among your personnel.’

The tech-priest reacted with a shocked twitch. ‘I hand-picked my party for this mission! There are no—’

The questor waved him into silence. ‘Don’t be naïve, Ferren. I believe his spies were aboard the *Tybolt*, and it is very likely that at least one of the workgangers brought here by the Sisterhood is also in his employ.’ He looked away, gliding around the room, peering into stasis jars and microgravity pods. ‘It matters little. If Hoth could have secured this world by force, he would have done so. And then the Ordo Xenos and the Adeptus Mechanicus would be at guns drawn over this dust ball, even if the galaxy at large knew nothing of it.’

‘If that happens...’ ventured Ferren, his vocoder module crackling.

Tegas shook his head again. ‘No. This is a matter in which we all are treading carefully.’ He studied some fragments of silver inside one of the preservation capsules, losing himself in the eerie glitter of the alien metal. ‘Do not allow yourself to be distracted by issues beyond your control. Instead, tell me what you have learned. This world once belonged to the necrontyr. *Say it*. I want to hear you say it to me.’ There was

almost a measure of pleading in his voice. The questor had ventured across half the Imperium to get here, and he wanted it to be true above all else.

Ferren's machine-face bobbed once, twice. 'It is so. There is no doubt. The necron species came to this planet several million years ago... Or at least, one faction of them did.'

'A *faction*?' Tegas echoed the word, the data-rod implants in his hindbrain glowing with life at the suggestion and the connections it made in his thoughts.

'Oh, indeed, my lord. At first it seemed like an error in data processing... My dig party compared the scans of materials recovered here at the main site with those given to us by Hoth and his people. There were discrepancies.'

'Human error,' Tegas said automatically. To a man, the members of the Adeptus Mechanicus had little respect for the methods and record-keeping of any of the Imperium's other august institutions, the Ordo Xenos included. If there was a discrepancy, it was typically a mistake made by someone outside the axis of the Mechanicus.

'My initial hypothesis,' agreed Ferren. 'Until we recovered samples of our own to mount a comparative analysis.'

The questor emulated a thrill of excitement. 'What did you discover?'

'Data that lends weight to a theory of differential sects within the alien society. It appears that the commonly-held opinion of the necrons as a monolithic culture, with little in the nature of divisive internal power blocs, is short-sighted at best.' Ferren pointed a mechadendrite at the servitor working on the skull. 'I believe that the necrons which attacked the convent and killed the Sororitas are not the same as the ones we have found evidence of here.' He indicated the scraps of metal inside the stasis pods. 'Construction, detail, cosmetic presentation, internal structure. All show numerous points of differentiation. Many of which are external and largely decorative, lending credence to the concept of tribal structures within the alien civilisation. Time-dating indicates that both groups of necrons are contemporaries.'

Tegas could no longer contain his anticipation at this idea and turned in small circles as he played with Ferren's discovery in his mind. 'This theory has been aired before... It has been less than popular... But if we have proof...'

'I am convinced of it,' Ferren insisted. 'For all we know, Kavir could have been the location of some sort of conflict, perhaps the result of a schism between two tribes of these alien machines. It would explain much... The patterns of damage in the crypts beneath the rock. The wreckage we have unearthed.'

'Then perhaps... Perhaps the Sisterhood were only collateral damage.' Tegas simulated a guttural chuckle. 'That would dent their pride somewhat. To know their sainted Battle Sisters died merely because they happened to be *in the way*.' He gave an oily sigh. 'I would see more of your works here, Ferren. Show me all that you have done.'

'It would be my honour,' said the tech-priest, beckoning him to follow.

'Milady, you will be displeased.' Imogen said the words with a bow and looked up to give the canoness her full attention.

Sepherina stood on the other side of the desk she had taken to using as her place of work inside the temporary command post, and glared at the Celestian. 'It is not for you to decide what will or will not please me, Sister. *Speak!* You return from the catacombs beneath the donjon with wounded and weapons spent... Explain yourself to me.'

The woman frowned, before outlining in frank and unembellished manner what the scouting party had discovered in the crypt-levels. Sepherina's grim expression hardened as she went on.

'The gun-servitors,' she broke in, 'where were they hiding? We detected no sign of them, they did not respond to any machine-call summons.'

'I can only suspect that they were hidden from scrying by the thickness of the rock.' Imogen nodded towards the stone walls. 'From what I can determine from the remains, they were set to work autonomously and left to their own devices.'

'For twelve years?' Sepherina demanded.

'Aye.'

'To what end?'

Imogen came closer, her voice dropping. ‘They were guarding the mouth of a sealed tunnel. The passageway does not appear on any of the official documents or architectural drawings of the convent buildings.’

The canoness glanced down and found a pict-slate on her desk, containing those self-same files. She paged through them, eyes narrowing. ‘You are certain of this?’

‘I am,’ Imogen replied. ‘Consider it, milady. The passage from the great chapel to that chamber below...’

Sepherina did so, viewing the maps, tracing a line along the route from the main hall, down along the ramps to the lower levels and around the circular corridors. ‘If one were to go to ground, this is the path they would have taken.’

The Celestian nodded her head. ‘A secret egress. We both know such things are a matter of course in our holdfasts across the galaxy, and it answers many questions. The enemy never made it down there, they never encroached that far. Perhaps they were stopped, driven back, or perhaps—’

‘Perhaps the last Sister was already dead by then,’ Sepherina broke in.

Imogen nodded once more. ‘It is likely. I would warrant that if we examine the final command strings given to the servitors, we would find they were ordered to bring down the tunnel entrance and then guard the blockade until they were unable to do so any longer.’

‘Without Tegas and his people, that is beyond us,’ muttered the other woman.

Imogen went on. ‘It was only the passing of time and the action of it upon their elderly and ill-maintained systems that turned the helots against us. They did not recognise us as humans, as their masters.’

‘And Sister Thalassa paid for that with her blood.’ Sepherina’s lips thinned. ‘Our first casualty and it comes from a bullet made by Imperial hands. Curse this place!’ She banged her fist on the table. ‘Every brick and stone here is a punishment to me!’ When the older woman looked up once more and met Imogen’s gaze, cold fire burned in her eyes. ‘Say the words, then, Sister Imogen. For the letter of the record, tell me of your... of *our* failure once more.’

She released a long, slow breath. The Celestian had wanted so much to give the canoness the reply she truly wanted, the answer that both of them had devoted themselves to, but instead she was forced to speak a different and damning truth. ‘The relic that we seek is not in the catacombs. Nor within the central donjon and the outer wards, even the greater span of the convent grounds. It is gone, mistress, and I cannot tell you as to where.’

Sepherina allowed a weak nod and she settled heavily into a chair. ‘And so it goes. Our long voyage has been for nothing.’

‘I have not given up hope,’ Imogen insisted. ‘If we can track the path of the egress tunnel, then we may be able to find the opposite end. If the relic was evacuated that way...’ She trailed off. Even as she spoke, her words seemed vague.

‘The God-Emperor and Saint Katherine themselves will damn me if I fall short in this, Sister.’ Sepherina spoke quietly. ‘It will be the greatest failure of my life.’

Imogen shook her head. ‘The burden is shared equally,’

‘No,’ said the senior Sororitas. ‘It lies upon me. I should have been here! For years I have carried this remorse about my neck like a millstone, and today it weighs more than it ever has. I have come so close only to have my hopes dashed at the last instant... I swear that if I fail, I will surrender myself to the Repentia and give up my name, and even that will never be enough.’

For a moment, Sister Imogen tried to imagine her canoness, masked in rags of blood-crimson, fighting under the whip as a member of the Sisterhood’s penitent brigade. Women who had wronged the Order or who voluntarily accepted reprimand filled the ranks of the Repentia, and it was written that they would fight the enemies of Imperial Truth until they were redeemed through death. She rejected the image. ‘Do not say such a thing,’ said Imogen. It troubled her to see the iron-willed Sister so distressed and sorrowful over something she had little control over. ‘All things are the God-Emperor’s will. If it was His wish that you not be in this place, then you served Him by being elsewhere. And now you will serve the Golden Throne by bringing His Light back to this forgotten world.’

‘It is not enough,’ Sepherina said softly. ‘Dear Sister, it is not nearly enough.’

A gauntlet rapped on the door to the chamber and a figure entered, bowing as she came into the pool of

light cast by the electrocandles. Imogen recognised the hospitaller Verity.

‘Forgive my intrusion, milady,’ began the younger woman, ‘but I was ordered to report to you immediately with word of Sister Thalassa’s condition.’

‘Give me something to be thankful for,’ Sepherina snapped at her. ‘Tell me you worked your own miracle with our Battle Sister’s life.’

Verity coloured slightly. ‘I would not claim to work miracles, mistress. But by the God-Emperor’s Grace, Thalassa lives. Her torso armour took the brunt of the barrage from the autocannons, protecting her vitals from a fatal level of damage. However, it saddens me to tell you that she will not walk again under her own locomotion. Our facilities here are crude and those remaining intact in the convent’s valetudinarium do not include tissue regeneration devices. I would recommend augmetic surgery upon her person after she has had time to recover.’

Sepherina gestured at the hospitaller. ‘So authorised. See to it, Sister.’

The comment was clearly a dismissal, but the nursemaid did not move from where she stood; rather, Verity remained in place, her amber eyes steady on the canoness.

‘Is there something more, girl?’ Imogen demanded.

Verity shot her a look. ‘Those broken machine-slaves robbed a woman of her legs. I cannot help but wonder why she was forced to surrender her future to a mission that goes unexplained.’

Imogen’s eyes widened at the hospitaller’s challenging tone. *Who does she think she is to speak in such a fashion?* ‘It may be so within the Order of Serenity for a Sororitas to talk out of turn as you have, Sister Verity, but this mission is under the auspices of the Order of Our Martyred Lady – and your insolent manner courts censure and castigation!’

‘Is it disrespectful to seek the truth of something?’ Verity replied. Her voice trembled, but she fought to keep it steady. ‘Every Sister here will give her body, their life in the God-Emperor’s name, but with cause. Is it too much to ask to know why poor Thalassa will now end her days walking on iron legs instead of those she was born with? The question is asked, Sister Imogen, and not only by me. The question echoes about the halls of this place.’

Sepherina rose and her cloak fell open behind her. She rounded the desk, advancing on the hospitaller. ‘What question?’

‘We...’ Verity could not help herself, and she shrank back a step. ‘We were brought here to reconsecrate this sacred place. But that is not all, I believe.’ The young woman steeled herself and met Sepherina’s eyes. ‘What are you looking for, mistress? Can we not be told, so that no more blood is wasted and shed?’

For a long moment, Imogen thought that the canoness would strike the hospitaller across the face for her temerity, but then the tension in Sepherina shifted slightly, and her stiff pose eased a little. ‘I could ask you the same thing, Sister Verity.’

The reply caught the other woman off-guard. ‘I-I do not understand.’

‘I know what happened to you on Neva. The mad plans of that deluded traitor LaHayn, but before that the death of your sibling Lethe. You put that to the earth and gave her to the God-Emperor’s will. You signed upon the charter for this mission – my mission – to Sanctuary 101 because you are looking for something. What is it?’

‘I don’t–’

‘Do not lie to me,’ Sepherina warned. ‘Answer.’

Verity swallowed a breath. ‘Avowal. I seek a way to reaffirm my dedication to Holy Terra and my oath as a Sororitas.’

‘And here you will,’ Sepherina told her, ‘as long as you remember who you are. As long as you remember *your place*.’ She turned away. ‘Sister Miriya. She came upon this endeavour because you encouraged her to join us. And like you, she is seeking something. Do you know what it is?’

Verity’s reply took a long moment to form. ‘Peace?’ she offered, at length.

The canoness allowed a thin smile. ‘That remains to be seen. Miriya has been a dangerous and unpredictable soul among the regimented choir of the Adepta Sororitas. She has stood out when she had no need to, and drawn discord to herself. Think of her now, a promising career set back decades because of hubris.’ Imogen saw Verity open her mouth to leap to the other woman’s defence, but Sepherina continued on. ‘Those who stray too close to such behaviour can be coloured by it.’ She glared at the hospitaller. ‘Don’t

allow her mistakes to let you feel you may make them also. Unless you too wish to be considered as outspoken and troublesome?’

‘It is not that,’ Verity managed, but Sepherina silenced her with a look.

‘You are dismissed,’ said Imogen, taking her cue.

Verity frowned, and she bowed and walked away.

When they were alone again, Imogen glanced across at the canoness. ‘Milady,’ she began. ‘I hesitate to say so, but the girl is right. There will come a time when we need to inform our Sisters.’

Sepherina looked away. ‘Yes. But I’ll not allow a nursemaid to tell me when that moment has come.’

The Watched knew where the interlopers were going, the men with their clanking metal limbs and their ever-present stink of machine oil. It wasn’t a difficult assumption to make. There was only one destination, and it was a place visited before. Many times, in fact.

The ragged figure scrambled down the sheer face of the rock into the arroyo, knowing instinctively where the handholds and foot wells were. There were places to hide from the red-robed men when they drifted past on impellor platforms, places where the Watched had sat and observed. A memory of the day they had arrived resurfaced. The revenant thought of the solid, unflinching certainty from that moment. A knowledge that these visitors were here to do ill, and in secrecy. A sense of *wrongness*.

Towards the bottom of the steep-sided canyon, it always seemed as if the ghost-soul voice of the Watcher inside the revenant’s head was dimmer, as if it were attenuated. But never quite gone, though. There was nowhere on the planet where it could be silenced.

The Watched took care to descend into the encampment without being seen by the guards patrolling the site, drawing close its ragged cloak to remain nothing but a shadow. And inside that ruined mind, thoughts ground against each other like flints, throwing sparks of emotion that were hard to parse. The Watched sifted through the wreckage of a shattered self, trying to understand.

Only one thing was clear; something had changed now that the convent had been reoccupied, and these intruders were a part of it. If only one could understand what these things meant to one another. If only these pieces of disparate jigsaw images could be remade.

The machine did not lay dead upon the iron slab. Rather, it twitched and clicked and hummed in desultory, shuddering motions that seemed pathetic. On its back, the construct’s six hinge-like legs wavered in the air, and Tegas could see where the null-grav coils along its thorax had been forcibly removed. The stumps of metal limbs were tied down with steel hawsers, the lengths of them cut in half.

Ferren saw where the questor was looking and nodded sagely. ‘I had the manipulator claws severed after we captured it. It killed two helots with them.’

‘A sensible precaution,’ Tegas muttered, although something in him was offended by the careless and brutal manner in which the cutting had been done. The machine’s sensor head tilted up in an attempt to peer at him as he approached, but it too was strapped down. He glimpsed a cluster of milky emerald eyes and broken visi-lenses between the figures in Mechanicus red, who surrounded the alien robot like carrion eaters plucking at a corpse. Servo-arms and serpentine actuators worked in the guts of the construct, causing spits of sparking discharge as they delved into the machine’s body.

‘I believe we will have it fully dismantled in the next few days.’ Ferren was proud of his work here. ‘A nigh-intact tomb spyder, broken down and collated in every detail.’

Tegas watched his former student’s men working and was not impressed. They lacked the finesse he would have demanded, and he lamented at the thought of how much data was being lost through their crude experimentation. ‘How is it that you have this automaton to begin with?’

‘A survey party disturbed it,’ Ferren replied, something in his manner making it clear there were details he didn’t want to dwell upon. ‘It was only just emerging from a dormant state... One of my tech-guard managed to englobe it with a stasis sphere before it could fully awaken.’

‘You were favoured by random probability, then.’ Tegas watched the machine-autopsy continue, the stink of hot metal and strange lubricants thick in his olfactory sensors. ‘This is your great prize?’

Ferren shook his head, his body language showing dismay. ‘No. No, my lord. But I thought you would be pleased... It is rare that such a find—’

‘Yes,’ Tegas broke in, becoming impatient. ‘I am aware. But your communiqué made many vague promises, adept. I wish to see something new, something that I have never encountered before.’ He gestured towards the tomb spyder. ‘This is not even a true necron, it is one of their tools. Your findings show potential... So please, tell me you have more to show me than just stone towers and broken automata? I want more than theories to take back to Utopia Planatia, Ferren. I want knowledge that will change the galaxy.’

The tech-priest hesitated, then shot a burst of machine-code at one of the lesser adepts working at the dismantling. ‘Get the artefact,’ he commanded.

The tomb spyder’s head twitched as it tried to follow them about the room, and from somewhere deep within its casing the alien device issued out a thin humming that echoed like a cry of animal pain.

Tegas glanced back. ‘You are tormenting it,’ he noted dispassionately.

‘I do hope so,’ Ferren replied.

The Watched had been here before. It knew the layout of the place, having stalked across the rooftops of the lab modules and dormitoria in the deep of night, spying on the red-robos without really understanding the reason why. Once or twice, the ragged figure had even entered the stone hallways inside the rock face, there where the men had cut away the rubble to reveal the alien geometry within. But the Watched did not like to tarry there. Inside that echoing place, it felt as if a million eyes were turned inwards, and the weight of something vast, black and nameless drifted just out of sight. Waiting for the moment to emerge and consume everything.

Listening now, the revenant clung to the top of an equipment shed. The mutter and buzz of the red-robos passed by. They were agitated about something, but the cause was unclear. Hidden in the folds of the torn, filthy hood, a scarred face twisted in a grimace, fighting with itself for any small scrap of knowledge. *It was such torment!* To see a thing clearly and not to be able to name it, even though the word danced on the edge of understanding. The Watched suffered this pain every day, but at this moment it felt so much worse. The new arrivals had made this happen; they had shone a bright light into the voids in memory, and the revelation was shocking. So much lost. *So much lost.*

‘What is this?’ The words fell away in a breathy whisper.

Then there was the crunch of sand beneath a boot, and one of the red-robe soldiers was suddenly there, a face spindly and sharp like that of a snake sculpted from iron. A lasgun in one clamp-fist grip. A mouth full of lenses and blue-glowing eyespots.

The Watched surrendered to animal impetus and attacked. Hood flapping, the ragged figure threw itself from the top of the shed and collided with the soldier, knocking it to the ground. Hands that ended in broken gauntlets dressed with crude claws of scrap metal lashed out and cut gouges in the pasty, grey skin of the red-robe soldier.

They struggled with the lasgun, then lost it between them in the sands. Reinforced cyborg limbs went against wiry bone and muscle, one powered by energetic battery cells, the other by sheer force of madness. Floodgates of emotion opened up inside the mind of The Watched and tears came again even as anger boiled beneath them. The cyborg staggered, losing ground, clawed feet slipping in the drifts of dust.

The ragged figure’s free hand vanished into the stained, dirty robes and came back with a black blade, a shortsword made of a material that only barely existed in the real world. It went into the soldier’s biogenerator implants, through the solar plexus with a sound like whispers. Oily blood splattered on the sand from the exit wound as the two combatants embraced.

The cyborg’s last act was to tip back its head and emit a silent scream in the ultrasonic ranges beyond normal human hearing.

‘Tell me about the deaths,’ said Tegas, drawing up the crew complement data that Ferren had sent him on his arrival. ‘The information you provided is incomplete.’

‘It is basic, I admit,’ said the tech-priest, shifting on his splay-toed iron feet. ‘But I felt it expedient not to waste time with extraneous data. Suffice to say that an expedition like ours is not without its hazards. I have lost operatives and skitarii to cave-ins and traps left by the xenos to secure their tombs.’

Tegas’s tolerance for Ferren’s manner was thinning. ‘What are you trying to conceal? What is it that you

were afraid to admit on an open channel?’ He drifted closer to his subordinate. ‘The necrons... Your reports to Mars said you had found only sub-level forms, nothing humanoid or demi-intelligent. Did you lie?’

Ferren reverted back to a blink-code of panicked denials transmitted in the infra-red wavebands. ‘No. Nothing like that. I am certain.’

Tegas scanned the stress levels in the reply and discarded it. ‘You are not.’

‘I am!’ Ferren retorted. ‘We have echo-mapped the entire interior space of the underspaces beneath the alien towers! We have encountered nothing there beyond the complexity of insect-machines! Whatever was here is gone!’

‘Gone?’ The questor turned on Ferren, a moment of pure, almost forgotten humanity rippling through him; the emotion of anger. ‘I have travelled light-years to this ball of worthless rock on your word, adept, on the promise of something incredible! But now you suggest that all you have is another empty tomb and a theory I have heard before?’

‘No,’ Ferren repeated. ‘I have more.’ The lesser adept trundled back, proffering an object in outstretched hands to the questor. ‘Look. See for yourself.’

Tegas took the artefact. It was a scroll, like those used in ancient days upon Terra to store knowledge before the advent of bookbinding. But it was not made of anything resembling paper. The sensing modules in his fingertips registered an incredibly ordered level of atomic structure in it, and attempts to identify the nature of the scroll’s make-up classed it as some form of metallic crystal. It was thin, flexible and light.

He drew it open, and the action of light falling on the scroll’s surface brought it to life. A silent waterfall of images and complex mathematical structures fell across the revealed page. Infinitely long lines of text revealed themselves, resembling the circle-spar iconography of the necrontyr. The scroll showed orb-like panes of data growing out of each other, and when Tegas tilted it, the images changed to reveal even more script layered atop them. It moved past with incredible speed, a library’s weight in texts passing by in a second, more following, more and never ending. The questor saw glimpses of known necron constructs – the dark pyramidal Monoliths, the skeletal forms of their warriors, the glowing emerald spears of gauss weapons and the scimitar curves of vast interstellar ships – but there were other things there as well, forms made out of arcs of grey steel that clawed at the ground, elongated skulls with cyclopean eyes and tripod walking machines that could only be war engines. He was looking through a tiny window into the heart of the necron machine, and what he saw there was beyond the scope of his imaginings.

‘I theorise that the iron scroll is some form of information storage apparatus,’ said Ferren, ‘and possibly more besides. It may even be a remote, portable terminal for a larger expert system.’

Another human emotion pushed to the fore of Tegas’s thoughts; the one he liked the most, the one he found it the hardest to part with. ‘I take back my doubts,’ he said, greed colouring his every utterance. ‘This is impressive, Ferren.’

The tech-priest said something in reply, but Tegas was no longer paying attention to him. All that occupied him now was the desire to take this object to his own laboratorium unit back at the convent. It would be important to move swiftly so as to secure credit for this discovery for himself, he mused. Someone of adept’s rank could not be allowed to deal with a find of this magnitude, this thing that could be the Rosetta Stone for all understanding of the necrontyr race. It had to be contained, managed... And properly exploited. In the right hands, the alien artefact could carry a man from the rank and file up to the giddy heights of High Adept of Mars, and Questor Tegas had entered into many bargains and accords in his life in the attempt to make that ascent.

More importantly, Tegas would have to consider how to handle the Ordo Xenos, who would throw aside any pretence at a slow and steady partnership and wade in with weapons and warships to secure the iron scroll, once they learned of its existence. *If they learned of it.*

Tegas folded the scroll closed, saddened to stop the rich flow of information, but it would be easy to become seduced by its potency. He watched Ferren wilt a little when it became clear he was not going to hand the object back to him. ‘I will deal with this,’ he said. ‘You understand the need for that.’

Ferren’s reply was lost in the sudden ultrasonic shriek of the camp’s alert siren.

They scrambled out into the dusty gloom and into a chorus of laser fire. Tegas saw streaks of bright yellow flashing up at the wall of stone above them, blasting divots out of the red rock in crackling concussions.

‘What is it?’ he brayed. ‘What are you shooting at?’ Even as the demand was made, the questor spotted a blink of movement up on the sheer stone mass. A figure, humanoid in form, scaling the towering side of the arroyo in leaps and jerks, vanishing in and out of shadow as it moved. He immediately scanned in a dozen variant vision modes to pinpoint the intruder, but it was difficult to achieve. Something about the hooded cloak that hid the creature caused his sensor returns to simply slide off it. Already it was getting beyond the range of the tech-guard’s laser weapons, and they were reluctant to open up with anything heavier than shoulder arms for fear of bringing the rocks down on the encampment.

Tegas turned on Ferren. The adept was doing his best to show a neutral aspect, but the questor knew him well enough to see straight through it. ‘What is that?’ He pointed towards the diminishing figure. He saw lifter platforms rising up in pursuit, but they were too slow to catch the fast-moving intruder.

‘The deaths,’ Ferren bleated. ‘Some were murders.’

Tegas looked away and found the crumpled corpse of a skitarii. The biosynthetic innards of the soldier-cyborg formed a pool around it as the body twitched, mech-agumented nerve clusters still firing after meat-death. ‘You were going to keep this from me...’ He spun and whipped at Ferren with two of his mechadendrites, swatting the tech-priest into the wall of a gear shed. ‘Explain now!’

‘It has been plaguing us for months,’ he admitted. Ferren began to spill it all out, as if relieved to be able to divest himself of a burden. ‘I suspect it may be some kind of guardian left behind after the xenos left the planet.’

‘*Necron?*’ Tegas spat the word, broadcasting a stream of binary curses with it. ‘There is a live alien on this planet, and you simply *omitted* that fact from your reports?’

‘You would never have come if you thought there was danger!’ Ferren became shrill. ‘The Ordo Xenos would have arrived instead and all this would be lost to us! Hoth monitors all our signals! He would know!’

Tegas’s fury built, and partly at the realisation that Ferren was correct. He spat oil into the dirt, reverting back to a human action in this moment of high anger. ‘Why is it still alive?’

‘We can’t catch it,’ admitted the tech-priest. ‘We need help. Perhaps you could influence the Sororitas to—’

Tegas whipped at him once more to make Ferren fall silent. ‘*Imbecile!* Has living out in this wilderness clogged your processors with sand? The Sisterhood cannot know of this! That thing must be killed by the Adeptus Mechanicus. Do you not understand? *It knows the existence of this camp!*’ He pointed into the air. ‘I am very disappointed in you, Ferren. It seems I have arrived just in time.’

‘I. I. I—’ The tech-priest was making stuttering noises.

‘I am taking full command of this expeditionary force,’ snapped Tegas. ‘This is so ordered.’ He looked inwards, encoded the directive into machine-code and transmitted it on wide-band.

All of Ferren’s men stopped what they were doing and bowed to the questor.



CHAPTER SIX

It was night, and Sister Miriya found herself in the memorial garden once more.

The Sororitas on Sanctuary 101 had taken to calling it that – *the garden* – despite the fact that nothing grew from the sand-clogged ground except the stone markers bearing the names of the dead. She walked with reverence between the ordered rows of little statues, her path illuminated by the glow of the eternal lamps inside each sculpture of Saint Katherine. Ghost-light flickered like candles in the shadow of the shield wall looming above, the saw-toothed battlements cutting a jagged line across a clear, dark sky. Miriya saw a figure move up there; it was Sister Pandora, her bolter in her hands, walking her circuit of the perimeter. The other woman glanced down, her face hidden behind her Sabbat-pattern helmet. By rights, it was against orders for anyone to be outside after curfew had been called, but Pandora said nothing. She merely gave the other woman a solemn, understanding nod and moved on.

Miriya looked away, her gaze drawn back to the rows of statuettes. She felt churlish, betrayed by her own venality. Unable to find sleep in the makeshift barracks that had been set up in the convent's exercise halls, the Battle Sister had stolen away in her duty robes and walked out into the cool night, in search of... *What?*

'Why am I here?' she asked softly, to the air, to the dead, to the image of the Saint. None gave her an answer.

If one wanted only a factual, colourless reply to that question, there was ample explanation. Miriya was here because of her mistakes.

First, her errors in allowing her second-in-command, Sister Lethe Catena, to be killed during the escape of a dangerous psyker captive; then her inability to widen her focus and the near-obsession with which she pursued her former prisoner. These things had caused her to fall into the orbit of the Lord Deacon Viktor LaHayn, a man of such hubris that his plans dared to shake the pillars of the Golden Throne itself. In the end, LaHayn and his sacrilege were obliterated and Miriya found some measure of reprisal, but there had been a high price to pay.

She glanced down, her fingertips finding the beads of her chaplet, caressing the places where the chain had been broken and then repaired. Each tiny orb represented an act of devotion in the name of the Imperial Church. Once there had been many more adamantine beads on the chain, sufficient to signify officer rank as a Celestian Eloheim, but now there were barely enough to compare with that of a Novice Constantia newly raised to the status of a Sister Militant.

Miriya had committed a crime against her Order. She had disobeyed the direct orders of her Sister Superiors and risked life and limb in order to follow her own agenda to the bitter end. At the time, it had seemed like it was the only choice, but the passage of weeks into months made that certainty appear less solid – and on the voyage aboard the *Tybalt*, Miriya had found herself with much time to reflect on the way things might have played out differently. She was fortunate to be alive, she reflected, but frequently that mercy felt like just another kind of punishment. The sentiment was not lessened by the manner in which women like Sister Imogen treated her.

In the aftermath of her demotion back to the line rank of Battle Sister, Miriya felt lost and without

purpose, and it had been the hospitaller Verity who offered her a path. The young woman impressed the warrior with her keen intellect and an inner reserve of strength that belied her gentle aspect, and so Miriya accepted her Sister's suggestion – and her forgiveness. Lethe had been Verity's blood kindred, and with her friendship, Miriya could at least believe that one of her mistakes had been absolved.

But it was not enough. She looked around, taking a deep breath of the dry air. Miriya signed on to Canoness Sepherina's mission because she believed that she would find some kind of renewed purpose in it. She believed this pilgrimage to the rim of the Imperium would let her make peace with herself. It had not done so. Rather, it had shone a light upon harsh truths that Miriya had never wished to dwell upon.

She tried to lose herself in the endless rounds of prayer and practice, drilling and singing and fighting. But she had never been one for introspection or the layered games of interaction between rank and file, church and state. Miriya was a warrior first and foremost, and she craved the pure focus of combat.

Battle was her true chapel. Here, on this distant outpost that lay nigh-forgotten by the rest of the galaxy, she was far away from the Order's great Wars of Faith, far from the places where her sword arm and her boltgun could serve the God-Emperor in dispatching the infidel. It troubled her to admit that without the clash of gunfire and the screams of the unworthy in her ears, all Miriya could hear were the sounds of her own shortcomings. The thought seemed seditious. Could it be true that she was so enraptured by the spilling of blood that without it she would crumble?

Her soul was turning inwards, and she did not like what she saw there. Sister Miriya's absolute faith to Holy Terra was not in question – that had never, *it would never* leave her – but now she felt as if she were a blunted blade. She was broken and rusting, and might never again be called to the heights of martial glory she had once reached for.

She would do her duty to the letter, because she was an Adepta Sororitas and even the death of every star in the sky would not change that. But Miriya was deeply troubled by the yawning hollow in her spirit, as it seemed to grow ever wider with each passing day.

The Battle Sister looked down at the memorial markers and wondered if that would be her fate – to live and die here, and be recalled only by those who had not known her.

I followed Verity out to the middle of nowhere because I thought that distance would bring me clarity... And for my sins, I have found it. Miriya's aspect became grim.

Turning from the lines of memorial markers, her line of sight crossed the courtyard, where the workgangers had erected their temporary bivouacs and wind shelters for the reconstruction gear.

Miriya glimpsed a motion between a stand of rockcrete panels and a tethered habitat module. She froze, old battle senses stiffening her muscles. This late, only Miriya and the guards were at large. She wondered if one of the workers might have been foolish enough to venture outside of their cabins after the last shift. Or perhaps it was a trick of the eye, the motion of the wind casting a moving shadow from the edge of an untethered tent-flap.

Then she saw it again, certain this time, and Miriya knew her instincts had been on the mark. Staying low so as not to stray into the pools of light cast by the windows of the hab modules, a cloaked figure moved in jerky starts towards the central keep. The umbra was human in scale, but the Battle Sister could not pick out anything visible beneath the hood or in the depths of the wide sleeves. Her first thought was that it was one of Questor Tegas's errant tech-priests sneaking back into the convent, but then the figure moved slowly past the struts supporting the Mechanicus laboratory module and kept on going.

Intruder. It could be nothing else. Taking steady, careful steps, Miriya advanced, never taking her eyes off the cloaked form. She cursed her circumstances; she had no vox on her, nor any weapon better than the combat knife in her boot. She was afraid to call out in hopes that Sister Pandora might still be within earshot. This one could be a scout for all she knew, there could be others of them in the deeper shadows where Miriya could not see. If she sounded an alarm without being certain, the workgangers would panic at it and doubtless break into disorder.

Her feet crunched on a broken stone and the figure spun in the direction of the sound. Miriya dropped to her knees behind the cover of a cargo drum, and took the opportunity to draw her blade.

Her mind raced. Whoever – or *whatever* – this interloper was, Miriya had only spotted them by pure chance, and the thought of that set her blood running cold. It had to mean that the cloaked intruder had not only made it past the perimeter line of sensing rods deployed by Imogen's scouts, but then across open sand

to the walls of the convent, through them and into the courtyard without ever drawing the attention of Pandora or the other Sisters on guard duty.

She chanced a look over the top of the drum and saw nothing. Even that brief moment of losing direct visual contact had been enough. Miriya snarled a sanctioned curse under her breath and sprinted back towards the wall. Gathering up a loose pebble, she pitched it at the battlements and it cracked off the stonework. After a moment Pandora's helmet emerged over the ledge, leading with the muzzle of her bolter.

'Spread the word,' Miriya hissed, low and quick. 'But quietly! Something is inside the perimeter! One intruder, humanoid.' She pointed. 'I saw it heading towards the central donjon!'

Pandora hesitated. Technically, she outranked the other Battle Sister even though they both had veteran's laurels, but Miriya's manner was still that of a unit commander; she had to remind herself to show fealty. 'Please, Sister Militant,' she added, appending the title to pay due deference.

Sister Pandora nodded and cocked her head. Miriya knew the motion. The guard was sending a subvocalised message via her vox-bead. Without waiting for a reply, Miriya broke into a jog, skirting the piles of rubble arranged by the worker helots, and made for the great keep as quickly as she could.

She reached the steel doors to the primus atrium and found they were already hanging open.

For a little while, Verity allowed herself to think she was back on Ophelia VII, in one of the Yabarantine Naves that dotted the landscape of the great Cardinal World. She imagined turning her face to the west in order to catch a glimpse of the moonlight off the towers of the Synod Ministra, the city-sized complex where some of the Imperium's most notable religious texts had been authored. The thought warmed her.

But then she opened her eyes and she was half a galaxy away from that sainted place, still here in the Kavir system, kneeling before a damaged altar and tending to a cluster of votives that seemed small, lost in the murk and the debris of the place. Deacon Zeyn's workers had done a passable job of clearing away the worst of the wreckage in the Great Chapel, but the sting of rock dust was still in the air and thick in the hospitaller's nostrils. The dust... The damnable dust coated everything, seeming to materialise out of nowhere to re-cover any surface a millisecond after it was wiped clean.

She listened to the soft crackle of the candle flames, and caught the scent of rose-oil wafting up from them. Each candle had a prayer machine-printed about the body of it, open and bland missives to the God-Emperor full of generalities and receptive hopes. They were a common sight in cathedrals across the Imperium of Man, cheap enough that a single Throne coin would buy you a box of them to place in your own domicile shrine, should one so wish. Here, this night, Verity had gathered up a few of them to light in the name of Sister Thalassa, and bound them with entreaty to Holy Terra. Perhaps a miracle might be visited on the injured woman and the shard of autocannon round that had lodged in her spinal column would yet be expunged; certainly, Verity and Zara and the other hospitallers had exhausted every earthly manner of doing so.

Verity's head was leaden with fatigue and she craved sleep, but still she had come to the chapel at this late hour to light the candles and say the words. She saw it as much a part of her duty as she did the healing of the flesh of her Sisters.

A dolorous moan echoed out behind her, and the noise made the woman go tense with surprise. She turned and saw a vertical crack of lamplight across the chapel, wavering in the gloom. The steel doors had opened, the groan of the mechanism sounding like a solemn lament. Verity came up from her knees and took two steps away from the altar, her brow furrowed. She had expected no other company in this place at this hour. Belatedly, a breath of wind came across the chamber and made the candle flames mutter.

Unbidden, fear prickled Verity's flesh, and she was suddenly very aware that she stood in a haunted, desolate place.

Then there was the whispering. It seemed to come from very far away, and it was difficult for her to place its location. A woman's voice, that was all she could be certain of. *And coming closer.*

Emotion, something base and animal in Sister Verity, uncoiled inside her chest, something abruptly afraid and very human. She backed away, shrinking into the lee of a towering marble column, her heart thudding in her chest. Her need for sleep was banished by a powerful kick of adrenaline. Verity let the shadows swallow her and pressed herself to the far side of the stone pillar, not daring to breathe. The whispering voice made its approach, carried by loping footfalls, and by turns it defined itself until she could

hear the words that were being spoken.

‘You know nothing,’ said the voice. It came through cracked lips and a parched throat. ‘Get out. You have no right to speak.’

Verity heard the shuffle and drag of boots, the murmur of a heavy cloak being pulled across the flagstones. Part of her cursed this moment of weakness. She was a Sister of the Adepta, not some child who ran and cowered at every shadow. She had faced great horrors in her service to the Golden Throne, seen terrible things as she tended to the wounded upon the battlegrounds of piety, sights that would have sent lesser souls running for the hills.

And yet at the same moment she felt an icy fear gripping her chest like claws made of frost. There was something out there in the gloom that she did not want to lay her eyes upon, and she could not answer as to why.

‘I hate you,’ said the voice, dripping with venom and old revulsion. ‘You cannot...’ There was a moment of silence, as if the speaker was listening to an interjection that could not be perceived by Verity’s ears. ‘*Silence!*’ The voice returned with an angry snarl, and boots scraped on the stones.

The hospitaller set her teeth and at last dared to peer around the column, listening to the thump of her blood in her ears.

She saw a human figure in a shabby cloak the colour of rust, turn and lash out at the cluster of candles atop the altar. With a single sweep of a clawed hand, an arm clothed in ragged strips of cloth emerging from the folds of the cloak, the husk-voiced woman dashed the votives to the floor, breaking the glass cups, snuffing out the flames and spilling fluid wax where they fell. She spat and ground them to powder beneath her heel. In the flashes of motion, Verity glimpsed slivers of the body hidden under the cloak as she moved: an emaciated form swaddled in tatters, flesh covered in scars, matted locks of dark hair. It seemed to be a human. *Seemed to be*. She could not be certain of anything.

‘You can’t stop me,’ came the hissing words. ‘No. No no.’

Verity realised then it was the voice that lit the fear inside her. There was a gallows manner in it, a tone that resonated as harshly as the slamming of a sepulchre’s gate. Hearing the hooded one speak was like hearing the voice of death itself.

With a strange gentleness, the figure gathered up one of the untouched candles left to one side by the hospitaller, and put it in pride of place on the altar. Head bowed, she struck a tinder-rod and lit the wick. The whispers returned as the cloaked head bobbed, muttering a litany that Verity could not define.

The hospitaller retreated into the gloom, not daring to take her eyes off the intruder, feeling her way back towards the main doors. Her hand flailed in the air and was suddenly arrested in the grip of another. Verity swallowed a yelp of surprise and spun to find Sister Miriya close by. The Battle Sister carried a wicked combat knife in one hand, and in the other a thick rod of steel rebar recovered from one of the rubble piles.

‘I followed it,’ Miriya said quietly, nodding towards the altar. ‘It came in over the walls.’

‘*She*,’ gasped Verity. ‘It is a human being. I think.’

Miriya accepted this without comment. ‘The other exits from this chapel – they are secured?’

‘Aye,’ said the hospitaller.

‘Then we have it– We have *her* trapped.’

Verity glanced back at the altar. There was only the candle there now, burning steadily. ‘Miriya–’

The warning had barely left her lips when a clattering noise and the snap of a cloak sounded out across the chapel. The hooded woman was moving, disappearing into thick stands of shadow, reappearing, moving in and out of cover.

The Battle Sister strode forwards, throwing Verity a last nod towards the chapel doors. The hospitaller understood, and raced across the stone floor towards the entrance.

‘Show your face!’ Miriya demanded, hefting the steel rod like a sword. ‘Surrender now and there will be no bloodshed. Resist and you will be killed!’

Verity skidded to a halt at the doors, hearing the rattle of loose stones out in the shadows. The chapel’s internal lighting system had not been repaired, and only a string of free-standing work lamps cast a corridor of illumination across the nave to the altar. Beyond its reach, the occasional shaft of moonlight cut through the dark ranges of the wide chamber.

‘Show yourself, intruder!’ shouted the Battle Sister, her temper flaring. Verity sensed movement out in the corridor as Cassandra emerged into the chapel, clad in full wargear and carrying her bolter. Isabel was a few steps behind her, and armed in a similar fashion.

‘There!’ Verity pointed in the direction of the sound.

Cassandra gave a nod. ‘The alert is being passed to all sentries. Stand back. Let us deal with this.’

Rubble shifted out in the shadows and the armed Sisters advanced at a run, closing in to join Miriya.

‘We need preysight to find this thing,’ she heard Isabel say.

‘No need,’ responded Cassandra, and plucked a small orb from her belt and tossed it into the air. The silver sphere described an arc that took it up into the rafters of the Great Chapel’s dome, and at the apex it burst into a glaring white clump of fire. The flare-pod began a slow drift back to the ground, but the stark illumination it threw out cast sharply defined shadows that shifted and wheeled.

Verity saw motion over on the west wall and called out; the ink-blot shape of a ragged cloak flickering as it dragged itself up the length of a dust-caked tapestry.

Isabel fired warning shots that chewed great divots of masonry from the walls, but Miriya was already cautioning her not to seek a kill. ‘We take her alive!’ she shouted.

The Battle Sister’s hopes seemed unlikely, though. Verity marvelled as the intruder scaled the sheer stone facia where there seemed little purchase, before leaping across yawning gaps to swing around support beams and stanchions. Isabel ignored her former commander’s call to stand down and tried to bracket the fleeing figure with shots. Each round was far past true, however, and the cloaked figure launched itself into space. She made a powerful, hurtling push and darted through the broken fingers of glassaic ringing the shattered portal in the roof dome. Dislodged fragments fell in a chiming rain against the altar as the intruder vanished into the darkness.

Other Battle Sisters pushed through the doors behind Verity, and she saw Helena there, bearing a drawn power sword, with Pandora at her side.

‘Did you see it?’ Pandora snapped.

Verity nodded. ‘I saw it.’

Miriya sprinted back towards them. ‘She’s outside, on the top of the dome! We can still catch her!’

Helena nodded. ‘Tactical squad, with me!’ She stormed back out into the corridor, with Isabel and Cassandra on her heels.

‘You won’t catch her.’ It was a moment before Verity realised that she had said the words.

Miriya halted and shot her a look. ‘We will try.’

Sister Pandora placed a heavy, gauntleted hand on the hospitaller’s shoulder. ‘Girl, what did you see? Tell us.’

Verity looked towards the altar, where a lone candle still burned, and she gave an involuntary shiver. ‘I saw the walking dead,’ she replied, speaking from the heart. ‘Not a resurrected, not something animated by the Ruinous Powers. Worse than that. A woman like a living ghost. Flesh and rags. Scars and tears... And that voice...’

‘Verity,’ said the Battle Sister. ‘Your words make no sense.’

‘Tears,’ repeated the hospitaller. ‘I saw tears on a broken face. She was weeping as she lit the votive.’

Dawn light was creeping over the walls of the convent by the time the canoness had called the gathering in the courtyard, fingers of orange-pink colour changing the shade of the sky. A low cloud of dust disturbed by the warming of the desert drifted down in the valley, and it seemed as if the outpost was some manner of island floating amid a sea of rolling haze.

Sepherina stood atop one of the cracked plinths and glared down with undisguised fury at the Battle Sisters Imogen had assembled. ‘This shall not stand!’ she snarled, searching their faces in turn. Miriya didn’t look away when she met her gaze. At her side, she felt the hospitaller Verity stiffen.

Isabel, Cassandra, Pandora and a dozen other women stood in a precise line in front of the canoness, while the Sister Superior Imogen watched from one side. None of them dared to speak, each fully aware of their failure in allowing the intruder to escape.

‘In Katherine’s name, I am sorely disappointed in each of you.’ Sepherina shook her head. ‘Did the length of our journey here make us slow and lax? Have the edges of our wits dulled through inaction?’ She

swept a hand over the group. 'I expected better, Sisters. First we suffer the indignity of that fool Tegas fleeing in the night like an errant child, and then the very sanctity of this hallowed place is violated!' She smacked her fist into her palm. 'And by what? You cannot even concur on the nature of this freakish trespasser!'

Miriya shared a glance with Verity. The young woman had been the best witness to the true nature of the hooded figure, but Sister Imogen seemed disinterested in the opinions of the 'nursemaid', preferring to cull a series of half-formed impressions from Pandora and the other women who had been on guard.

'How did this happen?' demanded the canoness. 'Imogen, answer me!'

The Battle Sister gave a contrite nod. 'The outer perimeter... There are still gaps in our security coverage, and despite our best efforts, we cannot cover every inch of the outer walls. The damage is in the process of repair, but—'

'I will hear no more excuses!' thundered Sepherina, her eyes flashing. 'Rouse Deacon Zeyn and the worker helots, have it done now! From this moment onwards, they will work around the clock until the walls are fully sealed and this convent is no longer open to attack! Work them until they drop, if needs must!'

Imogen nodded again and spoke into the vox-bead at her throat, relaying the new orders.

'Until further notice, Sanctuary 101 is now on combat alert status,' continued the canoness. 'All tactical squad leaders will make ready and weapons will be drawn. No more mistakes. *Vigilance*, Sisters.'

'*Vigilance*,' chorused the women, bowing their heads as they spoke the word like a benediction.

When Miriya looked up again she found Sepherina's cold eyes turned on her once more. 'Sister. You raised the alarm. You were the first to see this... person.'

'Miriya broke curfew,' Imogen added, without preamble. 'An action that will earn her even more demerits.'

The canoness silenced the Sister Superior with a raised hand. 'Why were you outside?'

The truth seemed a weak explanation, but it was the truth nonetheless. 'Sleep eluded me, mistress. I decided to take the night air. I have no excuse for my actions.'

'Tell me what you saw.'

She did so, recounting the moment in the garden, the warning she passed to Pandora – and then her desperate room-to-room search through the halls of the central keep that ended in the chapel. 'Sister Verity was there,' Miriya concluded. 'She saw better than I.'

'Is this so?' Sepherina measured Verity with a long look. 'You were in the chapel.'

'I was, milady,' said Verity. In turn, the hospitaller spoke of what she had seen before the altar, the maddened, terrible voice of the intruder and her strange actions.

Imogen offered the canoness the votive candle that had been left behind. Sepherina examined it, turning it in her gloved fingers, frowning. Finally, she looked away. 'Did the intruder speak to you?'

Miriya saw Verity give an involuntary shudder. 'She did not.'

'What kind of invasion sends a scout into a chapel to pray?' Imogen asked, her low opinion of Verity's account clear in her tone.

Sepherina shot her second-in-command a sharp look that silenced her once again. 'If this... person... dares to show themselves again within the bounds of our sight, I want her captured and interrogated, is that clear?'

'Aye,' came the reply.

'I will personally chastise any Sister who fails in her duty to protect the purity of this site!' she spat, her anger rising once more. 'I will—'

'*Target-sign!*' The shout went up from the walls, and Miriya recognised Sister Ananke's cry. The dark-skinned woman was high on the battlements, her bolter at her shoulder. 'Dust plume, to the east. Approaching at speed!'

'To arms!' cried Imogen, and the group surged into motion, gathering up their weapons, racing to find cover and sight-lines.

'Get inside,' Miriya told Verity. 'You'll be safer there.'

'Will I?' asked the hospitaller, and the question was heavy with import.

'Just go,' said the Battle Sister, as Pandora came to her side and thrust a loaded bolter into Miriya's

hands.

The dust clouds churned beyond the East Gate, or what was left of it. There had been a portcullis and gantry there when the convent was built, but in the process of the first attack that had left the outpost empty, that entrance had been demolished. Evidence of heavy energy weapon fire and the sheer brute-force power of a ramming apparatus showed that this had been the main point of attack when the necrons had come to cull the Sisters a decade ago.

Miriya fell in with Pandora and Cassandra, taking up positions behind the stub of a collapsed pillar. She checked her ammunition clip and brought her weapon to her shoulder, sighting down the optical scope.

A curtain of billowing sand filled the sight's vision block and she panned the gun slowly across the zone beyond the fallen gate. Miriya found the plume of trail dust immediately, and for a brief second she thought she caught sight of a slab-sided shape moving inside the ruddy cloud.

'Do you hear that?' asked Helena. 'Beneath the wind, a regular noise. An engine.'

'A vehicle,' Pandora agreed, listening to the chatter on the primary vox-channel. 'Ananke reports a detection from the thermographic scanners. Four hundred metres now and closing.'

Miriya's finger tensed on the bolter's trigger. 'Are we to fire?' Sepherina had said the words and ordered them to combat alert – and the letter of that standing order included directives to shoot anything that refused to identify itself. The sound of the engine reached her, a steady, rolling thrum.

Helena recognised it immediately. 'A Venator. It's one of ours.'

As the Battle Sister named it, the vehicle emerged from the low mist of windborne sand and started up the incline to the ruined gate, but in the next second the rover decelerated sharply and fishtailed in the dust, juddering to an ungraceful halt.

A dozen Sororitas guns were trained on the Venator, across from cover or down from the battlements. Any sudden motion, any threatening action, and the vehicle would be torn apart by bolter fire.

A hatch angled open and a hooded figure emerged. Unlike the intruder, this one wore the distinctive crimson of the Adeptus Mechanicus, and one by one, its fellows dismounted the rover, nervously clustering behind their leader.

'I calculate that you will demand an explanation,' called Questor Tegas, his voice rebounding off the broken walls. He appeared supremely unconcerned by countless guns aiming at him.

Miriya put her sights on the questor's head, observing the motion of his manifold eye implants, trying to measure his intentions.

Sepherina appeared beneath the broken arch of the East Gate, directly in the path the Venator had been following. She had twinned bolter pistols on her belt, and her hands strayed dangerously close to the weapons. Sister Imogen and two of her Celestians followed on behind her.

The breeze carried their voices so that all the assembled Sororitas could hear their exchange. 'In respect for your title and your exalted position,' began the canoness, 'I will grant you a moment to explain your actions.'

Tegas tilted his head. 'Milady...'

'If I do not find your words satisfactory, there will be consequences,' she concluded.

The questor stiffened at Sepherina's tone, and when he spoke again the obsequious manner he had shown before was wholly absent. 'I do not answer to you, Sororitas. You have no right to compel answers from me if I do not wish to give them.'

'You dare to play games of rank with me?' the canoness retorted. 'You vanish in the night by stealth, ignore my commands, steal one of our vehicles? I am within my remit to shoot you where you stand!'

'Your *commands*?' Tegas echoed. 'I think you overstep your bounds, milady. For all the authority you may think you claim, you have no power over the Adeptus Mechanicus. I do not need to justify my actions to you.' His augmetic arms folded closed over his chest with a hiss of pistons. 'You ought to give praise to the God-Emperor for the fact that you and your women are even standing on this planet. Had we wished to do so, the Forge Masters of Mars could have annexed this world and evicted your Sisterhood from it for all time, honoured dead or none!'

Sepherina's hand blurred and suddenly she had an ornate bolt pistol drawn and levelled at Tegas's head. His skitarii and adepts jerked and twitched, each bringing up their own weapons in a defensive arc. For their

part, the rest of the Battle Sisters maintained their unwavering aim. If the word was given, they would reduce the servants of the Mechanicus to oily smears on the sand, and never hesitate.

‘You vanish,’ the canonesse growled. ‘then we are invaded by an unknown interloper, hooded and robed as you are.’

For a fraction of a second, Tegas’s body language changed. He lost the tension of the moment, shifting. Then a heartbeat later he was stiff and rigid. Still, Miriya glimpsed the faint blink of laser light off the tip of one of his mechadendrites as he sent a silent communication to one of his adepts. ‘I know nothing of that,’ he said, at length.

‘You are lying to me. And I believe we have been told many lies along the path of this journey, questor. Yours are only the most recent.’ She advanced a step. ‘You will tell me where you have been and why you defied my orders to remain inside the compound.’

Tegas sighed. It was a feigned motion, as he had no need to breathe in a conventional fashion. ‘Your draconian edicts irritated me,’ he replied. ‘I decided to ignore them. To teach you a lesson.’

‘Arrogant cog—’ muttered Imogen.

Sepherina shook her head and the other woman’s invective ended before it could go further. ‘And so you committed a crime of theft and conspiracy against the Imperial Church?’

‘It is within my remit as a questor to appropriate military vehicles, should I wish to,’ Tegas sniffed. ‘As to your guards failing to observe our departure... I suggest you take that up with them, and review the Sister Superior’s tactical deployment.’ He paused, glancing around. ‘We were eager, canonesse. Eager to sift the dirt of this world through our manipulators, to see it at first hand... Not to wait inside the walls of this convent until you deigned to let us off your leash.’

Sepherina slowly lowered the bolt pistol. ‘And what did all your eagerness get you, Tegas? Tell me, out in the wilds, what great sights did you see? Was it worth incurring our anger?’

‘Our expedition found nothing of import,’ he replied. Watching through the targeting scope, Miriya could not shake a sudden, sharp certainty. *Once more, he lies.*

If the canonesse thought the same, she did not show it. ‘Your impatience could have seen you killed. You acted recklessly!’

‘Perhaps I did,’ Tegas allowed. ‘But your recalcitrant manner forced my hand. And if indeed there is another...’ He paused, framing his words. ‘If there is some unknown agent at large on this world, would it not better suit us both to put aside our differences and address that concern instead?’ Tegas asked Sepherina to relay the events in the chapel before the rise of the dawn, and he listened intently as she did so, offering nothing in return. She showed him the votive candle and he took it, scanning it with a fan of photons before passing it back to another of his minions.

Finally, he spoke again. ‘With your permission, then, I will retire to our laboratorium to conduct a deep analysis on this matter.’

Sepherina seemed as if she were about to launch into another tirade, but then she turned and beckoned to Helena and Pandora. ‘Sisters. Come.’ They did as they were ordered, and the canonesse gave Tegas a level stare. ‘From this moment on, no member of the Adeptus Mechanicus will be allowed to venture outside of your laboratorium without a Sororitas escort.’

‘For our own safety?’

She ignored his comment. ‘Any who fail to adhere to this order will be classed as intruders and shot. Do I make myself clear?’

The questor bowed slightly. ‘Absolutely.’

‘Then get out of my sight, before I reconsider.’ She turned her back on him.

Tegas blinked another beam-signal at his entourage and they filed in behind him, past the Celestians and into the convent proper. Miriya lowered her boltgun, and watched them go, the questor drifting as if floating over the courtyard flagstones. The last of the adepts passed close to her, carrying a cylinder the colour of iron in its grippers. She caught the damp cave odour of sandstone, and the tang of machine oil.

‘Imogen.’ Miriya turned as she heard Sepherina call the Sister Superior’s name. The canonesse waited a moment, until Tegas’s troupe were distant, and spoke again. ‘I will not have the cyborg’s motives remain a mystery to me, is that clear? I want to know what he was doing out there.’

‘I could take a team,’ Imogen offered. ‘Attempt to retrace the course of the Venator. We may be able to

find out where he went.'

Sepherina nodded, and Miriya saw an opportunity. She came forwards and bowed. 'Milady, if I may?' She pointed at the rover. 'The vehicle's machine-spirit – if we could interpret its datum, we might be able to narrow down the area of transit. We know how long Tegas was gone for. If we can reckon the charge remaining in the power core.'

'None of us are tech-adepts, Miriya,' Imogen's reply was brisk. 'The workings of such things are known to Tegas's people, and I doubt he would give an honest estimate.'

'Untrue,' Miriya corrected. 'I believe Sister Verity has some experience with technological devices. On Neva, her skills proved very useful.'

'The nursemaid?' Imogen made it clear she was unconvinced.

The canonesse frowned. 'Bring her. I want this matter dealt with.'

'And what of our intruder?' said the Sister Superior. 'What if she returns?'

Sepherina looked up at the warriors on the battlements. 'She will not find so easy a path this time.'



CHAPTER SEVEN

The rover crested the top of the sand dune and skidded, the six knobbled tyres spinning as they failed to find purchase in the red dust. At last the Venator lurched to a halt and the gull-wing hatches rose. In quick order, the squad of Battle Sisters deployed from the vehicle and formed a combat wheel. Exiting from the driver's compartment, Sister Cassandra bit back a curse about the lineage of the machine and paused to take a sighting from the Kaviran sun, almost obscured from the ground by the dust clouds. She muttered darkly, her words lost behind the breather mask that covered her mouth and nose.

Imogen dropped from the rear crew bay as if she were a queen stepping from a royal chariot and stalked around the vehicle. 'Another halt?' Her face was hidden behind the helmet of her power armour. 'I thought we had this zone fully charted.'

'Not well enough, Sister Superior,' said Cassandra. 'The digicompass continues to drift off true. Something in the rocks, a magnetic ore perhaps... It is interfering with the automap.' She showed the display of the auspex unit in her hand. 'It will take me only a few moments to sight and recalibrate.'

Sister Miriya stood at the open hatch at the rear and watched the exchange silently, leaning into the desiccating wind, listening to the rush of sand particles across her black wargear. They had been searching for several hours now, working through a grid pattern, and the armour of each of the Sororitas was slowly turning a dull mud-red as the dust coated the ceramite surfaces of vambrace, breastplate and cuissart. She had secured her combat cloak, but still it pulled at her shoulders with each new gust. Close by, the other Battle Sisters crouched and peered out into the haze. Like Imogen, they wore their helmets sealed. Sister Danae carried the steel-grey bulk of a meltagun, while Sisters Kora and Xanthe were armed with standard-pattern bolters.

The Venator rocked on its fat all-terrain wheels. A Masakari-pattern variant of the smaller standard scout car, this vehicle differed from those used by the units of the Imperial Guard or the Adeptus Arbites. It had a longer wheelbase, an enclosed space for a driver, and instead of mounted lascannons, an aft compartment where six women could be carried in supremely uncomfortable proximity. But even a unit specially-adapted for use on desert worlds like Sanctuary 101 was finding this sortie hard going. Still, it was better suited than a heavy armoured vehicle, like a Rhino or an Immolator tank, which would have sunk to its deck in the powdery metallic sands.

Miriya glanced up and caught sight of spires, spindly fingers of rock that rose up from the shallow canyon walls around them, carved by the action of the winds. The breeze moaned through eyes in the stone, rippling over the tips of the dunes. She looked away and bent to duck inside the rear of the Venator.

Verity was in there, whispering a prayer over a keyboard of brass buttons and a flickering pict-screen. She was pale and sweaty, and her face was set in a frown.

'Sister,' Miriya began. 'I fear I was too hasty to enlist your help on this excursion.'

The hospitaller looked up. 'Oh, Miriya, no... I am glad I could help. I only wish I could do more.' She absently fingered the hem of her robes, earth-brown with green-gold trim in the signature colours of the Order of Serenity.

'You said you had worked with the Sisters Dialogus and their thought-engines... I believed you would

have some measure of understanding about the scout's systems. If I was wrong, if I overstepped my bounds...'

Verity shook her head and gave a wan smile. 'No. It is not that. It is merely that the vehicle's machine-spirit is of a different order to the devices I am familiar with. And I am no expert.'

'We cannot ask the *experts*,' Miriya noted. 'The adepts are not to be trusted.'

'Yes.' Verity pecked at the keyboard with her fingers. 'We must be close. From what I have been able to glean, Questor Tegas proceeded to this zone and here the vehicle remained stationary for several hours. We need only find the exact locale to be certain.'

'We will find it.' Miriya caught a glimpse of Sister Imogen through one of the gun-slots in the hull of the Venator, as she snapped an order at the other Sororitas. Verity followed her line of sight.

'I think the Sister Superior does not share your belief,' said the hospitaller wearily. 'The longer we are out here, the shorter her temper seems to grow.'

'Imogen dislikes anything she cannot see down the barrel of a bolter,' Miriya replied.

'A narrow mind is a pious mind,' Verity replied, reciting an axiom from the pages of *The Rebuke*.

'I am certain she believes that,' said Miriya. Her words trailed off. There was more she wanted to say, but she could not find the right way to phrase it.

Verity saw the furrowing of her brow. 'What is it, Sister?'

'Why are we here?' The question spilled out of her. 'Why did we come to this desolate place, Verity?' The weight of uncertainty that she had felt before, in the memorial garden, returned to her.

'For the duty.'

She shook her head. 'No. More than that.' Miriya met her gaze. 'I know what you wanted from Sepherina's mission. After the death of Lethe and... And what we saw on Neva...'

Lethe.

The moment Miriya said her name, Verity saw her sister as clear as day, her dark hair framing a hawkish, elegant face, eyes that were old before their time. Her blood sibling, hardy and strong, always there to protect her. But no longer. Lethe was gone, and Verity remained.

Each time she thought she had made her peace with that truth, there came a moment when she realised that she had not, that she never would. Even though they had gone to separate orders of the Sisterhood on ascension from their schola – Lethe into battle with the warriors of Saint Katherine, Verity to the medicae savants – she had still felt as if her kinswoman was keeping her safe. But Lethe's death had brought home a terrible reality to her; the harshness of this universe, something that before she had been able to keep at a distance, came in and struck her in the heart.

Verity believed that it was the duty of every servant of the Imperial Church to improve humanity's lot in the galaxy, to beat back the night and the dangers of the alien, the mutant, the witch and the traitor. And for a time it had seemed possible, knowing that Lethe was out there, fighting for the same ideal.

Her murder shook Verity to the core. It threatened to shatter her faith. It brought her fury and sorrow of a kind she had never experienced. Miriya had stood with her and helped Verity find her way back, but the journey had changed her.

What she had *done* had changed her. Verity remembered the weight of a boltgun in her hands, the shock of the report as it fired. She remembered the first man she had killed in cold blood. It had been to save a life, Miriya's life... But in that act she had lost a piece of herself, and it seemed as if she would never find it again.

'I came on the mission to find... *peace*.' She looked away from the other woman. 'Sanctuary 101 is so far from the Wars of Faith, I thought that... I *hoped* that there would be a kind of stillness here. No distractions. No reminders. Just a chance to engage in the pure work of reconsecration. And perhaps renew my union to my God-Emperor into the bargain.'

'That peace... It is not here.' Miriya offered.

Verity shook her head, sorrow settling on her. 'I have not yet found it.'

Miriya's hand reached out and touched her friend's; and for a moment, Verity saw a terrible vulnerability beneath the hard, armoured soul of her Sister. 'We'll keep searching, you and I,' she said. 'He will show us the way.' Miriya nodded to the bulkhead, where a small brass icon of the Golden Throne lay bolted to the

Venator's roll cage.

Verity wanted to say more, but then the vehicle shifted on its chassis as Imogen climbed inside the crew bay. 'Correct the maps by four and one-third increments,' she ordered, and Verity nodded, immediately obeying the command. For the moment, her conversation with Miriya was at an end.

The display on the pict-screen shifted by degrees, turning to compensate for the magnetic effects as the other Battle Sisters boarded. Verity heard Cassandra grunt as she dropped into the driver's seat and gunned the sluggish engine. The Venator jerked forwards in fits and starts before the tyre treads finally bit and the vehicle lurched into motion.

'And where now?' Imogen demanded, twisting off her helmet as the hatch locked shut.

Verity peered at the map and indicated the mouth of a narrow defile half a kilometre from their position. 'This way, I think.'

'You think?' echoed Sister Kora, doffing her own helm to reveal an olive-skinned face shining with sweat. 'How long do we have to keep turning circles out here?'

'Until we find what Tegas was looking for,' Imogen told her, ending any further debate on the matter. She called out to the forward cabin. 'Cassandra! Follow the ridge towards the arroyo.'

'That will take us downwards,' came the reply through the grille between the compartments. 'The trail drops away, into a network of narrow canyons.'

'At least we'll be out of the wind, then,' said the Sister Superior, nodding to herself. 'Proceed.'

'They are humans,' insisted the revenant. 'I won't listen to your lies about them any longer. I saw it with my own eyes.'

++What you see is only the product of a broken mind, weak and pathetic++

The voice of the Watcher was like an earthquake inside, a thundering echo through bones and meat. The hooded figure dug clawed, bony fingers into the shredded rags at the edges of the dirty robe and pulled at them in anger.

Far below, glimpsed only as a ghost-image, the vehicle picked its way across the desert, the women on board ignorant of the fact they were being observed all the while from atop one of the rock spires.

'You said they were phantoms. Aspects of myself walking and talking in mimicry of the real, falling from the sky...' The words dissolved into a wild chuckle. 'Not true. Not true not true not true not true...'

++And if they are real, what of it?++

'It means I am not insane.'

++It means nothing. They will die like all the rest, screaming and boiling away into vapour++

The head inside the hood shook back and forth. 'No. No. I won't be alone again. I will not allow it.'

Something like laughter bubbled up from the darkness within. *++You have no say in the matter++*

The revenant stumbled and stood up. There, fresh in memory, was the recall of the moment in the chapel. The first time daring to return to the ruins. The candle. The precious votive. The prayer spoken, known so bone-deep it could not be remembered now, only spoken through pure flesh-recall. 'Liar.'

++What do you think will happen to them?++ The Watcher's whispers were made of pure poison. *++It all depends on how foolish they are. If they leave soon, they might live. But if they keep prying, keep digging++*

'Keep strutting and playing as if this world belongs to them...' The words formed in a husky, breathy staccato, spoken before the ghost-voice could form them.

++If they make a nuisance of themselves, they will wake the storm++

New tears began to fall, splashing on the red stone, drawing out the colour of the rocks like blood. 'That must not be.'

++They will perish in agony just like those who came before them++

Down in the canyons, the heat-form of the rover began to cool and fade as it passed into the lee of the sheer rock face.

++You cannot prevent that++ said the constant voice. *++You can only bear witness++*

'Not again,' she said, and jumped from the high ledge, scrambling down the fast, familiar path.

Disquiet settled in Sister Miriya's gut as the Venator descended from the desert landscape and into the

shadowed netherworld of the canyons. The rust-coloured rock and the endless dust gave way to rectilinear shapes that rose up either side of the narrowing gorge, planes of alien stone that unsettled her with their unnatural, almost machined geometry. 'What is this place?' she whispered.

'Give your arming prayers, Sisters,' Imogen ordered, looking around the crew compartment. 'Be prepared for anything.'

'What do you think those forms are?' asked Xanthe, staring through a viewport. Without her helmet to hide them, the sallow-faced woman's elfin eyes were wide with trepidation. 'I've not seen such structures before.'

'I have,' muttered Danae. The taciturn warrior offered nothing else to the conversation, instead running her fingers over the frame of her meltagun, whispering to it.

A dull chime sounded from the panel before Verity, loud as the peal of a cathedral bell in the sullen quiet of the vehicle. The hospitaller peered at the pict-screen and frowned. 'A detection,' she began. 'A lasing beam, it appears. There was a brief moment of contact from a kilometre distant. Gone now.'

'A targeting sweep?' said Kora, clutching her bolter.

'No,' Verity went on. 'The beam was too weak.'

Miriya remembered what she had seen in the courtyard of the convent, the blink of laser diodes between Tegas and his adepts. 'A communications signal,' she said. 'Something just sent an interrogative to us.'

'And if we do not reply in kind?' Imogen frowned. The Sister Superior leaned forwards. 'Cassandra, what do you see out there?'

'The canyon narrows,' began the Battle Sister. 'I...' She trailed off. 'I see structures! A fence... A gate!'

'Slow your approach!' Imogen stood up and shouldered open a hatch in the roof, daring to peek out. The Venator's engine grumbled and the vehicle decelerated. Miriya did not wait for an order; she came up beside the other woman, her gun at the ready.

There, ahead where the arroyo came to a dead end, grids of machine-stamped metal had been used to wall off the passage, and behind them a cluster of workshacks and habitat modules were visible, arranged in a precise radial formation.

'Another outpost...' said Imogen, disbelief in her words.

'Movement,' warned Miriya. At their approach, the gates were rolling back, clanking as they retreated away.

Cassandra called up from the driver's compartment. 'Eloheim? Your orders?'

'Take us inside.'

Miriya shot her a look. 'Are you sure?'

'Do not second-guess me, Sister,' replied Imogen, dropping back into the cabin.

Once inside the perimeter fence, the Venator rumbled to a halt before the hab modules, the engine still growling as it ticked over. Miriya chanced a cautious look through one of the gun slits and quickly took the measure of what she saw.

Judging by the amount of dust and silt that had collected around the stilt-leg pylons supporting the habitat capsules, this encampment had been in place for some time. Not in the measure of years like the convent, she estimated, but months at the very least. In some places the glassaic windows were still unblemished by the abrasive scouring of the winds, and the anechoic coating on the module exteriors was largely intact. She spied autonomic weapon turrets raised up on spindly towers, each aiming outwards down the canyon, and with a cold twinge of certainty she realised that the launchers up there could easily have obliterated them before the Venator had come within sight of the outpost.

'Contact, to the right!' hissed Sister Kora, at the aiming slits.

'More here, to the left,' added Verity.

Miriya looked and saw a group of figures in red robes, flanked by plodding gun-servitors and skitarii. 'The Mechanicus.'

Imogen's face twisted in an ugly scowl. 'Falsehoods and damned subterfuge... That whoreson Tegas lied to our faces!'

'I do not understand,' said Xanthe. 'What is this place? What are they doing here?'

'Fine questions, all of which I will have answers to,' snarled Imogen. 'Sister Miriya, with me. The rest

of you, weapons to the ready.'

Leaving her helm locked to the mag-plates on her hip, the Sister Superior threw open the gull-wing hatch and jumped down to the sand. Miriya came after her, her thumb snapping off the safety catch on her bolter. The wind pulled at her dark hair, whipping it back off her face. Miriya's earlier misgivings were now a thunder in her chest.

'In the God-Emperor's name, who is in charge here?' Imogen shouted, daring the Mechanicus adepts and their minions to remain silent. 'What is the meaning of this? Answer me now!'

One of them shifted and took a step forwards. Miriya saw the rank medallion of a sanctified tech-priest about his neck. The adept's face – such as it was – did not seem familiar to her. In fact, she quickly became certain that none of the assembled group had been on board the *Tybalt* with them on the journey from Paramar. And there were far more of them than Tegas had brought with him.

They were already here. Miriya felt a sickening feeling in the pit of her stomach.

'I am Ferren.' The tech-priest made a conciliatory gesture. 'Honoured Sisters, welcome. Your arrival is unexpected. That is inopportune.'

'Sister Superior.' Cassandra's voice buzzed in their ears, thick with static, her words carried to them by vox-bead. 'Long-range communications are inoperative. We cannot reach the convent by machine-call from this location.'

'Look sharp,' said Imogen, biting out the words.

Miriya said nothing. Was that some deliberate ploy on the part of these interlopers, or just an effect of the planet's turbulent magnetosphere? Whatever the cause, the squad were on their own in this. No warning of their discovery could be sent.

Slowly, the weapon-arms of the gun-slaves and the laser carbines of the skitarii rose to a guard position. Miriya studied the adepts and wondered if they were using their unvoiced speech to coordinate their actions. She moved to draw up her gun in return, but the instant she moved, a trio of actinic blue sighting beams threaded through the air to dance across her breastplate. She lowered the bolter again and they winked out.

'I must ask you to lay down your armaments and step away from the vehicle,' continued the tech-priest. 'Have the five others inside the scout car disembark one at a time.' His shifting crimson eyes scanned the Venator, doubtless picking out those within via thermographic vision cues, like the preysight of the Sabbath helmets. 'You are trespassing. This matter must be addressed.' He sighed, a grating wheeze that echoed the grind of old gears. 'I would prefer not to resort to violence.'

'You have the arrogance to accuse *us* of trespass?' spat Imogen. 'Tegas came here to find you, didn't he? Because of all this!' She gestured around angrily at the hab modules and the obvious signs of work on the stone walls, the cuttings and the laser-burned cavern entrance. 'Mark me, you will answer for your deceit!'

Miriya caught her gaze for an instant and saw something there; a look, an intention she couldn't properly interpret. She decided to construe it as she saw fit.

The tech-priest tilted his head in a quizzical gesture. 'I see that it is unlikely I will find a dispassionate response here.' The circle of weapons moved to take aim, directed by silent command.

'He's going to fire...' Cassandra's garbled whisper sounded distant.

'Your curiosity has brought you to this, Sister. I am disappointed that there is no other way to resolve our situation. If only you had turned back, returned to the convent, ignorant of what you have seen. Now I am required to take steps that—'

The Battle Sister did not let the tech-priest continue any further. Miriya squeezed the trigger of her bolter and fired it into the ground on full automatic discharge, allowing the slamming recoil to drag the muzzle upwards. The mass-reactive bolt shells ripped into the sandstone before her, kicking up a sudden torrent of dust and rock fragments.

With the first shot, Imogen was moving, firing her own weapon from the hip, shooting at the gun-servitors, aiming to kill the bearers of the heavier weapons. 'Cassandra, *drive!*' she bellowed, and Miriya heard the throaty roar of the Venator's motor as it lurched forwards, skidding.

Danae emerged from the scout's upper hatch with her melta weapon, and fired shrieking lances of heat in a fan of flame that scattered the skitarii. The vehicle ground through the sand and surged away, wheels spinning.

Fire flashed and Miriya broke into a duck-and-run, feeling the dry air crackle around her as crimson

beams stabbed towards her. Laser strikes fused sand into clumps of dirty silica at her heels as she ran towards the rear of the Venator. She bit back a scream of pain as one shot found its mark and melted into the ceramite and flexsteel of her shoulder pauldron. Smoky flame puffed and guttered out on the trim of her cloak, but she did not slow.

The Venator was racing in turning circles across the camp's central area, absorbing glancing shots and dodging others, trying to avoid a direct hit. Miriya saw Cassandra put the scout vehicle into a controlled drift, and the rear quarter swung out, smacking a gun-servitor into a broad support spar. The knobbed wheels spat dirt, and she waded through it, reaching for the grab rails along the flank of the vehicle.

She caught hold with her free hand and felt others pulling her in. Miriya put her foot on the running board and discharged her bolter one-handed, firing blind into the broken lines of the Mechanicus soldiers.

'Run for the gate,' Imogen shouted over the vox. 'Don't wait for me, go!' Miriya saw her moving and firing, trying to avoid salvos of beam fire from a quad of skitarii.

'Not without her,' she snapped. 'Cassandra, swing us around.'

The other woman didn't reply, but the Venator wallowed into a snarling turn and bounded back across the uneven ground, the tonnage of the rover bouncing to such an extent that the right-side wheels caught air under them before slamming back down on the axles.

Even as they came towards her, Miriya saw the scowl on Imogen's face at the disregarding of her orders. The Sister Superior broke into a sprint, tossing a krak grenade over her shoulder as she ran. The explosive bounced off the top of a workshack and detonated with a flat concussion that echoed down the box canyon.

As the Venator passed her, Imogen threw herself at the open hatch and landed on the deck, las-bolts cutting crimson pits in the hull of the vehicle. 'The gate!' she roared. 'Hurry!'

'Too late,' Xanthe replied. 'Look!'

Up ahead, the tech-priest's minions were closing the metal barrier, the gap narrowing by the second. Even with its mass, the scout car would be wrecked if it attempted to ram the gates. And now, without Miriya or Imogen loose on the ground to draw their attention away, all the gun-servitors and skitarii were training their aim on the Venator.

Miriya ducked in beneath the gull-wing hatch and tried to pull it closed behind her, but the mechanism had taken a hit and it was stuck solid.

'You've trapped us,' Imogen glared at her. 'We needed to get out of here, raise the alarm!'

'We are not dead yet,' Miriya retorted.

'The cavern!' Cassandra gave a shout from the forward compartment. 'There may be a way through, or—'

'Do it,' Imogen ordered, holding Miriya's gaze a moment longer. She turned away. 'The rest of you, firing positions. Beat them back!'

Ferren sent furious streams of machine-code across the local network between himself and his adepts, trying to correlate and forecast the motions of the Sororitas, but like so many things commanded by the drives of organics, they were difficult to predict.

At first, the unforeseen arrival of the females had sent him lurching towards a panic spiral. It was not enough that the questor had come here and overturned the careful order of things the tech-priest had set up within the compound. Now, through some process that Ferren could not know but did not doubt was Tegas's fault, the Sisters of Battle had come searching the deserts and traced his superior's route back to this place.

Ferren calculated his options within a microsecond, evaluating and considering all possibilities he could see, and discarding those that did not suit him. He had considered obliterating the rover on the approach, killing it and everything within using a barrage of missiles from the launchers in the towers. He rejected it, instead intending to engage in a more subtle approach.

If the vehicle could be taken intact... If the Sororitas squad could be terminated quickly and carefully... Ferren had assembled a plan to murder them and deposit their corpses out in the deep desert, where the local predators could pick the meat from them and the sands could rid him of everything else. And if they were located after the fact, they would be considered victims of misfortune, fools who had become lost in the dust clouds. The dig site would remain unknown, and his precious work would be protected. It was a good plan, a complex one, but a valid one.

Now ashes, though. Ruined by the unpredictable actions of meat-brains who could not even show the

logic to understand when they were beaten.

A memory engram resurfaced in Ferren's mind, brought up to the fore by the incident. It was of Tegas, in a time before the tech-priest had gained his current rank and stepped out from under the shadow of his teacher. The questor had mocked him for making every schema he created too elaborate, too clever by half. *'Simplicity is the true measure of an intelligent mind,'* he had said. Now Ferren wondered if he should have listened. The missiles would have worked just as well.

'End them,' he cried, his annoyance expressing itself in human lingua.

The Venator was damaged and trailing smoke, but like a wild beast it trampled on, unwilling to die, maddened by pain. He tried to touch its machine-spirit and recoiled in horror.

Then the rover turned in his direction and put on a burst of new speed.

Cassandra thrust the accelerator bar all the way forwards to full military power and the Venator bucked, indicator needles on the dash twitching into the red. The holy rosary hanging from the canopy snapped and clattered against the windscreen as the vehicle bore down on the treacherous adepts.

At the last second, the tech-priest seemed to blur, his mechanoid legs coiling to project him out of the rover's path. Instead, the bull-bars across the prow of the vehicle met the torso of a slow-moving gun-servitor and the helot crumpled across the hood of the engine compartment. Doggedly, it still tried to follow its task programming, arms ending in stubber muzzles scrapping across the bonnet, hammering at the windscreen; but without claws or manipulators, it could not find purchase. Metal squealing on metal, the blank-eyed servitor slipped off and under the wheels of the Venator. The vehicle's tonnage crushed it into the dirt, bursting wire-implanted meat in a spatter of blood and processing fluids.

Fighting through a skid, Cassandra pointed the front of the rover at the tunnel mouth cut into the sheer stone wall. The buzzing impact of laser hits became a steady cascade across the aft of the vehicle. A dull bang sounded and alert icons showed critical damage to the rearmost axle. The Venator began to drift, and Cassandra tried to resist it.

In the crew compartment, the lurching passage of the rover threw the Sisters around like stones in a can, and it was difficult for any of them to maintain good firing discipline.

'Reloading!' grated Danae, dropping back from the open roof hatch to eject a spent fuel cartridge from her meltagun. Hot gases escaped from the breech, stinging Verity's eyes. The hospitaller held on for dear life, pressing herself into the corner of the cabin.

Xanthe bolted forwards, rising up to take the other woman's place and Miriya was moving with her. The sounds of the battle were near-deafening, the roaring of the engine mingling with the howl of bolters and the air-splitting skirl of laser beams.

'Almost there,' Cassandra was shouting, 'Hold on...'

Verity's attention was pulled away by the Battle Sister's words. She turned back just in time to see Xanthe die.

The younger Sororitas, her shoulders and head poking out of the roof hatch, gave a sudden, savage jerk before her knees gave way and she fell into the compartment. Xanthe came back trailing a mist of hot, pink vapour and the stink of burnt iron. Her face was a ruin of blackened meat, cored straight through by a las-bolt.

Then darkness rolled over the vehicle as they crashed through barrier panels and into the cavern mouth.

The rear axle finally snapped, sending fragments of itself into the fuel lines and pneumo-veins webbing the underside of the Venator. The wheels locked and the scout car juddered sideways to a halt.

Crimson warning symbols filled the dashboard display. Cassandra kicked open the driver's hatch and pulled herself free of the restraint web, pausing only to wrench her bolter from the magnetic mount at her side.

She turned to see fingers of orange flame reaching up around the rear of the rover. Imogen and the other Sisters fled the stricken vehicle. The last was Danae, who shoved the hospitaller out before her, her teeth gritted.

Cassandra counted them one short. 'Xanthe...'

‘Dead,’ replied Miriya. ‘We need to move.’

‘Aye...’ Cassandra bit down on her sorrow. She was fond of Xanthe; her voice during the hymnals was something incredible to hear.

Imogen had the dead woman’s weapon in her hand and she forced it on Verity. ‘Take this. Make yourself useful.’ Without waiting to hear her response, she glared at Cassandra. ‘The vehicle—’

‘Too much damage. We’ll have to go deeper on foot.’

Untended, the fire reached into the crew compartment and took hold. Black smoke belched from the open hatches, building in the confines of the cavern mouth. More laser bolts whickered past as the Mechanicus skitarii came running.

‘So be it, then.’ Imogen nodded. ‘With haste, go!’

‘Go where?’ Verity asked, kneading the grip of Xanthe’s bloodstained boltgun. ‘We have no map, no means of knowing where this tunnel leads.’ Her voice gave a hollow echo off the dark stony walls.

‘We stay, we die,’ said the Sister Superior, ill-tempered at the interruption. ‘Out there we are only targets. In here... We can better choose the circumstance of our fight. *Move!*’

Danae had already advanced, leading with her meltagun. ‘This way,’ she called, her words resonating. The Battle Sister pointed the way into a black, fathomless passage that curved off, lit by bio-lume pods every hundred metres or so.

Retreating, the squad drew away and down into the throat of the cave, the directionless, hazy glow of the daylight quickly fading to be replaced by the dimness of the rock tunnels. Cassandra heard their armoured boots crunching on crystalline sand as they ventured on, and smelled the tart odour of ozone. The temperature dropped sharply, the stone walls radiating a hard chill.

She looked up and crossed glances with Sister Miriya. ‘This place feels like a tomb,’ she muttered.

‘If we tarry, it will be ours,’ replied the other Sororitas.

‘Are they still outside?’ Tegas asked the question even though he knew the answer.

‘Yes, questor,’ said Lumik. Since the static-flare, she had picked up an odd clicking reverberation in her vocoder unit.

He ignored her and sent a command to the remote optics on the exterior of the laboratorium module. A slaved visual feed entered his cortex, and he saw the two Sisters of Battle at guard ready outside the main hatch, where he had left them hours earlier. They remained impassive, their faces set in identical masks of dour focus. Tegas ran a cycle of amusement at the expense of their pomposity, and shared it with his entourage as they worked on the metal scroll from the dig. It lay there on a glowing sensor bed, surrounded by scanner arms and manipulator tentacles.

He orbited the workspace, considering. The Sororitas were fools. Outside, they believed they were in charge of this situation because of their guns and their stoic manner, as if somehow their blind faith made them superior to the Mechanicus. He did not doubt that if they had the means, the Battle Sisters assigned to be these so-called escorts to his staff would stand guard until the Kavir sun fell from the sky. They were single-minded that way, but what some called tenacity Tegas saw as evidence of limited intellects.

The Sisters of Battle ascribed all things to the will of the God-Emperor. They did not question the structure of the universe or the order of things, as those highest among the Adeptus Mechanicus were born to do. Where the sons and daughters of the great thinkers of Mars sought union with the Omnissiah and pushed back the boundaries of knowledge, the Sisters... The Sisters were the very exemplar of the *status quo*. They were blunt instruments, the bludgeons of the Imperial Church. They were artless beings, lacking in vision.

To say such things aloud would be to court suggestions of sedition, perhaps even heresy; and among some of his staff, Tegas knew there were those who would shy away from such daring thinking. But not one of these things was actually *spoken*, using crude flesh and air pushed through tubes of cartilage. Instead, they existed as vague thought-patterns rendered in binaric lingua, currents of concept floating through the shared data pool.

Let the Sisters think they had the measure of this place. Let them strut about and rebuild their precious convent. None would dare venture into the laboratorium, for the law of the Ministorum classed the module as de facto territory of Mars, a tiny embassy of the Mechanicus light years from the solar system. Tegas

would be within his rights to class any invasion of that space as an act of war.

The edict granted him the isolation he needed to complete his own examination of Ferren's relic. He drifted closer to the scroll, peering at it. Tegas had already absorbed every teraquad of data his errant protégé had gathered about the device, but he had ordered his own retinue to perform the same suite of tests again. He needed to be sure of what he was looking at.

If Ferren's data was correct, if his interpretations were sound, it seemed to suggest that the scroll-device was operating in discontinuous phase with the rest of space-time. It was acting through quantum linkages to gain access to instrumentality at levels undreamed of in Imperial computational devices. Information, stored in the very structure of subatomic particles. An infinity of facts, entire histories encoded within it; and most amazingly, all this on something that might be a trivial gewgaw to the beings who had manufactured it.

Tegas was excited and agitated in equal measure. The thrilling possibility of the device's library was compelling, but he chafed at the thought of how hard it would be to interpret it. It would not be just a life's work, but several lives.

He gave in to the impulse to touch it again, and pushed away the sensors, brushing his augmented fingers over the softly-glowing lines of glyphs. Understanding of it seemed so close, like something just out of reach, tantalising, daring him to make the connection.

He lost himself in it. Time passed – hours or seconds? He disengaged his internal chronometer; and when the correlation at last snapped into focus in his mind, Tegas felt a rush that was orgiastic.

The questor's hands opened and subdivided into spider-leg shapes, moving and tracing over the symbols. The scroll's unusual metal reformed itself, becoming a triangular section, almost the image of some great fan used by barony dowagers at the courts of the High Lords of Terra.

Hololiths blossomed from the steel-grey surface in mad profusion, far more than he had seen beneath Ferren's hesitant touch. Rings of virtual controls and what could only be command interfaces layered themselves atop one another, daring him to reach out and touch them. An invisible churn of electromagnetic radiation was building all about them, doubtless some side-effect of the device's activation. Tegas ignored a twinge of vertigo and felt a wave of panic-analogue push through the data pool. Lumik and the other adepts were shocked and afraid by the reaction. They were counselling calm and care, suggesting that he back off, and progress no further. Data had to be gathered. Considered. Evaluated.

All those things were true.

'But no discovery is ever made without boldness,' Tegas said aloud, reaching into the emerald glow.



CHAPTER EIGHT

Miriya heard the change in the structure of the caverns before she saw it, the hollow beat in the way the echo of their footfalls abruptly shifted. She glanced over her shoulder to where Sister Kora was taking the last place in the overwatch line, and then back.

Ahead of her, Verity gasped and Cassandra muttered a quiet oath. The tunnel disgorged them into a cavern bigger than a Titan hangar, the vast space lit by shafts of sunlight that fell at steep angles through jagged rents in the rock. Bridges made of the strange greenish-black stone they had seen elsewhere joined the far sides of the open void, and there were tiers of a sort, plates of harder sandstone that protruded from the walls like fungal discs. Patches of the dark stone were more frequent in here, and when Miriya chanced to run her hand over them all the warmth from her fingers was stolen away, even through the ceramite of her gauntlets. In places it seemed as if the alien material had grown out of the Kaviran sandstone, as if one had been remade from the atoms of the other. She found the strange fusion unsettling.

Avoiding the puddles of daylight, Imogen led the squad on a looping course around the perimeter of the chamber. Miriya looked back once more, and saw the faint glow of spot lamps bobbing along the walls of the tunnel behind them. She could hear the rat-scramble skittering of the Mechanicus's soldiery following them, inexorably tracking the fleeing women with thermal scopes, pheremonic scans and other sensing technologies that the Battle Sisters could only guess at.

Miriya's gaze ranged around the chamber. It would be a good place to make a stand, to ambush the skitarii and discourage their pursuit. But there was little cover, and the sightlines between the mounds of dusty rubble were cluttered.

Sister Danae halted and peered at something. Imogen saw and turned. 'What is it?'

'I am uncertain,' said the other Sister, pointing.

Like the black stone, out of place among the irregular shapes of the natural rock formations, there stood a thick pane of vitreous glass. Miriya estimated it was some eight metres tall, half as wide, and as thick as her fist. It was without doubt an artificially manufactured thing, the top and the sides of it cut sharply and perfectly level. It was like some strange free-standing window, anchored in the dirt.

'Another one,' called Verity, gesturing with Xanthe's boltgun. 'In the shadows.'

'More over there,' called Cassandra, casting around with her pin-light. 'Throne... There's dozens of them.'

The glass panels were arranged in a loose circle, broad faces aimed outwards towards the walls. Miriya had a sudden flash of memory, recalling the hololithic paintings in the Museum of the Holy Synod, which were set out in a similar pattern for the troupes of pilgrims who came to pay homage. But this place was no gallery, and these were no works of art. Something in the brutal, geometric shape of them rang a wrong note with Miriya.

'It is xenos,' said Danae, giving voice to the suspicion they all shared. She looked away and spat. 'We should leave this place. It was a mistake to come here.'

Imogen shot her a hard look. 'The choice was hardly open to us.' The sounds of the skitarii approach were growing louder with each passing moment. 'Look sharp, find cover. We'll make our stand in here.'

The Sororitas all nodded their agreement, but Verity's attention was elsewhere. Miriya grabbed her arm. 'Sister...'

'Do you feel that?' said the hospitaller, pulling up an auspex unit from where it hung at her belt. 'In the air? Like a... An electric charge...'

Miriya opened her mouth to say no; but then she *did* feel something. A faint tingling on her bare skin, a fresh scent of acrid ozone.

'It's like the air after a storm passes,' muttered Kora.

Danae was raising her meltagun. 'We should not be here!' she grated

A flicker of light caught Miriya's eye and she saw a glimmer in the depths of the nearest glass pane. Faint green sparks, like fireworks bursting in the sky observed from a great distance.

Verity's auspex gave off a sudden clicking sound and the tingling over Miriya's face became a crawling, itching sensation. Loose votive chains clicked and moved of their own accord, pulled gently towards the nearest of the shimmering panels.

Then a sudden throbbing pulse of viridian light bloomed in the cavern, each pane glowing bright like slow sheet lightning.

Ferren moved with his troops, a laser carbine modified for his personal use mounted on the largest of his servo-arms. He kept in the middle of the pack, surrounded by his best skitarii. The tech-priest wasn't about to deny himself the chance to engage some of the Battle Sisters first hand, but he was no fool. He had only middling combat prowess beyond the reams of match-move data he had downloaded from the central processing matrix of his warrior squads, but it was likely that he might be able to step in at the final moment and deliver a coup de grace to one of the intruders before she died. Ferren wanted to see how that event train would feel, to examine if it would stir any extant emotions in him. It would make an interesting experiment, and a fine way to show Tegas that he was not the null unit the questor considered him to be.

He wondered if he should feel remorse for such thoughts; after all, the Sisters were servants of the Imperium just as he was. They were not the arch-enemy.

Ferren dismissed the thought. The logic process here was clear. The women had discovered something they should have not. They could not be allowed to relay that information to their kindred. Murder was the most effective means of silencing them. A simple and effective process.

They were close now. The scouts leading the search party down the tunnels were beaming back their targeting data to the rest of the group. Sound sensors cut a picture out of the gloom, listening for the motion of boots on stone, the whine of power armour, even the thudding of human hearts. The Sororitas had entered the main chamber, the area that one of Ferren's adepts had named 'the hall of windows' in a moment of uncharacteristic whimsy.

The panes of glassy material, as much as they resembled fused silica, were actually some kind of extruded metallic crystal with a tensile strength greater than steel. In months of examination, none of Ferren's explorer team had been able to uproot them or gain insight into their functionality. And while they were proof against all but the most powerful ballistic rounds, the Mechanicus expedition had learned early on that they were transparent to las-bolts. If the Sisters were going to use them as cover, they would have an unpleasant surprise to face—

Ferren's train of thought was halted by a sudden surge of new inputs from the sensing palps at the tips of his mechadendrite cluster. A spike in exotic radiation came from nothing, spent neutrinos and quark-flux particles creating an invisible mist that could only be perceived by one with the eyes of a machine.

The tech-priest beamed an interrogative to the communal data pool and found he was not the only one detecting the same variance. Even as he communicated with his minions in microsecond-swift binaric pulses, comparing readings and building a theory, he began to register another effect. The local background level of electromagnetic radiation was rising exponentially, decay rates and backscatter patterns indicating the epicentre of the anomaly was out there, in the chamber.

Specifically, it appeared to be emitting from the windows themselves.

The electromagnetic force did not diminish; it became uncomfortable for the skitarii and the other adepts, causing misfires in their neural implants and stutters across the interface of their brain-augmentation connections. Ferren took an involuntary step backwards, his accelerated thoughts cycling, becoming glitchy

as the energy discharge grew stronger. He tried to engage his tempest shields, but the force was strong, overwhelming them. His deep logic cores began to auto-deactivate in order to protect vital data such as his persona matrix and his primary memories.

It was hard to concentrate. The pulse was like blades being drawn across the cords of the tech-priest's cerebral implants. But one element did seem clear. The pattern of the energy resembled something similar, a configuration that Ferren had detected emitting from the iron scroll during his examinations, but on a far more diminished level.

He had just enough time to wonder about the connection between these two things before the discharge topped out and sent every one of the Mechanicus reeling. The cyborgs gave off static-laced screams that resonated down the stone tunnels as they went blind, toppled over, and fell into stuttering restart cycles.

Green fire filled every one of the glass panes to their brim, sparks of photonic discharge glittering for brief moments around their blade-sharp edges. The depths of colour and hard light twitched, and in defiance of what seemed real, they extended into themselves. Like a mirror looking into a mirror, corridors made of infinity spiralled away. Energy flowing in watery puddles sent out ripples; and then, as if they were doors cut into the air itself, from within the spaces metal claws reached for the edges and drew outwards.

Some of the panes were broken, by rock falls or the destructive actions of Ferren's explorators, others were blocked by drifts of sand that trickled away, sucked into some nowhere space. Those that were open and clear became doorways spilling sickly light.

Shapes moved in that light, lensing it around them. Skeletal shapes, things stamped out of ancient machine-shops on worlds long since consumed by dead suns. They walked with solemn purpose, stirring from aeons of sleep. Pitiless and with perfect focus, summoned by the unwary, the spindly forms of necron warrior-mechs stepped back onto the sands of Sanctuary 101.

Verity's heart hammered in her chest as the glassy portals poured out more and more of the machine-xenos, ranks of the bony steel figures striding silently from out of nothingness. One after another, they formed into precise cohorts, groups of five taking up wedge-shaped patterns as if they were soldiers engaged in a parade ground drill.

She had never seen a necron with her own eyes before. What the hospitaller knew of them came from vague rumours and half-heard stories that were more supposition than truth. To look upon them now drew up powerful emotions in her: fear and terror, indeed, but also a kind of revulsion that sickened Verity to her stomach. The machine-things seemed to radiate an ephemeral sense of something ancient and callous. They were utterly inhuman in a way she could not find the words to describe.

Each of the necron warriors mimicked the structure of a humanoid skeleton, spun from dull chromium, spindly limbs ending in clawed hands that clasped weapons made of pipes and glowing emerald rods. Elongated death's-head skulls were animated by cold fire, casting this way and that as they entered the cavern. Most chilling of all was the way they moved without noise.

Verity's hands were frozen around poor Xanthe's bolter, her breath caught in her throat as if to utter a single sound would be to shatter this horrible moment.

Miriya, Danae and the others were ready, poised to fire. 'Eloheim?' Verity heard Kora hiss at the Sister Superior, the question in the word. But Imogen said nothing, her face pale with the same shock, petrified in the moment and unable to speak.

In the next second the necrons were advancing. They marched forwards, out of the circle of glowing panels and on towards the assembly of Mechanicus skitarii dithering at the entrance to the great cavern. The red-robos seemed to be in some disarray, but there were dozens of them, with many weapons in their grasp. *The greater threat? Verity wondered. Is that what these things see in them?*

The question became moot as some of the tech-guard gathered enough of their wits to fire on the warriors. Crimson light flashed, las-bolts threading from the barrels of beam carbines and into the arrowhead formations of the necrons.

A few of the machines stumbled and faltered, ignored by their companions. The others raised their weapons in perfect concert and returned fire.

Emerald flame, eldritch and crackling, engulfed the closest group of skitarii and began the work of

disintegrating them. Verity's mouth dropped open in shock. Where the tech-guard troopers had organic flesh, their skin and nerves, their meat and bone were flensed apart and flashed instantly to puffs of ash. The pure cyborg parts of them, the implants and the biomodules, became blackened pieces of slag, spilling onto the dusty floor as they collapsed and perished.

The necrons advanced to the sound of their killing, feeding into the mouth of the tunnel.

For one long, giddy second, Verity held on to the hope that somehow the xenos machines had missed the presence of the Sisters, that perhaps they would ignore the women seeking cover behind the rocks; but then the last two squads of the warrior mechanoids came to a smart, point-perfect halt. They turned on their heels and reversed their march.

Verity saw the chilling glow in their eye slits as the metal faces turned to glare down on the Sisters.

The moment broke Imogen's hesitation, and she screamed. '*Fire!*'

Ferren cannoned his way down the twisting tunnel, the ululating sound of the alien gauss flayer beams rebounding all around him. Green lightning flashed off the dark stone walls, reflections of kill-fire preceding the execution of his precious skitarii.

His mind was in a chaotic state, on the verge of a cascade breakdown. Memory stacks full of data carefully stored and collated over the last few months had been broken open by the electromagnetic burst and the shock of this sudden invasion. The tech-priest tried desperately to understand what was going on, to reason out the course of events as they transpired.

The explorator team had been inside the caverns for so long, they had done so much, and yet Ferren and his cohorts had been unable to find anything more complex than a dormant tomb spyder in a stasis cowl. All the time they had been here, and he had come to be convinced that whatever Sanctuary 101 had represented to the necrontyr before, its value had become nothing. For whatever reason, the execution of the original Sororitas colony had marked the end of necron interest in this world – and who was there who could disagree with that hypothesis? The ways of aliens were, well, they were *alien!* Unfathomable by even the sharpest of human minds!

The necrons had swept over this planet more than ten years earlier, made their kills, and then moved on. *This was fact.* Ferren was certain of it. *This was fact.* There was nothing here but the relics, a rich seam of remains to be mined and information to be gleaned.

The necrons had moved on. In the months he had been in command of this secret expedition that certainty had become almost like a mantra for Ferren. But now he realised that the truth was not as he had wanted it to be. What the tech-priest could not face, the grotesque emotional reality he kept denying, was that he was *afraid.*

Afraid that the Mechanicus had sent him to this place to die. Afraid he would never be able to advance beyond his present rank. And more than anything, afraid that the pitiless machines were still hiding beneath the sands, waiting for the moment to come and kill again.

His fear was real now, and Ferren cursed it as he listened to the dying screams and frenzied cries for aid from his tech-guard.

He emerged into the main passage, the open area in the throat of the caves where the smouldering wreck of the Venator still sat, wreathed in grey smoke. Gun-servitors, cut off from command-and-control inputs by the electromagnetic surge, had reverted back to base programming and were taking up defensive positions, drawn to the sound of the alien attackers. Ferren pushed past them and staggered towards the mouth of the cave, fighting down the sickeningly human sensation of panic that threatened to overwhelm him. He concentrated on the terms of the sacred equations, part of his braincore chanting them in order as a calmativ, while another level of his intelligence was weighing his combat options.

His last command had been to fall back, and the skitarii were attempting to follow it. The necron foot soldiers were unwilling to let them go, however, matching the pace of their escape and cutting down anyone foolish enough to show their back to the maws of their gauss guns. A dozen more life-sign indicators winked out in the shared data pool, their connections severed by the sudden termination of all cerebral function.

Ferren calculated how many troops he had already lost and the figure was deeply troubling. In a matter of a few minutes, the necrons had emerged – *from where?* he wondered – and cut a swath through the tech-

priest's elite. The punishing, inexorable numbers made the situation clear to him.

Raw information streamed through the communal pool in painful jags. The explorer team were totally outmatched. Conservative estimates reckoned that the xenos machines would complete full extermination of everyone in the encampment within less than ten solar minutes, should they exit the cavern.

Should they exit the cavern. The qualifier sounded in his thoughts, and Ferren cast around, even as the skeletal constructs emerged behind him, wading into the teeth of the gun-servitor lines. Heavy cannons crackled and chugged, and necrons fell; but there were more in the ranks behind, each stepping up to seamlessly fill every vacated space.

Ferren dove through the layers of information in the data pool and found something he could use, buried in the memory of a minor adept involved in the geophysical survey works. His piston-legs spitting as he ran, the tech-priest dodged through glancing flickers of green fire and found a workshack module nestled close to the cavern wall. It was a hardened capsule protected by secure hatches, but its primitive machine-spirit recognised Ferren immediately and opened all locks to him.

The odour of harsh chemicals, of hexogene rings and complex nitrotoluene clusters, assailed his sensing pallet. Inside, there were racks of metal cylinders, each marked with warning trefoils and warding runes; geo-mag charges of various explosive potentials, used to crack the recalcitrant rock during excavations and deep digs.

Had there been time for finesse, Ferren would have downloaded a stream of datum to a functionary like the surveyor adept and had them carry out his wishes, but the moment was now, and the tech-priest understood that he would need to do this himself. Before it was too late.

More icons faded from the communal network as he found and encoded a detonator spike. Ferren ignored the screaming and activated the charge. As the timer bar began to shrink, he dropped the unit and fled. In his thoughts, he ran a simulation of the detonation effect. It was a crude and poorly-placed alternative, but it would be enough to bring down the cavern mouth and seal it off from the rest of the encampment. The necrons would be contained, and while that meant a sizeable number of sacrifices among his skitarii – the ones still fighting back there, ignorant of what the tech-priest was doing – it also meant that the expedition proper would survive.

More importantly, it meant that Ferren would survive. He applied maximum motive energy to his augmetic limbs and sprinted across the stone floor towards the yawning entrance.

The glancing energy bolt swept over him and severed the tech-priest's right leg at the hip, throwing Ferren into a headlong tumble that was arrested only by a collision with the stub of a half-buried boulder. He doused all pain receptors the moment he was struck, but it was too late to stop the initial surge of agony. Ferren scrambled, a mess of torn, dirty robes and spindly iron-black limbs, flailing around like a swatted insect unable to right itself.

The shot had been random, a miss that had taken him instead of its intended target, but it mattered little. Ferren's mechadendrites and arms splayed out, stabbing at the dusty ground, trying desperately to pull him away towards the cave entrance.

But it would not be enough. Not nearly enough.

Ferren released a furious roar of scrap-code, putting all his sudden and very human anger into a last eruption of noise.

The explosion drowned him out.

The necron warriors attacked the Battle Sisters with a precision and a focus that was beyond any enemy Miriya had faced on the field of conflict. No motion they made was wasted, every footstep and aimed shot was perfectly calculated and deftly laid.

Gauss fire shattered the rocks they had chosen as their cover, driving them out to duck and run among the glittering panes of glass. Miriya was wary of the strange portal-panels. No more warriors had emerged from the doorways beyond them after the initial invasion group had come through, but there was no way to know if more were on their way.

Danae moved and fired with the meltagun, shooting from her hip, panning it about in a sharp arc that engulfed the glass panes and the machine-forms alike. The panes she hit slagged and misted, the fires within dying, but they did not shatter. Miriya could not help but wonder what kind of exotic matter could resist the

sun-hot power of a melta blast.

The necrons returned fire with their own weapons, laying down fields of coruscating green energy that soured the air and sounded shrieks across the echoing chamber. Miriya executed a shot from half-cover and placed a three-round burst of mass-reactive bolts in the chest of an advancing warrior. The steel skeleton was blown back off its clawed feet and it crashed to the ground in a ruined heap. It gave no cry of pain, no utterance or curse against her as she cut it down. The silence, the eerie cohort of stillness that surrounded the necron attack, was as chilling as the blank horror of their skull-faces.

And then, to her shock, the thing Miriya thought she had killed rose again. The grievous wound across its torso was shrinking, the metal plates there flowing like mercury, what could only be splines and wires beneath knitting back together to undo the injury. The necron strode towards her, raising its flayer high to present the curved axe-blade across the bottom of the muzzle, an executioner stepping up towards the killing block.

‘Throne and Blood!’ spat Kora. ‘What must we do to end these things?’ She ducked as she ejected a spent clip from her bolter, slamming a fresh magazine into its place.

‘If in doubt,’ said Miriya, recalling the words of a venerable abbess who had once been her weapons instructor, ‘aim for the head.’ She thumbed her bolter’s fire-select switch to its fully automatic setting and squeezed the trigger. Rounds thundered from the gun and punctured the skull of the advancing mechanoid, this time splintering the steel into shimmering fragments, decapitating it. Even though it was robbed of a mouth with which to scream, the necron finally emitted a death-howl. It was a grating, static-laced skirl of noise, a synthetic parody of a shriek that vibrated out from its entire body. Like the xenos machines themselves, the sound was a mockery of something born of flesh.

And it was just a single kill among a force of attackers that outnumbered the Battle Sisters two to one. The warriors had shifted into a skirmish line and now they advanced inexorably, drawing in to block any path of escape, forcing the humans towards the circle of glassy panels and the sheer rock walls.

Somewhere down in the tunnels, a massive concussion sounded, swiftly followed by the long, drawn-out rumble of collapsing rock. The ground beneath their feet trembled, but the necrons did not stumble.

‘What was that?’ called Verity. ‘An earthquake?’

Clouds of heavy dust billowed from the tunnel mouth, but no one answered the hospitaller’s question.

‘Concentrate your fire!’ called Imogen, stabbing a finger towards the machines. ‘Knock them out of the line, one at a time!’

‘They shrug off bolt shells like rain,’ snarled Cassandra.

Miriya saw Verity trying her best to engage with the attackers, the hospitaller’s aim true but her skills lacking. ‘Stay close to me,’ she called.

‘The tech-guard...’ began the other woman. ‘That noise...’

‘They fled and paid for it,’ Miriya broke in. ‘So we fight or die alone in this.’

As she said the words, something moved in the gloom above their head, and a shape unfurled like a raptor’s wings. A figure was falling into the alien light cast by the undamaged panes. A hooded shape carrying a black sword that reflected nothing.

The woman Verity had glimpsed inside the Great Chapel was transformed. The hesitant, stuttering figure who had wept and prayed before the broken altar was a killer now. For the first time since they had arrived, the necrons showed something akin to confusion, disrupted by the sudden appearance of a new enemy that had come as if from nothing.

Two of them pivoted to fire and the black sword spun. Viridian sparks flared as the muzzles of gauss flayers were cut away by the passage of the blade. The dark edge slashed at the machines, opening them to the air. Verity saw bisected parts of a necron warrior fall away, the cut ends polished and mirror-bright. The mechanoids collapsed to their knees, shuddering. She watched them grasping for severed limbs, trying to reconnect them to fresh stumps.

‘The intruder...’ said Miriya, the same flash of recognition on her face. ‘From the convent.’ The Battle Sister shot Verity a questioning look and found her confirmation.

‘Keep firing!’ yelled Imogen, for the moment unwilling to question the actions of this new arrival.

Every gun the Sisters had poured bolt-rounds and sun-fire into the enemy line, and like a cable stressed

to breaking point, their unit coherence abruptly snapped. The necrons dispersed, regrouping. Those with heavy damage dropped back, protected by their comrades as they entered regeneration cycles.

The hooded woman dodged the slicing claws of a warrior and made it to the middle of the cover where the Sisters were gathered, protected by the lee of the rock in the glow of the glass panes.

‘No time,’ she spat, her voice thick with venom. Verity could see some of her damaged face, she could smell the stale human odours of her. ‘No time no time no time.’

‘In the name of the God-Emperor,’ said Imogen, ‘who are you?’

‘No time!’ she screamed back, grabbing the Sister Superior’s arm. ‘More are coming. Coming back!’ She jabbed the sword in the direction of the tunnel. The steady clattering steps of necron footfalls were echoing ever closer. If the earlier noise had been a cave-in, then the machines sent after the skitarii would be doubling back, soon to bolster the numbers they had left to deal with the Sisters.

With strength that belied her form, the ragged-clothed revenant shoved Imogen towards the nearest portal-pane. ‘Go now,’ she shouted, her words slurred. ‘We all go now, or die here!’

‘Through that... gateway?’ cried Sister Kora. ‘To where? This is insanity!’

Verity looked away. In the gloom of the tunnel mouth, countless dots of green light were growing distinct. The damaged necrons in the chamber were reforming into attack groups, and they were waiting. Waiting for their brethren.

‘That is where *they* came from!’ Imogen retorted, pointing at the machines. ‘You would have us venture deeper into danger?’

‘Go now,’ said the hooded woman, slow and deliberate, ‘or die.’ She raised the black sword and held it threateningly at the Sister Superior. The blade did not resemble any kind of metal; it was like a river of ink, a shadow made solid.

‘What choice do we have?’ Miriya insisted. ‘Anywhere is safer ground than here! You said it yourself, Eloheim. We must choose the circumstances of our fight.’

Imogen’s eyes flashed. ‘Don’t twist my words against me, Sister Militant!’ She put hard emphasis on Miriya’s rank. ‘This circumstance is accorded to you! I should have left you behind at the convent.’ The Battle Sister glared at the hooded figure. ‘And you. Why should we listen to you?’

‘*A spiritu dominatus.*’ The scarred woman uttered the words like a curse, guttural and harsh. ‘*Domine, libra nos.*’ The utterance sent a shock through the assembled Sororitas, but then the revenant was moving, shouldering Imogen aside at the last moment. ‘Stay and die.’

‘It is the only way we can survive,’ Miriya pleaded. Behind her, the necrons began to advance across the chamber once more. There were dozens of them now.

Imogen very deliberately spat on the dirt. ‘The Saint will curse you for this,’ she growled, and turned towards the woman with the blade.

The cloaked figure did not look back, and stepped across the glowing glass threshold.

One by one, they followed her.

The passage was terrifying. The transition could only have lasted for a fraction of a second, but from Sister Miriya’s point of view it felt like an eternity. The watery green light engulfed her, seeming to lap over her flesh like a slow tide of oil, and then everything became distorted.

Her perception was twisted and useless. She saw dreamy shapes, colours and synesthetic effects that her mind could not interpret, giddy vivid impressions that could have been motion, heat, terror or some mixture of all. Miriya screwed her eyes shut and repeated The Emperor’s Prayer over and over, clinging to the rote words and her unshakable – so she still hoped – faith.

This portal, this alien gateway, was not meant for unprotected humans, and she could sense it trying to reject her. Miriya felt as if the power of the thing was actively repelling her flesh and blood, acting on it like the disparate poles of a magnet. Her skin crawled with sickening sensations that threatened to crack the Battle Sister’s iron resolve. This tunnel through nothingness skirted close to the psychic maelstrom of warp space, and she could feel the incredible pressure of the immaterium just beyond the walls of her own mind. *It was so close.*

And then, just when it seemed as if she could stand it no more, she was staggering, her boots ringing on a metal deck. Miriya tried to open her eyes, and found her skin layered with a coating of frost that crackled

as she moved. Patches of steaming ice covered her wargear, sloughing off in sheets as she stumbled.

Miriya beat off the shock and took a deep, shuddering breath. The air was tinny and thin, harsh in her throat. Her blurred vision cleared and the first face she saw was a jigsaw of shadows and scarification. The hooded woman turned away and Miriya moved, finding Danae, who was rising from where she had fallen to one knee.

‘The Emperor protects,’ gasped the other woman, making the sign of the holy aquila. ‘He delivered us...’

‘To where?’ Miriya wondered aloud, echoing Sister Kora’s earlier question.

Jade light flowed over everything before them, rendering a landscape made of tarnished steel into something even more alien. They stood upon a square iron platform as big as one of the *Tybal*’s loading bays, and it was suspended in the air by no visible means. Along one end were a line of glass panes identical to the ones in the cavern, most of them dark and unlit, but a handful – including the portal they had just passed through – throbbing with power. Some distance away there was a crescent-shaped section where the deck rose up as it had been pressed out of giant mould. It sported what had to be controls of some kind.

‘This is some sort of staging area,’ Danae muttered, her thoughts following Miriya’s.

The Battle Sister cast around, for a brief moment feeling a flash of gratitude to her Emperor as she counted Verity and the rest of the squad all safely there with her; but then she realised what she was seeing beyond the edges of the floating platform.

The open space inside the rock chamber had been massive enough, but this void dwarfed that by a magnitude of several thousand times.

An iron sky ranged above her head from horizon to horizon: a great metal dome broken into clean geometric sectors by lines of that familiar dark stone, cut in perfect, mathematically precise segments. Off in the distance, a massive obsidian spike emerged from the inside of the dome. It reached out across the open air towards them like a mountain placed on its side, and rods of brilliant light stabbed out from it at what seemed to be random intervals. Pools of white glow fell on rectilinear shapes, pyramids and ziggurats crested with gold filigree and emerald crystals. Others found silver monoliths discoloured by time that glittered dully.

These beams were what provided most of the illumination inside the vast chamber, although it seemed as if every shadowed structure had a soft glow of its own. Miriya tried to estimate distances and scale, but it was hard to reckon without something familiar to compare it to, and the deep shadows and stark illumination conspired to trick the eye.

‘Step back,’ said the revenant, appearing at her side. She was crack-throated and hoarse. ‘This must be done.’

Before the Sororitas could react, the hooded figure had the black sword drawn. Miriya retreated, realising that she had ventured close to the raised console. At the far end of the platform where the other Sisters were gathered, she heard Kora call out in alarm. Something had followed them back through the gateway.

A necron warrior was emerging from the closest of the glassy portals, backlit by the flow of powers that deformed space-time. Even as it placed its leading foot on the metal deck, it already had its gauss flayer aimed directly at Sister Cassandra.

The black sword fell in silence, describing a shallow curve that sliced cleanly through the metal panel. All power in the device vented with a crackling shout and the alien console went dead; at the same moment, all energy fled from the active portals and they became panes of flat, seamless glass once again.

Pieces of the necron warrior remained fused in place, half out of the gateway as it returned to its solid state. The light in the warrior’s dead eyes winked out.

Miriya turned back to the revenant. ‘You closed the passage.’ The hood bobbed once. ‘Then how will we be able to leave this place?’

‘I did it once before,’ came the distant reply. There was a strange sense of old pain and sorrow beneath the words. ‘I will do it again.’

‘We’re moving!’ called Cassandra. Perhaps it was because of the damage to the console, but now the platform was in motion, dropping slowly, descending towards a wide ring of steel that resembled a great cog wheel laid flat.

Miriya chanced a look over the side of the platform and saw a near-identical reflection below of what existed above. She had a sudden flash of understanding; they were inside a colossal iron sphere, as if the alien architects of this monstrosity had built themselves a small world and then turned it inside out. The Battle Sister struggled to hold on to the idea and she felt a giddy echo of the portal transit shiver through her. It was difficult to grasp the concept that something so alien, so contrary to the true order of things, could actually exist.

‘Do you see those?’ Cassandra asked as she came closer. She pointed with her bolter. ‘There.’

At first, Miriya could not grasp what the other woman was showing her, but then one of the light beams caught something nearby, and in the overspill from the blinding glow Cassandra’s subject became illuminated.

In the half-dark, what the Sororitas had first thought to be shadows cast by support columns and stanchions was revealed as a great open cradle of metal claws and sinuous cables. There, hanging like a player’s puppets at rest, were countless numbers of identical humanoid shapes, silver-sheened, eyeless and dormant. She saw the skeletal forms of warriors like the ones they had fought in the cavern, but there were dozens of other variants that stood taller and more muscular than their spindly cohorts. Her breath tight in her chest, Miriya brought up her bolter and peered down the optical sight to gain a closer look.

She saw hulks that aped human shapes, seamless heads with single cyclopean eyes, and gleaming, beetle-like things. There were strange craft cut from arcs of black steel and carbon, great constructs that resembled open ribcages made of metal, drifting at anchor in the thin air next to huge tetrahedral carvings like giant tombstones.

‘Ghost Arks,’ hissed the hooded woman, naming the necron monstrosities. ‘Monoliths and Night Scythes. Wraiths, immortals, scarabs...’ She trailed off. ‘Sleeping now. Waiting to come again.’

‘How many can there be?’ whispered Cassandra, awed and horrified in equal measure. ‘This is not just one army. There could be legions of these machines in here.’

‘You must see,’ said the revenant, in a dead voice.

‘We will,’ Imogen insisted, striding towards them with fire in her eyes. ‘We will see who brought us this madness!’

Before anyone could stop her, the Sister Superior’s hand shot out and tore at the hood concealing the other woman’s face. She gave it a savage jerk and pulled it back. The scarred woman let out a low moan, as if the action of light upon her pallid flesh caused her physical pain.

Imogen recoiled at what she saw beneath the hood, and Miriya could not stop a gasp from escaping her own lips.

They each saw a human aspect, but one that had been dismantled like a jigsaw puzzle, pieces of it opened and then reattached with thick lines of purple scarring and melt-burns. The face was a page across which cruelty had been written, over and over again. She had no hair, and her skin was translucent, taut across bone; but most shocking was the arc of dull steel – *necrontyr steel* – that crossed her cheek and covered the orbit of her right eye, the metal a setting for a bloodshot orb.

‘*You must see,*’ she repeated blankly, as the platform thudded to a halt above the great dock.



CHAPTER NINE

++*They are going to kill you*++ said the Watcher.

‘No,’ she muttered. ‘No.’

The red-haired one, the one with the strident voice and hard eyes, glared at her. ‘What are you?’ Disgust oozed from her words.

++*You have saved them for nothing*++

The Watched shook her head back and forth, pulling at her hood. ‘There is something you must see,’ she told the Sororitas, ignoring the voice in her head.

But her words fell on deaf ears. The other women were threatened and distrustful, their circumstances pushing them to seek violent options before any that required deeper thought. She could not blame them, suddenly finding themselves here in the belly of the alien enemy. But that could not be allowed to change the course of things. They had to see. *They had to.*

‘Sister Imogen,’ said the one with the dark hair, the scarred face and the serious gaze. ‘Perhaps we should—’

The one called Imogen did not listen. Instead she aimed her bolter squarely at the Watched. ‘You serve them. Is that why you enticed us here, so you could give us to your xenos masters? You are one of them!’

++*They are going to kill you*++ repeated the voice.

Fury flashed into life behind her eyes. ‘No!’ she roared, hard and loud. ‘You do not understand! Look! Look!’ She brought up the dark edge of the voidblade in her hand, slow and careful. ‘See!’ she spat.

The periphery of the sword’s cutting field, existing a microsecond out of phase with the rest of the weapon, buzzed as she lay it across the palm of her other hand. The entropic aura disintegrated the rags wrapped around her skin and made a perfect line along her dirty flesh. Bright crimson blood welled up and ran in streaks down her fingers.

‘I took this weapon from them.’ She stepped forwards and ran her hand over the chest-plate of the other woman, smearing her vitae over Imogen’s armour. ‘I am human.’ It had been an eternity since she had dared to voice those words. ‘Like you.’

‘Not like us,’ muttered another of the Sororitas, cradling a heavy meltagun.

She forged on, driven by some emotion welling up from deep inside, something she could not quantify. ‘You must trust me. *You must see!*’

++*They will not follow you*++ the voice mocked. ++*You cannot make them understand*++

‘See what?’ demanded the Battle Sister; but the Watched was already leaping off the lip of the floater platform, down to the cog-shaped docking ring.

The hooded woman dropped and for a moment Verity was afraid she had stepped into the empty air and to her death. Then she heard the clank of boots on the metal decking and saw her running, a loping sprint across the dock, weaving between the metal spars and gleaming stone plinths.

Danae hesitated at the edge. ‘Do we follow?’ She shot a look at Imogen. ‘Sister Superior, your orders?’

‘Whatever that one is,’ said Kora, ‘human or xenos, she is of a broken mind. One look in those eyes

makes that clear as daybreak.’

Imogen made a terse gesture, leading with her hand. The Sisters followed the hooded woman off the platform and onto the dock.

Verity gave an involuntary shiver. All around machines moved slowly, great turning armatures and floating modules going this way and that. It gave the impression of a massive engine of some sort, turning at a steady idle. She could not shake the sense that an intelligence was at work in this place, intent on alien schemes that would only bode ill for the Sisterhood.

Imogen drew herself up. The hesitation, the moment of fear she had shown in the sandstone caverns, that was gone now, and she seemed determined to expunge the echo of it with decisive action. ‘I will not have our path determined by the whim of an unhinged stranger! We are the daughters of Saint Katherine, honour to her glory—’

‘Honour to her glory,’ repeated the Battle Sisters, in immediate rote chorus.

‘And we are not here to die!’ Imogen went on. ‘This day unfolds to our will.’ She glanced at Danae. ‘Take two Sisters... Miriya and the nursemaid...’

The woman with the meltagun didn’t even attempt to hide her displeasure as she shot a look at Verity. ‘Aye, mistress.’

The Sister Superior pointed to the horizontal spike tower. ‘Scout that construct. Look for something that resembles a command centre or a control nexus. Report in by vox, standard interval.’ She looked back at Cassandra and Kora. ‘You are with me.’

‘And the... The interloper?’ Cassandra asked, nodding in the direction the hooded woman had gone.

‘We track her,’ Imogen said. ‘She wants to show us something. We’ll find out what that is.’

The group broke into two elements and Verity fell in step following Miriya as the Battle Sister took point in their formation. In turn, Danae walked a few metres behind her, panning her heavy gun back and forth, searching for a target. Within moments, Imogen and the other Sisters were gone, vanishing behind a forest of towering metal tubes and iron-stone supports.

The hum and crackle of energy fizzed above their heads where power conduits channelled lazy streams of green lightning back and forth. Platforms like the one they had ridden on moved silently, impelled by invisible ribbons of force. Verity took each step carefully, measuring her path and trying to watch every angle of approach at once. She had no illusions that her rudimentary military training would be of any great use if an attack came, but she would not allow herself to be the one to falter in her vigilance. This was alien ground, there was no doubt about that. On Sanctuary 101, even though it was a desolate outpost world, Verity had always felt that the God-Emperor’s sight could reach her.

But this place... Whatever or wherever it was... She had never known something so *alien*.

‘What is it all for?’ She asked the question preying on her mind.

‘Perhaps it is their home,’ offered Miriya, without looking back. ‘Perhaps the conduit we passed through has taken us to their point of origin.’

Such a thought made Verity’s blood run cold, and she made the sign of the aquila. ‘I pray that is not so.’

‘Wherever we are,’ Miriya went on, ‘this is not a place for the likes of us.’ She nodded towards towering ramps and other crescent-consoles like the one they had seen destroyed earlier. The constructs were strangely out-of-scale to human dimensions. They were made for something taller, a breed of life form that would tower over Verity, and one with a radically different set of aesthetic senses. The repetition of dull chrome and black stone went on forever, broken only by glassy crystals sculpted into coffin-like geometries, or golden iconography made of circles and radial lines.

The hospitaller cast her eye over the icons as they passed beneath arches detailed with them. It was a language, she decided. The configuration of it could mean nothing else. She could not help but wonder what it might have said if she could translate it into Imperial Gothic. Verity touched the auspex unit hanging at her belt. In a moment of clarity she had turned the device’s memory spools to an automatic recording state; there was no telling what they might find in here, and if they should make it back to safety, a log of what they encountered might prove invaluable as intelligence.

If they made it back.

The deck beneath them slowly became a ramp that curved up around a thick circular pillar, and with a

nod from Danae, they ventured on. The underside of the spike-tower was above them now, throwing out dazzling shocks of white light. This close to it, Verity could see what appeared to be window slits in the flanks of the construction.

‘We’ll get as near as we can,’ said Sister Danae. ‘Search for a path inside. In the meantime, be wary.’

But as they rose, they saw nothing, and the tension began to settle on Verity like a cloak of heavy mail. Finally, she voiced her concern. ‘Why have the xenos not come after us? They passed through the portals to attack the Mechanicus outpost, but now we are in the heart of their lair, they ignore our presence?’

‘A good question,’ grumbled Danae, clearly occupied by the same disquiet.

‘The ones in the caves,’ said Miriya. ‘Something must have summoned them.’

Danae gave a sniff. ‘How can you know that?’

‘There was an energy effect before the portals opened. I think it was that tech-priest’s doing. We have no idea how long he and his explorators were down in the arroyo. The God-Emperor alone knows what they were doing there, and what they may have meddled with.’

‘Poking swords into a hornet’s nest, aye,’ said the other Battle Sister. ‘You have the truth there. If we return to the convent, there will be a hard reckoning for the works of the questor and his brethren.’

‘But the...’ Verity swallowed. ‘The necrons.’ Just saying the name made her stiffen. ‘They must know we are here, now. Why do they not come to kill us?’

Miriya halted and glanced up. Above them, a wide frame of metal girders drifted along an inverted rail spur. A battalion’s worth of silent warrior mechanicals dangled from the frames like corpses on meat hooks. ‘They are quiescent,’ she said, her voice low as if she were afraid she might wake them. ‘We speak of them like hornets in a hive. So they are hibernating, as the hornets would be after a hard winter. They do not stir in number because nothing threatens them.’

‘Or perhaps it is because they are watching,’ said Danae grimly. ‘Perhaps our predicament amuses them.’

‘They have no soul, no mind as we know it,’ said Verity. ‘They are only automata.’

Miriya shot her a look. ‘Are they? What does the Imperium really know of these things? What truths?’ She grimaced. ‘This is the root of the very reason the Ordo Xenos were so loathe to let us return to Sanctuary 101. They must have known we would find something here!’

‘You have it about-face, Sister,’ said Danae. ‘We did not find them. They found us.’

‘The hooded one?’ said Verity.

Danae gave a nod. ‘We should have killed that creature when we had the chance.’

Miriya’s lips thinned, but she said nothing more. Verity refused to remain silent, however. ‘It... *She* is not a thing.’

‘You saw the face!’ scoffed the Sororitas. ‘A mess of flesh and metal. Like one of those Mechanicus cogs, or worse! Pretending at being a woman.’

‘I saw her,’ Verity went on, her conviction growing. ‘But with different eyes to you, Sister Danae. I saw a lost soul. I saw...’ *A kindred spirit*. She could not bring herself to say the words. She frowned. ‘I know this,’ Verity began again. ‘If we survive to flee this nest of darkness, then she must come with us. In Saint Katherine’s name, I will not see the lost left to wander without the God-Emperor’s light.’

‘Have you forgotten your own words already, girl? You cannot save the soul of a thing that does not possess one to begin with,’ Danae replied, her tone hardening. ‘Put such thoughts from your mind. That is an order.’

Verity glanced at Miriya, but the Battle Sister said nothing.

The black stone pyramids formed a long corridor, a grid of them arranged perfectly with each arrow-sharp corner a hand’s span from the construct to its side. The Sororitas moved in single file, casting wary glances up at the barrels of inert flux arc projectors that lay pointing into the darkness. Silent as they were now, the lines of Monoliths resembled arcane sculptures from the hand of some obsessive geometer, sinister and threatening even while at rest.

‘It is a manufactory,’ whispered Kora. ‘It must be so. We have found our way to some xenos equivalent of a forge-world.’

Sister Imogen looked at the younger woman. ‘If that is so, then where are the workers, the helots?’

Where are the foundries and weapon shops?’ She shook her head. ‘This is more a reliquary than a place of creation.’ The Sororitas paused and ran her hand over the flank of a Monolith, making a mark in the thick patina of dust that coated it. ‘These devices have not seen power in thousands of years, I would warrant.’

‘Perhaps more than that,’ offered Cassandra.

Imogen gave a grim nod and moved on. Presently, the floor dropped into a ramp that opened out to a long, low chamber dominated by rows of circular display screens.

The hooded woman stood at the far end, kneading her hand, dressing the wound she had given herself. She glanced up as they approached.

‘Is this what you want to show us?’ asked Imogen.

‘You have not witnessed enough,’ came the husky reply. ‘Not yet.’

Kora peered at one of the displays. It was filled with alien iconography, trailing down its span in cascades of unreadable text. ‘Not enough? An army of thousands, and you say it is not enough?’

The revenant shook her head slowly, the hood exaggerating the motion. She pointed at one of the circle-screens. ‘Each of these represents a single cohort of combat forces. One group, like the Monolith brigade above.’

Cassandra’s eyes widened as she took in the count of the screens. ‘But there are... There must be hundreds of displays here.’

‘And this is but one monitoring bay. There are many more.’

Imogen’s jaw hardened. ‘I tire of your games, creature. You make your object lesson clear. Say it, then. The number, if you will. Tell us how many of these Light-Forsaken machines are sleeping here. A legion’s worth? *More?*’ She advanced, brandishing her boltgun. ‘Do you mean to terrify us?’

‘I mean to illuminate you,’ came the reply. The revenant backed away as Imogen approached. She opened her arms to take in the screens with the gesture. ‘The enemy waits out the march of time in this place.’

‘It is a tomb,’ said Kora.

‘No,’ Cassandra corrected. ‘It is an *armoury*.’

The hood bobbed in agreement. ‘That one sees the truth of it. This complex is a staging area for invasion on a cosmic scale. A hub at the centre of the wheel, only one of many seeded in the deep past, left to wait out the aeons. Here they sleep, and they are maintained and prepared for eventual revivication. An army that numbers in the *billions*.’

Silence fell as the weight of the words settled in on the women. Imogen’s face grew pale as she processed the import of what the revenant had said, her bravado slipping for a moment. ‘If what you say is so... With those portals, they could strike en masse in an instant. No force sent by lander or teleporatrium could hope to match such numbers...’

‘Is that what they did on Sanctuary?’ said Kora.

‘Aye,’ whispered the hooded woman, the word almost a sob.

‘We have seen enough xenos here to invade a dozen worlds.’ Cassandra shouldered her weapon. ‘And you tell us there are *more?* Where is this place? What cold hell have you dragged us to?’

The revenant moved to a panel and raked a bony hand over it. The display changed, rippling as it did so. ‘I did not take you so far,’ she said. ‘Not so far at all. *See.*’ She pointed.

Cassandra and Imogen studied the altered display. The rain of glyphs became a tactical display, orbital paths and system dynamics similar to something one might find on the bridge of a warship.

‘How did you do that?’ Kora demanded, but her question went unanswered.

‘You recognise this.’ The voice from deep inside the hood seemed distant.

Imogen gave a slow nod. ‘I do. This is a visual of the planet... Of Sanctuary 101 and its lunar satellites.’

‘We came here,’ she went on, as the display centred on a dark orb of black rock spinning in a high orbit over the desert world, one of the planet’s captured asteroidal orbitals. ‘For what is stone is a lie, a falsehood hidden by alien guile.’

‘The Obsidian Moon.’ Cassandra gasped. ‘This complex exists... *inside* the Obsidian Moon?’

‘Impossible,’ snorted Imogen. ‘The *Tybalt* passed within a hundred kilometres of the surface of that satellite. A base of this magnitude would have been detected!’

‘Would it?’ came the question. ‘The machines alter space-time with their arcane technologies, they twist

dimension and void. You felt that in the gateways. They do the same here, coring out the moon as their hibernaculum, building something of impossible aspect where it should not exist.'

'And yet it does,' added Cassandra. She shuddered. 'It stretches the mind to contemplate such terrible science in the hands of aliens.'

Imogen glared at the revenant, emotions warring across her face. Finally, inevitably, anger won through. 'We have seen enough. We must return to the planet. A warning must be given!'

But the hooded woman shook her head. 'This is not what you must see.' She beckoned with her bloodied hand. 'Come with me.'

They entered the tower and found it made almost entirely of the black stone. Every face of it was polished to a sheen, and sculpted in sharp angles harsh enough to cut flesh if one were to press upon them. Miriya cast an eye over the walls in passing. Only a beam, a laser device of some impressive power, would have been able to forge such mathematically intricate designs. There were no blemishes, nothing to mar the cold perfection of the architecture; only a repeating shield-shaped motif etched into the walls. The design resembled an oval buckler, or the carapace of a beetle.

'The dust...' Verity said it before either Miriya or Danae had formed the thought. 'On the lower levels, the dust of ages was everywhere. But here... Nothing.' She looked at the Battle Sister. 'What does that mean?'

'It means that this place may be...' Miriya struggled to find the right word. '*Active.*'

'Weapons,' reminded Danae, as she progressed down the black corridor. 'If the enemy is revealed, we must be ready.' The command was more for the hospitaller's sake than Miriya's, but still she dutifully re-checked her bolter's fire select switch once again.

The beams from the underbarrel torches on their boltguns probed the darkness, finding a hexagonal metal door. A soft green glow emitted from a circular panel in the wall nearby.

'An operational system there,' noted Verity.

Danae nodded, and using silent battlesign gestures, ordered Miriya to take up a ready position on the far side of the hatch. When she was ready, the veteran slapped at the control and the hex-hatch opened, splitting apart into triangles that retreated into the stone. A draught of stale air wafted out, and Miriya caught the cloying taste of old decay upon it. The sensation collected at the back of her throat, but she resisted the reflex to cough and spit.

Leading with her meltagun, Danae entered the chamber beyond and Miriya fell in with her, aware of Verity taking nervous, careful steps behind her.

'Do you smell that?' said the hospitaller, grim-faced.

'Something... rotting?' Danae ventured.

The chamber was dark, and the light following them in through the doorway was weak. The torches picked out only pockets of imagery – a steel platform there, a cluster of viridian tubes here – and nothing that made sense to Miriya.

'On Tsan Domus,' Verity continued. 'I came to know that smell.' She spoke in a dead, distant voice. 'The air reeked of it.'

Danae halted, half turning. 'That world was a war grave,' she began. 'It–'

Miriya saw the other woman's boot cross a line of dark metal in the floor, and some invisible switch was tripped. Rippling out around them like a cascade of silent lightning, illuminators snapped into life and enveloped the chamber in a stark, antiseptic glow.

Danae spun back on her heel and what she saw made her recoil. She made a small noise of alarm, a faint cry, something she was probably not even aware of. Miriya's reaction had no voice, but she felt it in the blood draining from her face and the sudden chilly sweat beading her neck. For her part, Verity seemed only sorrowful. If the hospitaller had walked the fields of Tsan Domus – the site of Ultima Segmentum's worst witch-cult uprising in four hundred years, where an entire Order Militant Minoris had been murdered and defiled – then what they saw now was the echo of that horror.

In orbs made of cloudy, metallic glass there were corpses opened with all the detail of an anatomist's textbook. Miriya's knowledge of flesh and blood, human or otherwise, was limited to the knowledge of how to do harm to it and the most basic field medicine. About her, she saw layers of skin and bone, nerve and

sinew flayed away, and suspended by unseen means. Museum-perfect displays that were part art-work, part experiment. The Battle Sister was reminded of the exploded technical diagrams of gun components she had memorised as a Novice Cantus. But instead of frame, coil and lever, these things were aorta, marrow and organ meat.

There were dozens of the spheres, many of them containing exhibits so finely dismantled that it was impossible to know what species they might have originally come from. She saw what could have been parts of a greenskin, the dull blue hue of a tau, or perhaps they were all human remains, the last of the women who had died defending Sanctuary 101.

That last thought rose slowly in Miriya's mind, making her sickened and angry, becoming firm as she saw other objects in among the meat-diagrams. Here, a scrap of red combat cloak stained with dried blood, a Sabbat-pattern helmet stove in by a mammoth blow; there, a shattered plasma pistol lying near a grey, dust-caked metal drum etched with a fleur-de-lys. These things seemed like discards, trinkets to whatever mind had arranged the shape of this obscene gallery.

'Is it...?' Danae swallowed, grimacing. 'A trophy room?'

Verity shook her head solemnly. 'This is an arcade dedicated to cruelty, ordered by something that sees no horror in what has been done. No more than a child might pluck wildflowers and press them into the pages of a notebook.'

'Why?' Miriya asked, the question escaping her. She crossed to the nearest orb-pod and peered at a circular display floating near it. Alien text filled the disc, and she wondered what it might say. Was it the record of the agonies of a long-dead Battle Sister, captured after the invasion? Or coldly harvested genetic data, preserved for future iterations of necrontyr to study, so they might better destroy any humans they encountered?

'I thought the machines were only killers,' she went on. 'All records speak of them as turning their victims to ash. What purpose does a... *harvest* like this serve?'

Miriya looked back when neither Danae nor Verity gave reply, and she saw that they had other concerns to occupy them.

From the far end of the gallery, a black mist whirled silently in the air, moving as ink would flow through water. Tendrils of it looped out and back, some reaching to touch the orbs it passed, like the brief caress of an owner upon the brow of a pet. The accumulation of darkness was asymmetrical, seeming to emerge from a single solid point in the middle of the mass. Miriya's mind suggested the shape of a cloak, swelling with a ghostly breeze.

Each of the women took aim, and as if it was obliging them in some mocking fashion, the gloom reformed, retreating and solidifying into an obsidian staff that drank in the light all around it.

The staff was clasped in the taloned hand of a creation that resembled the warrior machines only as much as a deck serf might be said to resemble a Space Marine. Lean of limb and sculpted gaunt, the necron was a thing made of steel planes and ribbed iron. Gold accents and bright rings of platinum decorated every inch that was not polished chrome-bright. Unlike the tarnished metal of the mechanicals they had fought on the planet, this construct looked old-new, like a well cared-for antique.

It studied them with unblinking emerald eyes, and when it spoke, the voice was the sound of knife-edges drawn across one another.

'You have come so very far,' it said.

'Now,' said the revenant, kneeling at the edge of the high platform. 'You will see.'

Imogen, Kora and Cassandra dropped into a crouch and came as close as they dared to the sheer drop. After the end of the platform, there was nothing but empty air for a good thousand metres until the top of...

Of something...

The architecture of the construction was like everything else inside the Obsidian Moon, all time-soiled metals surrounding carved rectilinear ribs of heavy stone – but where those shapes seemed to at least adhere to some rational, if alien, design ethos, this thing was an impossibility.

The Sister Superior tried to take it all in with a single glance, but it would not come to her. Like an optical illusion, lines seemed to begin and end on themselves, hard-cut corners forming into angles that collapsed upon one another. It made her head swim to try and hold the shape of the thing in her mind's eye.

An inverted tetrahedral surround of old iron, it stood bigger than the central donjon of the Sanctuary convent, glinting with flickers of power. Dull, unearthly light gathered in the open framework of the thing, the same brilliant green hue they had witnessed elsewhere.

Cassandra was the first to make the leap of concept. 'It is another portal.' She glanced at the hooded woman and the revenant nodded once.

'Very different to the simple doorways we passed through,' she intoned. 'This is an engine of transmission far more powerful, capable of instantaneous conduction across vast tracts of interstellar space. A Dolmen Gate.'

Imogen sucked in a breath of dry air and forced herself to look upon it once more. Where the glow emanated, she saw something like a scrap of gossamer net, dancing as if borne by winds. It seemed to be pulling from the dust itself, formed out of nothingness. 'Where does it lead?' She dreaded the answer to the question.

'Everywhere,' said the revenant, retreating into the shadows. 'The dolmen bores down into the matrix of the universe, the grid of line and power that underpins all things.' She cocked her head. 'The eldar have a name for that network. They call it "the webway".'

Cassandra uttered a curse. 'I have seen the Harlequins use that magick,' she grated. 'Tunnels through space, big enough to bring tanks and war machines from worlds away. You say the machines know this lore as well? How is that possible?'

'I have no answer for you.' The hooded woman was sorrowful. 'It operates by no means I can understand. The necrons are slicing into the ethereal realm with this device, but the mere act corrodes the stone it is made from.' She pointed towards the edges of the massive gate mechanism; parts of it were laced with cracks and fragments drifted about it in pockets of null gravity.

Insectoid machines continually scrambled over the length of the dolmen, mandibles flashing as they worked to cut and sculpt and mend the stonework. Imogen knew repair effort when she saw it. 'They are preparing the device,' she said.

'A long task,' said the revenant. 'It is the reason for this entire construct. The layers of space run thin here. The barriers between our realm and the conduits of the webway lie close to the surface in the Kavir system.' She pointed upwards, to where complex arrays of wide metal tubes ranged over their heads. 'They draw power from a vast energy core to keep it open a crack.'

'Is this why the Sisters in the convent were killed? To protect the existence of this?' Kora wondered aloud. 'The necrons were defending a strategic asset...'

'Perhaps,' Imogen allowed, never taking her eyes off the face beneath the torn, ragged hood. 'If this... gate is opened, then it will not just be Sanctuary 101 that will feel the lash of these aliens. Countless worlds could fall beneath their shadow.'

'Attacks would come without warning,' said Cassandra. 'Legions of these war machines phasing in out of nowhere...' She paused, considering the scale of it. 'God-Emperor... The Imperium would be defenceless.'

'Simultaneous mass invasion, from here to the shores of Holy Terra herself,' said the revenant. 'The xenos would slake the thirst of their warlords with human dead.'

Imogen rose with a sudden jerk and in a single step she was glaring into the depths of the dark hood. 'You know so very much about this place, about the necrontyr!' she snapped. 'Tell me why that is, creature! You are not one of them, I will accept that. But you cannot be human! All humans on Sanctuary were murdered!'

'Yes,' she agreed, her words thick with emotion, 'that is so.'

'Where did you come from?' asked Cassandra.

'From my own hell,' whispered the ragged figure. 'Damned to serve as witness to all this. But I escaped. Traded one prison for another.' She tapped at her head. 'Now returned here for you. So you can—'

'So we can see,' Imogen broke in. 'But what good does that do us if we all remain trapped here in this iron mausoleum?'

'We are all witnesses now,' the revenant said, shuddering. 'We are all the Watched, if we live long enough to be so.'

'Cease your riddles—'

But the woman was no longer listening to her. She pointed outwards at the dolmen. Metallic forms were darting up towards them, shimmering in and out of vision like flickering images from a damaged picture. Twisting, serpentine spines grew from legless, manta-like torsos made of black metal. Arms ending in bouquets of blades reached out in silence.

‘We are seen,’ said the hooded woman. ‘The wraiths come for us.’

‘Know me,’ the necron began, showing no move to make an attack. ‘I am Ossuar, Great Cryptek of the Sautekh Dynasty, citizen of Mandragora the Golden and Woken of the Great Sleep.’ The words had a ritualistic quality to them, and Verity sensed a peculiarly theatrical manner in their delivery. She would not have been surprised if the machine had taken a courtly bow at the end of its utterance. Such declarations of self and intent were commonplace in the courts of the Imperium, but to hear an alien using such a mannered form of address was unusual. It was likely only the shared shock at this statement that had stopped the immediate release of a salvo of fire from the Battle Sisters.

The machines she had seen in the caverns had appeared as puppet things, clockworks that aped human form but with no more intellect to them than an animal predator. She had never expected that a necron might be able to communicate with them, or indeed, that one would ever wish to.

‘It speaks,’ muttered Miriya, scarcely able to believe her ears. ‘Like automata playing at being alive.’

‘It is your kind that imitate true life,’ came the reply. There was almost a masculine tonality to it, and without thinking Verity immediately classified the creature as a *he*. ‘Strange organics, lost in your limited meat without the glory of biotransference.’ The machine-xenos spoke as if they were meant to understand the meaning and import of his words. ‘You come so far to be here. So eager to interfere with us. To embrace death.’

Miriya answered it with questions. ‘Why did you do this, alien?’ She indicated the glassy orbs. ‘What do you hope to learn from such acts of spite?’

‘To feed well the food stock must be tasted. And there was also the puzzle to be solved.’

‘What puzzle?’ Verity was unable to stay silent.

The creature Ossuar made a noise that might have been a sigh of pleasure. ‘How it was you came to evolve. The answer still eludes.’ He raised the abyssal rod in his claw, and the extraordinary non-glow of fluid dark moved around the tip. When he spoke again, Verity was convinced she heard amusement in his tone. ‘But you return, offering me more material to explore. Gratitude to you.’ The staff shimmered, coming up in a threatening rise. ‘Your offer will not be wasted.’

‘Kill it!’ spat Danae, finding her voice; and suddenly the moment of brief peace was shattered.

The wraiths came in fast, their spine-tails lashing at the air. Imogen fired first, and to her horror the shells from her bolter passed harmlessly through the closest of the machine-things as it went intangible.

Broad-shouldered and possessed of blank skull masks, they danced around the Sororitas, hovering on pillars of etherium energy, cocking their heads as they examined the humans. Hands that were little more than blade-sharp manipulators clenched and unclenched as they considered the intruders.

‘I can see through them...’ said Cassandra, tracking one of the wraiths with her gun muzzle. ‘They must be decoys... Holographs!’

The hooded woman had her black sword in her hand. ‘They are very real. They exist out of synchrony, moving back and forth between phantasm and corporeal to strike and fade.’ She shot a look at the Sister Superior. ‘We must fall back, now.’

‘You are not in command here,’ Imogen retorted.

Kora gave a yell as the wraiths moved. The Battle Sister’s hand tightened on her trigger and she fired into the closest attacker, shell casings clattering around her. The wraiths broke apart and passed through stone pillars as if they were made of smoke, diving silently on the young woman.

‘No!’ Cassandra called out the warning just as the machine-ghosts crowded around Sister Kora. Ethereal claws and tail-barbs passed harmlessly through her torso – and then suddenly became real, manifesting *inside* her flesh.

Kora’s death-scream was smothered by an expulsion of blood from her mouth, and her bolter fired wide.

The revenant swept in, her tattered cloak whirling, her dark blade a sweep of shadow. The alien sword

took the head from one of the machines while it was still at the business of killing Sister Kora, avenging her. The weapon swept on and slashed at another wraith, damaging it severely.

Following her lead, Cassandra and Imogen unloaded their guns into the wraiths that dithered around Kora's body, briefly catching them as they were manifest in phase with this plane of existence. But in an eye-blink, they were turning ephemeral once again, ducking, weaving, preparing another attack.

This time Imogen did not hesitate. 'Retreat!' she barked. She tore an incendiary grenade from her belt and tossed it towards the Battle Sister's corpse.

Cassandra swallowed a prayer in Kora's memory and did as she was commanded, the hooded woman moving at her side.

The explosion hammered at their backs as they ran.

In the confines of the gallery, the fight became a storm of fire and darkness. Danae's meltagun forged lines of solar flame that lashed at the necron creature, and in return he unleashed black beams of negative energy that froze air molecules to snow in their wake. Verity dashed into cover as Miriya fired true, marching rounds up the chest of the machine to beat at its near-featureless face.

This Ossuar, this creature that called itself 'the cryptek', swatted the rounds away as if they were nagging insects and rolled the staff in his talons. A sinister shroud of oily smoke emerged from the rod and flowed towards them in a towering wave.

Miriya yanked on the breather mask stowed in her gorget, fearful that the alien had deployed some kind of gaseous weapon – but the shroud behaved like a living thing, rising up in curtains of rippling gloom.

Incredibly, she felt it plucking at her mind, prickling her skin. A sudden sense of despair loomed over her, so strong it almost forced a sob from her mouth. She felt a snake of dread uncoiling inside her chest, slithering across her will. The nightmares of an orphan child that she had banished from her mind in adulthood, burst through the walls she had built over them and gathered around her.

'Curse you!' Miriya spat, reaching deep within herself for the wellspring of defiance that she knew was there. The Sororitas had no concept of how Ossuar's weapon was working its assault on her senses. Through science or arcane magick? It was impossible to know. But she was sure of one thing – she would resist it.

The litany came easily to her, and Miriya invoked the Light of the Emperor, saying the words in a breathy rush. The effect was immediate, it was electric; she felt renewed as she looked within and touched her love and faith for her god.

Yes, she told herself. Still strong.

Miriya was elated; before, at prayer and at peace, she had searched for this moment and been found wanting. But now, in the teeth of battle, it came ready and real, as if it had always been there.

With her free hand she drew her chainsword and swept it up to beat at Ossuar's staff. The nightmare shroud parted before her savage attack and the necron actually staggered, as if he were surprised by the vigour of her counter strike.

Blade met staff with a clash of sparks and the force of it shoved the two combatants apart once again.

A hooting, braying tocsin was sounding through the gallery, broadcast from some hidden speaker. Ossuar made an angry sound and dodged a beam-blast from Danae, weaving, gathering himself.

The circular screens shifted, each showing the same series of bright white icons; Miriya knew an alert when she saw it.

The necron drew a dark veil across the chamber, shifting behind it so they could not draw a bead on him. 'More of you elsewhere,' he grated, seeming to pluck the datum from the ether. 'What clever animals you are.'

That fragmentary moment of distraction was enough for Danae to take her shot. A blast of energy shattered one of the orbs close to where Ossuar moved, and the detonation blew the machine-creature off its feet. The cryptek scrambled, trying to right himself.

'This way!' cried Verity, retreating towards the hexagonal hatch while the necron was still in disarray. Miriya broke cover and ran to her.

'We are not animals!' Danae shouted, and as she fell back she immolated the rest of the glassy capsules with wildfire.

As they staggered into the corridor, a piercing whistle sounded from their vox-beads. Unknown to them, inside the gallery the thick iron walls had dampened their comm signals almost to nothing. Miriya wondered if it was some other consequence of the strange veil-effect Ossuar had generated.

Cassandra's voice was barely discernable through a rush of crackling static. *'If you read us,'* she was saying, *'we are regrouping. Home in on our location.'*

'I have it,' Verity noted, fumbling at her auspex unit. 'Below us. Not far.'

Danae fired again into the hatchway and glared at them both. 'I am done with this place,' she spat. 'Find me our Sisters and let us be gone!'

Behind them, a tinny rattle sounded across the stone walls, and Miriya looked up. 'The... the cryptek...' She said the alien word and scowled with it. 'He won't be done with us yet.'

She saw one of the etch-shapes in the stone *move*. Emerald light blinked on within it, a single eye emerging along with six needle legs. The ovals shifted against rock and fell to the floor. One, then two. Then dozens. The beetle-like machines twitched, shaking off dormancy, taking in their circumstances. They found the humans.

'Scarabs!' hissed Danae. 'Run!'

++*What can you do?*++ demanded the Watcher.

'Save us,' she told it, furious at the words. 'Watch me do so.'

++*You will fail*++ came the reply. ++*They will die and you will be trapped here. Again*++

'Shut up!' shouted the revenant, skidding out of her run to a halt.

++*You should not have come back*++

The one called Imogen grabbed her shoulder and spun her about. 'In Terra's name!' She snarled at the revenant. 'If you lose your mind now and strand us here, I swear I will slit your throat before they come for us!'

She pushed the Sister Superior away. 'I am sane,' she muttered, pretending that was true. 'I brought you this far.' The hooded woman tugged at her cloak and sprinted into the corridor of inert Monoliths, moving from one to another, brushing her bony fingers over them.

Behind her, the thunder of bolters sounded as the Battle Sisters duelled with the wraiths. The ghost-machines dogged them at every step, dancing in and out of reality. She had seen them use that tactic before, forcing their enemy to waste their ammunition, wearing them down.

In the brief moments they did become solid, the baleful light of their exile beamers flashed. Anything caught in the rays cast by the devices vanished, dimension-shifted into some random otherwhere.

++*You wonder how you know these things*++ said the Watcher. ++*Surrender and you will understand*++

This time she did not give any reply. Her hands crossed the surface of another silent Monolith and at last she felt the touch of what she had been searching for. 'Here!' she cried. 'To me, quickly.'

More footfalls sounded from along the corridor, and she glimpsed three more of the armoured women approaching from the other direction. Far behind them, the floor undulated and shifted, a metallic carpet of hissing, chittering forms moving in a slow wave. The scarabs were coming to disassemble them and carry their corpses to the reclamators.

++*If you are fortunate*++

'We are trapped,' said the one called Cassandra. 'What escape is this?'

'I have a way,' she told them, and she meant it. 'It will cost me much...'

'More than your life?' asked the dark-haired one with the scar on her face. Miriya, that was her name. The one who had stalked her through the halls of the convent.

'Yes,' she told her, with brutal honesty.

She let herself fall into the fugue state and touch the horrors inside her own mind. There she found the geometric shapes and the patterns she needed, the equations that would activate the mechanisms and find a pathway from this place. *Back to the planet. Back to the ruins and the dust.*

They reached out to her, these fragments of alien knowledge. They tried to grab her, drag her down into the dark of herself. It was hard to fight back, and they took a toll, breaking pieces of her off, hoarding them.

But it was done. The dull pane of polished stone across the face of the Monolith ran like a vertical puddle, eldritch light pooling upon it. The necron craft hummed and rose off the ground, impelled by

internal powers she had awakened.

‘Another portal...’ said Cassandra. ‘And where will this one take us, witchling?’
She answered the question by stepping through.

The scarabs and the wraiths were all around them, and the Sisters had nowhere else to go. Miriya heard Verity cry out as one of the insectoid machines bit her and she shook it off.

The flash of light from the portal gate in the front of the Monolith bathed them all in an eerie glow. The woman in the hood didn’t hesitate; she vanished into it.

‘We seem to be making a habit of this,’ growled Danae, and she propelled the hospitaller before her, firing at the wraiths. ‘Do we even have a choice but to follow?’

Imogen’s pale face darkened with chained fury, but she said nothing as she followed the revenant once more into the unknown.

The cryptek arrived to see the dimensional interface cycle ending, the conduit phase collapsing back into the structure of the Monolith. The pyramid settled back to the deck, inert once more, and the serviles milled around, waiting for a new command. He dismissed the scarabs and had the wraiths scan the chamber for damage estimates. The organics were careless with their weapons; the ruination these humans had caused in the gallery alone would take many of their man-years to mend.

Ossuar traced the activation runes on the Monolith and entertained a concern. No organic should have been able to operate this mechanism. It was simply impossible to comprehend.

Yet it had been done. He drew a recall of the instant from the groupmind memory bank of the scarabs and examined it.

A distant sensation awoke in Ossuar. It had been so long since he had experienced such a thing it took a while to process and identify it. At last, he found a name for it: *an emotion*.

The cryptek filed it away for later consideration and studied the dead portal.

It was clear that the situation on the planet was moving beyond his capacity to control. Here, inside the Hub, Ossuar had a perfect understanding of his capabilities and the powers he had to draw upon. But there? Outside in that realm, beyond these hallowed corridors... He reluctantly conceded that it required the talents of a different entity.

The time had come to awaken the nemesor.



CHAPTER TEN

There had been a time – so many centuries gone now that it was almost a dream and less than a memory – when Tegas had been fully human.

Then, barely a youth, he had been recruited out of the schola progenium where the evaluators of the Adeptus Mechanicus had found him. Recruited, if one were to use that word as a synonym for *taken*.

Young Tegas had been foolish, stupid. It embarrassed the questor to consider him now, regarding that frightened boy as little better than an infant, fouling itself and incapable of feeding without assistance.

On the way to Mars he had tried to take his own life, utterly ignorant of what glories the Machine-God would open to him upon his arrival. He had eaten poison aboard the transport ship, and almost succumbed to the potency of it. In the end, the toxins had only hastened the need for the excision of many of his internal organs and the implantation of newer, better replacements.

The only sense-memory he still carried from that moment was how the poison felt as it ran through him. The sickening disconnection it brought between his thought and his action, the sense of a body dying outside of his control. The fear.

He remembered that clearly, all these years later, as Adept Lumik fretted over him, plucking at him to help him rise from where he had fallen.

Gathering his wits, Questor Tegas swatted her away and got up, shaking off the ill-effects of... *What?*

He reviewed his internal program loops. He had made this happen. In his eagerness to probe the secret of the iron scroll, something Tegas had done had released a surge of electromagnetic energy unlike any he recognised. The alien radiation swamped the interior of the laboratory, and the efficient ray-shields that so cleverly protected the module from outside surveillance or imaging had trapped the force of it inside.

The questor's timebase was so corrupted he could not immediately ascertain how long he had been inert. Parts of his internals were still off-line, cycling through reboot phases. He grunted and staggered to the workstation.

The scroll was still there, sheathed in an emerald glow, mocking him with its complexity. I did do something, he told himself. The back-shock had not been some kind of security measure, but the side-effect of a larger event. Tegas knew what he had seen in the holograph glow of the scroll's interface. *Control*. The virtual switches he had tripped, they had sent signals along quantum filaments, the electromagnetic surge spilling out around them. *I did something*. He smiled. *I summoned something*.

A fear reaction would have been more logical at this juncture, he reasoned, but strangely, even the smallest glimmer of that emotion escaped him. This was experimentation, he told himself. It was not without risk, even to one's self, and whatever data or effect was generated from the result, he was confident he could address it. Tegas did not consider this arrogance.

What is that ancient axiom I have heard soldiers spout at moments of extreme crisis? Tegas cocked his head, thinking aloud. 'That which does not kill me makes me stronger.' Or in my case, smarter.

'L-lord?' stuttered Lumik, hanging on his words. Her tics were becoming more pronounced. 'I d-do not understand—'

He rounded on her. 'Are we secure? The Sororitas, outside... Are they aware of anything amiss? Have

we suffered damage?’

‘Yes. Apparently n-not. One death.’ She answered his questions in quick succession.

‘Good.’ He gestured at the iron scroll. ‘We will make it inert, examine our recorded data and then proceed from there.’

‘Lord,’ Lumik went on. ‘We cannot. We have been trying to revive you for fifty-seven minutes.’ She pointed a mecha-tentacle at the alien artefact. ‘The device is drawing on power from an unknown source. Speculation: extradimensional. It resists all attempts to enquire it.’

‘What?’ He pushed her aside, listing as he stomped across the lab chamber’s metal decking. This was not right. The device had never shown any sign of being self-sustaining in its actions, not in Tegas’s examinations or any of the tedious studies run on it by Tech-priest Ferren.

‘W-what did you do?’ she asked him, unable to keep accusation from her tone. ‘We were supposed to observe, evaluate, collate. Nothing more. Those w-were the orders.’

‘Orders?’ Tegas said in harsh echo. ‘Ah yes, the so-called “suggestions” of Inquisitor Hoth and the Ordo Xenos.’ He turned an eye-cluster to glare at her. ‘We are the children of the Omnissiah and all knowledge belongs to us. For Mars’s sake, we do not adhere to the demands of the Inquisition! If that were so, then those stunted minds would have shackled every last creative thought from our species long ago!’

He crossed to the scroll, ignoring the other adepts who seemed afraid to venture too close to it. The alien holograms were flooded with glyphs that moved so fast even his enhanced cognition subroutines could not interpret them. The sight of the icons made him feel pleasantly giddy, as a flesh-and-blood man might react to a potent glass of amasec.

‘What are you doing, you lovely thing?’ he asked it, his smile widening.

The device chose to answer him.

The iron scroll had shown many interesting characteristics, including a capacity to alter itself on an atomic level by moving sheets of molecules back and forth. At first it was a roll of metallic paper, then a fan of thin, feather-like blades. And now, it changed once again.

It *opened*.

Radiance, a rippling emerald shimmer like captured lightning, emerged from the edges of the scroll as it unfolded along its length. The device deconstructed itself, a sculpture formed of metal paper unmaking its shape. As Tegas and his adepts watched in stunned awe, organo-metalloid materials deformed as new molecular patterns stored deep in particle waveforms imposed themselves.

The scroll became the fan, the fan became a pennant, the pennant bending into a thin spline, curving up and growing. Chains of molecules reordered and knitted in new configurations, mimicking an accelerated biological growth cycle.

The questor watched it with a mixture of anticipation and anxiety. Lumik stuttered and jerked as she pulled at the hem of his robes, begging Tegas to stop it, but even if he had been capable, he would not have done so. He was enrapt by the dance of reconstruction, the living metal cresting to make itself into a ring of chrome a little over two metres in diameter.

Across the disc of the ring a net of crackling green sparks formed, merging, reforming. A liquid effect, the visual component of exotic radiations interacting with air molecules, appeared. It was like a child’s toy, the membrane of a giant bubble held tense in the hoop.

Tegas and the others studied the effect with senses that perceived realms beyond human sight, sound, smell. The questor’s probes danced in the air around him, sampling and tasting. Unusual particulates that resembled ozone, calcites and other elements were being generated by the membrane, wafting invisibly into the laboratory. Waves of radiant, invisible energy spilled out with them, and Tegas felt the passage of air on the few pieces of skin that formed his face.

On an impulse he could not fully quantify, he reached up his hand towards the glowing, filmy light. Tegas wanted to touch it. He knew that it would give under his steel digits. He wanted to sift the energy in his fingers, like sand.

The membrane quivered and burst before he could reach it.

Displaced air screamed and crashed in tiny thunderclaps, and the ring vomited shapes wreathed in clouds of icy vapour. Human figures exploded into the room. A hooded form, then others in flashing black

armour and crimson capes crusted with rimes of frost. They crashed across the workstation and landed in disarray, colliding with examination gimbals and servitors too slow to get out of their way.

Battle Sisters. The surreality of their arrival caused a brief computational error cluster in the questor's thoughts before his mind caught up to what he was seeing. The adept had been right – extradimensional energy was the key. The scroll had been the information repository, the fan, the control matrix and the ring...

The ring was a portal...

Tegas's train of thought was broken as Lumik generated a droning scream of alarm, and he flinched backwards as the disorder ensued.

A green bolt of energy emerged from the shuddering membrane and flashed out across the chamber, destroying a cogitator console in a pulse of black smoke. The questor saw other things emerging at the foot of the ring, slower than the first arrivals: beetle-sculptures made of steel and emerald glass, venturing forth – no, coming *through* – with slow machine cunning. Tegas remembered the construct Ferren had been tormenting, the tomb spyder; these were the smaller cousins of the same automata, the so-called scarabs.

'Get back!' shouted one of the Sororitas, a woman with dark hair and a fierce aspect, directing her command at Lumik. Without waiting for the adept to obey, she opened fire with a bolter and destroyed the first of the mechanoids with pinpoint shots.

The woman who had come through first – the one in a stained and torn robe that stank of old, soiled matter – lurched back towards the ring and snatched at it. Reflexively, afraid that she would destroy this incredible piece of technology, Tegas tried to stop her.

Without pause, she batted him away and he crumpled to the deck. In that instant, he got a scan of her and the data returned was a confused mix that was hard to interpret. Hot and cold thermal patches, low-yield radiation, organic resonances, evidence of biomech implantation. She did not make sense. The scan was closer to a Mechanicus cyborg than a Sister of Battle.

The question was pushed away when the woman snatched at one of the threads of silver fibre making up the lines of the ring. Impossibly, it broke, and like the tension in a bow string failing, the perfect hoop of alien steel came apart with a blinding crackle of spent power. Lashing across the room, the metal cut a line of orange sparks over ceiling and deck, bisecting illuminator strips and severing the arm of a gun-servitor that had wandered too close. Tegas watched in amazement as the metal did its trick once again, retreating into itself. Within seconds, it was weaving back into the shape of the scroll, as if nothing had happened.

He marvelled at what he had seen. If these modes of function were available to this necron construct, then the questor could not help but wonder what other shapes it could take. *Poor Ferren*, he mused, *he has no understanding of what he discovered.* He was a child grubbing in the dirt for lost coins, who found a God's ransom instead.

He would have laughed if not for the circumstances he was now forced to face.

Tegas turned and found Sister Superior Imogen's gun pointing at his head. He gave the very smallest of bows. 'Milady,' he offered, as if greeting her at evening prayers. 'Welcome.'

'The laboratorium...' Among the Sororitas, a hospitaller with a drawn, pale face, peered at her surroundings. 'We have been returned to the surface.' Her comrades were swiftly getting their bearings, and they did not like what they saw.

Lumik and the other adepts were cross-communicating silently, and the shared data pool was in danger of brimming over with questions. Where did the Sororitas come from? How does the device work? Who is the hooded one? Has the dig site been compromised?

The answer to the last of those he saw in Imogen's eyes. She didn't need to say it and he felt no need to conceal the lie any longer. Now was the time to exercise damage control, before things could spiral into violence. The Adepta Sororitas were a pious lot and largely narrow of mind, but once roused to anger they would carry their rancour until the death of time itself. Tegas did not wish to find himself at the sharp end of their wrath.

Not now he had something so perfect within his grasp.

'This object,' rasped the hooded one, tracing a bony finger around the closing scroll. 'I sought the closest way back to the convent and the Monolith interpreted that wish literally. It repurposed this device to form a temporary endpoint to the conduit.'

‘Where did you find it?’ Imogen demanded of him. ‘Speak, questor!’

‘It is good fortune that I did so,’ Tegas deflected. ‘It came from the desert... I was able to fathom some of its functions.’ That was almost a truth, and he pressed on. ‘If I had not, perhaps you would have never made it back from...’ He let the words hang, and predictably, one of the other Sisters filled the silence with the answer.

‘We found the caverns,’ said the one carrying the meltagun. ‘Your secret outpost!’

The unaugmented were so easy to manipulate, he reflected, unable to avoid giving voice when caught in the highest of emotional states. ‘I can explain.’ Tegas modulated his tone to appear contrite. ‘I fear we have all been misled—’

‘More lies will only bury you deeper, you boneless clockwork!’ Imogen growled. ‘Your men tried to kill us.’

Tegas silently cursed Ferren’s lack of restraint, but said nothing.

‘Their actions summoned the xenos,’ Imogen went on, ‘and for that we may all perish!’

There were so many things he wanted to know, but the questor realised that his next utterance would be his final one unless he acquiesced. Beaming an order to the other adepts to give no resistance, he bowed to the Sororitas in surrender. ‘I am sure there is an explanation for all of this.’

‘We will see.’ Imogen beckoned her second in command. ‘Bring him!’ spat the Sister Superior. ‘And his toy as well. The canoness must know what we have seen.’ Imogen glared back at Tegas. ‘You will have a steep price to pay for what you concealed from us, maggot.’

‘Sister,’ said one of the others. ‘What about... her?’ She pointed at the woman in the hooded robe.

‘She comes too,’ said Imogen, cutting at the air with her weapon. ‘It is time to reveal all the damned truths hiding in this place.’

The entrance corridor to the stasis-tomb sloped away, and the steady tread of Ossuar’s iron-clawed feet echoed in the heavy air. A single pair of lychguards stood sentinel at the entrance to the nemesor’s vault, warscythes crossed over their chest-plates, the tall fans of their ornate skulls raised as dead eyes stared into nothing. They had not even acknowledged the presence of the cryptek. Instead, after a moment of sampling the intelligence stream via mnemonic probe from the complex’s knowledge nexus, they silently interpreted his intentions and let him pass. Ossuar scanned them as he passed, making a vague attempt to glean an understanding of their thought processes. But the works of the mind of the battle-forms were always hard for him to grasp. It was a cryptek’s way to see the universe in a different manner from those of the warfighting castes, after all.

Ossuar and his kindred were harbingers, and that had been their singular purpose since biotransference, unchanged despite the passed aeons of the Great Sleep. Psychomancers like he were the ones who knew the hearts of the unenlightened child-races the best, and he had often fought with his gift-powers at the fore. Ossuar’s brethren, be they geomancer or plasmancer, the time-weavers or the storm-callers, were the intellectual elite of the necrontyr, echoing in eternity what they had been before the C’tan had come to uplift them. But he and his kind were not soldiers. They were ultimately thinkers, the learned of the dynastic houses. It was not their place to engage in the petty actions of killing the meatbound en masse.

Although... On some level, Ossuar had to process the truth that engaging the human females in direct armed conflict had been briefly... *exciting*.

He followed the inclined corridor down towards the antechamber, led by a vee of wayfinder scarabs etched with the sigil of the Sautekh clan. The cryptek bore the same mark himself, etched by laser on his steel sternum. Data traps in the walls registered him and let him pass, deactivating lethal gauss emitters hidden inside ornamental carvings.

The nemesor’s sleeping chamber opened to him, and the scarabs bowed on their six legs before retreating into their wall-slots. Ossuar paused to examine the latest status update in the Somnus Codex and saw that the revival process was well into the final stage. Beyond, to the right, the annex chamber brimmed with weapons of all kinds, a personal armoury that contained flayers and etherium projectors, gauntlet-mounded voidblades and null spears, tachyon arrows and hyperphasic swords. Ossuar found such an overt display of these killing tools to be without purpose. In his existence, the cryptek had never found the need to use anything other than the abyssal staff he carried with him at all times. But then warfighters did so

fetishise their weapons, a truism that appeared to be valid across all species, even the most inferior ones.

Ossuar made the sacrosanct signs of Activation and Eternity for the monitor eyes observing the interior of the tomb, partly as it was expected of him to pay such ritual obeisance to the Stormlord, but largely to operate the gestural control interface that would lower the force wall between him and the inner chamber. The glittering field dissipated and the cryptek entered the sleeping room proper.

The nemesor's sarcophagus had already risen from its holding claw and was in the process of moving from the horizontal plane to the vertical. A thin trickle of dust rained down from the intricately-machined surface of the iron coffin. Although the slumber in this outpost had been only an infinitesimal fraction of the millions of cycles their kind had spent in the Great Sleep, Ossuar still experienced a moment of trepidation. Awakenings were always difficult things, he recalled, and trauma of mind was sometimes the result. The cryptek recalled his own rise from the Timeless Dream and how helpless it had made him feel at the start, in those vulnerable moments before his machine body re-engaged with his essence. It was not an experience he would ever wish to repeat. Ossuar had privately vowed he would never go dormant again, and that had been in great part why he had taken the role of woken custodian of this place.

The lid of the sarcophagus broke in a line across its centre, and then its length. The four quadrants of metallized stone folded up and away, and the nemesor was revealed.

The warlord, like Ossuar, displayed the same skeletal form as all humanoid necrontyr did, the shape a deliberate echo of the frail bones they had left behind when they embraced the majesty of biotransference. But where the cryptek was spindly and long of finger, the warrior-general was almost muscular. Layers of redundant lamellar armour made of living alloy plated his torso and limbs, and a splayed head-crest framed a gaunt steel face that was bright with copper accents. The Sautekh symbol was brazen upon the general's forehead, as sharp this day as it had been when the master of their dynasty, the undying Imotekh, had burned it there with his fire gauntlet. The Royarch of Mandragora had favoured the nemesor, and the mark made it certain that all who gazed upon the warlord would know so.

A green flash signalled the return of awareness to the figure in the coffin, and his eye slits glowed with renewed life.

Ossuar bowed his head. 'My Lord Khaygis, dream no more. You are needed.' The nemesor's name had not echoed in the halls of the outpost for many cycles.

The general's vocoder favoured a vocalisation like stones grinding across one another. 'Cryptek...' said Khaygis, weighing the title. 'How long?'

'A breath of wind, little more.'

The general rose, slowly and carefully, testing his limbs as he stepped free of the casket. Tiny phylacter arachnids scuttled across him before flinging themselves back into their container, now that their tasks of repair and maintenance were done. 'It must be an issue of import, then.' Khaygis's intonation had a hollow quality, a resemblance to something echoing down a long stone tunnel. 'It must be so, for the great Ossuar to admit he faces something he cannot overcome with intellect alone.'

The cryptek cocked his head. 'I would say that I require... your unique insight.'

'Of course you would,' Khaygis replied, folding knife-blade hands into a fist and back again. 'Show me now.'

'Very well,' began Ossuar. 'But first it might be necessary for me to explain certain facts.'

The nemesor gathered up his robe of command and settled it over his steel shoulders. 'You misunderstand, cryptek.' He closed on the other necron, his leering metal face straightening. 'I have no wish to listen to you give me the interpretation of things you think I should know. I told you to show me.' He reached up and folded his talons around Ossuar's jaw. 'So show me.'

The cryptek felt Khaygis's intrusive mnemonic probe as it beamed from the antennae hidden in his crest, the data-philtre touching Ossuar's outer consciousness. Hastily, he re-ordered his internal firewalls to protect his deep secrets as the nemesor looked into his recent memory stores.

It might have been possible for Ossuar to fully resist the violation of his mindframe, but to offer even token resistance to the nemesor would have been seen as disobedience. Khaygis was cementing his place in the hierarchy from the very start, reminding the cryptek that although he had exalted rank as one of the Stormlord's greatest harbingers, he would never be beyond the general's command.

The two of them shared nothing but suspicion of each other's motivations. The cryptek considered the

nemesor to be little more than a violent braggart, while in return the general saw the harbinger as ill-focussed and obsessive.

Reluctantly, Ossuar accepted the situation and allowed Khaygis to duplicate a full memory feed of everything that had transpired during his dormancy.

As she had been commanded, Sister Miriya leaned forwards and rested the barrel of her bolter against the back of Questor Tegas's skull, her finger upon the trigger.

'At my word of command,' said the canoness, biting out every syllable, 'you will kill this mendacious wretch, is that understood?'

'Aye, mistress,' she replied, holding the weapon steady.

The veteran glanced across to where the ragged, hooded woman stood watching, with Sister Verity at her side. Sepherina frowned, weighing her options.

'She helped us,' Miriya volunteered. 'We all would be dead now if not for her, and this perfidy would have gone unchecked.'

From his position on his knees in the Great Chapel, the Mechanicus adept made a clicking, sighing noise. 'If I can be allowed to explain? All will be made clear.'

At the corner of her sight, Miriya could see where the rest of Tegas's group were surrounded by a ring of similarly-armed Battle Sisters led by Pandora, who cradled a storm bolter in her grip. All of them were experienced in the duties expected of an Adepta Sororitas execution detail.

Sepherina looked to Sister Imogen. 'The device,' she began. 'Where is it now?'

'Secure,' Imogen replied tightly. 'Sister Danae and a group of Retributors hold it in one of the deep prayer cells as we speak. Wards have been placed around the object and explosive charges made ready. If it so much as twitches, it will be destroyed.'

'You cannot do that,' said Tegas.

'You have no right to demand otherwise,' Sepherina snapped.

'You misunderstand,' Tegas replied, his head still bowed. 'I make no demand of you. I simply tell you the facts. You cannot destroy it. You *will not* be able to. The material it is composed of is a living alloy.'

The canoness's eyes narrowed. 'You know so much, questor. How many things have you kept from me since Paramar?' She advanced on him, her fury building. 'Lies standing upon lies! There is nothing you have said to me that I cannot doubt, your every word and gesture subterfuge and artifice!'

Miriya had watched the silent tide of anger rise in the veteran's face as Imogen brought the Mechanicus adepts before her and explained what had taken place. She could not miss the way that Tegas hung on the Sister Superior's every word when she described the portals that took them to the Obsidian Moon, and the tale of what they had encountered there. Miriya suppressed a shudder as Imogen described the echoing metal corridors of the necron complex, the thought of being there crawling at the base of her neck.

It was only now that she had returned to the convent that Miriya was able to parse the sensations she had felt in the lair of the machine-xenos. In all the time they had up there, it was like something in the Battle Sister's spirit had come loose and disconnected. Now that feeling was gone, and she found a moment of understanding.

There was a numbness about the necrons and their machines that leaked into the air around them. A sense of dead space, of decay. Not like the rot of a plague zombie or the charnel stench of a battlefield, worse than that. It was a complete and total absence of the force of life.

Miriya had walked in a place and encountered beings that could only be described as *soulless*. For one whose existence orbited around the light of faith and the power of the human spirit, to experience that chilled the Sororitas to her marrow. The necrons were antithesis, raw and real and made manifest.

She fought down the cold in the core of her soul and snapped back to the moment at hand.

'A concealed dig site, staffed by explorators from your ministry,' Sepherina was saying. 'It is not enough that Inquisitor Hoth and his lackeys disrespected our dead and engineered the exile of the Sisterhood from their own outpost! Now I learn that the Adeptus Mechanicus has been here, perhaps for years, grubbing in the dirt in secret!'

'I admit,' Tegas said carefully, 'that some omissions of data have been made.' The canoness made a growling noise and spat; the questor pressed on before she could order him shot. 'I was aware of Adept

Ferren's presence on the planet. I did not know how large his party was, or what they were doing.'

'Liar,' snarled Imogen, and Miriya was forced to agree.

Tegas kept speaking. 'I came here to deal with him. *Quietly*. Ferren was acting on his own initiative, without oversight. His actions jeopardised the Mechanicus's relationship with the Ecclesiarchy!' The questor shook his head. 'I knew, yes. But how could I have told you? How would the Order of Our Martyred Lady have reacted to such information?'

'With burning censure,' Imogen replied.

'Exactly.' Tegas nodded sharply. 'I came to order Ferren to cease his work here, to remove himself from this world. Please, milady, you must believe me.'

Sepherina moved back and forth in front of the questor, shaking her head. 'That is your explanation? I break through the shell of your untruth and find another nested beneath. Will there be another beneath this one, and another and another?' She pointed a finger at him. 'I submit to you, adept, that you have abused the trust of the Adepta Sororitas to bring you to Sanctuary 101. Once before you warned me that you and your masters might annex this planet for your own needs. I believe that you have attempted that very thing, you and Hoth together in alliance for whatever spoils lie beneath these sands!'

'But why involve us?' Miriya let the question slip.

The canoness looked across at her. 'To cover their lie. Because even they cannot be seen to defy the Imperial Church so blatantly. They pretended to share this duty with us, but all along we are seen as nought but an impediment.' Sepherina looked back at Tegas. 'Tell me, questor. Is Hoth coming here? Have you drawn plans to destroy my Sisters, bury us in the dust on this distant world where no eyes will see?'

'You do not understand,' said Tegas, his tone turning flat and cold. 'This is more important than the corpses of a few dead women.'

Sepherina drew her chaplet and a thin blade emerged from its length with an oiled click. 'I'll slit your throat for your betrayal!'

'Be sure to take the life of your Sister Superior and this one with the gun at my head into the bargain,' Tegas retorted. 'If your blade seeks traitors, they are deserving.'

'A pathetic ploy!' snorted Imogen.

'Is it?' Tegas spat back. 'I have analysed all sensor data on that... female.' He nodded at the revenant. 'You have allied yourself with a monstrosity! A xenos hybrid! You have willingly consorted with something that is inhuman! That is a grave sin against Saint Katherine's name, is it not so?'

'More lies...' said Miriya.

But the canoness hesitated and pointed her chaplet blade at the revenant. 'You,' she said. 'Lower your hood. Show yourself to me.'

Recollection flowed like icy waters.

Time was an abstract for a necron. Once, when they had been organics, the passing of the eras seemed like such a terrible burden, a great cosmic weight upon the back of their species. But when the C'tan came with their gifts of understanding, all that had changed. The passage of the Stargods through the lives of the necrontyr race had left them forever changed, and with the ending of the great war with the Old Ones, they had found a new purpose. Led by the Silent King, the necrons revolted against the powers that had remade them from meat-matter unto the immortal perfection of steel – and finally, trapped in a history mortally wounded by war, they went to the Great Sleep to wait out the millennia.

Time... So much time had passed in the null-state. Both the cryptek and the nemesor shared the same sensation from their past, the same sense of affront they had experienced on awakening. The galaxy they had left behind sixty million years ago had been broken wreckage, a warzone torn open by battles that had erased entire star systems from existence as easily as insects were swatted from the air. The one they awoke to was whole and healed... But it was infested. Not just by the accursed eldar, the lackeys of the old enemy, but by new things that pretended at intellect, that swarmed in the dirt of worlds and believed themselves superior.

The throneworld Mandragora the Golden had awoken to changed fortunes, newly rich in this strange, pestilent present. Its master, the Stormlord Imotekh, had grasped the reality of things far quicker than any of the other Royarchs who had survived the Timeless Dream. Served by a legion of dynasts that counted

Ossuar and Khaygis in their number, Imotekh's crusade for dominance began in emerald fire.

It was this fire that swept to the star the humans called Kavir.

Imotekh's steady march across the galactic plane wove its course even now, out in the depthless tracts of interstellar space where necron tomb ships and harvester cruisers travelled at near-light velocities. The Royarch's grand schema, embedded in the mindframes of every necron in his service from warlord to drone, was to reunite the scattered, sleeping remnants of their species under his sigil. They had come to the Kavir system in search of the Obsidian Moon, and the Dolmen Gate that lay hidden beneath its surface. The Atun, the dynasty that had built it, was weak and scattered, and the Sautekh had claimed it for themselves.

It was almost as an afterthought that the pocket of organics on the surface of the nearby planet were exterminated. Worthless things in the eyes of the Stormlord, impediments to the cause, the human outpost died and the moon was annexed. It was victory.

Or to be accurate, it was a victory of a kind.

Hidden inside the moon, a treasure trove of Atun soldiery and weapons inert but undamaged, ready to be reprogrammed and turned to Sautekh allegiance. Great value to any Royarch, even one as powerful as mighty Imotekh, whose war fleet already brimmed with death-dealers. And there, the Gate itself, rare and precious. Capable of penetrating the immaterial walls of the subspatial network existing in the bones of the void itself.

Rare and precious, indeed. And *broken*, much to the Stormlord's annoyance. Perhaps by the ravages of time, perhaps in the final spasms of the war with the Old Ones... It mattered not. Without the Dolmen Gate in full order, the weapons stored inside the Obsidian Moon could not be deployed, their function stunted.

Ossuar remembered this moment well. He remembered Imotekh's irritation at cracking open this prize only to find it useless to him.

The cryptek saw opportunity and took it. Every member of the Stormlord's hierarchy knew their master was driven by his fire, his eternal desire to press on and never again be tethered to just one single world. Despite the counsel of his trusted warlords – generals like Khaygis – Imotekh refused to remain and dig in at Kavir. There was too much out there, too many other Tomb Worlds yet to be found and awakened, too many dangerous and savage child-races to be left uncultured.

It had been Ossuar's manoeuvrings in the Royarch's court that provided the solution. The cryptek used his influence to ensure that the suggestion did not appear to come from him, but in the end it was only he who could direct it.

The Stormlord could gather his fleet and depart; but someone would need to remain behind, to stand as custodian to the Obsidian Moon while the repairs progressed. Ossuar nobly offered himself in service to that role, to watch over the reconstruction of the Dolmen Gate and the slumbering army, freeing the war fleet to move on and seek new objectives. When the work was done, the fleet would return,

And if, in the performance of this duty, Ossuar was allowed to indulge his own interests in the dissection of organics and experimentation upon them, then so much the better. Alone, unburdened by the drive to battle, he would have his time.

But trust did not come easily to the Stormlord, and indeed it would be a foolish Royarch who allowed a cryptek to stand as de facto master of such an important – if still inert – resource. Rebellions had emerged from such mistakes, and it was the nature of harbingers like Ossuar to seek ways to aggrandise themselves.

Khaygis was the watchman left to oversee Ossuar, placed in suspension while his soldier-mechs followed the cryptek's every move. Should he go against his master's wishes, Ossuar would be nullified, his biopattern engrams deleted and his machine-frame repurposed as a warrior drone.

'All this I know,' said the nemesor. 'I was there. Show me what happened while I slept.'

'As you wish.' Ossuar opened more of his memories, and braced himself for the inevitable torrent of invective he knew would come.

After the fleet departed, Khaygis had soon grown weary of watching the cryptek study the dusty halls of the lunar complex, and tormenting the handful of survivors from the human colony to their death-state. Eventually he chose to embrace the Sleep until such times as the Dolmen Gate was ready. That had been nine solar cycles ago, by the local reckoning.

And now Khaygis saw what had gone on beneath his slumber. Ossuar's experimentation and the agonies he had inflicted upon the survivors. The arrival of more organic ships, drawn by the death-cries of their

colony. Humans from those vessels, allowed to grub in the dirt and touch the relics of necrontyr greatness.

The nemesor's claw slipped around the Cryptek's iron neck. 'What have you done, fool?' he demanded. 'You allowed the organic vermin to return to the planet and you did not exterminate them?' Something like confusion entered his tone as Khaygis scanned the rest of the data. 'More of them? Why, Ossuar? What reason could you possibly compute to let these parasites run free?' The ephemeral, invisible data stream between them abruptly ceased as the general cut himself off.

'They fascinate me,' admitted the cryptek. There was little point in denying it. 'I saw no harm. They were ignorant of us.' He cocked his head. 'We were once like them. The recursion of evolutionary patterns is most compelling. I learn so much from deconstructing them.'

Khaygis emitted an angry buzz and shoved Ossuar away, stalking towards the annex. 'I see now I should never have taken the Sleep, even for a moment. You have treated this duty like your own private science experiment.' He glared at him. 'You harbingers always think you are subject to no rules but your own!'

'It is only my boundless curiosity that—'

The nemesor gathered up an ornate fire gauntlet and silenced Ossuar with a flicker of green flame though his fingers. 'Curiosity?' he echoed. Khaygis reached for a tachyon arrow launcher and secured it around his other wrist. 'That is nothing but the cloak about your desires for power above your station.' He pointed a talon-finger. 'You have put us at risk. What if more of these organics are coming here? With a fleet of ships? Enough to destroy us?'

'They are only humans.' Ossuar could not keep the mocking tone from his vocoder. 'Parasites, as you said. What threat are they?'

'If they are no threat, then why did you wake me?' Khaygis boomed. 'You are in error and you know it full well! And now you have created this mess you panic and come to me to repair the damage for you!'

'Panic is an unproductive emotional state that I do not emulate,' Ossuar insisted. 'The need for it has long since been edited from my consciousness.' He turned as heavy footfalls signalled the arrival of the two lychguards. The cryptek realised that Khaygis must have summoned them via beam-signal.

The dark blades of the warscythes in the hands of the towering guardians turned towards him, directed by the nemesor's silent commands. 'I should have you decompiled,' said Khaygis.

'And when the Stormlord's fleet returns, what would you tell him?' Ossuar retorted. 'That I suffered a damaged actuator and accidentally fell upon an upturned blade?' He pointed at the warscythes. 'The Royarch expects much. The repairs to the dolmen will never be complete without my stewardship!'

At length, Khaygis nodded. 'Know that you remain intact only because of that truth.'

Ossuar allowed himself to bow slightly. 'I beg forgiveness for my presumption. I see the error, indeed. I ask you for your aid in terminating the organics.'

'At last, a directive I can compute.' Khaygis waved the lychguards away and came close to the cryptek. 'How it must sear you to be forced to emulate submission to me. What analogues of resentment do you process at this moment, Ossuar?'

'I exist only to serve the will of the Royarch,' replied the cryptek.

'Then do so by following my every command as if it were that of the Stormlord himself,' Khaygis grated. 'And curb your own petty obsessions until the work is done. Once the Gate is repaired and the army here wakes, you will have enough humans to cut upon and dissect to sate your curiosity.'

The hood fell, and Verity heard the collective gasp as the Sisters in the chapel looked upon the revenant's face and beheld the damage there.

Slowly and carefully, the woman shrugged off the tattered, ragged robe and picked at streamers of cloth, so old and dirt-stained that they tore like strips of sloughed epidermis as she peeled them from her arms and her throat. She mumbled to herself, so low and hollow that Verity could not make out the words.

A human female, indeed, but mutilated by callous intention. Implants of alien design, some of steel, others green crystal or metallic stone, emerged from pockets of sunburnt flesh or pressed up from beneath translucent skin. The works that had been done to her lacked the ritual nature of bio-organ embedding used by the Adeptus Astartes, or even the embrace of machine parts practised by Tegas's precious Mechanicus. She was a tormented woman who carried her tortures with her, *inside* her.

'Throne and Blood,' whispered Sister Pandora. 'How can she still be alive?'

‘How indeed,’ accused Tegas. ‘The scars, canonesse. Do you see the scars on her?’

Verity looked, and she saw. Self-inflicted marks along malnourished limbs and bare skin, lines and circles that mimicked the arrangement of the necron glyphs she had seen inside the alien complex.

‘An agent of the xenos, after all...’ Imogen was saying. ‘I was right to suspect.’ She raised her boltgun.

Suddenly, the hospitaller was stepping forwards, putting herself between the revenant and the muzzle of Imogen’s gun. ‘No!’ she cried. ‘No, you will not do this!’

‘Step aside, nursemaid,’ said the Sister Superior. ‘Truth must out, and force will see to it. First the hybrid and then the adept.’

‘No!’ Verity shouted the denial again, her voice booming across the chapel. ‘You are so quick to hate you do not take a second to think! Do you not question how she came to be here, or who she is?’ The young woman pointed at the sorrowful, emaciated figure behind her. The revenant’s cheeks were wet with tears. ‘You must look with better eyes than that!’

‘They did that to her,’ said Miriya. ‘The necrons... *The cryptek.*’

Verity crossed to the great altar, careful to keep herself in Imogen’s sightline, and found what she was looking for among the fresh votives and prayer tapers; a data-slate. She gathered it up and crossed back.

‘From the moment I glimpsed her face two nights ago,’ she began, paging through the slate’s contents, ‘I knew. When I saw her within this chamber, I knew this woman was a kindred spirit.’

‘I...’ The revenant bowed her head. ‘I don’t know why I came here.’

‘I do,’ Verity replied. ‘This slate contains the memorial record of every Sister who perished at Sanctuary 101, all the faces and names of the dead we honoured outside.’ She halted, a gasp escaping her lips as she found what she was looking for. ‘I was uncertain before... But no longer.’

The hospitaller pressed the slate into the cracked, dirt-smeared hands of the other woman. ‘What... is this?’ she asked, looking down at the device. Teardrops splashed across the glowing screen.

‘This is you,’ Verity told her, her heart hammering behind her ribs. She turned back to face the canonesse. ‘Her name is—’

‘*Decima,*’ said the revenant, the word catching in a sob. ‘My name is Decima.’

On the slate, an unblemished mirror of her ruined face stared back from a decade past.



CHAPTER ELEVEN

For a moment, Miriya's attention was stolen away from the task before her and she stared at the living dead. The woman – *her Sister in arms?* – wept openly, gentle sobs echoing across the Great Chapel.

No one seemed able to speak. It was as if the revelation was so powerful that it silenced them all, robbing them of the power to challenge it.

But then Imogen finally gave voice and the moment shattered like glass. 'Sister Decima is dead. Perished along with all our kindred. There were no survivors of Sanctuary 101.' She made the statement a command.

'I beg to differ,' Verity replied. With deft, practised motions, the hospitaller opened the narthecium pack on her belt and produced a needle, with which she pricked the revenant's bare skin. She ran the needle into a slot on the auspex she carried and let its internal cogitator work, whispering a litany of operation to it. The device gave a chime and she held it up for all to see. 'A blood match. I swear on the Golden Throne, she is Decima.'

'I... am Decima,' mumbled the ragged woman.

'What she was is irrelevant,' Tegas insisted. 'What she is... is a necron plaything.' He glared at the canoness. 'Ask her something, milady. Go on. Ask her a question that only an Adepta Sororitas of this convent could answer.'

Sepherina's glower shifted and she eyed the weeping woman. 'Calm yourself,' she told her, 'and tell me the name of the abbess who commanded here.'

Miriya saw Decima's face tighten in pain as she tried to dredge up the fragment of recollection. It seemed to wound her just to make the attempt.

'That...' She paused, panting for breath. 'I don't...' Abruptly, she gave a savage jerk as if swatting away an invisible insect. '*Shut up!*' she hissed.

'Who do you speak to?' Verity asked gently.

'I don't know!' shouted the woman. Then she looked to Sepherina and repeated the words with deep sorrow. 'I don't know. Her name... is lost to me. So much is lost to me. I am all that is left.'

'Convenient,' Tegas muttered.

'They cut it from her,' Verity interposed. She pointed up, at scarred skin over the revenant's skull. 'We cannot know what they took.'

'Or what they left behind,' said the questor darkly.

Miriya's patience for the adept was running thin and she shoved him with the muzzle of her bolter. 'Run your mouth some more. I dare you.'

Sepherina stepped forwards, ignoring a warning look from Sister Imogen, and ran her hand over the woman's face. 'Is it possible?' she wondered aloud. 'A single survivor? Alive after all this time?'

'He did not want to kill us all at once, milady,' came the reply.

'Who?'

'The cryptek. Ossuar. The one who tormented me.'

Nearby, Sister Pandora ventured a nod. 'Human experimentation. The xenos abused her flesh so it could

better learn how to kill us.'

'I am... so sorry...' said the woman, trembling beneath Sepherina's touch. She was barely holding herself together, and Miriya could see Verity's eyes were wet with sympathetic emotion.

'Decima.' At last the canoness said the name. 'How can we know she is you? The adept, curse him, speaks the truth.' Sepherina held up her chaplet-dagger. 'It would be safer to kill you.'

'It matters little now,' came the reply, thick with emotion. 'I weep for us all. We are all dead.'

'Her mind is broken,' said Imogen. 'Let me end her, mistress. I will make it quick. A kindness.'

Sepherina raised her hand to the Sister Superior, but did not break eye contact with the revenant woman. 'Do you mean to threaten us?'

She gave a slow shake of the head, her gaze dropping until she was glaring at Questor Tegas. 'I mean to tell you,' she began. 'His kind are to blame. I watched them come, watched them cut open the desert and the rock as if it were theirs to toy with as they pleased. Before... Before, the machines were sleeping. Once before they had awoken and fought one another, and we died in the crossfire.'

Tegas said nothing, his synthetic face impassive.

'His kind have disturbed the machines.' She pointed a skeletal finger at the questor. 'The ones in the canyon, his servants... I studied them, tried to stop them. Killed one or two... But I could not prevent it. They have drawn the attention of the necrontyr, stirred them from stupor and indifference... Just as the Sisterhood did before.' She shuddered. 'We paid with blood then. The cost will be the same now.'

'If that is so,' Tegas said, refusing to remain silent. 'Then why now, hybrid? What have you done to stir up the hornet's nest?'

'Not I,' she insisted. '*You* did this. You should have stayed away. The cryptek... He ignored all the clumsy digging in the sands, as long as it was of no consequence. But no longer.' She looked back at the canoness. 'Heed my warning. The machines will rise from their stasis-tombs. Many more of them. They will not return to their sleep until this world is devoid of all alien life.'

'They are the aliens!' Imogen snarled. 'Not us!'

'Not so,' said the woman, shaking her head. 'Not *here*.'

Her words brought the chapel back to the long silence once more. At length, Sepherina turned away, retracting the blade into her chaplet. The canoness glanced at Sister Imogen. 'Send a message to the *Tybal*. Tell the captain to return here immediately.'

'The ship has been gone for several days,' noted the Sister Superior. 'They may have already entered warp space.'

'Even if they are still within the Kavir system, a vox-signal may not reach them in time,' added Pandora. The party dispatched to reconsecrate the convent had no astropath among them. The Sisterhood were well-known for their abhorrence of even the sanctioned slave-psychics used by the Adeptus Terra, and it had been a point of honour that no such being would be among them on this hallowed duty.

'Send it anyway,' Sepherina told them. 'The Imperium must be warned. Inquisitor Hoth was gravely mistaken. The necrons are at large on Sanctuary 101.'

'They never left,' mumbled Decima.

Imogen eyed her. 'If this one is to live for the moment, then we need to know all we can about the threats we face here. She must tell us what she knows.' The Sister Superior shared a look with the canoness that only Miriya seemed to notice. A silent communication passed between them, and the Sororitas wondered once more what they had yet to speak of to the rest of the Sisterhood.

'Her mind is damaged, anyone can see that,' said Pandora. 'How can we know truth from illusion?'

'There is a way,' Verity replied.

The great machine moved about the business of warfare, gantries and rails interlocking so that carrier frames could approach the great cog-shaped embarkation deck and deposit their loads.

Ossuar tuned his expressionless iron face up to watch as an Annihilation Barge detached from a magnetic clamp and floated on humming impellers to the metal decking. The nemesor rode down with it, and he was dressed in his opulent battle robes and chain-tresses. The gold and silver of his matched battle gauntlets glittered in the half-light.

Khaygis's hooded gaze found the cryptek and the warlord graced him with a nod. 'Come to watch,

harbinger?’ Before he could reply, the general continued. ‘Stay out of my way. You have interfered enough.’

Ossuar bowed slightly, spending his irritation in the tight grip he kept on his abyssal staff. The black rod whispered with power, but he kept it in check. Even the smallest exhibition of defiance here and now could have dangerous consequences. It was better to let the braggart strut about and have his posturing. At the end of the matter, when the humans had been exterminated, Khaygis would grow bored again and drift back to slumber... And Ossuar would be in charge once more.

When the first warning had come – when it had been made clear that the idiot organics were playing with the scroll they had happened upon, ignorant of the great powers it contained – the cryptek had sent out a phalanx of warrior drones with simple kill orders and assumed that would be enough. His error had been to underestimate the ingenuity of the humans, specifically the females who against all odds had turned his attack back upon itself, and infiltrated the complex.

Ossuar would never admit the blame for that rested with him. He knew it, but he would never voice it where Khaygis could hear. Any admission of error would be taken by the general and used as a knife to carve him with. He could not afford to weaken his position, so it was with cloaked resentment that he allowed the nemesor to strut and snarl.

It was the survivor that troubled him more than anything else. He had done so very much to take the female to the ragged edges of her body’s endurance, cut her and modified her and made her his great experiment. When she escaped from confinement all those cycles ago, he had almost been able to process something akin to disappointment.

He felt – if it was possible for Ossuar to actually *feel* anything – betrayed by her. The cryptek had let her live after all her fellow humans had been culled, and all he had asked was to observe her pain and catalogue it. He had learned much about the manner in which organics operated, recovering vast quantities of data that had been considered irrelevant during The Uplifting. Then, the Stargods had promised the necrontyr they would never again need to consider organiform matters... But that had been one lie among all the others.

Ossuar’s work was important. He and his fellow psychomancers were the harbingers of despair, and to fulfil that title they needed to understand pain in all its forms. The female had been of great help in that regard.

But she had fled, and the cryptek had reluctantly closed the book on that research. He had never computed the possibility she might have still been *alive* down there on the desert world, and certainly not after all this time. The odds were too great.

The humans seemed to have a knack for defying probability. Ossuar idly wondered if he could set up an experiment to test that theory; he would need a lot of disposable organics for it to work.

Another carrier halted and disgorged a fresh cohort of drones, ready to board a waiting Ghost Ark. There were now two battle-strength phalanxes of warriors armed with charged gauss flayers, several of them still bearing the command mark of the Atun dynasty. This great complex and the Dolmen Gate at its heart had once been an important base for the Atun, before the war broke up their dominions and left them fragmented. It had been easy for the Sautekh to take the Obsidian Moon for themselves sixty million years later. In time, every necron bearing the mark of the Atun would be re-branded as Sautekh. Inwardly that was already so, as insidious abjuration programs crafted by the Stormlord’s cybermagii had already reset their allegiance to the great Imotekh.

The warriors were joined by a unit of immortals. These were necrons of a more powerful build, with greater battle-zone survivability, shock troopers armed with twin-chamber gauss blasters or the crackling power of tesla carbines. The nemesor’s own lychguard were also there, including the pair that had menaced Ossuar in Khaygis’s crypt. There was more than enough for the task at hand, he estimated, much more. And yet, the general’s army was still not yet complete. Other transport frames were coming closer, some bearing heavy autonomous weapons and even a Monolith.

‘Do you think the humans will be so great a threat as to require this much firepower?’ He asked the question as Khaygis strode past him. ‘The organics have a term – *overkill*.’

The general halted and his emerald eye band took the cryptek’s measure. ‘I have heard of it,’ he admitted. ‘I should like to observe it first-hand.’ Khaygis advanced on the other necron. ‘This deed will fulfil more than one purpose, Ossuar. Perhaps, if your consciousness existed outside of the abstract of your theorems and experiments, you would be able to process that fact.’ He gestured at the assembled ranks of

drone-soldiers. 'This time, I will wipe out every organic on the planet.'

'Events repeat themselves,' offered the cryptek.

'Negative,' replied the warlord. 'This time there will be none of them left for you to keep as a plaything, no pets left for you to let run wild and unchecked. Nothing but ashes. Not even a trace, a fragment, a splinter.'

Ossuar raised a taloned hand. 'With respect,' he began, 'it remains important that I be allowed to research the organics. The Stormlord himself ordered that I do so.'

'The Stormlord ordered that to be rid of you from his war fleet,' Khaygis shot back. 'How else could Imotekh divest himself of your peculiar obsessions?'

'It is not an obsession,' Ossuar insisted. 'It is science!'

The general turned and sent a summons towards one of the new arrivals. 'Justify it to yourself as you will. But the humans will die, and the termination of that broken little toy of yours will be foremost among them.'

'I would prefer otherwise,' said the cryptek, trailing after the nemesor as he walked away. 'I have invested much in her... At least, allow me to recover the implants inside the female for repurposing—'

Khaygis did not answer him. Instead, the warlord waited as the soldier he had called upon approached and bowed. Ossuar recognised the configuration of the new arrival's wargear; the hyperspatial waveguides etched into the dull steel armour, the airstream lines of the metallic skull and the dark gaze of the solemn optics within. All these things were characteristic of a deathmark, the marksmen assassins of the great dynasties.

The sniper bowed to his commander. Across his back was the slender, lethal shape of a synaptic disintegrator rifle, the signature weapon of the necrontyr's most deadly killers. Khaygis offered the deathmark a glassy bead, a data-jewel containing information on the sniper's assigned target. The bead activated, displaying a DNA trace and energy signature that the cryptek identified as belonging to his test subject.

'With respect,' Ossuar ventured, 'would it not make a more efficient use of forces to assign the deathmark to eliminate the human commander instead?'

The sniper silently absorbed the data and returned the bead to Khaygis. 'No,' said the general. 'The hybrid you made offends me. And there is another reason.'

'Which is?'

The nemesor gave him a cursory glance. 'Because you wish it.' Khaygis nodded to the assassin. 'Go now.'

The deathmark bowed once more, and the dimensional matrix in its armour glowed brightly. The sniper became insubstantial, ephemeral, before vanishing entirely. Unstuck in space-time, the assassin now existed in a hyperspace oubliette, a micro-dimension out of synch with this universe. From there, the deathmark would track the woman and be drawn to her, waiting in nothingness until he was ready to execute his sanction.

Khaygis looked back at him. 'A lesson must be learned. Not just by the humans, but by you, harbinger. You will be reminded of your place.' His grim visage loomed. 'We are necron. We ascended above these meat-things when the fleshtime was forgotten. But you still dally with them, and it repulses me. I will break you of this addiction.'

'You do not understand,' Ossuar replied. 'The human organics are not a real threat. They present no danger to the great works to repair the Dolmen Gate.'

The general's manner shifted, and his eyes flashed. Khaygis stiffened. He was not one to have his edicts questioned. Resolute ire built behind his words as he spoke again. 'Arrogance brought you to this place, psychomancer. If your skills were not so rare, I would have dissipated your consciousness on the Stormlord's command even before the Timeless Dream! Had you adhered to the letter of Imotekh's commands instead of nurturing desires for power above your station, these other humans would have never been allowed to set foot on the planet! Your pitiful attempts to conceal the depth of your illicit works have been fruitless. I know the full scope of what you have done. There will be censure for your acts, Ossuar. Know that.' He turned away, signalling the activation of the portals. 'But first I will correct your mistakes.'

Zara brought what was needed from the medicae tents set up in the convent courtyard, and as the Sisters Militant looked on with their doubts clear upon their aspect, Verity and the other hospitaller set up the monitorium units.

Imogen had found them a room inside the central donjon, what had once been a chamber for storing prayer books. The space had only high, unreachable slit-windows thick with silt and a single doorway. Outside, Sisters Helena and Danae stood in the corridor with weapons drawn and ready; within, the canoness stood with Miriya and Cassandra as her guardians, watching like a hawk.

Decima sat in a reading chair of old, distressed oak, unmoving, barely breathing. The business of disarming her, of persuading the woman to give up the weapons concealed beneath her cloak, had not been easy. It was only Verity's steady, careful entreaty to her that had finally convinced the revenant survivor to agree – that, and Sister Imogen's departure.

Typically, Imogen's blunt manner had been at the forefront, and finally Canoness Sepherina had ordered her to stand down and convey Tegas and his party away, to a place where they could be put under house arrest. If she remained close by, it was clear that Decima would never relax. She feared the Sister Superior's intentions towards her, and rightly so. Verity did not doubt that Decima would have joined her long-dead comrades already, had Imogen been in command here. For now, the Sister Superior had been charged with imprisoning the questor and preparing the convent's defences for the threat of attack.

'What kind of blade is this?' Sepherina asked the question as she turned Decima's night-black sword over in her hands. 'The metal of the grip and the pommel is unlike anything I have ever seen.'

'The edge cuts through steel as if it were smoke,' Cassandra told the veteran. 'I saw her use it on the necrons. It is some product of alien science.'

'Yet it weighs next to nothing.' The canoness made a slow practice swing with the weapon, and the air crackled quietly in its wake. 'Where did it come from?' she asked.

Decima blinked. 'I don't remember. I think I took it from them. It was a long time ago. When I escaped.'

Sepherina handed the sword off to Cassandra, who took it as if it were coated in poison. 'It is important that you remember,' she told the ragged woman. 'Your life depends on it.'

'Ours too, I think,' noted Miriya.

'Don't be afraid,' Verity told her, as she connected a thin wire to an auspex, then the far end to a probe disc she placed on Decima's throat. 'You're safe here.'

'No,' Decima told her, with chilling firmness. 'None of us are safe here. They came once, they will come again. There will be no errors this time. They learn.'

The canoness found another reading chair where it had fallen, and righted it, dragging it to set herself down at arm's length from the other woman. 'Decima,' she began, 'if that is who and what you are... You will remember for us.' Sepherina gestured at the walls. 'Our records of what transpired here are full of blank spaces and voids, half-facts and missing time.'

'Yes,' breathed the revenant. 'I know.'

'I need to understand,' the canoness went on. 'I need to be sure of what you are, beyond all shadow of a doubt. Are you the woman Sister Verity believes you to be, or some cleverly constructed proxy that speaks with her voice and apes her manner?'

'I have no answer to give you,' came the reply.

'For your sake,' said Sepherina, signalling Miriya and Cassandra, 'I hope that is not so.' The two Battle Sisters raised their bolters and took aim. Miriya felt reluctance drag on her a moment, but she pushed it away. *Orders were orders*. If the proof Verity was looking for could not be found, then Miriya would put a bolt-shell through Decima's heart, and Cassandra another through her skull.

'Rest now,' Verity was saying, as she held an injector bulb at Decima's throat. 'This will ease you into the memory.'

The injector touched her flesh and Decima went rigid, her bony limbs stiffening. 'Don't speak to me,' she hissed, glaring past the Sister into the middle distance. 'I won't stay silent for you! I won't!'

'She talks to ghosts,' Zara said, with trepidation. 'To voices only she can hear.'

'Perhaps we need to listen to them as well,' Verity shot back, gently soothing the other woman's distress.

Decima slumped as the drug from the injector passed through her. The revenant's eyes lost focus, and her arms slackened, hands falling into her lap.

‘Is it done?’ said the canoness.

Verity nodded. ‘She is on the edges of a trance-state, lulled by the philtre. She won’t harm herself.’

Sepherina leaned closer. ‘Hear me. You will tell the tale of what happened here. Spare no detail. How did you survive the attack on Sanctuary 101? How have you managed to live in the wilderness for more than ten years? What did the xenos do to you? Answer me.’

++Confess to them++ said the Watcher. *++Tell them the truth of how you failed so utterly. And when you are done, they will execute you++*

The voice seemed to boom off the confined walls all around her. She blinked, peering at the faces of the Battle Sisters. Couldn’t they hear it? It was so loud, so strident. It was impossible to ignore. How could they be deaf to it?

++You failed. You know how they punish failure++

‘I failed...’ The words left her lips.

The canoness eyed her. ‘Explain.’

++Tell them and you will die for it++ screamed the voice. *++You can still escape, kill these ones and flee, back to the desert where it is safe++*

Her hand gave a reflexive twitch, and she felt betrayed by the impulse.

The Watcher seized on the moment. *++Out there you cannot die, out there you will be free to hide and watch these ones perish when the attack comes, you alone will survive again++*

A dark emotion took hold in her chest. ‘I survived,’ she went on, sickened at the horrible, inescapable truth of that statement.

With care, the woman called Decima pressed her torn nails into the palms of her hands until they pierced the skin and drew thin rivulets of blood. The pain provided a focus, and it made the voice turn distant.

At first, the words came with hesitation and care. She cautioned herself and edited her speech before uttering it, but from moment to moment that began to change. The pain, the buzzing burn from the small cuts on her hands, was magnified through the echo chamber of her memory. She remembered *hard*, the terrors of capture and confinement, of escape and evasion, all of them returning to her as little by little Decima allowed the floodgates to open.

The other women fell silent as she told them of the first attack. ‘There was no warning. They came just before the dawn, destroying the power plant. In the gloom, they hunted the Sisterhood down every corridor and passage.’

‘The necrons,’ prompted the canoness.

She nodded. ‘Skeletons of steel... I saw a...’

++A sickly green glow following them wherever they went. Silver cutting blades++

Decima heard the words and could not be certain if she had said them. And suddenly she remembered a face that had been lost to her for years. Elspeth. Her dear Sister, her confidante and close friend.

++Clever Elspeth, who was good at regicide and games of tall card++ The Watcher was very far away, but not enough to go unheard. *++Pious Elspeth who sometimes mumbled the catechisms in her sleep++*

She shook her head, bringing up one blood-marked hand to grind the heel of her palm into her eye-socket. ‘Iron skulls,’ she managed. ‘A baleful gaze like burning emeralds. We had never seen anything like them.’

The others were hanging on her every word. The canoness studied her, and for an instant, her face flowed like wax and she took on the aspect of Decima’s own commander, a decade now dead and gone. She heard her words rise up from the depths of memory, and for a blessed moment the Watcher was blotted out.

‘The artefact must never fall to the xenos.’ She repeated the order that had been given to her on that final day.

Sepherina reacted as if she had been struck, jerking back so much that the reading chair she sat upon scraped across the stone floor. ‘What did you say?’

‘This is my last command to you,’ said the revenant, a faraway look in her eyes, her tone thick with emotion. ‘Go now. Take it and go.’

‘Take what?’ whispered Cassandra, from the side of her mouth. ‘What artefact?’

Miriya could only guess; but then she caught Verity's eye and saw a measure of understanding in the hospitaller.

The canoness held up the blade of her hand to silence them before anyone else could speak. 'Who said that to you?' she demanded.

'You did,' said the ragged woman. 'She did. Agnes. The canoness.' Her bloodied hands came up and she held them in the position one might adopt if they were holding a newborn child. 'I cradled it,' she went on. 'Against the storm and the fire, I was mother to it. Protector.' The hands began to tremble and they dropped away.

Colour darkened the woman's face. She slumped forwards, and her manner shifted as Miriya watched a great shame overcome her.

'Where...?' Sepherina stopped, and glanced around at the others. She was hesitating, afraid to complete her question within their earshot. Finally, the canoness's gaze crossed that of Verity, and her tone grew firm again. 'Where is it now?'

It was a long time before the revenant answered, in a small, sorrowful voice. 'My disgrace is eternal. He Upon The Throne sees it still. I can never escape it.'

Sepherina shook her head in frustration. 'Where?' she insisted, heedless of the other woman's distress.

'I was unable to complete my mission. They came and took us both. I expected to die...' A shudder passed through her thin frame. 'The cryptek had other intentions for my flesh.' Suddenly she was shivering, even though the air in the store room was close and warm. She began to whimper and mutter in low, almost inaudible tones.

'The alien broke her mind,' said Verity. She glanced at Zara, who looked up from the auspex and returned a grave nod. 'But did not destroy it.'

'The power of faith can endure much,' said Miriya. 'The Emperor protected something in her.'

The canoness's brow furrowed. 'How did you escape?'

'The Watcher told me how,' she admitted. The name meant nothing to any of them. 'I fled into the desert, and I survived. Alone with only the voice.' She tapped a torn finger on her temple.

'She hears voices we cannot,' Cassandra repeated quietly.

'Is it any wonder?' said Verity. 'Surviving alone out in the desert wilderness, recovering from torture and experimentation.' The hospitaller gently took the revenant's hands and dressed the self-inflicted wounds there. 'Her persona must have fragmented and crumbled as she struggled to stay alive and search...' Verity looked at the canoness. 'For that which she lost?'

'Take care, nursemaid,' said Sepherina, ice forming on the words.

'But she's right, isn't she?' Miriya let her bolter drop from her shoulder-ready stance. 'Ever since we landed on this dust ball, you and Sister Imogen have been looking for something. This is not about the necrons, or the dead, or Hoth and Tegas and whatever secret pacts they may have made. You have hidden something from us, milady. And since the very start of the pilgrimage, I would warrant.'

Verity nodded at her Sister's statement. 'What could be so important?' she asked. She did not demand, or insist that Sepherina answer her – and yet, the compulsion to reply crackled in the air.

Slowly, the canoness got to her feet and studied their faces in turn. Her hand twitched close to the butt of her holstered pistol, and her stony, unreadable expression returned.

But only for a moment. By degrees, the hard, unchanging aspect she showed them disintegrated, and Sepherina showed them truth. She looked stricken, like the lost orphan girl she once had been, like they *all* had once been.

Verity felt a jag of sorrow as, for the first time, she gained some sense of the great burden that the canoness had been silently shouldering.

'A lie has been told,' Sepherina began. 'A great gift was stolen from us in this place, twelve years ago. An artefact of exalted significance, something priceless and irreplaceable. Lost by pure chance in the xenos attack.' She looked down at Decima, who hung her head low, mouthing a prayer.

'A relic?' asked Cassandra.

'Aye,' The canoness nodded. 'This secret is known only to a few of the highest-ranked abbesses and certain members of the Sisterhood. I have borne this burden ever since Hoth first told us of the loss of

Sanctuary 101. It has been my singular onus since then, and now you will all be sworn into the same oath, on pain of death.’ Sepherina waited for them to nod their wary agreement before she went on. ‘It was deemed that it would travel the galaxy, making a pilgrimage to every convent, holdfast and citadel of the Order of Our Martyred Lady. No matter how remote or how far from the axis of the Core Worlds. It was ordered so, to bring a moment of light to all places we called ours.’

Verity had heard of such things; while most pilgrimages of Imperial artefacts and saintly relics required that devotees cross space to come to them, there were some shrines that were constantly in motion, aboard ships or with cadres of preachers and missionaria soldiers to protect them.

But what had happened on Sanctuary 101? What had been within these walls when the necrons had struck?

‘*The Hammer and Anvil*,’ said Sepherina, and she spoke the name as if it were agony to do so.

Miriya, Cassandra, and the other Battle Sisters went white with shock, and Decima let out a faint sob. Their shock was palpable.

Zara frowned. ‘I... do not know that name,’ she admitted.

‘It is an object sacred to the daughters of Saint Katherine, the founder of their sect,’ Verity told her, nodding at Sepherina and the others. ‘The nature of it will never be revealed to us, or to anyone else outside their Order. But I have heard the name, and I know that it is of great value to them.’ Verity recalled the stories about *The Hammer and Anvil*. Some said it was a weapon of great power created by the Emperor himself during the time of the Horus Heresy, capable of blinding suns; perhaps a great storehouse of cosmic knowledge without rival among any species, human or xenos; or a device capable of shifting the flow of time itself, built by a rogue caste of technologists employed by the apostate lord Goge Vandire.

Cassandra turned on the canoness, her eyes flashing. ‘How can this be?’ she spat. ‘The relic is on Ophelia VII, in our shrinehold!’

‘No,’ Sepherina told her. ‘That is the fiction told to the galaxy at large. In reality, it has been in motion for the last four hundred years, secretly crossing and re-crossing the space lanes as it visited every place we hold sacred...’ She trailed off. ‘Until it came here.’

‘And this was done without the knowledge of the wider Sisterhood?’ Miriya asked.

Sepherina nodded. ‘Private ceremonies were held in each place, as blessings were made. It was done in secret so that the relic would not be threatened.’ She frowned. ‘There are many who would wish to possess it.’ The canoness reached into a pocket concealed in her robe and returned with a small, oval pict-slate. ‘This image is all that remains.’

The display showed a container made of heavy, starship-grade metals, inscribed with runes and wards, carved symbols of the Sororitas spread across the surface. Decima’s hand went to her mouth when she saw it, harsh recognition etched across her features.

‘It is lost,’ she moaned. ‘I failed...’

‘It is *not*,’ said Verity, snatching the pict-slate from Sepherina’s hand. ‘It is not lost. I saw this object.’ The closer she looked, the more she became certain.

Miriya saw it too and gave a silent nod of agreement.

‘Where?’ Sepherina demanded. ‘Speak, for Throne’s sake!’

A grey, dust-caked metal drum etched with a fleur-de-lys. The memory of it snapped into hard focus in Verity’s thoughts. ‘Ossuar... The necron tormentor. I saw that container in his laboratory. What you seek is up there inside the Obsidian Moon.’

Sister Imogen placed them in the cell-crypts, one member of the questor’s team in a compartment, each of them separated by one empty cell, with a local-range countermeasures transmitter set up in the corridor to make it difficult for them to engage in wireless communication. Similarly, the acerbic woman had left Battle Sisters patrolling the corridor outside, watching for any of the Mechanicus adepts who might have dared to use a mehadendrite or laser beam to connect to one of their fellows.

Tegas had weighed the options, judging if an attack against their captors would work, and the probabilities returned to him were less than favourable. He elected to offer no resistance for the moment, and Lumik and the others followed his example.

Instead, he decided to play a longer game. For all the things that had been done to offend the Sisterhood,

it was only acts of heresy that they would kill for without hesitation, and Tegas would never betray the Throne. Sepherina and Imogen, for all their stern snarls and righteous anger, would not murder him out of hand. He was alive because they wanted him to face what they considered his misdeeds before the High Lords of Terra. It would never occur to them that perhaps some of those self-same High Lords were complicit in what was going on in the Kavir System.

He decided he would wait and look for an opportunity; but Tegas didn't expect to see it so very soon.

'A great gift was stolen from us in this place, twelve years ago. An artefact of great significance, something priceless and irreplaceable. Lost by pure chance in the xenos attack.' Sepherina's voice came to him on a narrow bandwidth that the crude Sororitas jammer had no hopes of blocking. It was being transmitted from a microscopic surveillance probe no bigger than a sand-fly. In the moments before Imogen had turned her guns on him, Tegas had released the miniscule robot from a pod in his arm. Currently, it was hiding in a crevice on Sister Cassandra's power armour, the crackle of static over the transmission indicating to the questor that it was close to the Battle Sister's backpack microfusion generator. He ordered the probe to crawl into a position where its sensors could better relay the ongoing conversation.

Now Sepherina was talking about secrets and clandestine pilgrimages, and Tegas's interest was piqued.

Then she said the name of the relic, and unbidden, the questor's emotive emulator gave him a kick of adrenal reaction. *The Hammer and Anvil*. He knew of it; like a million other relics and legendary items from the deep past, the Adeptus Mechanicus had a file on the object. It was inconclusive, little more than a list of possibilities, but it was undeniably tempting.

The revelation made immediate sense to him. All this time, and he had been labouring under the impression that the Sororitas wanted nothing more than to bury their dead and make melancholy speeches about the victims of necron aggression... But they were here for the same reason he was, in search of a glittering prize.

If the Sororitas relic was in the Kavir System, then Tegas's quest had just gained a new and exciting objective. There was still time to salvage this mission, still time to turn it to his advantage and return home not only with Inquisitor Hoth's gratitude but also an artefact that would lead him straight to exalted rank and high office on Mars.

Necron weapons and a fabled, sacred item of lost-tech. It was a bounty worth risking everything for... And if the Sisters perished in the winning of it, then that would be a tragedy he would have to endure.

Tegas granted himself leave to do something human, and smiled as he listened on.



CHAPTER TWELVE

Uriahi Zeyn ran a thick-fingered hand through his unruly hair and pulled it back into a tight, high ponytail, binding it up with a brass wire as he climbed the spiral staircase inside the watchtower.

Each stone of the steps was engraved with words from one of the verses from *The Book of Atticus*, and he whispered them to himself from memory as he rose into the dimness. There was scant light inside the tower other than the faint pre-dawn glow that ventured in through the gun slits in the stone walls. The deacon emerged on the battlement tier and took a moment to pause, drinking in the sound of the workgangers going about their duties below him, at the foot of the shield wall.

They did not sing, because the canoness had ordered them to maintain a sense of order and quietude. Zeyn disagreed with that – the work was a sacred task, and being unable to raise voice in the duty of it seemed somehow negligent. He loved the hymnals and a day without them was like being denied water or air. The only sounds were the occasional mutter of the men and the steady clink of metal on stone as they cut and placed the blocks that would rebuild the collapsed segment of the wall. Floating lume-globes drifting over the heads of the workers offered weak illumination, but enough that Zeyn could see them all and measure the pace of their efforts.

He wanted to sing with them, but Sepherina forbade it. The thought brought a grimace to his lips. The God-Emperor had so much to watch over, he mused. How was He supposed to turn His gaze this way, if not by hearing the songs of His most devoted?

The workgangers saw Zeyn and they all put on a spurt of fresh exertion, and made sure not to meet his gaze. The deacon's electro-whip hummed in its holster, and there was not a single man or woman among them who had not felt the lash of it. Zeyn folded his thick arms and scanned the group, searching for any infraction he could punish.

He counted the shift a man short.

The whip came out and uncoiled, a neon-bright streamer twitching in his grip. 'You.' The preacher pointed at the nearest man to him. 'The work party is shy a soul. Tell me where he is—'

He had no need to say the words *or face the whip*. The man pointed up at the higher tiers of the guard tower.

'Went there, he did,' came the nervous reply. 'Went for water, padre.'

Zeyn nodded down to the flagstones below, to where one of the Sister Hospitallers was moving among the labourers with a jug. 'There's enough here.' The deacon gave the worried workganger a threatening look that promised censure if this proved to be a falsehood, then he turned on his heel and returned to the spiral stairs. Careful to walk as silently as his bulk would carry him, Zeyn climbed to the very top of the minaret.

The slender tower was designed with a gun post at the apex, where a heavy weapon could be emplaced and give a full sweep of the outlands beyond the convent's walls, but the damage suffered in the xenos attack had collapsed part of the structure, opening the tower to the air and ripping away its easterly battlements.

The deacon had been a soldier in the Imperial Guard before he had gone to his holy calling, and he had lost none of the military training the instructors had beaten into him a good thirty years earlier. It was these

skills that spotted the makeshift tripwire arranged by the roof hatch. An oil can dangled from a cord, a handful of pebbles inside it. The crude device would have been enough to warn anyone on the roof they were about to be discovered.

With care, Zeyn made safe the alarm line and slowly went the rest of the way. He emerged on the roof to find a workganger in a leather vest bent down over what appeared to be a pict-slate. A stylus in one hand moved in swift little jerks of motion, as lines of ideograms were entered into the device's memory.

The deacon let the lash out once again, and cleared his throat.

The man started and jerked to his feet, grimly holding on to the slate, his other hand fumbling at the catches on his vest. 'Beg... Beg pardon,' he began. The glow of the whip made his face pale and ghostly.

'Sloth,' Zeyn began, measuring out the word. 'Sloth is one of the aspects of a man of low character. He lets his fellows do their share and shirks his. Thinks he's better than the rest...' The deacon had given this lecture and the accompanying discipline a hundred times, and was about to again – but something in the worker's manner stopped him.

The pict-slate. The slight man gripped it like it was his lifeline.

Zeyn was adroit with the use of the electro-whip, enough that he could strip a single leaf from a tree branch. He flicked his wrist and the tip snapped up, cutting a line of blue fire over the workganger's hand. The man screamed and the slate went flying, spinning away cross the flagstones.

The deacon bent to recover it. The device's display was covered with symbols that he couldn't read, coded numeric runes in long, meaningless strings. 'What is this?' he demanded, searching his memory for the worker's face, his story.

It came to him: Jonah Sijue, an indentured citizen working a six-solar contract with the Imperial Church, as payment for a feast day infraction. He was a stonecutter, and he should have been hard at work, lasing rock into perfect cubes for the new wall.

What Jonah Sijue certainly was *not* was a man who had the wealth to own a device of such fine manufacture as this slate, nor was he a man of such learning who would be able to parse a complex text-code like this one.

Sijue's face lost its dull, cow-like blankness and grew an expression of cold, steady focus. 'Turn it over,' he told the deacon, without fear.

Zeyn did so, and there on the back of the device was a symbol stamped into the metal. A capital letter ringed by wards in High Gothic; an 'I' bracketed by crossed spears.

'You know what that means,' said Sijue, rubbing at the wound on the back of his hand. 'Now return it to me.' Gone was the obedient, servile nature the man had shown on their previous encounters.

'The Inquisition,' Zeyn had to say it aloud just to be certain of it. 'You... You are not of the ordos! You are a helot, a drudge doing the Church's work!'

Sijue drew a disc of dark metal from inside the lining of his vest, and it unfolded into the shape of a holdout pistol. A silencer baffle shrouded the muzzle. 'Clever toy, isn't it?' remarked the man. 'Like a logica game. Something too clever for you to meddle with, priest.' He gestured at the slate. 'Give it back, now. Give it back and we'll forget all of this. I'll go back to work. And so will you.'

Zeyn wasn't a fool. Oh, the Sisterhood had kept their motivations close and spoken little of what happened on Sanctuary 101 before this reconsecration – but he had heard the stories, the rumours. The workgangers spoke freely when they thought he was not listening. They talked of many things, some ideals fanciful and unlikely, others less so. Some said the Ordo Xenos were enamoured of this planet and wanted it for themselves. Some said they were being watched by the Inquisition at every turn here.

He hadn't done anything to disabuse the workgangers of these beliefs. Paranoid men tended to work harder than those at ease with their lot. But Zeyn had found it hard to imagine that the exalted guardians of Imperial integrity would be drawn to somewhere so remote and so desolate as this world.

He thought differently now, however.

'Put away the whip and give me the slate,' said Sijue. 'I won't ask you a third time.'

Sudden heat boiled at the back of Zeyn's thoughts. 'You will kill me to keep this secret? Whatever master you serve, you do so in darkness!' He took a warning step forwards, and the tiny gun muzzle rose with it. 'In the name of the God-Emperor, I refuse!'

'I serve Him as much as you do,' Sijue replied coldly. 'As much as any of these fools or those

sanctimonious nuns. But there are some things more important than prayers or—’

He never finished the sentence. From below, down on the broken wall, a man cried out and the voice broke the pre-dawn hush with such abruptness that they were both distracted for a split-second. Sijue reflexively glanced away, and Zeyn reacted without thought, snapping the whip once again.

He caught Sijue across the chest and face, and the smaller man spun back in a cluster of sparks, howling. The deacon ran to him and batted him down, one heavy punch from his ham-sized fist enough to disarm and put him on the floor. The gun clattered away, as the wind began to pick up. Particles of loose sand hissed across the stones.

Warily, Zeyn peered over the lip of the tower and looked down, careful to keep the injured man at the edge of his vision. He saw the workers breaking rank and scrambling to climb back over the half-repaired wall, some of them in such haste they were shoving one another aside in panic.

What was putting them to flight? His grip stiffened on the whip’s handle as he glared out past them, to the open, rock-strewn sands beyond the convent walls.

Out there, in the half-dark and the low clouds of dust, he saw what looked like fireflies, lines of them bobbing and dancing as their phosphors glowed; but then they began to resolve into other shapes, the green glimmering moving in steady, careful motions, radiating out from eye-sockets in metal skulls.

The swarm of lights broke apart and changed, the trick of it as clever and dangerous as Sijue’s secret gun.

He heard the man curse under his breath and speak a prayer to Holy Terra as he caught sight of the same thing. ‘They c-come,’ he blurted, his manner shifting once more, this time into raw fear. ‘If we see them, they are already surrounding us!’

Zeyn rounded on him. ‘Did your ordos masters do this?’ he demanded. ‘Are they here because you brought it on us?’

When Sijue looked up at him, his eyes were blank with absolute terror. ‘I have no wish to learn the answer.’ Something made a bony crunch inside the man’s mouth and Sijue lolled back, his eyes rolling to whites, a toxic pink froth gathering on his lips. His chest stuttered and was still.

The deacon looked away and saw lines of metal soldiers moving inexorably into the glow of the work-lamps, silent and purposeful.

Khaygis was disappointed.

He had yet to be challenged by the meat, on whatever worlds he faced them, in whatever form they opposed the might of his armies. Each time he awoke from the sarcophagus-sleep, he hoped that the next battle would be the one to truly test him – but that day had not yet come.

And even now, as he watched the phalanxes of his warriors and immortals advancing on the human outpost, he doubted that the organics who fled before their march would prove to be a worthwhile foe. He wondered if he ever would meet an enemy he could consider worthy, and thought it unlikely. After all, he was a soldier who had fought in the War in Heaven, once of those who had seen the Old Ones defeated in the time before the slumber. Millions of years later, and the galaxy saddened him with its inability to produce an opponent to match those he had killed so long ago.

He had been here before. It was the nemesor who had commanded the first assault on this compound, a dozen solar cycles ago. Then, fresh from the Atun pacification, it had seemed like a new test of his skills and his soldiers. The necrontyr had never faced this particular tribe of meat-being before, these females that called themselves ‘*Soh-ror-it-az*’, who emitted strange choral melodies as they fought, and refused to surrender.

But they died as easily as the rest. In the end, the assault on the outpost had been more an execution than a military strike. The females had been unprepared and poorly commanded. Khaygis, linked into the slave-minds of every last warrior under his authority, had flowed through their defences like liquid mercury, arriving by portal and Monolith. He had killed many with his own talons, and never been truly threatened along the way.

The humans died in their droves, not knowing what had destroyed them, unable to name it. He would ensure they would do so again, and this time he would be thorough.

Gauss flayer beams erupted in a wall of flames as the leading rank crested the broken wall, blazing into

the backs of the organics who attempted to flee. Defensive gunfire from the towers and the unbroken stretches of wall answered back, and the nemesor sensed the first few shutdowns as warriors were knocked off-line by the massive kinetic impacts of ballistic rocket-shells. Even as they fell, they entered regeneration cycles, the living metal of their bodies knitting back together over their bloodless wounds. Khaygis stroked the resurrection orb at his side, hastening their return to battle with a small measure of the device's powerful essence.

The immortals, true to their name, marched undying into the teeth of the human guns and let fly with their tesla carbines. Blue-white fire reflected off their morose skull-faces as chains of living lightning leapt into the human cohort, ripping from one organic to another, gathering power from the life-force they liberated with each screaming kill.

Alarm bells tolled inside the walled outpost, and with the great acuity of his vision band, the nemesor could pick out the arrival of more of the combatant females, a blaze of green reflecting off their space-dark battle armour. They did not rush to meet his first advance, but instead fell into defensive stances, setting up fire corridors and chokepoints.

He cocked his head. These ones were better prepared than the others had been; they had been waiting for an attack, not caught unawares by it. Perhaps they would be more of a challenge.

But that was unlikely. Khaygis turned away and transmitted a new order-meme to his forces. The constant, dusty wind picked up its tempo, and from high overhead, a new sound joined the melee.

The Tomb Blades came in fast, the scream of their repulsor drives resonating off the hillside. Resembling some strange combination of a cargo-crane's claw and a metallic throne, the flyers shone dully in the wan light. A flight of three craft, each armed with a particle beam cannon, tore down over the walls and stitched lines of crackling red-orange light across the flagstones. The beams cut black lashes into the rock, and the workgangers who did not get to cover in time were flashed to wet clouds of cinders when the fire-light touched them.

Sweeping ahead of the advancing lines of the necron warriors, the flyers hammered at the defensive positions manned by the Battle Sisters, looping in the pre-dawn air and slicing into their barricades. The warrior mechanoids wired into the command trains of the Tomb Blades were less pilots than they were components in the killing machine, there only to process the complicated strings of attack data and combat patterns. They piloted their craft dispassionately, focussed blankly on the business of breaking the morale of the defenders so that the ground forces could progress more easily.

But the God-Emperor's Sororitas were not ones to break. Years of duty, of unflinching discipline, of battle against all the foes humanity had to face made them ready to weather alien attack without hesitation.

The women who had died in Sanctuary 101 twelve years earlier perished because they had believed this world to be benign. They had allowed the desolation and the emptiness of the planet to lull them into a false sense of security – and they had paid for that with their blood, ending their lives in desperate defence of this remote outpost.

The women here now knew full well the dangers their Sisters had not seen, and they were ready for them.

As the Tomb Blades wheeled in the air and came back for another pass, a squad of Sister Danae's Retributors took position and made ready. Experienced Battle Sisters to a woman, they were specially trained in the use of heavy weapons. They considered themselves to be the hammer of the Sororitas forces.

Danae gave the command for weapons free and the Retributors cut the sky. Heavy bolters thundered, dense mass-reactive rounds blasting the necron flyers. The searing bright discharges of meltaguns joined them, throwing brief flares of stark, juddering illumination over the courtyard.

They found their target, and the first true enemy casualty was struck as a Tomb Blade erupted in fire. The pilot within was so heavily damaged that not even its inbuilt reanimation protocols could overcome the storm of shot and shell, and the flyer disintegrated into a metallic rain, clattering down over the open quad.

Particle fire answered back and claimed the lives of Battle Sisters, the kills coming so fast that they were robbed of the chance to scream. The Retributors fought harder, avenging their kindred with defiant retaliation. A second Tomb Blade was hit, colliding with the third as it struggled to maintain airspeed. Both flyers, oozing thick and acrid smoke, broke off the attack and flipped over, rolling away towards the hills

and into the embrace of the echo of engine noise. Their attack blunted for the moment, they retreated to repair and regenerate.

The Sororitas regrouped and gathered up their injured while the ranks of necron warriors, steady and unhurried, continued to approach.

Her red combat cloak flaring, Sister Isabel sprinted across the courtyard as flayer beams probed towards her, blind-firing bursts of bolter shells in the direction of the alien advance.

In a strange way, she felt *relieved*. Ever since the Sisterhood had returned to Sanctuary 101, an ominous air of foreboding had hung over everything. Isabel was not the only one who had felt it; the eerie graveyard emptiness of the desert planet had weighed heavily on the minds of many of her Sisters. Every day that passed on the surface tightened the rack of tension. Each of them held the secret fear that the xenos who wiped out the first colony would return – and now they had, the terrible waiting was over. The threatened storm was breaking at last.

Silence and tedium dragged on Isabel's nerves like razors on her skin, but battle she could embrace as if it were an old friend.

Her bolter's slide snapped back as she expended the last shell in the clip, and she vaulted a low wall to drop down into cover behind the rubble of one of the destroyed statues.

Sister Ananke was close by, methodically aiming, firing, aiming, firing. She ignored the streaks of eldritch green flame that lashed at the stone around her. The pungent stink of burnt rock and fused sand soured the air. Isabel ducked and busied herself loading a fresh magazine.

'How many of them have fallen?' Isabel asked, without preamble. She scanned the enemy approach with her single cybernetic eye, drawing in target data. She counted many.

'Hard to tell,' Ananke replied, between shots. 'We put them down and they resurrect, they rise again.' She fired again. 'I swear I have killed the same ones a dozen times now.'

Isabel executed a pop-up attack and blasted an immortal back into the dust. 'Aye,' she admitted, 'they all look the same.'

With exaggerated, spindly motions, the necron machine dragged itself back to a standing position, and then walked on as if nothing had happened. Each of the immortals raked energy fire across the courtyard with each step nearer they took

Ananke followed Isabel's lead and joined her as she attacked the same target again. This time, it dropped and disappeared behind the advancing line, but it was not clear to either of them if it was down and out, or if the necron would once more rise to plague them.

'We need reinforcements,' Ananke grated into her vox-bead. 'Cutting and sniping at them won't be enough.'

Isabel said nothing. She had come from the central keep, where the raising of the alarm had sent the Battle Sisters to combat ready, each standing a post to repel the invasion. From the crackles of weapons fire coming from the battlements to the west and the south, it seemed that the wall breach before her was not the only place where the xenos were making their assault. She had no idea if there was anyone who could come to their aid; but it was clear that they did not have enough guns to hold the line for long.

'Steady your will,' came a strident voice, so loud that both Battle Sisters heard it through the vox and the air. 'Sing with me!'

A deep, bass voice bellowed out the first line of the hymn Holy Terra We Beseech Thee, and Isabel's augmetic eye caught the movement of a figure bounding over the fallen statuary.

Lit by surges of green fire, Deacon Zeyn came running like a wild man, his hair streaming out behind him, his eyes lit with fervour. In one hand he gripped an industrial laser cutter liberated from the wall rebuild, and in the other his electro-whip spun and flashed. 'Against the alien, we prevail!' he shouted, burning white light across the line of the necron advance.

Isabel saw the immortals actually slow for a moment, as if they were startled by the sudden appearance of a lone human, coming in to fight them hand-to-hand. But then, they were only machines, were they not? The unpredictable ways of men were not known fully to them.

'To the deacon!' shouted Ananke, seeing the same opportunity. 'Go!' The dark-skinned Sororitas leapt from her cover, firing and running. Other Battle Sisters nearby heard her cry and followed suit.

Isabel grinned and mantled the plinth before her, leading with her gun. 'We prevail!'

Zeyn's whip lashed out and struck the leading elements of the necron line, discharging its full power into the machine-skeletons. They performed a mad dance as the electro-discharge misfired their motor controls, and one of the immortals jerked, sweeping up its gauss blaster while still firing, turning its gun over the torsos of its brethren.

Isabel used her cyber-eye to target and shoot without needing to raise her bolter to her shoulder, sprinting into the dithering necron skirmish line. The machines had been caught off-guard, but they were quick and they would adapt to the new circumstance in moments.

'Sing!' shouted Zeyn, and Isabel did, joining the Sororitas in the hymnal, letting the martial rhythm of the tune carry her forwards, shield her from doubt and hesitation. She killed an immortal with a salvo that took off its head, and the machine crumpled, disintegrating into a bright flash of light. Zeyn's lash rose and fell, his makeshift laser weapon bisecting limbs and burning through steely skulls.

Other emerald flashes sparked along the assault line as the necrons staggered and finally broke formation. The bodies that did not fall to later rise seemed to melt into the energy flares, as if swept away by teleportation or some alien manner of techno-sorcery.

The immortals and their warrior cohorts tried to reform but the Sisters had the taste of blood in their mouths now, and they were closing the gate, forcing the machines back towards their breach. Zeyn's mad, reckless charge had been all that was needed to rally the Sororitas.

All at once, a silent signal seemed to pass down the line of the necrons, and they fell back en masse, retreating towards the breach in the shield wall.

Something rang a wrong note with Isabel, and she skidded to a halt. 'Wait...'

'Follow them!' roared Zeyn, scrambling up a low hill of rubble and fallen masonry. He raised his whip high, spinning it like a glittering rotor, daring the necrons to find him with their shots. 'Our faith is our armour! In the God-Emperor's name!'

Whatever instinct it was, either a trained warrior's intuition or something of divine providence, Isabel's attention was seized by a motion behind the mass of the defenders. She spun to see a group of spindly humanoid shapes loping across the courtyard from the western wall. *They were inside! Behind us! How could they be inside?*

The necron warriors raised their guns and fired as one, burning light lancing over her head as she dodged away.

The shots converged on Deacon Uriahi Zeyn and tore him out of existence. The last verse of the song from his lips extended into a blood-chilling shriek, as the gauss flayers did their work. His mane of hair and the ruddy skin of his face became ashes, the bones beneath briefly blackening before they too were made powder in the nimbus of jade fire.

'It's a feint! They are inside the walls!' Isabel shouted into the general vox-channel. 'The enemy is within!'

The moment the gunfire began to sound, Questor Tegas went to the barred door of the cell-crypt and called out to the Sororitas on guard. One of them, a woman with a hard face and narrow eyes, hove closer and glared at him.

Before she could speak he banged a metal fist on the inside of the door. 'It is the xenos,' he told her. 'You cannot leave us in here while they attack the convent. We can be of assistance to the canoness!'

'I have my orders,' the Battle Sister replied. 'And you are not to be trusted.'

Tegas's mechadendrites trailed over the dusty floor of the cell, hissing trails through the dirt in unconscious reflection of his mood. Armed with the information gleaned by his surveillance probe, he was unwilling to sit out the conflict and allow Sepherina's troops to engage the necrons alone. He was not prepared to place his life and that of his party in the hands of the Sororitas. 'Honoured Sister,' he began, biting down on his irritation and modulating his voice into something that would make her manner more pliant.

She shut him down with a crash of noise, slamming the butt of her bolter into the door. 'Do not speak to me again!' said the woman, spitting at him. 'It is your lies—'

Tegas never learned what it was that *his lies* were responsible for. At that moment, the corridor outside

the cells was filled with sound and light.

A shrieking sound of air molecules being slashed apart. A blazing viridian light that caused his optics to shunt to counter-glare settings.

The Battle Sister was caught in the nimbus of a necron flayer blast and her death-cry was lost in the howling discharge of the alien guns. The last of her Tegas saw was the woman's flesh puffing into scraps that resembled burnt paper.

Bands of colour searing the receptors of his artificial retinas, Tegas recoiled from the barred window in the cell-crypt door and pressed himself flat against the nearest wall, where any observer peering inside would be unable to see him.

He heard crashes of noise and more skirls of particle beam energy, registering reflected flickers of light off the stone that matched the albedo of the necron guns. Metal claws tore open cell doors and burned the interiors with millisecond bursts of kill-fire, advancing down the corridors towards his hiding place.

Tegas wondered how the aliens had managed to push so quickly into the outpost's underground levels. Had they teleported in through those infernal gateways of theirs, or dug out through hidden tunnels? Were there paths into the convent that Imogen and her dogged Celestians had been too ignorant to see? It did not matter; all that mattered was that he was going to die in here, and the monumental unfairness of that struck Tegas like a bullet.

He found old hate and let it rise. Why had the Omnissiah cursed him so? How did it serve the grand design of the Machine-God to place the questor so close to such riches and then end him before he could reach them?

His hands found the sacred symbol of the Great Cog where it hung about his neck, and he traced the shape of it, hoping that his deity would be watching him.

Sister Isabel's warning was redundant to the Sister Superior, having come too late for her to save the lives of the Sororitas at her sides. Within the central keep, from either side of the corridor, necron warriors had advanced seemingly from out of nowhere, and the Battle Sisters had died in the initial exchange of fire.

Imogen spent her last grenades to avoid the same fate, and dived into a stairwell as the machines fired towards her. The only escape route was upwards, and Imogen scrambled up the narrow spiral staircase, cursing her luck. Behind her, she could hear the inexorable scrape and crunch of iron feet. They were almost at her back, less than a turn or two behind her.

At the next landing she came to a halt and lifted her gun, aiming back the way she had come. *How dare they make me run*, she told herself. *The faithless have no rule over the faithful.*

The first two that emerged she put down with shots to the head, but there had to be a whole platoon of them marching up after her, and Imogen did not have enough shells for them all.

'Aside!' Strong hands shoved her to the wall and a figure in armour lurched past, emerging from a doorway across the landing. Imogen saw the other Battle Sister hurl a cluster of fragmentation grenades down the mouth of the stairwell and then dive for cover. She dropped to the stone floor as the grenades detonated almost immediately, the fuses dialled down to their shortest setting.

The concussion deafened her and blasted the necrons into pieces, choking the spiral staircase with broken rock and broken machines.

Then Imogen realised who had come to her aid and her expression soured. 'Sister Miriya. Where is the canoness? You left her side in the midst of an attack, in the company of that hybrid?'

The other woman's voice was woolly and difficult to understand, but Imogen could read lips well enough. 'No need to thank me, Sister,' Miriya replied, coughing at the thick dust in the air. 'Sepherina is safe. And Decima is not our enemy. She sensed the necron approach...'

'But not soon enough to make a difference!' She pushed the other woman aside and strode out onto the upper level of the keep. 'Begone. Get to your post.'

'The canoness bid me to ensure you were safe—'

Imogen rounded on her with sudden fury. 'I do not need your help, *Sister Militant!*' She turned Miriya's low rank into an insult.

She expected an angry reaction, but Miriya's manner was sombre. 'Why do you challenge me at every turn?' asked the other woman. 'Why do you make everything between us a contest that only you can win? I

obey your orders and you show me nothing but contempt!’

‘Now is not the time for this.’ Imogen turned to walk away, but Miriya grabbed her arm.

‘We may perish at the enemy’s hand at any moment,’ said the Battle Sister, ‘and I would rather go to the God-Emperor’s side knowing what insult I have done to you, for I can see no other explanation!’

Imogen shrugged off her hand. ‘You dare give me commands? But of course you do! You swan about as if you are of high rank and noble status. You are Sister Miriya, the woman who defied the orders of her canoness on Neva, and was allowed to escape chastisement for it!’

Miriya held up her broken chaplet. ‘I *was* punished for that. And you punish me still, for something you know nothing of!’

‘I know you disobeyed your commander!’ Imogen shot back. ‘We are an Order, Sister! And Order means we obey, without question. I am the instrument of the Imperial Church! But you are an unprincipled opportunist, forgiven by a mistress too weak to see you executed!’

The other woman stepped back, her expression one of shock. ‘Is... is that what you think of me? That I would put myself before my Sisters?’ Miriya’s manner hardened once more. ‘You have no idea what happened on Neva. I was ordered to leave my squad behind to die, when I still had the chance to save them! I chose otherwise!’ Distant gunfire cracked, echoing down the long corridor.

Imogen hesitated. Something in the other woman’s tone made her moderate her own. ‘That is not what is said in the convent, and among the Sisterhood. It is said that you allowed women under your command to die.’

‘I *allowed* nothing,’ Miriya replied, a note of pain in her words. ‘But I was responsible for lives lost... And I did not wish to see more die for nothing.’ She glared at the Sister Superior. ‘The words of those who do not know the truth mean nothing to me. But would *you* have done otherwise, Imogen? Let your Sisters die, even if there was the slimmest chance you could prevent it?’

I would obey my orders. Imogen wanted that to be her answer, but she knew it could not be. Finally, her lip curled in a sneer and she turned away. ‘I will not argue with you. Come. I’ll not allow the canoness to fight without my arm at her side.’

Miriya’s expression remained unchanged as she followed the Sister Superior down the corridor at a run.

Out in the tunnel beyond the cell-crypts the sounds of conflict were deafening, the noise of the necrons now joined by cries of pain from human mouths and the dull drumming growl of heavy autoguns. One of the surviving Mechanicus weapon-slaves must have been freed and shrugged off its concealment, reverting back to battle mode to engage the aliens.

Finally, Tegas heard the clash of xenos blade on forged steel as the axe-head upon a gauss flayer barrel met the door to his cell-crypt. The metal around the hinges deformed and bent, before the axe bit and sliced, the monomolecular edge cutting it cleanly.

With a thunderous crash, the cell door fell inwards and kicked up puffs of rust and dirt. The questor saw the glitter of the necron axe-blade, and his limbs, his servo-arm, his serpentine mechadendrites, all came up to defend him in a flurry of claws and talons.

Adept Lumik entered the cell with the gauss flayer in her hands, holding it like a child given a las-rifle to toy with. She found him where he cowered and spoke without any judgement or emotion. ‘The necrons killed the g-guards,’ she told him, anticipating his first question. ‘The gun-servitor k-killed the necrons.’

He peered past her and saw a mess of death. The ashen remains of the murdered Battle Sisters and some of Lumik’s fellow adepts, pieces of molten slag surrounding a mortally wounded servitor lying on its side, legs kicking pathetically. ‘We should not have been able to defeat them,’ he said quietly.

‘They broke their attack pattern unexpectedly,’ the adept explained. ‘We t-took advantage of it.’

Tegas looked back at Lumik, and on an impulse he couldn’t identify, he snatched the alien gun from her. It was surprisingly light, almost as if it were hollow inside, and it felt *wrong* somehow in his grip. The questor was immediately overcome with a desire to be away from the weapon, a physical repulsion that shocked him with its potency.

It wasn’t time for him to be playing with these things. Not now. *Not yet.*

He threw the flayer gun into the corner of the cell and pushed past Lumik. ‘Strip the autoguns from the helot, take what the Sororitas carried. Then follow me.’ He lurched into the smoke-filled stone corridor, his

lung filters wheezing.

‘Where are we going?’ Lumik asked.

Tegas kept walking and didn’t answer her.

For one moment, it seemed as if the necron assault would close around the throat of the convent’s defenders like a steel hawser pulled tight. They came in from three points of the compass, some emerging as if from nowhere directly among the blockade points manned by Sepherina’s best fighters. Weapons blazed on both sides, but it was human casualties that escalated fastest. The Battle Sisters were spread too widely, covering every angle of attack, redundant or not. They reconfigured quickly, squad by squad responding to the enemy sortie, but the necrons were precise with their kills, carving into the convent’s defences with a scalpel’s precision.

The Sisters met them with massed firepower. They weathered their blows and some died, but those who lived, wounded mortally or not, mocked the machines by rising on sheer force of will to fight on. With prayers and acts of faith upon their souls, the Adepta Sororitas let the love of their God-Emperor drive them into the fight, and let their hatred of the alien propel them beyond reason and mere endurance.

The necron line cracked in places as it had before Deacon Zeyn’s impassioned rally. It cracked and it broke, and the wave of steel marching forth suddenly fell into retreat.

Warriors and immortals began to phase out by the dozen, squad after squad dissipating into crackling sheets of energetic expulsion as space-time warped about them. The ripple effect echoed down their lines and it was only a matter of moments before no xenos soldiers stood within the walls of the Sanctuary 101 outpost.

Silence fell upon the Battle Sisters; silence and the slow, sullen rise of the Kavir dawn.

‘The enemy have fully disengaged,’ Cassandra told the canonesse. ‘Danae and Helena report in from the primary and secondary contact points. The necrons gave up and retreated.’ Her voice was caught in the wind. Up here on the gently sloped roof of the main donjon, they could see the full spread of the stronghold and the valley beyond the walls. She searched for the glitter of sunlight off silver and did not find it.

‘No,’ muttered Decima, standing to one side, next to the hospitaller. Verity had remained with them while Sister Zara had left to aid the wounded.

Sepherina did not acknowledge the other woman’s utterance. ‘This is certain?’

‘Aye,’ said Cassandra, unable to keep a measure of incredulity from her voice. ‘If fate blesses us, I think we may have bloodied their noses and sent them reeling.’ She glanced at the revenant. ‘They expected the rout they faced last time they came here, but this time we were ready for them.’ For a moment, the Battle Sister dared to hope that she might be right; but then that hope faded and died as Cassandra met Decima’s cold, empty eyes and remembered the endless army she had witnessed inside the necron orbital complex.

‘I have never believed in fate,’ Sepherina replied, glancing around as Sister Miriya and Sister Imogen emerged from inside the keep. ‘Report,’ she demanded.

Imogen shared a wary look with Miriya and bowed briefly. ‘Multiple vectors of attack. Casualties were high, but we held the line. The fight was in the balance until...’

‘Until they left.’

‘You mean, they retreated,’ Verity corrected.

Miriya shook her head. ‘*Retreat* suggests they were giving ground. This was nothing of the like. They made a tactical withdrawal. They are regrouping.’

‘Why would they do so?’ Cassandra asked. ‘They could have kept up the pressure.’ She did not want to say the rest. *We would have lost, eventually.*

‘A probe,’ Sepherina told them. ‘The xenos were testing us.’

‘Khaygis is their nemesor. Their commander,’ Decima offered. She ran a bony finger over one of the implants in her face. ‘I think I heard him.’

‘Is this... nemesor... still out there?’ Imogen strode boldly to the edge of the roof and glared out into the desert.

‘They never left,’ whispered the ragged woman, her gaze turning inwards, weighed down by brutal memory. ‘They never, never left...’

‘That much appears clear now,’ said a new voice. Guns were raised as Questor Tegas and a few of his Mechanicus adepts stepped up onto the windswept roof.

Imogen scowled. ‘How did you get free?’

‘Your Sisters fought bravely,’ Tegas said, with solemnity. ‘They saved my life.’

Sepherina took a warning step towards the adepts. ‘Or perhaps you killed them in the confusion.’

‘Then why would I be here, now?’ he shot back at her. ‘You are wilfully blind to my knowledge in all of this, canoness. You do not want to associate with me because you cannot see past your prejudice for all that is not of the Sororitas.’

‘You dare?’ Imogen went for the haft of her power maul, but Sepherina stopped her with a gesture. Cassandra watched as the canoness gave Tegas permission to continue with a terse incline of her head.

‘Speak on,’ she said. ‘I will let you talk yourself into an execution.’

Tegas sniffed. ‘I know more about the necrontyr than any other human on this blighted rock, more even than this broken toy.’ He pointed his servo-arm at Decima. ‘The deaths here, among your Sisters in the year eight-nine-seven? Those were not the first of our species to be executed by these xenos monstrosities. They were merely the first to be *widely known*. Human eyes laid gaze on the necrontyr more than two centuries before that day.’

‘Impossible,’ said Verity, although she spoke as if she were trying to convince herself. ‘A threat so grave... The Adeptus Terra would not have remained silent over such a danger to the Imperium.’

The questor snorted at her. ‘Are you all so naïve?’ He paused, and Cassandra realised he was accessing some internal reservoir of memory. ‘Solemnace. Morrigor. Lazar and Bellicas. Have any of you heard of those worlds?’ When none of them answered, he nodded and went on. ‘And you never will. The Imperium faces so many threats from within and without. The common people need not know how close the necron claw is to their throats.’

‘How many attacks have there been like this one?’ Sepherina demanded. ‘Tell me what other knowledge Inquisitor Hoth imparted to you!’

‘I will tell you this.’ Tegas nodded again. ‘This is a false dawn. A probe, as you yourself said, canoness. It is a pattern repeated by the necrons on dozens of battlefields. The xenos have fallen back to repair and rearm. And when they return, it will be in numbers so great they will shake the earth with their passage.’



CHAPTER THIRTEEN

There was a moment when Miriya thought that the canoness would give the kill-command, then and there atop the roof of the central keep.

The Battle Sister saw the moment unfold in her mind: Sepherina snarling the order, the other Sororitas bringing up their guns. A howl of shots. Tegas, his arms wheeling as the impacts blew him over the lip of the roof.

It was all he deserved, after all. He had lied to the Order of Our Martyred Lady, perhaps for years, first about the secret Mechanicus explorator base in the canyons, and then about the deadly threat of the necrontyr themselves.

‘You should die for what you have done,’ said the canoness, giving voice to Miriya’s thoughts. ‘I would be remiss to let you draw breath a moment longer.’

‘That would be a grave mistake,’ Tegas replied. His voice was level and lacked any note of fear, but Miriya imagined that too was just one more trick in his arsenal of subterfuge. Inwardly, the questor had to be terrified. One misstep now and he would be executed where he stood. ‘I have no reason to keep anything from you any more, milady. Events on the ground have exceeded the remit I was given. We now all find ourselves on the horns of the same dilemma.’

Sepherina looked away, disgusted with him. Her gaze ranged up into the pale dawn, and she found the hazy ghost-shape of the Obsidian Moon, still visible high in the sky.

Finally, she spoke again. ‘If what you say is so, we need to reformulate our defensive strategy.’ The canoness glanced at Cassandra. ‘Pass orders to the defence squads to move the force wall generators surrounding the convent’s genatorium chamber. Shift them out to the edges of the keep.’

‘That will leave our power systems unprotected,’ said Verity.

‘If the xenos get that far inside again, it won’t matter,’ Imogen offered grimly, as Cassandra spoke quietly into her vox-bead.

‘And him?’ Miriya pointed at Tegas with the muzzle of her bolter.

‘I will allow the questor to live, for the moment,’ said Sepherina, and Tegas visibly relaxed. ‘His skills and insight may provide use to me.’ She stepped closer to him. ‘Do you understand that, *cog*?’ Tegas flinched at the pejorative. ‘The second you fail to be of any tactical value, you are deadweight.’

Miriya shouldered her weapon and glared at the questor. ‘So this is what we will do?’ She turned to the canoness. ‘Stand and die?’

‘Sister Miriya!’ Imogen snapped harshly. ‘You forget yourself! You will speak with deference to the mistress!’

She bit her lip and bowed. ‘Of course... I meant no disrespect...’ Miriya looked up. ‘But my question stands. We must find a new strategy, my lady. If we do not take the fight to the xenos, they will overwhelm us!’

‘It is not your place to question the orders of your superiors,’ Imogen went on. ‘I would think that lesson would have been made abundantly clear to you since Neva!’

Miriya ignored her, concentrating on holding Sepherina’s gaze. ‘We must deal with this threat at its

source. We must go back to the Obsidian Moon...' She trailed off. 'We all understand the reasons why.'

'I do not disagree,' said the canonesse, 'but such a raid would be suicidal, given the countless numbers of enemy troops you reported in the alien stronghold.' She glanced up again. 'We have no vessels to make the trip, no way of entering the chamber you spoke of in the canyons...'

'There is always another path,' Tegas spoke up, pulling his cloak closer about him as the wind rose. 'I can offer a solution.'

'The iron scroll,' said Decima, breaking her silence at last. 'It turns to many functions.' She glanced away, muttering at nothing, her voice low and harsh.

The questor pressed on, suddenly animated by the challenge. 'Now I have seen it in operation, I believe it is possible for me to conjure the portal configuration from the device's matrix. All that would be needed is an active necron gateway within the Obsidian Moon to connect to. I could open a pathway into the complex.'

'But can we destroy it?' Cassandra asked, cutting to the heart of the matter.

'He lies still,' murmured Decima. '*Shut up!*' she spat, whispering at voices only she could hear.

Tegas paid no attention to the revenant. 'As we have a reactor core inside this outpost, so the xenos have a dimensional-phase device to provide power to their largest facilities. Yes, Sisters, I can deactivate it if you take me there.'

Imogen heard the avarice as it finally bled into his voice and raised her gun again. 'The hybrid is right! He lies again, and even now I do not doubt he is scheming, to find the ends of this that will most benefit him!'

'The ends?' Tegas echoed. 'Even my most favourable probability equations give us a success ratio of one in five thousand iterations! At this moment, what benefits me most, Sister Superior, is not dying!'

The winds carried the questor's angry words away, and for a time there was only the low howl of the sand over the stone.

'We will stand and fight,' Sepherina said, at length. 'It is our way. We are the unbreakable bulwark ranged against the enemies of mankind. It has ever been so.' She glanced at Miriya. 'Our Sisters perished here and in their memory we will stand their posts. We will fight to the last bolt-shell if the God-Emperor decrees it.' She took a step towards the edge of the roof. 'And while we fight, Sisters, you will go into the catacombs of the alien machine and cut its throat.'

'You are certain of this course of action?' said Imogen.

Sepherina nodded. 'If we do nothing, Sanctuary 101 will fall silent once more. History will repeat itself.'

The ghost of a smile twisted Tegas's not-quite-face and faded as fast as it had appeared, perhaps an emotive artefact of the questor's true feelings. He was behaving as if he had won a victory, Miriya realised.

She decided to challenge him. 'Why do we need to put our trust in the Adeptus Mechanicus? We have among our ranks a Sister of Battle whose knowledge of the necrons outstrips that of Lord Tegas.' She inclined her head towards Decima.

The other woman reacted, wringing her hands. 'No,' she slurred, 'No, no. Don't go. *Be silent!* I don't want to go back again.'

'You would trust this...' Tegas paused, struggling to find the right word. 'This damaged, broken soul over me?' He approached her, and Decima shied away. 'Do you have any idea what she really is?'

'The necrons did that to her. The cryptek, the one that called itself Ossuar.' Decima flinched as Verity said the name. It was strange; inside the caverns and the alien complex, the lost Battle Sister had been strong and defiant, but here and now she was cowed and fretful.

'*We lose if we wait,*' she whispered, eyes set on some unknowable, distant point. 'Yes. Yes.'

Tegas opened his cloak with a theatrical gesture. 'It seems that the only way I can cement my trustworthiness to you is by example. So, I will give it. I will show you what this poor, pathetic wretch really is.'

'She is a human being!' Verity insisted.

'Like a Space Marine is a human being?' said Tegas. 'Like a psyker? Or a ratling, or an ogryn? Like *I* am?' He flared his manipulators before Decima and she stood her ground, chewing on her scarred lip.

The tip of one of Tegas's mechadendrites snapped open like a metal bloom. A fan of glassy triangles emerged from it and spun into a circle, clicking into place. The pieces created a device that resembled an

outsized magnifier. The lens misted and grew definition as Tegas ran it over Decima's limbs, a few centimetres from the surface of her flesh. Terahertz waves bombarded her harmlessly, reflecting through the meat and bone of her to display a three-dimensional image. The myriad of metal implants forced into her flesh became starkly visible.

'A test bed, I think,' Tegas said, becoming distant and clinical. 'This necron scientist you named... He was experimenting on the human form. But I would need a full dissection to be certain as to what he was trying to prove.'

'You won't touch her,' Miriya said firmly.

'No?' Tegas moved the lens up towards Decima's head and she tried to back away, making small, whimpering noises. 'When you see this, you will change your mind.'

The lens framed a model of the revenant's skull, rendered in layers of colour and photic density. Visible clearly, clasped to the occipital region, was a device that Miriya had seen before, inside the halls of the Obsidian Moon.

It was a variant design of a necron scarab mechanoid; smaller than the others, the malevolent beetle-form buried in the meat of her neck, its needle-like legs embedded in her spinal column. As she watched, the Battle Sister could see it moving slightly, as if it were alive.

'I'm sorry,' Decima began to weep. 'I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry...'

'We don't know what name the xenos have for them,' Tegas said, in a hectoring tone. 'Inquisitor Hoth called them "mindshackles", although I find the term overly fanciful myself.'

Cassandra's bolter was raised. 'A mind-control device?'

'Aye,' nodded Tegas. 'But this one appears to be damaged.' He indicated places in the scan where the machine's carapace was darkened. 'I'd warrant that the malfunction of the shackle scarab was what allowed her to flee the necrons all those years ago. It let her have some free will back.'

Verity looked ill. She placed a hand on Decima's arm and the other woman shrank back as if she had been burned. 'She hears voices in her head. Is it the cryptek, tormenting her?'

'Perhaps,' said Tegas. 'But it could just be the damage to her mind expressing itself. The effects of trauma on the human psyche have such unpredictable effects.'

Imogen frowned. 'It does not matter. Either way, she cannot be trusted.'

'I could say the same for him,' Miriya retorted, pointing at the questor.

'No,' came a quiet voice. The revenant's gaze crossed over them. 'What the cog says is true. I am flawed. I am dangerous to you. If you bring me too close, Ossuar will see... He might see through my eyes.'

'You don't know that,' insisted Verity.

'You cannot take the risk, Sisters,' Decima said, with grave finality.

From the throne atop his personal command Monolith, Nemesor Khaygis surveyed the ranks of his troops. Lines of warriors stood ready, some freshly advanced through portals from the orbital complex, others returned and regenerated after the initial attack wave. Immortals and lychguard waited motionless for his word to strike. His army was frozen in time, waiting to reanimate, waiting to kill.

The nemesor gazed over the Monolith's battlements, the contra-gravity motors beneath him emitting a steady, resonant thrumming that beat at the air. Khaygis paused to take a moment of communion; he connected his intellect to the broad control matrix that spread out among all his lesser soldiers, sampling their recent memories and collating the data there.

The warriors were barely sentient in the true sense of the word. Before the Great Uplifting and the sweet release of biotransference, they had been the lowest of the necrontyr castes, the workers, the menials and the poor. The Stargods had freed them from the tyranny of conscious thought, stripping away all emotion and character until only the very core of being remained. The smallest possible spark of animate life, rendered soulless and servile.

How content they must be, Khaygis mused, for never having the need to think for themselves again.

Their superiors, the immortals, had been the soldiers of the dynasts in the fleshtime, and their reborn forms reflected that fact. The immortals were better armed, better armoured, and they retained a tiny fraction more of what they had once been. Not enough to give them a name or a persona, of course, but

enough that their martial training remained intact. It was an efficiency, after all, not to waste the time and effort that had been put into training them. But they too did not have the intellect to exist anywhere beyond the moment. Both were walking weapons, tools of killing, and they performed those functions admirably.

Khaygis did not remember his biotransference. All he recalled was awakening in this machine body, rippling with power and lethal potential. His overriding recollection of that glorious moment was a sense of incredible freedom – freedom from petty things, like the decay of his organic form and the worthless moral codes of mortal beings.

The nemesor did not remember who he had been before the Uplifting. That part of him had been edited out and discarded. He must have been a man of great rank to be allowed to retain any elements of self, and that was explanation enough for him. The first act Khaygis had performed in his new machine-form was to kneel before his master, the Stormlord Imotekh.

Others were not so lucky, of course. Some did not pass through the eye of the transformation without suffering damage, and some were warped by distortions of self in ways that took millennia to manifest themselves. There were the destroyers, the berserker kin of the necrontyr who sought only to obliterate all that lay before them. Their minds were stripped down to the killing urge and nothing more, broken by engram decay and consumed by nihilism. But they were nothing compared to the loathsome horror of the flayed ones, who flocked to the shedding of organic blood like carrion eaters. Driven by a compulsion that the harbingers called a ‘curse’, the flayed ones garbed themselves in the skins of dead flesh-forms and plundered battlefields for the meat of corpses. Some said that they were possessed by a madness that drove them to an obsession with the flesh they had lost – as if they were trying to rebuild it from the bodies of those who died opposing the necrons. Others spoke of one of the murdered Stargods, his last act before perishing in the War in Heaven the release of a virus that would one day turn them all to the same path.

Khaygis detested both these aberrant kind, and would never allow his forces to enter battle with either counted among them. Perhaps it was an element of self he retained from the being he had once been, but the nemesor saw combat as a sacrosanct thing, a place where all truths could be put to the test, where will and might would answer all questions. If he had still been capable of such an emotional state, it might have been true to say that Khaygis cherished warfare in the way a parent would love their offspring.

He completed his collation of the data, and the nemesor sifted through it. At once he saw it all, every single sporadic contact, every engagement, every melee kill, flayer strike, tesla blast. A map of death drew itself in his mind as the necron general experienced a hundred little wars from the perspectives of his soldiers, all in unison, laid atop one another. He saw where the fallen had been defeated, he saw where the victorious were mighty. For those brief moments, Khaygis sat at the heart of the network and *absorbed*.

When he was ready, the nemesor disengaged and the emerald light of his eyes glowed brightly. He had his plan, gathered from the aftermath and replay of the first assault. He had his soldiers, outnumbering the females inside the outpost by a very significant factor.

In his mind, Khaygis already had his victory. It was inevitable that the necrons would overwhelm the human invaders. All that remained now was the tedious business of the actual killings. The theorem of death he had posited needed to be proven.

Behind him, harsh jade-coloured light spilled out from the power crystal atop the Monolith, framing the nemesor with shifting aurorae as he pointed with his fire gauntlet. Khaygis aimed the glowing glove out across the desert wastes, towards the near-distant valley where the organics were marking out their last moments of mortality.

He transmitted the battle plan to his assemblage, every detail of it perfect in their minds, with no space for misinterpretation or alteration. He told them all where to go and what to kill.

Then Khaygis spoke a single word, and vocoder relays in his machine-frame relayed the sound out through the Monolith’s onboard resonator arrays. It was not required for him to do so, but the ritual of it, the finality of the gesture, appealed to him.

The word was ‘*Execute*’, and without battle-cries or elation, without fear or hesitation, the necron army began its march towards Sanctuary 101.

‘This could be a ploy,’ Verity said quietly, pitching her words so that only Miriya could hear them.

The Battle Sister glanced up at her from where she crouched, in the middle of checking her combat gear

before she set off on her mission. ‘You think that I have not considered that?’

Verity looked around at the walls of the Great Chapel and grimaced. ‘It is not enough that you must do this, but that the xenos machine must be activated *here*, in this holy place...’

‘Is it the best-protected part of the convent, Sister,’ Miriya reminded her.

‘Indeed,’ Verity replied, ‘but it still feels like sacrilege.’

‘I do not disagree,’ said the other woman gravely. She paused. ‘I am well aware of Tegas’s intentions. I have a bolt-round put aside just for him, when the moment comes.’

‘The Adeptus Mechanicus are not faithful, not like us,’ Verity insisted.

‘Don’t tar them all with his brush,’ came the reply. ‘I have fought alongside adepts who acquitted themselves with honour in service to the Golden Throne. Tegas is not the best of them, by any measure.’

‘They serve an adulterated deity,’ the hospitaller continued. ‘They worship a Machine-God, only an aspect of the God-Emperor... How can any of them ever see His true glory as we do?’

‘We can debate theology if you wish, Sister Verity,’ Tegas called out from across the cavernous room as he approached, flanked by Cassandra and Danae. ‘But forgive me if I suggest that this is neither the place nor the time for such things.’

‘He hears me...’ Verity whispered.

Miriya made a motion near her ear. ‘With all the augmetics crammed inside his bones, I imagine he could hear the tread of every sand-fly within these walls, if he wished it.’

‘And more besides,’ said the questor, a cold and avaricious smile in the words.

‘Enough,’ said the canoness, standing nearby. She beckoned to Sister Ananke, who approached holding a storage pod. At Sepherina’s direction, she warily opened the container and removed the grey shape of the iron scroll. Ananke seemed physically revolted by her proximity to the device. Decima lurked in the shadows of the pillars behind her, watching the events unfold from beneath her hood.

‘Give it to him,’ ordered the canoness.

Ananke did so, only too pleased to be rid of the xenos artefact. Tegas took it eagerly, and she backed away, unlimbering her bolter. Nearby, Sister Imogen and a trio of other Sororitas were already at weapons drawn, taking aim at Tegas’s head.

He feigned a disappointed sigh. ‘Is this really necessary? I have given my word that I will cooperate with you.’

Sepherina made no move to have the other Battle Sisters lower their weapons. ‘Make it work,’ she told him, ‘and know that if you betray us in any way, you will not live to see the fruits of it.’

‘Perish the thought,’ the questor replied. ‘After all, my dear canoness, we both want the same thing.’

‘Do it!’ Imogen barked, her patience wearing thin. ‘Now!’

‘As you wish.’ Tegas turned his manipulators in towards the scroll and moved them over the surface of the device, tracing circles and lines, making alien symbols.

Verity’s attention was caught as she heard Decima give voice to a soft whimper, and then in the next second the necron artefact went from a piece of inert metal to a glowing, writhing cord of green fire.

Tegas reacted with shock, his cyber-limbs going rigid, but he held on tightly to the device. The living alien metal shivered in his grip, changing its forms with a disturbing fluidity that made Verity’s skin crawl. First it opened into the scroll, alive with symbols and texts, then it became the fan of angled panes, emitting light and colour. It was briefly a cube, then a rod, before finally unravelling into thin wires that wafted in the air like grass stalks in a breeze.

‘Yes!’ The questor was elated. ‘I have it now!’ The human emotion seemed ill-fitting and out of place coming from the Mechanicus adept.

The spline-threads grew in length and diameter, Tegas releasing the reforming device to be free to find its ultimate expression of form. It began to re-knit itself, making curves that turned slowly to bring their sparkling tips towards one another. The alien metal came together with a ringing sound to form a hoop large enough for a human to step through. A haze of energy wove across the span of it, glistening with exotic radiation. Verity was drawn in by the play of light and colour, mesmerising, almost seductive...

And alien. She shook her head and forced herself to break eye-contact. The portal’s membrane quivered, seeming harmless as it stood there – but Verity had seen with her own eyes what lay on the other side of that threshold, the infinite armies and their incomprehensible machines waiting for the moment to wake.

The very thought of being asked to go back there filled her with an ice-cold dread. She chanced a sideways look at the canoness. Would Sepherina order her to do so? Verity felt ashamed by her fear, but could not stop herself from silently praying that the command would not come.

She had never been in a place like the necron complex, a place where the absence of spirit was almost a tangible thing that could be touched and tasted. The hospitaller struggled to frame her thoughts, to find the right words to describe the sensation she had felt up there. It was simply... *emptiness*. A void like no other, a place where faith itself could hold no purchase.

She shuddered at the thought, as Decima ventured to speak.

'You have little time,' said the ragged woman. 'Extended use of the device will draw their attention. You must hurry.'

Sepherina closed on Tegas. 'It is done?'

'Indeed,' he nodded twice.

The canoness looked away, towards the Sister Superior. 'Imogen. Assemble a squad and proceed to the alien stronghold. Your orders are to destroy it or die in the attempt.'

The other woman gave a crisp salute. 'Understood.' Imogen searched the faces of the other Battle Sisters surrounding her. 'I need five women whose souls are strong, who are ready to meet the God-Emperor this day. We may never return from this mission. We may die on alien soil. Who will join me?'

'I will.' Miriya was the first to step up, the last question barely out of the Sister Superior's lips. Verity had expected no less of her friend.

'And I.' Danae hefted her meltagun. At her side, Sister Ananke gave a solemn nod of agreement.

'Here or there,' said Cassandra, coming to the ready. 'Where we end matters little, as long as it is in His name.'

Sister Pandora was the last, mirroring Imogen's salute. 'Aye.'

'Noble,' offered Tegas primly. He took a breath. 'I should think it would be best to send a proxy first...?' He looked towards his junior adepts, and Verity saw them shrink back in fear. None of them wanted to pass through the portal, to be the one who might set foot in a necron trap.

'You said it was done,' Sepherina said, coming close to Tegas. 'The passage is open, yes?'

'Yes, but prudence—'

She never let him finish. In a swift flourish of motion, the canoness grabbed fistfuls of the questor's cloak, and with the enhanced strength borne of her power armour's artificial musculature, she lifted Tegas off his feet and threw him bodily into the shimmering membrane.

The formation of a cry left his lips, but it was abruptly cut off as he touched the event horizon of the portal and vanished into nothing, an emission of bright energy marking his passage.

A callous grin formed on Imogen's face for a moment, then faded. 'Squad ready, milady.'

'Make certain he keeps his word.' Sepherina bowed her head. 'Blessings of the Golden Throne be upon you, my Sisters. *Ave Imperator*.'

'*Ave Imperator*,' chorused the Battle Sisters.

'Good luck,' said Verity, a forbidding tightness claspng at her chest.

Miriya paused at the threshold and threw her a nod; then she was stepping into the portal and light-flashes filled the chamber.

Decima watched the women go, one after another, her hooded eyes distant and unreadable.

The first assault had been a slow, steady approach. The necron commander had programmed it so, spending the attrition of his lesser troops to gauge the placing and the potency of the human defence forces inside the outpost.

The second attack was fast and fluid. In the cover of the low clouds of sand kicked up by the heat of the sunrise, the enemy approached the convent and broke into a swift march as they came within visual range of the defenders. Lychguards, immortals and warriors went in formation, flowing around rock outcroppings and rises in the dunes. They moved like a horde of locusts.

Leading them was an iron monster.

The Triarch Stalker was a towering, three-legged machine that walked on limbs that resembled great scything blades, the arrow-sharp tips planting pits in the sand where they fell. A cluster of sensor discs gave

the impression of a spider-face across the mechanism's central body, accentuated by manipulator talons that drooped like open mandibles. A triarch praetorian rode high in the control nexus above, all function from the necrontyr soldier subsumed into the greater body of the war machine. The first few shots – beams fired from long las-rifles wielded by the remnants of Tegas's personal tech-guard – were absorbed harmlessly by the invisible panes of dispersal shields that hung around the stalker.

The maw of a glowing crimson cannon swept back and forth, searching for a suitable target, and then with a howl of flash-burnt dust, a rod of punishing fire leapt forth. The heat ray angled upwards and brushed the battlements over the main gate, where Tegas's shooters had made their gun-nests. Rock turned dull crimson and flowed to lava, and the tech-guard were reduced to screaming torches.

It was the signal that the final clash had commenced. Every Battle Sister on the line went weapons free and opened fire on the necrons. Warriors and immortals returned their hate with the precise threads of flayer-beam, denaturing stone or ashing flesh wherever they found their marks. The lychguard led the way, blocking killing shots with the dispersion fields surrounding their long kite shields. With their warscythes, they sliced cleanly through lines of hastily-laid razor-web and anti-infantry spike traps. The stalker crabbed sideways across the approaches, dodging throbbing pulses of plasma as it tuned the heat ray to a wide dispersal and sprayed fire into the places where the wall had already been partly breached.

Up on the battlements, Sister Helena dropped as a shrieking hail of green lightning sliced the air where she had been standing. She cursed and scrambled forwards, pulling her bolter tight to her breastplate.

'Report!' she called out, as she spotted Sister Isabel. 'My vox is down.'

'All vox is down,' Isabel corrected. 'Don't ask me how, but the machines have neutered all the frequencies.' She had to shout to be heard over the sound of the other Battle Sisters around her, all of them firing down into the enemy advance in a cacophony of snarling bolters.

'I feared as much. It is the Monolith,' Helena said grimly. 'Did you see it out there? Like a castle set adrift, in the distance at the rear of their lines... They broadcast electromagnetic fields, disrupt our comms. They're trying to make us fight in isolation.'

'They outnumber us,' said Isabel. 'Five-, perhaps ten-fold. Runners from the south and west walls say there are more coming in from across the sands.'

'Bah!' Helena spat and executed a pop-up shot, finding and beheading an immortal marching below them with a pinpoint bolt-round to the throat. 'The God-Emperor damn us all if we let these clockwork toys repeat their desecration of this place!'

A woman's scream sounded from behind her, and Helena turned in time to see a Sororitas tip over the edge of the wall and fall to the rocks below. The upper half of the Sister's torso was a blackened ruin, trailing meat-smoke and embers. Seconds later, another heat beam slammed at the air, and the halo of it thundered over them both.

Isabel hissed like an angry cat and Helena swallowed a jolt of pain as the train of her hair crisped and caught aflame. She beat out the fire with the palm of her gauntlet and grimaced. 'That bloody walker,' growled the veteran. 'We have to kill it.'

'With what, song and sermons? It is shielded.'

Helena nodded bitterly. 'The *Tybolt* is long gone, and with it our hopes of reinforcement or evacuation...' She trailed off.

'The latter would never be set to pass,' said Isabel. 'The Adepta Sororitas gave ground here once. We would dishonour those who died to do so again.'

'Aye, that's truth. But there's another way,' Helena replied. 'How many grenades do you have?'

'Four remaining.'

The veteran thrust hers into Isabel's hands. 'Take mine too, bind them, synchronise the fuses.' She chanced a look over the battlement; the stalker was shifting in place, planting its feet and making ready to fire on the wall. If it widened the breach, the line would collapse. Helena watched the jerky motions of the crested necron wired into the machine's core, visible behind the shield panes.

'What are you planning, Sister?'

'A daring and foolish thing, for an old crone like me. When the moment is right, pitch the grenades at the shield. I'll do the rest.' She didn't wait for Isabel to reply. Instead, Helena broke into a sprint along the line of the battlements to the next tower, a burnt stump that had been torn open by sustained streaks of

enemy fire.

The necrons bracketed the air around her with green flame and Helena felt it tear the air molecules from her lungs, filling her nostrils with acrid ozone. She made it to blackened nub of rock that was still searing hot to the touch and rolled to a ready position. Her marksmanship was unparalleled within the Order, or so the veteran liked to believe. Now she was going to prove it.

Isabel did exactly as she was meant to. A spinning cluster of tethered Krak grenades described a narrow arc down towards the dorsal panels of the Triarch Stalker, and at the perfect moment, they detonated. The force of the blast was enough to weaken the quantum shields for an instant – long enough for Helena to lay a lethal three-round burst on the praetorian pilot.

The necron war machine lowed like an animal and stumbled off its axis, treading on a dozen of its own kind as it lost balance. Helena heard Isabel and some of the other women on the firing line give voice to a cry of triumph, but even as they did so, she knew they were premature.

The stalker was wounded, gravely indeed – but despite their desperate plot they had not killed it outright. Instead the mechanoid blundered straight into the wall and accomplished with sheer brute velocity what it had wanted all along.

With a noise like slow, tortuous thunder, the battlements cracked, sagged, and gave way. Helena saw black-armoured figures falling as the stone blocks lost cohesion and came apart from one another. The stalker collapsed to its knees and lay twitching, but like a brood spider engulfed by its hatchlings, the lines of necron soldiers swarmed over the carapace of their fallen battle engine and poured into the cracks in the convent wall.

Helena felt ice in the pit of her stomach and she dragged herself up, reloading as she went; and for the first time in what seemed like hours she looked back into the outpost proper.

The middle ward and the courtyard were a mass of smoke and gunfire, and this breach point was only the newest of several others. There were silver skeletons in droves, green lightning shrieking back and forth, screams and dust and death everywhere she laid her gaze.

The second fall of Sanctuary 101 had begun.



CHAPTER FOURTEEN

She steeled herself for the sensation once again, but nothing Miriya could do was enough to prepare her for the experience.

The giddy, sickening rush of motion-without-motion, the lurching twist that set her perceptions reeling, they engulfed her as she fell headlong into the portal. In that timeless non-space, she was no longer entering a doorway, but tumbling down an impossibly infinite well of light and sound, a void through which it seemed she would fall forever. Miriya was twisted inside out, exposed to dimensions that were unnatural to the human animal. She held on to her faith as she had before, and prayed until it was over.

The strange translucent ice left behind upon her by the force of the transit crackled as she took the next step. Metal rang under her boots and she angrily brushed at the thin rime of frost over her flesh, spitting out flecks of it. Her bare skin felt raw and wind-burnt.

‘Katherine’s Eyes...’ muttered Ananke, crouching close to the ground. ‘What in Hades was that?’

‘Just the opening of the door, Sister.’ Miriya offered the dour woman a hand up, and she took it.

‘When we are done here, I will walk back,’ came the reply, and the blank stubbornness of her words made Miriya’s lips split in a harsh grin.

All around them, the other Battle Sisters were recovering, gathering their wits and probing the gloom for enemy contact. Miriya blinked droplets of melt water off her eyelashes and cast around, taking in their point of arrival.

Behind them, a perfect square cut into the side of a small, black pyramid was rippling like a pool of water, but in defiance of gravity it stood upright. The glow it cast showed pyramids ranged away in a line before them, and Miriya had a jolt of recognition.

‘The Monolith yard, where we fled before,’ she began. ‘We’ve returned there.’

‘No,’ Imogen said, panning around with the beamlight beneath the barrel of her bolter. ‘Not the same place. This is another storehouse for their infernal machines, near-identical in form and function.’

As Miriya considered, she realised Imogen was right. There was far less ambient light here, the shadows deep and brooding, and the dormant Monoliths were of a different livery. She picked out rich lines of gold detailing lost under thick layers of dust.

‘Do you see that?’ said Pandora, pointing. ‘A glyph, there. It repeats on all of these craft.’ She indicated a shape that resembled a broken arrowhead, the tip blunted, the shaft barbed, with a circle cut into the blade.

‘I saw that before,’ said Miriya. ‘The creature we encountered, the cryptek... It bore that mark upon it.’ She tapped her chest-plate to indicate the location, her voice trailing off as she realised something was amiss. ‘Where is Tegas?’

The questor was nowhere to be seen. Each of the Battle Sisters activated their lamps, throwing stark white beams out through the dusty air. Behind them, the portal in the Monolith was fading, losing its power. Within a few seconds, it had reverted back to solidity, resembling little more than a pane of vitreous glass.

‘The damned cog was only a moment ahead of us...’ said Danae, scowling. ‘Did the machines take him?’

‘Do you hear that?’ Pandora had walked ahead of the group a few steps. She held up her hand for

silence.

Miriya caught a sound in the dead air of the vast chamber: a peculiar, hollow tone, like a rattle. She pointed. 'It came from over there.'

The Sister Superior hefted her gun and gestured for the squad to move forwards. 'Tactical stance,' ordered Imogen. 'No weapons fire unless I give the word.'

Miriya fell into step behind Pandora and followed the slender woman through a narrow gap between two of the dormant necron craft.

Pandora glanced back at her, her pale brow furrowing. 'What is that sound?' she whispered.

The peculiar echo gave the noise a machine-like quality. It reminded Miriya of a running motor or the working of gears. They emerged into the next row of Monoliths and she realised that it was the rhythm of laughter.

Tegas was walking slowly down the line of the silent pyramids, his hands, his servo-arm, his mechedendrites extended to their full span, tracing lightly across the angled surfaces of each Monolith he passed, stroking them. Faint green sparks showed here and there, flicking between the alien machines and the questor. He tipped back his hooded head and made the stuttering motor-laugh again. The moment disquieted Miriya. It seemed improper to witness the Mechanicus lord expressing joy for such alien stimulus.

'Tegas!' she hissed. 'Step away!'

He halted, turned and faced them, as Imogen and the others filed out through the gaps between the pyramids. 'This...' he began, shaking his head. 'This is incredible.' The questor looked up towards the high, iron-dome sky above them, where emerald lights moved back and forth in silence. 'Oh, my dear Sister Miriya, if you could see with my eyes...' He waved at the air, as if he were clutching as things only he could perceive. 'Layers of data etched into the atmosphere itself. Quantum shift matrices, electromagnetically-encoded mnemonics, gardens of exotic particles singing in symphony...' Tegas described a slow pirouette, folding in his limbs to prayer poses. 'Is this what they perceive all the time, I wonder? It is like swimming in an ocean of data, one within another within another within another—'

'Questor!' Imogen snarled at him, and he fell silent. 'Whatever machine-sorcery you are toying with, cease it! If we alert the xenos to our presence, we will be lost before we can begin!'

Tegas gave her a mocking look. 'Sister Superior, think for a moment. We have just arrived inside this complex through a direct dimensional shunt corridor, forced into connection by brute means. If the necrons were awake down here, they would have sensed that immediately and come in their droves!' He opened his hands, taking in the silent stone craft. 'Anything? No. I have already intuited that this entire quadrant is in enforced dormancy, perhaps awaiting a greater battle to be fought. We have nothing to fear.'

'All the same,' Imogen went on, 'I gave you an order. You will obey it.'

Tegas stiffened. 'The Sisterhood have always looked down on my kind. You are happy to have us maintain your guns, forge your power armour, build your tanks and your starships... But you balk at the idea of seeing us as equals. Your canones's treatment of me, disgracing my rank as if I were a slave to be cast about without a care! That is intolerable!' His vocoder crackled, almost as if it had difficulty processing something like real emotion, real anger. But then his tone changed again. 'But I forgive it. I am glad she sent me through first. The riches here are a thousand times the reward for that indignity.' He wandered back towards the closest Monolith, reaching out to touch it once more. 'So many riches,' he cooed. 'I want to take everything in this place to pieces, see how it works...'

'I never thought his kind were capable of greed,' Ananke said, out of the side of her mouth. 'Isn't that too human for them?'

Miriya stepped up and grabbed Tegas's hand. The motors in the cybernetic arm whirred as they struggled against the Battle Sister's enhanced strength. 'Remember why we are here,' she told him. 'This sortie is not for your amusement. Your life rests in our hands.' She raised her bolter.

Tegas relented and stepped away. 'I remember,' he said, after a moment. 'Forgive me. The shock of the unusual... But you're quite right, of course. We have a mission to complete.'

'The power core,' said Imogen. 'Lead us to it.'

He bowed and set off, Pandora following close behind.

As Imogen drew level with Miriya, she leaned close to speak to her. 'We have a mission to complete,' she said, mirroring the questor's words. 'The relic. The hospitaller saw it in the laboratorium space you described. Can you find it again?'

Miriya looked up, studying the gantries and giant moving components of the complex. 'Perhaps. If I can orient myself, find one of the shifting platforms to the upper tiers.'

'It is a... *secondary* objective.' Miriya could see it cost Imogen to say that. 'The Saint burn my eyes from me for speaking these words, but the destruction of the Obsidian Moon must take precedence. It is better we deny the relic to the future than save it only to allow these machines to blacken the stars.'

She knew the Sister Superior was right, but still Miriya could not stop the pulse of shock in her heart as the meaning of the order sank in. *The Hammer and Anvil*, truly lost, truly destroyed? Miriya wondered if even a lifetime among the Repentia would be enough to repay the guilt for allowing that to happen. 'It won't come to that,' she managed.

Imogen's hard manner returned. 'Don't be naïve,' she said, marching on.

The noise of the war came down the corridors and it sounded like the ending of the world. Over the moans of the injured and the whisper and buzz of medicae tools, the crackle of near-distant bolt fire and alien energy weapons was constant. Every once in a while a massive explosion would make the walls tremble and quake, sending streamers of dust down upon the heads of the hospitallers and their charges.

The Sisters of the Order of Serenity had moved their temporary infirmary out of the exposure of the courtyard and into this chamber, a long, curved room with a vaulted roof, studded with pillars. It had been a garrison hall when the convent had first been built, and a handful of the sleeping pallets that remained in disarray had been repurposed for the injured among the Battle Sisters.

Verity, Zara and the others worked diligently. This was combat-zone protocol, where the wounded were stitched back together as swiftly as possible and sent back into the fray; but in truth there were very few who needed their skills. Most of those who took a hit from the necron guns died of it almost immediately, and those that did not were lying in shallow comas, their bodies shocked almost to the point of total physical shutdown by the raw trauma of a near-hit. She used a valetudinarian gauntlet to run over the flesh of a flash-burnt workganger whimpering in his drug-induced sleep. Scalpel blades, auto-sutures and remedial probes clicked out from mountings on the fingers of the metal glove, tracking over his skin. Using the gauntlet was like second nature to Verity, the device as much a part of her as a boltgun was to a Sister Militant.

She glanced at Thalassa, who lay half-awake, the bandages across her gut dark with blood from a wound yet to heal. The Battle Sister was grim-faced, staring at the stone roof and listening hard, as if she could piece together the course of the fight from the sounds it left behind.

Verity turned away, in time to see Zara look up from the unmoving form of a Sister Dominion brought in from the west wall. Their gazes met across the infirmary and the other hospitaller gave a slight shake of the head, before pulling a death-shroud up over the Dominion's face.

'They keep coming,' said a voice through gritted teeth. Decima stood in the lee of a broken pillar, watching. 'Even now, they are forcing us back from barricade to barricade, drawing us closer to the central donjon. The tide is inescapable.'

Verity wondered for a moment if Decima was reliving a memory of the past, or if she was describing the battle at hand. 'Why are you here?' she said.

'The canoness took my weapon,' she said. 'Forbade me to fight. Told me to *stay out of the way*.' Decima shook her head. 'I cannot be trusted.'

A familiar sharp stab of compassion cut into Verity once more. She felt such empathy for the broken-minded woman, a deep sorrow that Decima herself seemed unable to express. 'I don't believe that. You came here, to stand guard over us.'

'I did?' The question whispered from her lips. 'I did,' she repeated. Then with a sudden jerk of motion, Decima lashed out and grabbed Verity's hand. 'You are a medicae. Can you excise it? You know how to cut and stitch meat, yes?'

'Yes,' Verity's reply was wary. 'Decima, what do you mean?'

'*Decima*,' she repeated. 'I want to be her. I can't be sure.' She balled a fist and screwed it into her eye.

‘There are memories, but they are locked away. I see them like picts on a screen, but they connect to nothing. I can’t know who they belong to. You tell me I am this woman. The Watcher tells me I am not... I am...’ She turned and shouted at her invisible tormentor. ‘Stop it! *Stop talking!*’ Verity was startled as Decima brutally slapped her own face. A trickle of thick, oily blood began to weep from the woman’s cracked lip. She stabbed violently at the meat of her neck with her bony fingers, at the place where Tegas had shown the damaged mindshackle implant lying beneath the skin. ‘This thing! This thing makes me ill! I can’t make it stop!’

‘How can I help you?’ Verity asked at length. She felt a cold hollow open up inside her, fearing the most final of options would be requested. It would not be the first time the hospitaller had been forced to grant someone the Emperor’s Peace, and with every occasion of it, it was as if she had lost a piece of her soul along with them.

At last she looked up at the survivor, and saw something inexplicable. Like the glow of plasmatic discharge around the masts of a starship in the warp, a strange halo of eldritch light – faint but distinct – twinkled around Decima’s head.

‘Wh-what is that?’ Thalassa had seen it too, and was dragging herself up from her sickbed.

Decima’s answer never came. Something caught her attention and suddenly she was screaming, howling like a furious animal. The revenant threw her weight into Verity and the two of them went tumbling across the garrison hall floor as a bright light flashed in the confines of the chamber, dazzling her.

At first, Tegas thought he might need them.

The danger inside the necron complex was, of course, incredible. If they so much as tripped a single alert, a phalanx of warriors would be dispatched to their location and they would be terminated. The questor had thought he would need the Battle Sisters for that eventuality. Not because he believed that they could win through by force of arms – no, that was idiotic – but because they would occupy any necron reaction force for a while by fighting and dying, giving him the time he needed to slip away.

But now he was here, now Tegas had seen and swum through the invisible miasma of raw data filling this place like rich fog... He changed his mind.

Already he was beginning to understand the first principles of how the necron network operated. With the correct quantum transmitter, it could be accessed from anywhere in the universe, instantaneously communicating through the entanglement phenomena of controlled quanta. Modification protocols inside Tegas’s internal systems were working on adapting one of his many communicator arrays to perform just that function. Already, he had gently sampled a few benign subroutines and chanced a low-level intrusion into the dormant sectors of the complex’s invisible grid. Soon, he would be ready to try something more pro-active.

One of the subroutines was generously filling his redundant data-stacks with mapping data that showed the scope and design of the Obsidian Moon facility. He found it odd that the necrontyr did not keep all information under walls of heavy data-security, but then they were not like the Imperium. In the nation of the Emperor of Mankind, ignorance and fear were the core tools of rulership; and the best way for the Adeptus Terra to keep the people ignorant and fearful was to keep them unaware of even the most basic of truths. In many sectors of the Imperium, it was a capital crime for a common man to possess a star map without official sanction to do so. On some worlds, it was illegal even to *read* without a licence.

But the necrontyr had no reason to keep their lower orders afraid and unaware. The roots of those things – of fear and the need to know – did not exist within their greater ranks. What the Imperium hoarded like gold was freely available among the necron species. Information abounded within their networks, uncountable near-infinite amounts of it there for the taking. Millions of years of data, and Tegas’s first impulse was to want it all.

But that was impossible. Here he was, his memory stores colossal and robust by any definition, but even he was a cup attempting to hold an ocean.

An emulation of frustration turned to pragmatism after a nanosecond or two. He could not encompass the whole of the alien matrix, nor should he try. Even with the new reams of data he had now, Tegas would be able to count himself the most knowledgeable authority on the necrontyr in human space. *If* he was able to survive and escape the conflict.

He considered that. It pleased him, the idea of returning to Mars, swollen with gigaquads of information on the alien machines. Not only would it erase all question of any past errors of judgement in his service, not only would it see him raised into the ranks of the Lords of the Red Planet, but this gift would allow him to shift the balance of his relationship against Inquisitor Hoth and the Ordo Xenos from subordinate to superior. *They* would come to *him* on bended knee. The Adeptus Mechanicus would be shown the respect it was due.

But he needed more. Sub-brain sectors of Tegas's mind were formulating a plan for how he would be able to weather the storm of this little war, and had been for several days. He needed only to allow the necrons to wipe out the Sororitas again and ensure he did not draw their attention. Eventually, the machines would revert back to their dormant state, and a window of opportunity to flee would open.

He would take a prize with him, though. Something that would be a bargaining chip to anyone who came to the rescue, be it Hoth's agents or more of the Sisterhood. The relic; he would take *The Hammer and Anvil*.

Tegas listened to everything. He heard Imogen and Miriya talking. On the planet, his probes had heard the hospitaller wench spill out her story about the necron laboratory where the Sororitas artefact had been seen, and the maps the aliens did not guard told him where that was.

The questor began to prepare a script in his mind. It would begin with his return to the convent, alone. He would be sorrowful at the deaths of Imogen's entire unit. He would present Sepherina with the relic as a token of that – but there would be no time to be thankful. The necrons would be coming – he could broadcast on their communications lines and ensure they were alerted – and he would slip away in the fighting, keeping the artefact for himself.

He looked up at the towering metal walls and intricate, crystalline machinery far overhead and simulated regret. Yes, it would be necessary to destroy this magnificent place as well, but perhaps one day they would come back and sift the remains for something of use. Hard choices needed to be made, if he were to live through this. After all, if he perished, this would all have been for nothing.

In a battle, it would be easy for one intelligent being to hide in the cracks while the women and the machines annihilated one another. Tegas would need to play the long game, but it would be worth it.

They halted at a four-way junction and he paused, sampling the air with the sensors on his servo-arm.

He felt Sister Pandora's presence behind him. 'Which way now?' she asked, the alien immensity of the place lost on her.

Tegas eyed her. She was like all the others, too blinded by dogma to appreciate the strange geometries and incredible artistry of the complex's design. The Sisters only hated, he told himself. It was foolish to expect anything else of them.

The questor pointed with his servo-arm. 'That way. The corridor will lead us closer to the main power core.'

'You seem certain,' Imogen sniped. 'How can you be so sure?'

'I am detecting the largest outflow of energy in this entire complex above us, in that direction. It can be nothing else.'

'Go on, then,' said the woman.

He nodded obediently, and looked away, waiting for the right moment as he walked onwards.

The moment had come.

For the deathmark, the passing of time was something that registered in only a distant fashion, a set of numerals that shifted and changed from one optimal to another. Waypoints, in effect, marking the path of the weapon from activation to execution to re-tasking. The cycle endless, the progression constant.

In silence, phase potentiality altered and softened a sector of space-time inside the human complex, and allowed the necron marksman to slip out of the hyperspatial oubliette where it had observed and prepared. The alien killer emerged from the dimensional blind and activated the hunter's mark. The datum-jewel on the target provided by Nemesor Khaygis was rich with information and perfect for the sniper's needs. The designator transmitter inside the deathmark's armour-hood embedded the neutrino-boson template upon the target, tuning it so the marker glow would fluoresce across five-dimensional space. Wherever the objective went, if she made it to the immaterium or into a teleportation chamber, passed through chronometric

barriers or the heart of a star, it would not matter. Until the decay-pattern fell below the receptor threshold – little more than an hour by human reckoning – the energy halo would denote the inescapable eye of the assassin upon her.

It was unheard of for a target to outlast the mark upon them. This deathmark's own records showed only one objective of note, an eldar exarch who managed to avoid termination for a full five minutes before the kill-shot claimed him. It anticipated no such challenge from this mind-damaged human.

The deathmark raised its synaptic disintegrator rifle and fired, unleashing a streak of compressed lepton particles across the chamber.

Decima's answer never came.

She slammed Verity into the flagstones as the burning streak of energy went wide of them, claiming poor Thalassa as its victim instead.

The wounded Battle Sister released a bloodcurdling scream as the weapon ripped through her neural tissue, destroying all synaptic activity within her brain. She crumpled, her body a nerveless sack of meat, eyes open and turned to ruby. Blood trickled from her nostrils, her ears, pooling around her head. Horribly, she seemed to be still alive, dying slowly, her legs twitching as her ruined neural matter misfired and dissolved.

Panic erupted in the infirmary as Verity and Decima scrambled to find cover.

'Deathmark!' said the revenant. 'necrontyr assassin-cadre!' She scowled at the strange glow shrouding her. 'He's here for me. I am targeted for termination. It must be the scarab implant... It has locked on to it.'

Verity chanced a look around the side of the fallen pillar where they hid and saw Zara and the others leading a frantic evacuation of the infirmary. Further out along the length of the garrison hall, she glimpsed a shift of black mist and dull steel. A thread-thin laser beam, bright and green, swept the room.

'Zara?' Verity called into her vox. 'Get them out, warn the Battle Sisters! We will keep it occupied!'

'No!' Decima shouted. 'You must go! It only wants me! The deathmark will kill its target and then fade away. Let me die!'

'Was that what you were going to ask of me? A moment ago, when you said you were not sure?' She leaned closer, her voice trembling. 'Did you want me to... release you?'

'Yes.' The reply was instant. 'No. Yes. No. No. Yes.' Decima ground her teeth together and bit out the word. 'No.'

Another streak of energy lashed over their heads, crackling into the stonework.

'But the choice is not mine to make,' said the survivor, with sudden clarity. 'It has been taken from me.'

Verity's fear transformed inside her, becoming a fire, becoming power. 'I refuse to accept that,' she told her. She raised the gauntlet on her hand, the construct of brass filigree and complicated clockwork unfolding like a flower of blades and needles. 'If you are willing to die, then are you willing to risk? Do you trust me?'

Decima screwed her eyes tightly closed and Verity knew she was enduring the silent persecution of the voice in her head. 'I trust you,' she said, in a small voice.

'There will be a lot of pain,' Verity told her, reaching for Decima's neck.

They were somewhere above the Dolmen Gate, by Miriya's reckoning, close to the same tier where they had arrived through the first set of portals. She looked around, trying to make sense of the repetitive, identical chambers. The laboratory is nearby, the Sororitas told herself. I am certain of it.

It was difficult to be certain, however. The structures of the necron complex were modular in design, thousands or even millions of identical components slotting together in harmony to build the vertiginous walls and endless corridors that ranged away into the gloom. There was none of the artistry or the elegance of a craftsman's work that characterised the way things were made in the Imperium. No artisan had designed and constructed this place; the cavernous inner spaces of the Obsidian Moon had been built with all the cold and inhuman precision of a cogitator program.

Through vents in the steel walls she glimpsed regular flashes of light dazzlingly bright, and her skin prickled with static electricity. On the far side of that barrier, vast amounts energy had been chained and put to work powering this place. She could only guess at what kind of science could create such a thing.

‘Access way, here!’ called Pandora, ahead at the point of the squad. With her gun she indicated a hexagonal tunnel at right angles to the passage they were in.

‘Show me,’ said Sister Imogen, stepping up to take a closer look.

Miriya turned to Tegas, who had slowed to a halt. ‘Is this the way?’ she asked him. The questor didn’t answer at once, and she repeated her question more sternly.

At last Tegas gave a slow nod. ‘Yes,’ he said at length.

A crawling, nagging sense of disquiet pulled at Miriya’s thoughts. Tegas seemed distracted, his attention somewhere far away. He exhibited the same behaviour pattern he had days earlier, in the convent. Then, he had been silently communicating with his cohorts – but now? What was he doing *now*?

‘Those markings,’ said Danae. She nodded at the walls of the tunnel. ‘The etchings in the black stone...’

Miriya looked and she went cold. She had seen the shapes carved into the dark walls before. *Perfectly laser-cut ovals, shield-shaped designs with a single dull ruby at the top of the circumference.* She heard the faint crunch of metal on rock.

‘No...’ She spun back towards Tegas. ‘Do not—’

The ovals buckled in and inverted, and Imogen and Pandora were directly below them. Danae cried out, but it was too late. The walls of the tunnel – not an access way at all, but some sort of storage gallery – came alive as iron insects boiled out of the stonework where they had been quiescent.

A tide of chattering scarabs surged forwards at waist eight and Pandora spun away, knocked out of the path by the Sister Superior. Imogen’s gun cracked once as she got off a single shot, and then she was swallowed up by the writhing mass of insect-forms.

Tegas battered Miriya with the heavy grasping pincer at the head of the servo-arm growing out of his back, and the blow knocked her off-balance. Suddenly the questor was fleeing, claw-feet flashing across the tiles as he raced away. She hesitated for a heartbeat, unsure of what target to prosecute.

The other Battle Sisters engaged the massive scarab swarm, the horde that somehow Tegas had been able to summon. The wave of writhing metallic beetles came on and on, and did not slow. In the middle of the mass a shape moved, and to her horror Miriya saw Imogen stagger back to her feet through sheer force of will.

The scarabs covered her like a coat of whispering chainmail. Blood ran in rivers from her bare flesh, and her power armour sparked and jerked where the machines were biting into the myomer muscle bunches and drive-trains. She beat at herself, clawing at the things as they ripped her with a hundred sets of razor-sharp mandibles.

Imogen’s right eye had already been gouged out, but the other glared forth and found Miriya, angry and accusing. Over the buzz and whine and wet bone-crunch of the scarabs feasting on her, the Sister Superior managed to give voice to one final command.

‘Don’t fail!’ she choked, gurgling as a bright froth of blood fountained from her lips; then in the next second she was falling back into the mass of the swarm, the machines eager to take her to pieces.

Miriya turned her back on the engagement and broke into a sprint, her boots clanking on the steel floor as she went after the questor.

The deathmark ignored the other humans as they fled the area of engagement. None of them appeared to possess anything approaching a weapon, nothing that the assassin’s external sensors registered as capable of penetrating its armour-hood.

Unhurried, it marched across the vaulted hall with the disintegrator long-rifle raised to the shoulder, the discharger array in the muzzle humming with power. The target designator glowed in the virtual field of the necron soldier’s vision, shifting back and forth behind a low barricade of fallen masonry. The energy dispersal was unusual, outside standard parameters, and the assassin consulted the datum the nemesor had provided on the target organic once again for clarification.

It was an atypical humanoid, heavily modified with necrontyr technology. The hunter’s mark flickered around a key element of the modifications, a mindshackle scarab module. Khaygis had supplied all data on that device as well, and it had made tracking the target a simple matter of homing in on the unit’s emissions.

But now the reading was attenuating, becoming irregular. The marker glow was bisecting, behaving as if it were in two places at once.

The deathmark halted and lowered the rifle. This was unusual, unprecedented. Two minutes had elapsed since designation. Time was passing now, out here in the universe, and the target was not yet terminated. These factors were converging. The kill needed to be made sooner rather than later.

A sound split the air; a brutal scream of pain. The assassin noted it and continued onwards. A slit in reality opened briefly and the deathmark sealed its disintegrator back in the dimensional oubliette. It returned with a secondary weapon – a silver hyperphasic sword capable of cutting through all but the densest matter. The works of the dynasty's assassin cadres were not always conducted at extreme range; sometimes the close-in kill was the better method. The necron marched towards the fallen pillar, raising the sword.

The glow of the hunter's mark split in two and went in opposite directions.

The brass gauntlet on her hand wet with blood, Verity bolted from cover and ran for the door. The broken, twitching scarab device was still clutched in her fist, the needle-like legs kicking and pressing against her grip. It glowed with the same ethereal light that had framed Decima's head, and she was very much aware that holding it made her as much a target.

Then she made her mistake, the kind of error that a Battle Sister would not have indulged. She looked back.

She had to. Removing the scarab like this, on the spur of the moment without any adequate preparation, with only the most basic of tools and a prayer to the God-Emperor for success... It was more than likely that doing so had given Decima the very mercy death Verity had argued against.

She saw no sign of the injured, bleeding woman. The hospitaller thought of the raw, open wound on Decima's neck, where she had peeled back the meat and scarred skin down to the bone...

There was a chance, she had thought, that the deathmark would be confused by the forcible removal of the marked implant, perhaps even enough to defeat its targeting logic. That seemed foolish now.

The necron was right behind her, and she stumbled as it slashed at her with a glittering sword.

She lost the scarab in her fright. It clattered to the ground, where it began to wander in a circle, leaving a trail of Decima's blood behind it. The deathmark gave it a dispassionate glance and stamped on it, destroying it outright, killing the glow.

For a moment she thought it would kill her too, but the blank skull-face of the necron, polished to a mirror-bright sheen, only showed disinterest. It turned away, looking for Decima once again.

The deathmark found her. The woman came screaming out of the shadows, her scarred face and neck wet with newly-shed blood. With the hunter's mark on her, the glow made Decima into a terrifying sight; she was a spectre of vengeance, the unquiet spirit of her dead Sisters sent to exact payment on those who had killed them.

In her hand, Decima had a piece of rockcrete larger than her head, and she slammed it into the Deathmark with such wild violence that the xenos assassin staggered under the blow.

++You cannot win++ howled the Watcher. *++You can never silence me++*

She rained down attack after attack upon it with the might and the pace of the feral, breaking the stone on its shiny metal ribcage as the alloy caved in and broke.

'I will not fall to you,' Decima shouted. 'You are gone! I have killed you! *Leave me!*' She was screaming, insane with her emotions. All of it had been bottled up inside, unable to find release; but no more.

++Never++ came the reply. *++I am in your head. I am in your psyche++*

The alien fought back, swiping with the sword, cutting air as it tried to slice the revenant in two. Decima fainted and came close, inside the deathmark's guard. Before it could react, she grabbed the ball-joint of the necron's arm and pivoted, forcing it against itself. The weight of the assassin-mechanoid shifted and it was unable to arrest the fall.

'She tore out the machine,' hissed the woman. 'I don't have to hear you any more. I take back my soul! I take it back!'

Decima made sure the deathmark fell slowly, inescapably, onto the upturned tip of its own blade. With a scratching hiss, the hyperphasic sword entered its metal skull beneath the chin, and gently worked its way

up to pierce the armour-hood.

++No++

She glared at her own blood-stained reflection in the deathmark's polished face, listening to the voice in her head die into silence.

++no++

'I am not you!' she spat venomously at it. 'I was never you! Never!'

The necron did not respond, the emerald light in its eye sockets fading to nothing.



CHAPTER FIFTEEN

The sandstorm was drawn to the valley by the static flashing into the air, as the blue-white flickers of tiny lightning charged the atmosphere. The clouds of oxide dust swirled and mingled with plumes of black smoke from untended fires, the hellish gloom they cast ignored by the invaders as they marched ever onwards. Around them, burning vehicles, shredded pergolas and the blackened husk of the mobile explorer module stood mute witness to the thoroughness of the alien assault. Human dead lay where they had fallen, ignored by their killers and abandoned by their comrades in the rush to fall back to safety.

A bright hail of gauss-beams, tesla blasts and accelerated particle streams cascaded across the open courtyard, the angles of attack slowly shifting as the necrons advanced. The howling bolts of fire impacted the sheer, rounded sides of the last untouched structure inside the convent proper – the keep.

The dark red stone of the towering donjon glittered with a heat-haze effect thrown up by a void shield generator. The energy barrier deflected the torrent of death, great ripples shuddering in the air all around it as the device laboured to protect the last stronghold on Sanctuary 101. Once, the force wall had been part of the arsenal of a great Battle Titan, and in the aftermath of the War of Faith in which it was lost, this component of it had been bequeathed to the Order of Our Martyred Lady. It had served them well for three hundred and eleven years, but now it teetered on the edge of a catastrophic overload, stressed beyond all limits.

With each wall breached, the Sisters had fought until they were about to be overrun, using every weapon at their disposal. They set mines and flame pits, they used converging fire and counter-siege tactics that had been ancient before the days of Holy Terra's Old Night. The necrons were destroyed, but the advance did not cease. The ranks that followed marched over their crippled fallen, and those that were obliterated simply vanished in crackles of green fire. For every one that was destroyed, another was there to step into the breach.

The canoness ordered the Battle Sisters back, and back, and back, until at last there was nowhere else to go. Now they waited inside the keep, the Sororitas and a tiny handful of terrified survivors from the workgang party and Questor Tegas's Mechanicus contingent.

From inside the transparent, purple-hued barrier, wounded and weary Sororitas looked out through gun slits as the inner ward of the convent became a mass of silver alloy skeletons. The necron numbers seemed endless, and their cold desire for battle relentless.

Then, somewhere up on the third tier, a Battle Sister began to sing. The unmistakable refrain of the Fede Imperialis echoed down the corridors, and with each woman who heard it, a new voice was added to the choir. Soon, every Adepta Sororitas within the walls of the keep was at one with the words, the harmony of them swelling in a prayer. Above the crash of beam fire, the battle-hymn rose high.

On the other side of the void shield, warriors and immortals in massed ranks concentrated their firepower on specific points of the energy barrier, loci that the Canoptek wraiths had scanned and determined as the ideal points of overload for the attack. A ring of steel remains ringed the edge of the crackling force wall, shredded pieces of attackers and a single ill-fated deathmark that had attempted to penetrate the barrier

through hyperspatial transition. The humans had been careful, raising the power that coursed through the void shield until it was dimensionally impregnable. But the intensity required to do so was monstrously high, and it would exact a grave cost in time.

The nemesor observed from his war-throne as his command Monolith cruised over the rubble that was all that remained of the outer walls. He sampled the data returns from tomb spyders scuttling around the perimeter of the void shield, reading their scans. Khaygis raised a taloned finger and at once all gunfire within the courtyard ceased. The only sounds were the crackle of static discharge, the thrum of contra-gravity motors, and faintly, of human voices in one of their peculiar tonal harmonies.

He needed only to linger. Even if the massed necron army stood here, silent and waiting, there would come a point when the human barrier would reach the end of its operational lifespan and fall. The nemesor did not need to expend any more energy. The march of entropy would do the job for him. He made a quick calculation – in a few solar rotations, he estimated, no more.

Of course, that time could be reduced to a single Kaviran day with sustained bombardment, perhaps even hours if he placed his Monolith's particle whip and flux arc cannons to the deed.

Or it could be dealt with *now*, at this very second.

Khaygis raised his hand and made a motion, a gesture like beckoning. A new sound rose to join the others – grav-motors, but of a different calibre, faster and higher pitched. A flight of Tomb Blades droned out of the dust clouds at the edge of the valley, flanking a third craft that drifted slowly across the sands, its arched prow turning towards the central keep.

The ground troops parted, creating a path for the barge to follow. Made of blackened carbon and bright alloy, the craft resembled an inverted steel ribcage, and at the stern a triarch praetorian sat wired into a battle chair, surrounded by glowing planes of systemry and function. Slung beneath the barge, running almost the entire length of it, was a cylindrical mechanism that held spirals of lethal radiation inside a maw crested with collimator vanes. Its designation was etched in glyphs along the rise of the scorpion-tail sail above the central deck. There were many names for the craft, honours and dedications presented by the Sautekh dynasty for all the battles it had won them. If its description could be translated into the poorly-nuanced tongue of the humans, they would have named it a Doomsday Ark.

The barge halted and as the Tomb Blades made a cursory strafing run against the force wall, the great cannon along its spine moaned with power. Bright spears of discharge flashed from heat vanes, fusing sand to glass beneath it.

When it was time, the nemesor closed his open claw into a fist, and the Doomsday Ark fired. Such was the power of the blast, it momentarily drained the potential of the barge, sending it dropping to the earth as it recovered; but the searing bolt of actinic plasma it unleashed roared across the courtyard like a spear made from the flesh of a star.

Those Battle Sisters not behind their helmets or quick enough to seek cover were instantly and permanently blinded. They did not see the writhing charge of energy meet the haze of the void shield, did not see the massive release of contrary power as one overwhelmed the other.

The barrier protecting the keep was shattered with a single blow, and monumental back-shock resonated through the generator's beam-vanes. Down in the basement levels, the generator exploded, killing the operator crew and its guards. Fire caught and bedded in there.

Silent but for the crunch of their metal feet on the sand and the rubble, the necron army began to advance on the naked, unprotected citadel, raising their guns to the ready. From every weapon slit and barred window, the Battle Sisters opened fire, lines of tracer, flame and plasma sleeting down at the wall of alien steel.

Khaygis watched. In a few moments, the Doomsday Ark would be returning to active power levels, and soon after that it would have enough energy for a second blast from the main cannon. The nemesor plotted the best points of attack. The weapon would be able to bite chunks out of the thick stone walls of the central donjon, perhaps even undermine it enough to force a total collapse of the structure. He could hold back his troops, let the long guns do all the work. The humans would eventually perish.

Except...

Except that did not seem like it was *enough*. Khaygis reached deep to find the root of his thought and could not place it. He could only be certain that it was *not enough* to stand off and assail the human

stronghold until it was ruins. These fleshthings needed to die with terror in their hearts, seeing the faces of the necrontyr as they perished.

The nemesor would not compute the same errors that Cryptek Ossuar had allowed to progress. The humans had to perish, with a zero degree of survival. He would see to it personally, through the eyes of his soldiers. Through his own claws, if need be.

Khaygis transmitted the kill command, and the walls of the keep were breached. He watched his troops swarm inside, re-enacting the massacre from twelve years ago with swift and perfect efficiency.

How long have I been a traitor? The question rolled around Questor Tegas's mind as he ran, letting the autonomic pathing processors in his scuttle-claw feet follow the route he had programmed for them.

Treason is merely a matter of dates. The words rose up from some deep memory store, something that Tegas had absorbed from a data stack centuries ago, the origin and context of the truism lost to him.

He didn't truly consider himself a turncoat. To be that, he would need to go against the Adeptus Mechanicus of Mars and the Ommissiah, and there would never be a moment in the questor's life when that would occur. All weakness in that regard had long ago been burned from him.

No, what he did now was the *opposite* of treason. He was committing a supreme act of total allegiance, freeing himself from the burdens that surrounded him so that he could return to the Mechanicus as a herald... And as a hero.

Of course, some distasteful acts were required. The women, for example. He had to divest himself of the Battle Sisters for his plan to reach its conclusion. It surprised him how easily he was able to remotely interfere with the lowest levels of the necron hierarchy, beaming signals into the ambient network all around him. He was elated that it had actually worked, and already redundant subsections of his thought-process unit were busy evaluating the import of what had happened. Tegas had alerted the scarab-mechs, raised them up from dormancy to active attack mode. *Could that possibly mean... By the Machine-God, what if I could command them?*

The possibility was delicious. For a brief second, Tegas imagined himself entering the Hall of Forges in Olympus Mons with a phalanx of necrons as his slaves.

He pushed the thought away. This was no time to become distracted. He was deep within alien territory, undefended, on borrowed time. Tegas steeled himself, marshalling his thoughts towards the search for the prize – the Sororitas relic. With it in his possession, he would have all the coin he needed to pay his way to glory.

The laboratorium was exactly as he had heard the hospitaller describe it to Canoness Sepherina. The questor slowed and moved as stealthily as he was capable, extending antennae and probes from his body through sewn holes in his robes. He broadcast a low-level electromagnetic signature to mimic the same outputs he had detected from a necron warrior, mouthing a prayer that the alien sensors inside the complex would not be intelligent enough to see through his digital masquerade.

He approached a hexagonal door and it broke open in segments. Tegas pointed an eye-cluster back over his shoulder to ensure he was not being followed, and then advanced. At one moment, one of the females – Sister Miriya, he recalled – had been on him, but she had been waylaid by a warrior patrol Tegas had managed to avoid.

Dead now, he decided, and entered the chamber.

The dark stone and the sharp-cut walls stood out in shades of white and pale green to Tegas's enhanced eyesight. He found the sensor strip on the floor, and with a burst of anticipation-analogue, he let the chamber illuminate around him.

Tegas set himself to data-gathering mode and drank it all in. He looked through hundreds of eyes at the glassy globes and the organic remains they held in stasis, the holographic panes of alien data accompanying them. Some of the containers showed signs of recent damage and he made a negative noise. Doubtless that was the work of the Battle Sisters, blundering around in here like clumsy, ignorant children.

He found a display of broken armour pieces and dead firearms, and there among them, discarded and ignored, was a grey, dust-caked metal drum etched with a fleur-de-lys.

Tegas ran his hands over the container, scanning it for micro-fractures, energy bleed, booby traps, anything untoward. The sensors in the tips of his fingers registered nothing, and gingerly he gathered up the

capsule, turning it over.

It was undoubtedly the correct item. He found the bloodlock and the personal sigil of the previous canoness of Sanctuary 101, embedded in the seal that had remained undisturbed for over a decade. Tegas measured the weight of the object, and could not escape wondering what he would find if he opened it.

He reviewed his files on the artefact known as *The Hammer and Anvil*. Data was scarce. The Sisters of Battle guarded their secrets with great care and vehemence, and this was one of their most precious. It was unquestioned that the relic dated back to the thirty-sixth millennium, to the Age of Apostasy when the mad High Lord Goge Vandire had plunged the Imperium into his so-called Reign of Blood. Some said it predated the creation of the Adepta Sororitas, having been gifted to the progenitors of the Battle Sisters when they were still known as the Daughters of the Emperor. Others said it was a tool, a powerful weapon granted to the Sororitas by the High Lords of Terra during the great Reformation, when the remnants of Vandire's cults were mercilessly purged from the galaxy. Many records of that era were sketchy, but the Adeptus Mechanicus had reports of entire worlds being 'burned at the touch of the Hammer' and 'broken upon the Anvil' of the Sisterhood's fury. If those words were more than just figurative... The thought hung in Tegas's mind.

And yet the identity of the relic was unknown to the galaxy at large, and had remained so to all but the most highly ranked Sororitas for thousands of years.

Tegas looked at the capsule and felt *hungry*. He had no need to eat, his internal systems fed by a microfusion generator and monthly ingestions of a polymer nutrient gel dense in metals and proteins, but he remembered the sensation from when he had been fully human. Even as he set the pod down on the stone floor, he knew what he was doing was folly. Logic screamed at the questor to take the capsule and flee with it, to find some safe location far from prying eyes before he even contemplated what he was doing now.

And yet, he did not stop himself. The need to know was just too great. It swamped his reason. *I will just take a look*, he told himself, *just enough to lay my eyes upon it and know*. He could not conscience the thought that he might perish in his escape from here – and the chances of that were substantial – without ever having uncovered the secret the Sororitas had kept. Information was meant to be known, known by those with the intellect to use it. That was Tegas, that was the Adeptus Mechanicus. It was his right. More than that, it was his *duty* to know.

With a cutting laser in the tip of his servo-arm, he delicately excised the security lock-out on the capsule and worked to open it. The task would have tested anyone else, but not the questor. The Sisterhood had failed to remember that their security devices and their strongboxes were made by the Mechanicus. Every lock could be defeated, if one understood it.

Time passed. The lid came off and clanked to the floor, a whiff of old air curling in the cold of the necron laboratory. Tegas detected the flicker of a stasis field disengaging. Whatever had been inside had been kept in a timeless condition of suspension by the field effect.

His manipulators trembled slightly as he reached inside and grasped the object within. *A thick, heavy rectangle*. He detected metals and plastics, combinations of chemical surfactants and cured organic matter. *Leather. The relic is covered with a sheath of cured leather.*

Tegas had expected a pistol, a skull, an orb of gold, a crown made of crystal. He had expected something xenos and inhuman, or daemon-made and unholy. A hundred possibilities. But nothing like this.

In his hands he held a book. Thick, secured by dense bindings and a latch that held it shut. There, on the hide cover, etched in gold, the title: *The Hammer and Anvil*.

His driving curiosity, the one human emotion he had never been able to fully purge from his persona, faded away and was replaced by something else, something rare. *Confusion*.

The questor carefully opened the book at its first page and coiled his mechadendrites around it, scanning the tome across every possible perceptive range. The form could be illusory, he told himself. There were files on Mars that described things that resembled books, such as the *Malus Codicium*, the *Ravonicum Rex* or the *Epistles of Lorgar*, things that were so much more. Pages encoded with telepathic matrices, subspace memes, even possessed by daemoniac energy from the warp. There could be nanofoms within the ink itself, the paper could be psychoactive, even the spine might hide data needles that led to other riches.

He detected nothing, only the great age of the pages. The book was old, on the scale of hundreds of centuries. Tegas blink-transcribed the text into his personal data pool, dragging it through counter-

encryption programs, layering it one image atop another, sifting for patterns. He created a disarray of meaningless information, the rational words on the paper rendered into recurring gibberish by his attempts to read something into them.

In his hands he held a book, pages of verses and observations on faith and duty, penned in pious manner but with no sense of focus or aim. It was not a disguise for something else, it was not imbued with preternatural power on any scale that Tegas could detect.

As he scanned it, and scanned it again, the questor's confusion deepened. There was no secret message lurking in these words, no code embedded in the patterns of the text. No blueprints for a weapon so powerful that it could burn a world of heretics. No ethereal powers lying dormant, no binding made of daemon's skin or ink drained from the blood of aliens.

All he held in his hands was *a book*. Ink and paper and binding.

'This is... nothing else!' Tegas bit out the words, trembling. He shook the container, but only particles of dust fell from it. The questor brandished the tome in his claw grip. 'What is this? *What is this?*'

'Read the name.' Tegas spun in place and found the woman Miriya standing in the entrance to the chamber. He had been so invested in the relic he had not heard her approaching. She was panting, her face bloody, but her manner was reverent. 'The author's name,' she demanded. In her hand she held a smoke-blackened bolter.

Tegas looked down at the title page and read aloud what was written there, scratched in a careful and deliberate hand. '*These words and thoughts are mine. Know me. I am Sister Katherine Elysius, Daughter of the God-Emperor.*'

'Blessed be her name, mother of my Order and first among the companions of Alicia Dominica.' Miriya completed the ritual phrase and bobbed her head. She hoped that Saint Katherine could forgive her for failing to make the sign of the aquila, but under the circumstances she did not trust Tegas enough to take her eyes off him. 'You opened it. You have no right to touch it, cog! You dirty the words of my mistress with your presence!'

'Words... ' The questor shook his hooded head. 'In the name of Terra, tell me that there is more to this than just words on a page!'

He waved the ancient tome at her and Miriya felt a jolt of fright. She was furious at him for his desecration of the relic, but at the same moment terrified he might damage it. 'Give it to me, or I will kill you where you stand.'

Tegas didn't seem to hear her. 'There is nothing in this, is there? No secret but the one you have invented to surround it!' he shouted. 'How can this worthless text be so highly valued? There is no new knowledge here, no insight that unlocks the universe! *It is just a book!* I risked everything for the doggerel of a dead nun!'

'You blaspheme my Saint.' Miriya took aim at his head. 'It is *her* book, you maggot! Written in her own hand, her own words laid down for her Sisters to come. For me! It is faith, in its purest form!'

'I know faith!' Tegas shot back at her. 'I have conviction enough for the Imperial Cult and the Ommissiah!'

'Your only faith is in your own arrogance,' Miriya said coldly. 'You have no understanding of what it is to believe in something bigger than yourself.' The words seemed to come from somewhere far away, as if they were being spoken by a part of the Battle Sister that had been silent for many months. '*The Hammer and Anvil* is Katherine's soul poured out onto paper. You hold the only copy still in existence. The physical matter of it, the pages, the binding... Those things have no value at all. But the inscriptions within, questor... The Martyred Lady herself wrote them. In this, that book is beyond any material worth to the Adepta Sororitas. It is our secret prize, carried from convent to convent to bless each outpost of our Order with Katherine's memory. I wondered why Sepherina fought so hard to return to Sanctuary 101... I did not fully understand until she told me of the book.' Miriya glared at him. 'Do you understand now, Tegas? The coin with which you measure the value of the world does not carry to all of us! What you think worthless I see as priceless.'

He was silent for a long moment. When he spoke again, the questor's voice was loaded with venom. 'I should destroy it out of spite. You and your Sisterhood have been nothing but impediments to my designs

from the very beginning!’ Then with a jerk of motion, he threw it down. ‘Take your precious book, then, and read aloud all your dead Saint’s homilies and sermons on the nature of faith. We will see how far that gets you.’

Miriya reached for the book, and a cold breath of air passed over her face. It brought with it the heavy aroma of old dust and heated metals.

She knew that odour. The Battle Sister spun, bringing up her bolter to aim down the length of the chamber. Her blood chilled as she glimpsed a curl of inky mist creeping along the walls of the laboratory, sliding over the glassy spheres and the lines of steel supports.

‘Faith,’ said a sepulchral voice. ‘Once, I had so much of that. But now it is forgotten to me. I struggle to remember how it was to process that concept.’

‘There!’ Tegas stabbed a finger into the gloom. ‘I cannot read the nature of that mass... It is radiation-opaque—’

‘Be silent!’ Miriya snarled at him.

The veil of black melted into the walls like a tide retreating across a shoreline, revealing the arched, decorated form of the cryptek. Ossuar tilted his head to study the Battle Sister. ‘You came back,’ he offered. ‘Good. Things were left unfinished at our last meeting.’

‘It speaks...’ Tegas managed, bringing up his mechadendrites to wave in the air around him. ‘Analysing.’

‘You may make the attempt, human,’ said the necron. ‘You will understand nothing.’

‘I understand enough,’ the questor retorted. ‘You are not superior to us.’

‘No?’ The machine eyed him. ‘Do you actually believe that you gained access to our information network on your own? You are here only because I allowed it.’ It approached, studying the questor with open curiosity. ‘Fascinating. You have attempted biotransference through an organic replacement progression. Flawed. Your theory is based on a faulty base concept.’ The cryptek eyed the Sororitas. ‘Is this part of your “faith”? These false beliefs, the insistence you show on defying us?’ He gestured with the black staff in his claw, pointing it towards them both. ‘I wonder how it will be of use to you when I dismantle your living forms.’

Miriya’s expression darkened. ‘I am Adepta Sororitas,’ she told the xenos, ‘and we do not suffer the alien to live.’

She pulled the trigger on the boltgun, and unloaded the rest of the mass-reactive rounds in the clip into the cryptek’s torso.

On the other side of the towering stained glass windows, a hell-storm was raging. The tiles of the Great Chapel’s ornate floor trembled beneath Verity’s feet with the deep impacts of heavy weapons fire, dislodging stones and rains of dust from the high dome over her head.

She helped Zara move the last of the wounded into the lee of the granite altar, wrapping the injured woman in a combat cloak. The Battle Sister’s breathing was shallow and she was in delirium. The woman lay unaware of where she was or what was taking place around her.

‘Perhaps it is for the best,’ said Zara in a low voice, her thoughts paralleling those of the other hospitaller. ‘When the end comes, she will not be troubled by it.’

Verity rounded on the other woman. ‘We are not dead yet!’

Zara looked away, to the tall steel doors where Battle Sisters were arriving in twos and threes, their guns smoking hot from firing. ‘I beg to differ,’ she replied.

Verity shook her head and walked away, her hands finding one another as another lengthy barrage of enemy shots shook the pillars around her. Zara’s morose manner was infectious, and she could feel the same creeping sense of desolation welling up inside her. She spoke a litany under her breath to stave off the sensation, but it was hard to focus. The roar and shriek of alien weapons were so close, they sounded as if they were on the far side of the chapel’s curved walls.

As if in response to her thoughts, a metal stay broke from the constant vibrations and the tall tapestry it supported crackled as it fell to the ground, pooling in a heap. The others ignored it, the Battle Sisters busy as they secured great wooden pews across the only other means of egress from the chapel, the door to the transept. And there, strangely calm among it all, she came across the canoness.

Sepherina was lighting votive candles, one after another, arranging them in rows along the front of the curved altar. She seemed oblivious to the dissonance of the encroaching battle.

It had been on her orders that they had drawn back to the chapel. When the force walls faded and died, the command had come over all the vox-channels. Sepherina did not tell them to retreat. She did not use words like 'withdraw' or 'surrender'. Instead, the canoness told them that the hour was upon them.

'Come to the chapel,' she had said, 'it is time for matins.'

Verity looked up as green light flashed in the windows. It did not seem like any morning prayers she had ever experienced. They were in the eye of a hurricane, the pitiless advance of the necrons and their constant guns drawing closer with every passing second.

The chapel was the closest thing to an impregnable space in the convent, but then those who had made those claims had also promised that the walls would never fall, that the wards would never be breached. Verity considered this as she watched the trickle of survivors slow to almost nothing.

Now Sepherina was speaking into an auspex activated in recording mode, moving her hands in a benediction. Verity came closer as the gun-thunder sounded again, and caught some of her words.

'It is my hope,' she was saying, 'that those who come to find this will also find forgiveness for us. We did not fulfil this mission, and for that I will pay penance in eternity. Look to us at the God-Emperor's side, Sisters, and know that we did our best.'

'Last rites?' Verity challenged, as Sepherina placed the device on the altar. 'Is that all we have left now?'

'That and our devotion.' The canoness made the sign of the aquila before the statues towering over her. 'I only wish it had been enough. But I was foolish to think so.' Her hand fell to the sheathed sword at her waist. 'I believed our tenacity and fortitude would be enough to cut through all the lies and lost truths in this place.' She glanced around. 'But arrogance has doomed us all. Hoth's, Tegas's... and mine.'

'I don't want to die here.' Verity said the words without thinking.

Sepherina gestured at the statues. 'Under the eyes of Saint and God-Emperor? What better place is there?' She paused. 'Do you have a weapon? You should have a weapon.'

'You already consider us dead,' she shot back. 'What is the point, what would I be defending?'

The canoness looked at her with surprise. 'Your Sisters,' she said, with mild reproach. Sepherina drew one of her own bolt pistols and pressed the master-crafted gun into the hospitaller's hand. 'There. I give this as a gift to you. Its name is *Ithaca*. I was awarded it on Gamma Solar for victory in the pogroms there.'

She cradled the pistol in her hands. 'I am not a Sister Militant.'

'You are today.' Sepherina walked on, down the aisle towards the doors. 'Close the way, my Sisters,' she called, her voice carrying over the din. 'Come to the altar and draw near.' She pulled the coif from her head and discarded it, running a gloved hand over her bald, tattooed scalp.

'Wait!' Zara cried out. 'Someone comes!'

Wisps of grey smoke curled around the open door as the Battle Sisters standing guard there hesitated on the threshold. Guns growled in the corridor beyond, and then a figure stumbled through the gap, bloody but still walking tall, the muzzle of the storm bolter in her hands glowing dull red.

'Sister Isabel...?' Sepherina accepted a weary salute from the other woman.

'Not the last,' coughed the Sororitas, jerking a thumb over her shoulder.

Verity holstered the pistol and gathered up her narthecia pack, following Sepherina as another shape came through the smoke. The last arrival resolved itself into a ragged figure supporting another.

Decima, her torn hood pulled back from her scarred face, gently set Sister Helena down. The veteran had cruel burns all down one side of her body, and she was barely conscious.

'Tesla carbine,' explained Decima. 'The blast was attenuated but she caught enough for it to wound her deeply.'

Verity nodded, drawing counter-infectives and pain-killers for the injectors in her medicae gauntlet. She worked on bandaging Helena's wounds, and the other woman stirred. The hospitaller stole a glance at Decima's troubled expression. The last she had seen of the revenant had been when the attack began in full force. In the disorder following the first breaches of the wall, Decima had vanished. Verity thought she might have gone searching for a death in battle, but now here she was, a life saved in her hands.

A life saved, for all that it mattered. With a heavy crunch of gears, the chapel doors were sealed. Outside, the rattle and howl of the attack began to lessen, but still there was a steady drum resonating

through the floor beneath them.

'They're marching out there,' said Isabel, with a wheeze. She halted, bitterly wiping smoke-dirt from the lens of her artificial eye. 'Nothing to stop them now.'

'Thank you... child...' Helena's eyes fluttered open as the medicines began to take effect, and she righted herself. She gave Decima a terse, respectful nod, and limped away, looking for a place to make ready for the last attack.

The revenant walked the length of the aisle back to the altar and Verity trailed after her. At the foot of the statue, Decima went to one knee and adopted the position of a supplicant. The hospitaller could not help but see the mess of raw, dried blood across the back of her neck where she had forcibly removed the mindshackle. Crude dressings, wet with fluid, covered the worst of the wound.

'You must be in such pain,' said Verity. 'Your body and your spirit.'

Decima shook her head. 'It is a benediction,' she told her. 'All is silence.' She raised a hand to her temple, touched the skin there. 'I thought they had cut out my soul, but it was only veiled. The Watcher concealed it from me. You restored it.'

Verity said nothing. In the aftermath of the deathmark's assault on the infirmary, she had found herself occupied by the question of the device she had found implanted in Decima's flesh. There was no way to be certain at what level it had still functioned, and she wondered if it ever really had.

What if the voice that tormented Decima had been something other? What if, instead of this so-called Watcher's words issuing from her necron tormentors, they had originated elsewhere? Verity was chilled by the thought that poor Decima's ordeal might have come not from without but from within her own agonised psyche.

Like Sepherina, Decima tortured herself over her survival of the massacre at Sanctuary 101, and together both women had endured their torments in different ways – but perhaps in the end, both equally destructive. Both believed themselves to have failed their Order. It troubled Verity deeply to consider that it might take death itself before either of them could find their peace.

A shadow fell over her, cast by the shifting light from the fires burning outside. Verity stepped aside as the canoness came nearer. 'I misjudged you,' Sepherina told the kneeling woman. 'Rise now. The God-Emperor knows your name. Saint Katherine sees you.' She gave a wan smile. 'And so do I.'

Decima did as she was commanded. 'Milady?' Puzzlement coloured her expression. 'I do not understand.'

'You faced the enemy alone to save your Sisters in the garrison hall. Isabel tells me you did the same for Helena, braving necron fire to recover her. If I doubted your devotion, it was wrong of me.' She reached out a hand and touched Decima's face. 'You have endured so much. I cannot take one more thing from you.'

Sepherina reached inside her robes and produced the voidblade she had confiscated from Decima hours before. 'This is yours. A spoil of your war, I believe.'

The revenant glanced at Verity, almost as if she were asking for guidance, and the hospitaller gave a nod in return.

Decima took back the alien weapon and weighed it in her hand. 'I have punished many of them with this, a sword of their own creation. It was fitting.'

Outside, there was silence now, no marching, no gunfire. When the canoness spoke again, she did so with full voice, enough to carry across the room. 'Mark my words. I grant my blessing and the blessing of the Order to this woman. Know her name, kindred. We welcome Sister Decima back into our fold. I know now she has never left it.'

A brittle smile came to the survivor's lips. 'I have waited a lifetime to hear that.'

Verity met Sepherina's gaze, and it was unreadable. Did she mean what she said, or was this some final act of kindness for the ragged woman, in the moments before the necrons came to end them all?

The questions went unanswered as a heavy fist of iron slammed once-twice-three times into the sealed doors of the chapel. Then another rang on the metal, swiftly joined by another and another, more and more crashing impacts. The Battle Sisters scrambled to their fighting positions as the sound of steel on steel grew louder and louder. The doors began to flex against the steady concussion, the makeshift blockades before them trembling.

'Give them nothing,' said Sepherina, raising her gun and drawing her sword.

Verity pulled the bolt pistol into her hands, as the hinges broke and the doors collapsed like a falling drawbridge.

Beyond, she saw nothing but steel and emerald.



CHAPTER SIXTEEN

The impacts punched into the flawless metal of the xenos machine-form, and Sister Miriya felt a momentary surge of triumph as the cryptek staggered backwards, caught by surprise at the sudden violence of her attack.

The moment did not last. What she had thought was nothing more than some kind of ornate talisman around Ossuar's neck cracked open. It was a phylactic charm, and from within it a horde of gel-like spiders emerged, swarming over the necron's chest and burying themselves in the wounds she had just inflicted. Even as she watched, the living metal began to flow and scab over, in a parody of organic healing.

Miriya ejected the clip in her bolter and reloaded. Tegas scrambled across her sightline, and she hesitated on the trigger. But the questor was not exhibiting some sudden instance of bravery.

'Stop! Stop!' he cried, his vocoder amplifying the words, making them crackle. 'We have no need for further violence! We can find common ground, a peace!'

Miriya's expression soured at the thought of such a thing, and she scrambled to gather up the holy relic they had come here for, while the moment was open to her. Her hand clasped the leather cover and the Sororitas fought down a shudder of fear as she bound the sacred book to the votive chains on her belt. She vowed to stain the pages of Saint Katherine's great work with her dying blood rather than see it stolen once again.

Tegas was still talking, almost babbling as he tried to get all the words out. 'There is much we could learn from one another, your technology, our insight—'

'If you believe there could ever be a unity, even for a moment, between our species, you are ignorant in the extreme.' Ossuar's voice was acid. 'You organiforms are below us, and ever will be.' The necron cocked his head, examining Tegas with a pitiless stare. 'Once I thought there might be value in you as experimental stock...' He glanced at Miriya. 'But no. Khaygis was right. You are not worthy of our attention. A diversion, nothing more. And now one to be swept away.'

Some part of Tegas's innate arrogance reasserted itself at the cryptek's dismissive manner, and he rose up, his servo-arm swinging high. 'No! I will not allow it!'

Ossuar made a sound that might have been laughter, a million years ago. 'You have no say in the matter.' The necron's abyssal staff rose and from the tip jetted a stream of black, inky matter that resembled smoke but moved like fluid. Miriya instinctively went to cover, but Tegas's scuttling feet were too slow over the metal deck.

The smoke-wreath hit him and enveloped the questor like a claw made of living mist, wrapping itself around his body, pouring into the hood of his cloak. He let out an inhuman scream, a sound like a recording of a man's cry run back and forth through fields of distortion. Quivering, he fell, the synthetic shriek becoming a long, drawn-out moan.

Then Ossuar was calling more blackness from the rod, letting it spread out around him like a cloak. Miriya grimaced. She had seen the cryptek use this trick before, and no sensors or preysight would be enough to penetrate the rippling wall of dark the necron bent to his will.

Still, she had to try. Miriya thumbed the fire-select catch on her boltgun from full-automatic to single-

shot setting, and began a quick dance of move-and-fire, putting rounds into the gloom as she saw flashes of metal in among the mist. Random shots blasted into the walls or exploded the orb-like containers ranged in lines along the laboratory gallery. Storage fluids that stank sickly-sweet frothed and gushed into hidden gutters beneath the deck plates, and shards of glass-like material crunched underfoot. The unrecognisable gobs of meat and flesh-matter pooling on the tiles blackened and decayed in the open air.

The veil of black swept towards her, and Miriya vaulted away from it, but the churn of inky colour was too swift for her to avoid. In the close confines of Ossuar's gallery of horrors, there was little room to manoeuvre. She was aware of the book pressing into her beneath the folds of her combat cloak, anchoring her to the moment with its presence.

Green light glittered and faded at the corner of her vision. The Battle Sister spun and fired into the smoke, but the instant the round left the muzzle of the bolter she realised she had been duped. A fast, spindly presence faded in behind Miriya.

Ossuar was suddenly there, the iron skeleton looming over her. The abyssal staff flashed, dark on darkness, and the heavy, smoking tip slammed into her like a club. Even through her power armour, Miriya felt the strike in the marrow of her bones. It seemed to penetrate her wargear effortlessly, a shocking flash of cold that deadened her arm. She lost the boltgun to her nerveless fingers, heard it clang against the deck and slip away.

For a split-second Miriya was terrified to glance down at her limb, her mind telling her that there would be nothing there but a withered stick of elderly bone and paper-thin skin. But still she looked; her hand was bloodless and twitching with nerve-shock, but whole. Retreating, she shook off the illusion and kneaded her fingers. It was like touching the hand of a corpse.

Ossuar did not come after her. He raised the staff until it was horizontal across the plane of his now-repaired torso. The liquid gloom emerged from the shimmering rod, but instead of a flow, this time it was a deluge. Smoke-black haze exploded from the cryptek's weapon and flew at her.

Reflexively, Miriya threw up her hands to protect herself as the shroud swathed her body. She knew what to expect after her earlier confrontation with the alien, but this time the attack was a hundred times more powerful.

Darkness fell and she was suddenly in the heart of a depthless void. Nothing seemed real or substantial. She flailed, trying to find the walls and support pillars she knew were there, but there was *nothing*.

The dark was in her mind. The weapon was not just something that could confuse vision. The necron technology was projecting a nightmarish mantle that cut her off from everything. It was not like the poison of a psy-witch, oily and insidious, toxic to thought; no, Miriya had faced psykers before and it did not feel like this.

Ossuar's weapon was very different. It was touching some primitive level of her animal brain, buried under the rational and logical. It awakened the most base of primal fears – of the dark, of isolation, of death. Even as she understood it, she felt the shroud drawing tighter, starving her mind of reason as a strangling hand would choke air from her throat.

The void filled with emotion, and that emotion was every shade of despair. It was raw and bloody, inescapable. Suddenly, Miriya was drowning in regrets and misery. She saw the faces of the dead from days past, heard their cries pealing against the walls of darkness. Her Sister in arms and trusted friend Lethe, sad Portia whose potential had never been realised, Iona and her milk-pale face beneath the crimson cowl of a Repentia... And beyond them, a hundred, a thousand others, the whole mass of the women who had died at Sanctuary 101, rising up to blame her for failing them. The dreadful phantasms drew closer, mirrored everywhere she turned her gaze. She could not close her eyes. She could not shut them out, trying and failing to find the words of faith that had saved her before. The ghosts were drowning her, smothering her in desolation, killing all hope...

Hope...

Forcing the nerve-deadened hand to work, Miriya reached beneath her cloak and her trembling fingers found old leather and iron latches. She forced herself to think of what was written on the pages of *The Hammer and Anvil*.

'Fear is the enemy of hope. Hope is the foundation of faith. Faith is the weapon to kill fear.' The axiom came to her as if Katherine herself had breathed the words into her ear.

Illumination came from within, streaming from a place in her heart that could never be extinguished, never be doused. It could only be hidden, concealed by the subterfuge of the enemy. The foe would fight to convince you that it was gone, the fire of the soul doused and ashes, that hope was dead... *But it was a lie.*

It was eternal, and so clear to her now that it amazed Miriya she could ever have been uncertain. She spoke a litany to invoke the Spirit of the Martyr and burned her doubts, steeling herself. In one hand she clutched the sacred book; the other reached for the grip of the chain-sword sheathed upon her back.

The darkness died, and the moment shattered. It had only been the briefest of instants, and yet in the grip of the nightmare shroud it had seemed like hours.

Ossuar reared up and emitted a sour, hissing sound. 'Still you defy,' he intoned.

'All acts of faith are acts of defiance,' she shot back. Miriya attacked with a battle-cry, sweeping down with the snarling chainblade. The cryptek blocked the blow and fat yellow sparks gushed from the point where the tungsten-alloy teeth met the alien material of the abyssal staff.

Vehemence propelled Miriya's attack, that and her righteous fury. She executed a sweep and parry that opened Ossuar's guard for a moment too long and the blade fell across the plane of the necron's skull. The Battle Sister put her weight behind the weapon and there was a horrible screeching clatter as the spinning teeth ripped open the cryptek's chromium face. Optical lenses and sensing elements were crushed instantly, and the alien gave an atonal howl.

He struck out blindly with the abyssal staff, beating Miriya back with a random blow. 'My vision is impaired... I cannot see...' Ossuar swung out again as the phylactery medallion irised open, spider-menders teeming as they boiled across his silver skin towards the wound. 'Foolish. I will self-repair. And you will pay for daring to strike a harbinger of the Sautekh dynasty!'

Black mist emerged from nothing, curtains of dark falling. Miriya swung again at the necron, but the cryptek was gone. He appeared, stepping in and out of the churning veils, moving from one side of the laboratorium to another without seeming to cross the physical space in between. Nearby, Tegas groaned, dragging himself into a corner out of the fray.

Tucking away the holy book, Miriya stooped and swept up her bolter from where it had fallen. She turned in a single motion to fire at the retreating alien. But each shot was late, an instant after Ossuar passed into the veil and escaped her. He was trying to wear her down, buying time to heal himself as she expended her ammunition on illusions.

'I will not fight with ghosts,' spat Miriya, and threw herself into a rapid spin, dropping low to one knee to let the boltgun describe an arc across the room. She did not fire towards where Ossuar was; instead she filled the air with bolt-rounds, firing towards where he *would* be.

Half a clip of shells exploded against nothing, but then she found her phantom in the space between manifest and immaterial – and blasted it back into corporeality. Ossuar took a cluster of rounds in the torso and crashed into a stasis orb.

Ruined, broken sounds spilled from the necron's damaged skull. The angular metal mask was broken and fractured, and Miriya saw complex crystalline workings behind the façade. The cryptek lunged wildly with the abyssal rod, savage and random.

Did it feel fear? she wondered. Did it feel that, now she had blinded it? Was the machine capable of emulating that state? Miriya wanted it to be so. It did not seem right that Ossuar should be able to cause such terror and yet go untouched by it.

With a brutal axe-blow strike of her chainsword, Miriya took off the cryptek's arm at the elbow joint and it lost the staff. The necron's self-repair systems were going into overload, frantically trying to fix the critical damage. But the Sororitas could inflict it faster than Ossuar could heal it.

She cut and chopped at the machine-form, taking little victories in the guttural, haphazard noises that spilled from the cryptek. The necron rallied, raising a clawed finger to point towards her.

'You think you can win?' The words were laced with static. 'There are more of my kind than stars in your night. We owned this galaxy before your species was born. We killed the first gods and we will kill yours.'

Slowly, deliberately, Miriya knocked the machine down once more and sheathed her chainsword. She raised her bolter and rested it on Ossuar's damaged skullcase. 'My God cannot die,' said the Battle Sister. 'He lives in faith, and faith lives in us.'

Miriya blasted the harbinger's head into fragments of steel scrap, and watched the green fire of disintegration crawl over the remains of the torso, crackling with the last ergs of energy inside the alien machine.

Questor Tegas was where he had hidden, still trembling from the after-effects of the nightmare shroud. His neural implants were stuck in a restart loop that made him twitch like a victim of palsy. The Sororitas dragged him to his feet and backhanded the adept across his synthetic face.

'You are considering how to kill me,' he grated, regaining his composure. 'But circumstances have changed.'

'Not really.' Miriya glared at him. He could see her raw need to cut him down where he stood, burning hard in the woman's eyes. 'We still have a mission to complete.' She grabbed a fist of his robes and shoved him towards the corridor. 'Move.'

'Why should I?' he shot back. 'I abandoned you... You want revenge for that. It is what you are. The daughters of Saint Katherine. It is what you are known for!'

She ignored his words. 'Sister Superior Imogen is dead. That means that I am the most senior Battle Sister, so command of this mission is mine.' She showed him her bolter, menacing him with the weapon. 'Your life belongs to me now. The duration of it will depend on how you obey me from this point onwards.'

'What I did...'

He tried to frame the words. 'I was forced to make unpalatable choices.'

'Unpalatable,' she repeated, in a dead voice. 'You left us to be killed.'

'It was for a higher purpose! For the good of the Imperium and Holy Terra. Your sacrifice would not have been forgotten!'

Miriya halted. 'Do you believe that, Tegas. Honestly, and truthfully?'

He nodded, without thinking. 'Of course. I am the Ommissiah's loyal servant.'

There was a long silence before the Sororitas spoke again. 'If that is so, then you have only one chance to redeem yourself, questor. Do you understand?'

'You want me to do as I first promised. Deactivate the necron power core.' He had intended to do that all along, but there was no point in revealing so to the Battle Sister. 'I will.'

'Do it,' she said solemnly, 'and I promise you salvation.'

'I will,' he repeated, moderating his voice-synth, imitating the tones that would best convince her he was not lying.

She did not respond; finally Tegas gave a nervous bow and set off back the way they had come. His tertiary sensors registered a flash of leather-bound pages and iron chain, there beneath the woman's combat cloak.

The machines came in through the yawning doorway and met a cascade of bolter fire with viridian counterblasts. The atmosphere inside the Great Chapel became a humming, crackling thing that vibrated with Sundered air molecules. Flayer beams, tesla gun discharges and bright particle streams washed out in murderous waves. The heavy scents of ozone, cordite and promethium coiled in wisps of white vapour, the effluent of the gun-chorus that screamed defiance against the alien invaders.

Verity had never witnessed such savage combat in so confined a space. Even though the chapel proper was big enough to hangar a dozen bulk landers, it was still too small for the battle that raged within it. A war had been bottled up inside this chamber, poured in and left to rage against itself.

She heard the death-cries of Battle Sisters as they were reduced to cinders by the concentrated fire of the xenos. Necron soldiers widened the entrance with heavy beam blasts and they surged forwards. The fallen of their number vanished in snarling crackles of energy – although she could not be sure if they were self-destructing at the final moment, or being swept away by some form of teleporter. When they died – if one could call it that – the necrons emitted a piercing howl that seemed deliberately pitched to grate on the spirit and chill the blood. At all other times, they were voiceless, silent in the face of the Battle Sisters as Canoness Sepherina exhorted her troops to heights of pious fury.

Verity was behind a heavy oaken pew, with both hands holding the bolt pistol Sepherina had given her. So far, the hospitaller had missed more times than she had hit with the shots she had taken. Verity silently vowed that if she lived to survive this horror, she would work to improve her skill with a weapon.

Her training with firearms was only the most basic. As a medicae in the Imperial Church's service she was often in harm's way, but always in the company of true warriors, never expecting to be called on to fight the enemy face to face. Verity was not squeamish about the weapon, but she lacked the cold ability to kill that women like Sepherina had. Her calling was to life, not to death; but the necrons were something between those two extremes. They were hollow and soulless – one look into those glowing eyes and that could not be denied.

Not for the first time, Verity turned inwards and called on her own faith to steel herself... And by the God-Emperor's grace, she found it.

The great wooden bench in front of her upended and spun away, as if it had been reeled in by an invisible line. A metal statue rose up and threw a shadow over the kneeling woman.

It was a lychguard. Stocky and heavy-set where necron warriors and immortals were thin of line and skeletal, the machine was plated with silver armour accented in platinum and copper. A fanned crest of intricate design emerged from the back of its metal skull, and it advanced with a tall kite shield sheathed in sparks of energy. In its other hand, the alien held an axe-like weapon made from dark blue metals, the cutting edge mirror-bright.

On impulse, Verity jerked the trigger of the bolt pistol and spent the rounds in the clip harmlessly against the spatial dispersion effect surrounding the shield. As the breech snapped open on the empty magazine, she fell backwards, desperately trying to put distance between them. All around, the chaos of the battle continued, ignorant of this small drama among the greater conflict.

The axe – a warscythe – moved, falling towards her face. She jerked away, and felt the wind of the blade's passing brush her lips. The very end of the curved axe-head met the chest-plate of her duty armour and sliced through it as if it were smoke. Panic flooded Verity as she stumbled, expecting a gusher of blood to emerge from the cut; but only desultory impact fibres bled through from within. She had out-stepped the blow by a tiny fraction. A centimetre less and it would have cut her open through the breastbone.

The lychguard shifted its stance, taking its time. The pitiless gaze of the machine-form glared down on her. The next blow would not be in error.

The axe rose, just as a blur of motion came from the shadows nearby. With a grunt of very human effort, Decima came racing into the fray, her black-bladed sword flashing. The necron turned to meet her attack, bringing up the kite shield, but she was already leaning into the blow.

Verity watched Decima force the voidblade into the crackling field around the shield with all her might – and *through* it. Decima carried the strike all the way, ripping across the long guard. The shield broke in two, necron technology cut cleanly by necron technology.

Verity wondered if she saw a moment of anger as the lychguard discarded its now useless wargear. It swung the warscythe at the other woman, and the two alien blades met with a discordant clang. The necron was a head taller than the gangly survivor, and at least twice Decima's mass. She did not let that halt her attack, however, and sword and axe met again and again.

Verity dragged her attention from the wild melee and fumbled a fresh ammunition clip into the bolt pistol, before bringing it up to take aim. She hesitated, her finger tight on the trigger. Decima and the lychguard were in a lethal dance, in close, blade leading blade, searching for a breach in the other's defence. Verity was suddenly afraid to take the shot. One mistake and Decima would die.

Then the choice was made for her. The necron found the opening it needed and slammed Decima in the head with the butt of its warscythe. She rocked and fell back, losing her footing. The lychguard seemed to pause, as if it were calculating the perfect plane of the blow it would make, the single, flawless killing strike that would end the life of the tattered Battle Sister.

Verity opened fire, shouting wordlessly as she pumped the pistol's trigger, letting the muzzle rise with the slamming recoil of the rounds leaving the barrel. The necron tried to protect its head with its armoured hand, distracted and off-balance for a brief instant.

Decima took the moment and made her riposte. With a piercing cry of anger, the woman spun in a lethal pirouette and leapt, coming back down with both hands on the hilt of the voidblade. The black sword entered the lychguard's torso where a human being would have its clavicle, and rotated with the force of the blow. Decima pushed all her might into it, and took the alien's crested skull from its shoulders. The headless necron sank slowly to its knees and trembled, sparks gushing from the neck stump.

Decima withdrew her stolen weapon and took a step towards Verity. 'Sister,' she began. 'I will keep you—'

Safe. The word died on her lips as the tip of the warscythe burst through her stomach, dark arterial blood splashing on the stones. At her back, the beheaded lychguard was still twitching, the last action communicated from its dying machine-mind to stab her in the spine.

Verity screamed as Decima's legs went dead and she fell forwards off the axe-head, crashing to the floor in a heap. Amid the raging gunfire, no one heard her.

'Sis-ter.' Decima managed the word through a mouthful of bloody spittle. She reached up with her bony, malnourished fingers and touched the tears on Verity's cheeks. 'I never heard...' she gasped. 'Before, I could always hear them. In my head. The Watched... I was always watched... But this time... I am free.'

'Decima, I am so sorry...' Verity wanted to reach in and seal the cut with her own hands, even as she knew that was impossible. The hospitaller recognised a mortal wound all too well.

'Will you forgive me?'

She felt a jolt of shock. 'For... what?'

'I could not protect the relic.' Each word was a labour for Decima. 'Katherine will hate me for that.'

'No. *No!*' Verity shook her head. 'She will *love* you for it, Sister. You gave up so much to survive. To warn us.' Bitter sorrow welled up inside the hospitaller. She felt powerless and broken as she watched the woman fall into the arms of death.

'Sister,' she gasped. 'I had forgotten that we are kindred. But I remember now.'

'I will not forget,' promised Verity; but Decima did not hear her.

Danae, Cassandra and the others stood among a drift of smashed necron scarabs, the charred and blasted remains of the machines carpeting the stone floor. Miriya heard the Sister Retributor speaking in low tones as she came closer.

'Imogen Nal, Sister Superior of the Order of Our Martyred Lady, honoured soldier of the Golden Throne, and daughter of Ophelia VII and the Convent Sanctorum. We remember your name and lay you to rest in this place. The sight of the God-Emperor finds you even here.' Imogen's ruined body lay in front of Danae, and she held her meltagun trained on the woman's corpse. '*Ave Imperator,*' she concluded.

'*Ave Imperator,*' repeated Miriya, drawing hard looks from the rest of the unit as she dragged Tegas along with her.

'You left us,' Pandora accused. 'Imogen died because of—'

'She was dead already, and she knew it,' Ananke spoke over her, silencing the other woman. 'But the girl is right. You fled in the middle of an ambush.'

'I did not flee.' Miriya looked to Danae. 'Finish the rite, Sister. We cannot leave Imogen's body to these creatures.'

The Retributor said nothing for a long moment, a silent challenge in her eyes. Then at last she looked away. Imogen's wargear had already been stripped of equipment, grenades and ammunition, leaving only her armour, her chaplet and personal votives. On the battlefield, the corpse would have been recovered for a proper burial, but here such attention was impossible. Instead, her funerary would be concluded by the most expedient means.

Danae bowed, and pulled the meltagun's trigger. Plasma-bright fire hummed from the weapon as she used it to immolate the Sister Superior's body, turning metal, bone, flesh and ceramite into an ashen mass.

'It's done,' said Cassandra, grimly dressing a fierce wound at her neck. She nodded towards Tegas, who stood shifting his weight from foot to foot. 'An execution next?'

'He lives,' Miriya replied. 'We need him.'

'You decide this?' said Pandora. 'You abandon us in a fight to rescue a worthless cog, and now you give out orders?' Her face creased as the acrid smell of burnt human flesh reached them.

'That is her right,' Danae noted. 'She may take seniority if she wishes. She has the laurels.'

'I gave my oath to Imogen,' Pandora retorted, 'not to her.' He looked at Danae and Ananke in turn. 'So did you!'

'You gave your oath to the Order,' Miriya corrected. 'Imogen understood what was at stake here. This is not about anything else.'

‘No?’ Pandora stepped closer, glaring at her from under her thin tresses of red. ‘She did not think you fit to be in command. We have all seen the broken links of your chaplet. What gives you the right to take the Sister Superior’s place now?’

‘You don’t need to follow me,’ Miriya told her, a weariness in her words. ‘But you will follow this.’ She reached into the folds of her crimson combat cloak and produced the book.

She dropped it into Pandora’s stunned grasp. The young Battle Sister’s expression transformed in a heartbeat. ‘It... it is real.’

‘Take it, if you think you are worthy,’ Miriya told her. ‘Guard it until it can be placed in the hands of the canoness.’

The others made the sign of the aquila over their armour. ‘They told us the book was held in the Convent Sanctorum,’ said Ananke, disbelief in her tone. ‘How can it be here?’

‘Saint Katherine’s words have been in transit across the galaxy for decades, hidden behind a falsehood,’ said Miriya. ‘Going from outpost to convent, chapel to colony. Giving secret blessing.’ She nodded to Pandora. ‘Open it. Read.’

Her hands shaking, the Sororitas did so. Her eyes glistened with tears as she gave voice to the first words she saw. ‘*Our greatest strength is the steel that lines the heart of every woman. The mother, the daughter, the sister. Her love is eternal and unbreakable. It is the blade that cannot be blunted.*’ Pandora’s voice turned husky with emotion. ‘Throne and Blood... These are the Saint’s words.’

‘This is why we came back to Sanctuary 101, this is the real reason we returned.’ Miriya gave a grave nod. ‘Not just to lay the ghosts of the dead to rest, not for the convent or in the name of the God-Emperor. We came for that.’ She pointed at the holy tome.

‘If we have the book,’ began Ananke, ‘then is not the mission ended? We should quit this alien mausoleum and abandon it to the xenos.’ She gave Tegas a level look. ‘And leave the questor for them to toy with.’

‘We’re not done here,’ Danae said, before Miriya could speak the words. ‘Book or no book, too much blood has been shed. The necrons have to pay the butcher’s bill.’

‘Aye,’ Miriya agreed. ‘We need ask ourselves only one question of how we are to proceed. *What would Katherine do?*’

With great care, Pandora closed the book and secured it beneath her cloak. ‘The Saint would kill them all,’ she replied.

Miriya nodded and turned to Tegas. ‘The power chamber above the Dolmen Gate. You will lead us.’

The adept gave a jerky nod and moved off, the Battle Sisters falling into a skirmish line behind him.

The humming from beyond the trembling stone walls of the chapel grew into a roar, and Verity looked up from Decima’s corpse to see a slab-sided shadow pass over the taller of the stained-glass windows. The shape moved with slow, deliberate menace, and for an instant she was reminded of an ancient battle galleon gliding across a calm ocean. She heard Sister Helena cry out a warning, but the words were lost to her in the din.

Then the fire came. A stream of purple-white flames burst through the wall high above her head, and lashed out in a shuddering line. The flaring rope of energy sliced horizontally through the supports, the windows it touched puffing into clouds of brittle shards. It moved from right to left in a single sweep, stonework losing all coherence and collapsing in its wake.

A great gust of wind and rock dust rolled in across the chapel proper as the eastern wall came apart in jagged chunks and the thunder of cracking stone. Verity shielded her eyes and saw the looming shadow framed in the breach it had just created. A great, hovering ziggurat made of black stone drifted closer on a haze of anti-gravity force, and it shouldered its way through the opening. With its presence in the chapel alone, the necron Monolith committed the worst blasphemy imaginable.

Gauss flayer arcs on each corner of the floating pyramid twitched and moved, seeking targets. They laid down pulses of energy that ripped up the intricate mosaics across the tiled floor, flash-blasting discarded prayer books and Battle Sisters alike into embers and ash. Verity went low, dropping into the lee of a fallen pillar, and she dared to look up once again.

Atop the Monolith, before the towering crystal emitter of a particle whip, there was a throne that

appeared to be woven out of thick brass cables. A necron bedecked in a metal cloak rose from it, glaring out imperiously over the war his kind had brought to the convent. It raised its hands and pointed them into the battle. From one leapt pulses of green fire, boiling through the smoky air to set stone melting where they impacted; from the other, projectiles trailing lines of energetic particles hissed across the chamber. Verity saw one such arrowhead strike a Sister Dominion with such force that it picked her up and carried her off her feet, into the shadows.

The machine paused, scanning the chamber with its cold gaze.

‘What is it?’ she asked aloud. ‘Looking for something?’

‘Stay down, nursemaid!’ A muscled hand grabbed at her and dragged her out of sight. Verity found herself next to Sister Isabel, who worked at the slide of a bolter jammed by a misfire. ‘It’s some kind of commander unit,’ she added. ‘In all the hells, what else could it be? He’s come to end us personally.’

The idea that the robotic, artificial killers would even be capable of such a want or a need seemed jarring to the hospitaller. Even after the confrontation with the cryptek back on the Obsidian Moon, she found it hard to imagine the aliens as anything other than sophisticated automata. Verity could only see them as clockwork, bereft of anything like human sentience or emotion. They were like the uncommon minions of the Legio Cybernetica, things that mimicked the shape of life but bereft of the essence that animated a living thing. She said as much to the grim-faced Battle Sister.

Isabel shot her a look, made fierce by her augmented eye implant. ‘They have no soul, aye. But they live, that is certain. Just don’t ask me how.’ She hefted her bolter. ‘Stay here,’ said the Sororitas, as she made to rejoin the fight. Isabel turned back and glanced at the pistol in Verity’s hand. ‘Count your rounds, Sister,’ she told her, ‘and keep the last for yourself.’

The Battle Sister vaulted over the fallen pillar and vanished into the haze, firing as she went.

The Monolith’s particle whip discharged, and in the confines of the breached chapel it was a sound like the end of the world. Huge pieces of the majestic dome overhead were sliced apart, and they crashed to the floor with earthshaking impacts, kicking up more dust to clog the thickening air. Verity reeled, and saw a glimpse of the pale blue sky overhead, framed in a ragged tear across the ceiling. Up there, pallid with the reflected light of the Kavir sun, she could make out the ghostly curve of the Obsidian Moon, still visible after the dawn.

She thought of Miriya, and felt afraid for her friend and Sister. There was no way to know if she was still alive up there, or if Imogen’s strike team had failed in their mission to penetrate the heart of the necron complex. Verity’s thoughts were touched by the horrible certainty of her own imminent death, and as the screaming and the firestorm rolled on, she worked the slide of the bolt pistol to eject a single round into her hand. Verity rolled it between her fingers, touching the shell to her forehead and then the fleur-de-lys on her duty armour. She pocketed it, and dashed from cover.

The necrons were everywhere she looked, fighting in hand-to-hand scrambles with Battle Sisters or engaging them in gun duels through the smoke and fire. She realised she was standing next to the grand altar, and lying at the base of the stone dais there were a dozen dead women who had perished at the foot of their Saint. Scattered among them were emptied weapons, ammunition boxes... And a silver-grey cylinder that resembled a scroll made of metal.

Thrumming a bass note so deep it seemed to shake Verity’s ribcage inside her flesh, the Monolith progressed up the rubble-strewn aisle towards her, relentlessly closing the distance. She started towards the iron scroll as a fan of emerald laser light swept back and forth across the chamber. The beam crossed her and she gasped, expecting to be burned alive, but it was a harmless scanning ray, emitting from a device on the necron commander’s throne.

The beam fell on the scroll and hesitated. The necron in the cloak raised his crackling gauntlet again and released a stream of green fire that reduced the device to molecular vapour.

Verity’s stomach knotted with shock. The alien device was the portal to the Obsidian Moon, and although the manner in which it worked was beyond her understanding, the hospitaller knew that without it Miriya and the other Battle Sisters would be trapped. ‘You have killed them!’ she shouted, and fired on the alien commander. The mass-reactive rounds keened harmlessly off the fuselage of the Monolith, but still she pressed on. ‘No more! In the God-Emperor’s name, *no more!*’

‘*No More! No More!*’ From all around her, Verity’s cry was taken up by Battle Sisters who emerged

from the smoke to lend their arms to her impassioned attack, and salvos of bolt-shells and melta blasts crashed into the Monolith's dense hull.

A woman with a brazen sword in one hand and a bolt pistol in the other charged headlong past the hospitaller, the rich blood-crimson of the sanctified Aspiriate cloak at her back flaring as she ran. Canoness Sepherina sprinted up a fallen section of the roof, canted at an angle like a ramp, bringing her level with the battlements of the rumbling Monolith.

As Verity looked on, blazing with righteous fury like the Saint she so revered, Sepherina threw herself into single combat with the necron commander.



CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Tegas's internal chronometers, accelerometers and positioning sensors were finely-tuned pieces of archeotechnology, and operating in concert they were capable of telling him at any time, in any place, of his exact location against the greater skein of the universe.

But not here, and not now. Energies out of balance with the questor's understanding of space-time assailed him, and he was – for want of a better term – *giddy*. His claw-like hands found the safety rail running alongside the thin gantry where they had emerged, and he clung to it as if on the deck of a ship in a high gale. Tegas was tilting as his neural matrix tried to reorient itself against new fields of micro-gravitation. The Sisters of Battle, with their crude human sense organs, were barely affected by the shift in the invisible energy that webbed the air around them. They moved with stealth, silent and steady. The hard-faced one with the meltagun – Danae – glared at him accusingly, and motioned with the barrel of her weapon for him to keep moving.

They could not see what he could see, the threads of neutrinos and bosons liberated and roiling all around them, the streamers made of high-energy particles so rare and charmed that their existence was only theorised by the high thinkers of the Adeptus Mechanicus.

All this emitted from the perfect white cube some five hundred metres below them. Like the access gantries that criss-crossed the core chamber, it was suspended by nothing, hanging there in defiance of both logic and physics.

The chamber itself was a vast tetrahedron, four huge triangular slabs over three kilometres in length along each edge, assembled together into a pyramid-like structure. Walls of dull, mirrored metal rose up all around them, broken here and there by wide slots that opened out into the darkened service spaces of the Obsidian Moon. Each apex was an exposed cluster of crystals and metal rods, their purpose unknown. Beyond them, over their heads Tegas could see flat transport platforms bearing quiescent Monoliths and Ghost Arks, and far below, through to the space where the damaged Dolmen Gate was under repair.

The cube floating in the middle of the chamber resisted all attempts from his mechadendrite sensors to take a read of its surface. Crackles of blue light formed a shifting aurora around the object where the output of a powerful electromagnetic field prevented it from interacting with anything larger than an air molecule. He could see busy tomb spyders moving on the lower walkways, and the floating shapes of Canoptek wraiths drifting around monitor podiums. Occasionally they would pause and adjust something on one of the control panels. The questor guessed they were there to regulate the flow of energy to and from the cube.

'No defenders,' said one of the women, in a low voice. 'It may be a trap.'

'Aye,' said Danae. 'Pandora is right. This place should be crawling with the xenos.'

'They're not here,' Miriya told them. 'They sent their armies away.'

'Where?' said the one called Pandora. But as the question left her lips, she must have realised the answer.

Tegas had glimpsed the nemesor's order-memes floating at the edges of the necron communications matrix when they first arrived. Almost every active combatant unit had been committed to the attack on Sanctuary 101, in an act of massive military excess. To do so was an almost human act of resentment and

hubris, and Tegas found that to be most interesting. Perhaps the necrons were not as devoid of emotional response as they appeared to be. He noted the possibility for later consideration.

His gaze was drawn back to the core. *The cube*. He could not help but turn every optic cluster, every sense module he had, onto it. Behind that barrier was a power source as primordial and as lethal as the forces of creation – a singularity. Tegas heard the women wondering aloud as to the nature of it, and for a nanosecond he considered attempting to explain the phenomenon to them. But they were only soldiers, and their minds, however tactically capable, were simply too limited to understand the awesome power before them.

It was no surprise to Tegas that his sensors returned him only gibberish. The singularity was an elemental effect so uncommon that what mankind knew as the laws of physics simply ceased to apply within its influence. That the necrontyr could shackle such a power to their will was incredible, but then this was a species that apparently dated back millions of years, to an era when things half-recalled by race memory and distant myth walked the stars. The xenos had shown they had knowledge of forced spatial distortion, dimensional transit, teleportation, quantum gravity... The questor would have given much to plunder the mind of one of their scientists, if such a thing were possible.

The singularity was an artificially-created event in space-time, shrouded by some form of exotic material acting as its event horizon. The energy differential between this plane of reality and the one where the singularity existed as an orbifold was being siphoned off, becoming self-reinforcing, bleeding cosmic amounts of radiation into its shell – or so he theorised. The science of it was staggering, and again Tegas felt hungry looking at the object. Somehow, the necrons had manufactured this thing and turned it to power not only the altered dimensional spaces of the Obsidian Moon, but also to the activation of the Dolmen Gate. He did not wish to contemplate what might occur when the necrons finished their repairs on the Gate and opened it. A day, a year, a century; however long it took them, in the end the Imperium would suffer for it.

Tegas realised that he was being spoken to, and with effort, he disengaged himself and turned away. Sister Miriya was standing over him. ‘Tell me how to destroy it,’ she demanded, nodding towards the object.

He reacted as if he had been slapped. The brutality of her order repelled him. ‘You do not understand,’ Tegas told the woman carefully. ‘To de-power this magnificent creation will take time.’ He pointed down towards the lower levels, to the monitoring platforms where the wraiths were working in ignorance of being observed. ‘We will need to isolate each control station, perform a staged shutdown...’ He relished the idea of it, of getting into the heart of the necron machines and dismantling their code. ‘You will have to protect me as I work. It may take several hours, but I believe I can deactivate it.’

The dark-skinned Battle Sister made a spitting sound and looked away.

‘What if that is impossible?’ said Miriya. ‘What if we are forced to destroy these... platforms?’

Tegas shook his head. ‘If the singularity core enters an uncontrolled collapse, it will annihilate...’ He spread his hands. ‘All of this.’

Miriya gave a slight nod, and peered over the edge of the rail. ‘Thank you, questor. You may consider your obligation fulfilled.’ She stepped away and called out ‘Grenades!’ as she snapped krak munitions from the clips where they hung at her belt. Tegas blinked as the rest of the Battle Sisters mirrored her actions. She set to work twisting a fusing dial near the trigger pin. ‘Set timers for staggered detonations.’

‘No! *No!*’ Tegas’s voice caught up with his panicked thoughts and he snarled, grabbing for Miriya’s arm. ‘No, you can’t! You will doom us all!’

She shrugged him off. ‘Have faith, questor,’ Miriya said coldly. ‘I’ve done this sort of thing before.’ She glanced at the rest of the squad. ‘Ready. Ready. *Release!*’ A rain of grenades were dropped over the edge of the gantry and they fell towards the glowing, perfect cube.

This time Tegas shouted so loudly that the echo of his voice bounced off the metal walls and down far enough for the wraiths to detect the sound. They were already lifting, anti-gravs propelling them up to deal with the intruders, when the first of the krak grenades detonated. It destroyed part of a lower gantry, and the walkway buckled, dropping down to collide with the halo of the electromagnetic field.

The Battle Sisters were already firing, raking bolt-shells and melta blasts towards the monitor platforms that Tegas had indicated. He pounded his fists on his head in ferocity. ‘What have you done? You stupid, ignorant animals! That is something rare and faultless, and you are—’

Ananke backhanded him and Tegas collapsed to the metal decking. His sensors went wild with random, contradictory readouts as the women methodically destroyed every governance system, every monitor and control unit they could reach from their high vantage point.

He crawled to the edge of the gantry and dared to peek over the edge. Monstrous discharges of unrestrained force lashed at the necrons below them, ripples of gravity waves tearing supports from the walls and twisting walkways like paper. The flawless white cube rippled and began to crumble. As Tegas watched, wide-eyed, a rain of precipitated non-matter began to fall upwards, peeling away. He glimpsed a burning flare of radiation emerging beneath, but he could not look away.

He reached out a hand towards the singularity, and the light radiating out from it shone through the metal of his cyberlimb; for a moment he saw through the steel and plastoid, glimpsing the intricate workings within. He struggled to understand.

That was all he had ever wanted to do, *to understand*. Everything on this road had been towards that end, in the name of Mars and to the glory of the Ommissiah.

Tegas was lost in the sight, barely aware of movement around him. The women were running, fleeing back the way they had come, out through the walls of the tetrahedron chamber. He watched the radiant glow shiver and brush against the walls as it cut loose, growing larger as it slipped its chains. Great gouges of metal simply vanished, reduced instantly to atomic particles.

‘Questor,’ Miriya had to shout to be heard over the sizzling crackles of energy. He looked up and found her standing before him.

‘You... are a weapon,’ he told her. ‘I see it now. All of you, weapons, blunt instruments of a blind church. You care only for vengeance.’ He tried and failed to stagger to his feet as the gantry rocked. ‘There are so many riches here! The necrontyr hold the keys to a cosmos of understanding!’ Tegas found his full voice and bellowed at the Battle Sister. ‘But you would rather shatter it all, and for what? In the name of a few corpses and a zealot four thousand years dead?’

‘I gave you a chance to redeem yourself,’ she told him, her eyes never leaving his as fire lashed around them. ‘Salvation.’

‘I brought you here!’ he spat. ‘Gave you what you want! Is that not enough?’ Tegas held out his hand. ‘Are you satisfied now? Help me up. At least I may live to tell of this!’

‘I promised you salvation,’ Miriya replied. ‘Not your life.’

The Battle Sister raised her bolter, and the last sound Tegas heard was the roar of the shot.

Locking her gun to the mag-plate on her armour, Miriya kicked the traitor’s twitching corpse over the rail and watched it spin away into the frothing mass of energy below. Cassandra was screaming at her to run, and she took her Sister’s advice, breaking into a sprint as shockwaves resonated across the chamber.

Katherine, show me the way, she said to herself, the gantry shaking beneath her boots. In truth, she hadn’t expected to live this long. One look at the device in the core and she had known what would become of them. Perhaps the cog had been correct, perhaps if they had been granted the time it might have been possible to render the entirety of the necron complex power-dead and inert. But this was a war now, not a scientific experiment, and all the lies and the subterfuge were boiling over into battle. The only way now was to destroy, to attack whatever stood in their path and strive for victory.

Or death.

That was the nature of the Sisters of Our Martyred Lady. They were revenge made manifest. In this place, at this moment, Miriya and the others were the answering echo to the screams of the women who perished twelve years ago. The necrons had come to kill, but rather than punish them, men of weak character in the Imperial hierarchy had allowed their gaze to be turned by the prospect of alien knowledge. Decima’s ruined face flashed through her thoughts and she pushed the image away. It sickened her to consider it; the lesson this place had taught her was that nothing with its roots in the ways of the xenos could be trusted. It could not be tamed, or appeased, or allied with. It could only be killed.

We cannot suffer the alien to live.

‘Miriya!’ Cassandra shouted her name in a warning, and she dared to look over her shoulder.

The wild overspill of energy had punched through the triangular walls and raked the upper tiers. As the Battle Sister watched, great slabs of decking were liberated into free molecules by lightning strikes as big as

warships. Monoliths, still glowing with internal power, their dimension gates shimmering, fell into the chamber through cracks in the walls and came crashing down towards her, ricocheting off the dull metal.

She was almost at the hatchway when a black pyramid cut through the gantry she stood on, ripping her footing away from under her. Miriya grabbed at the rail as it twisted and bent, and suddenly she was dangling over an ocean of white as the cube came apart. The light threatened to burn her eyes from her head with its glare. She saw the Monolith touch the expanding bow-wave of the energy field and it cracked like glass.

A strong, slender hand enveloped hers and she saw Sister Pandora dangling above, held in train by Cassandra and Ananke. 'Come,' she shouted. 'The book! We must return with the book!'

She hadn't expected to live this long. Miriya had been ready, they all had been ready. The Battle Sister imagined a catastrophic and immediate liberation of energy from the necron core after she gave her command – a single moment of white light as precursor to awakening at the God-Emperor's side. Better to perish and deny the Saint's holy tome to the galaxy than risk its loss again. Katherine would understand. She would forgive her.

Would she?

'Sister! The mission is undone!' Pandora screamed. 'Take my hand!'

Miriya reached up and let them help her the rest of the way.

In the spaces beyond the wrecked gantry, the air was close and thick with ozone. The outermost layer of the power armour worn by the Battle Sisters was cracked with heat damage, and the crimson of their combat cloaks was marred with ugly scorch marks from the nuclear fires they had fled.

Danae led them to the spiral riser that threaded up through the decks, and they ran on in the hellish half-light, ignoring the rattle of the radiation detectors in their gauntlets and the inferno boiling beneath them. Ethereal fire rose like floodwaters, forever at their backs. Gravity itself began to malfunction, and they loped as they fled, desperate not to stumble, fall and be lost.

They passed tiers where entire legions of necron warriors stood in silent formation, their command trains broken, without even the sentience to seek an escape as the Obsidian Moon came apart around them. In other places, clusters of flyers swarmed like flies in a bottle, trapped inside vast staging areas that were sealed tight by emergency lockdown commands. Stasis tombs that dwarfed the size of the greatest cathedrals of the Convent Sanctorum were consumed by the rippling fires of the singularity as it grew towards a point of critical mass. The necrons slumbering within them had been there for millions of years, since the time of the War in Heaven. Now they would never wake again.

Up in the iron dome-sky far overhead, sections of the complex suspended by gravity shunts were suddenly cut loose to implode under their own impossible weight. Tesseract chambers holding isolated pocket dimensions exploded open and devoured themselves, unable to retain any stability in this reality.

The Battle Sisters crossed paths with a unit of triarch praetorians, and a brief, furious combat ensued as both sides engaged knowing that they were fighting in a burning house. Blasts of emerald light from the triarch rods of covenant cut the stale, smoke-choked air, but the Sororitas had the advantage of numbers and sheer fury. They left the machine-forms crippled or disintegrating, but the fight had cost them time.

The deck beneath their boots was trembling as the slow approach of the energy surge rose closer with each passing second; and at last Danae dared to ask the question none of them wanted to voice.

'Where do we run to now?' she asked. 'Or shall we kneel here and take a last prayer before the flames consume us?' The veteran looked around. 'We cannot outrun death.'

'You... *We* will die when the God-Emperor wills it, and not before' Miriya replied, raising her voice to be heard by all of them.

'I think that moment may be here, Sister,' said Pandora, grim-faced.

She turned on the other woman. 'If that is so, then why did you pull me up from the gantry? I thought as you did, but what if... What if we are wrong!'

'There is no greater destiny for us!' Danae bellowed, with sudden fury. 'We succeed but we fail! The alien complex will destroy itself, but the book will burn with us. This is our lot!'

Miriya shook her head. 'I refuse to accept that.' She glared at Danae. 'Do you remember what Sister Imogen said, when we arrived in this blighted place?'

‘We are the daughters of Saint Katherine, honour to her glory,’ repeated Danae.

‘Honour to her glory,’ said Miriya, with Pandora, Cassandra and Ananke mirroring her words.

‘And what else?’ Miriya went on.

‘We are not here to die,’ said Danae, recalling the moment.

Miriya pushed past her and moved towards a chamber along the line of the closest tier. ‘The necrons we dispatched, they were guarding this area.’

She didn’t look back as the other Sororitas, all of them battle-weary and fatigued, followed her one last time.

In the chamber stood hundreds of empty transport racks, the same sort of support frames that Miriya had seen the first time she came to the Obsidian Moon. They were the carriage for the necron warriors. The skeletal machines slept upon them, hung like slaughtered animals, released only when they went to war.

And before the racks stood thick, glassy panes, several of them glowing with ghostly light. *Mirror looking into mirrors. Corridors made of infinity, spiralling away.*

‘Gateways,’ said Danae. ‘The same as the ones we found in the cavern on the planet...’

‘This is the way,’ said Miriya. ‘The God-Emperor shows us the path.’ With her boltgun and chainsword drawn, she chose the closest portal and walked towards it without hesitation.

There was no way to know where it would lead to. There was nothing but faith and prayer that could carry them now, into the non-space of the necron dimensional corridor and on to an uncertain fate.

Miriya marched with the words of a prayer on her lips, but her thoughts rang with the words that Imogen had spoken an eternity earlier.

The Saint will curse you for this.

The audacity of the human commander was incredible. The organic actually believed that she was a match for the nemesor. She seemed to think that by force of fury and daring alone, she would be able to meet Khaygis in single combat and beat him. It was such folly.

The female dared to throw herself aboard his command Monolith and dirty the flawless hull with her flesh. Some distant, long-forgotten part of Khaygis was recalled, and with it the sense of repulsion.

The meat-things could not see themselves the way that a necron could. They could not detect the invisible cloud of crude chemical exhalations emitted by every pore and orifice on their body, they could not detect the oily matter and trails of sloughed hair and skin cells that were left behind them wherever they went. The microscopic effluent registered to the nemesor’s enhanced machine senses in trails that clouded the atmosphere. Each lungful of air the female breathed out polluted the space around her. Khaygis was disgusted by her presence.

Braying a challenge in her crude human language, she went at him with an energy-enhanced sword, and the nemesor parried it away with his fire gauntlet in a puff of sparks. There was little room to manoeuvre atop the Monolith’s battlements, and Khaygis fainted backwards past his command throne, gaining room. The burning brightness of the power crystal rising from the pyramid’s peak cast everything with a stark light.

The human fired a shot from a hand weapon and the necron swept up the length of his iron cloak, allowing the metal shroud to deflect the kinetic impact of the bolt-round. The mass-reactive shot exploded and cost him a moment’s balance.

The sword flashed, and swept down and across in a lethal arc. Khaygis dodged the blow, but the blade carved into his throne and tore open the delicate mechanisms within it.

In return, Khaygis loosed a tachyon arrow, which keened from the launcher atop his other gauntlet and missed the human by a fraction. Sounds emerged from the female’s lips – the nemesor probed his memory banks and found the recall of the same harmonics. They had been sung on the day the first humans had been terminated on this desolate world, and now they were echoing here.

Khaygis disliked the noise. He wanted it silenced.

The nemesor drew back his gauntlet and conjured a globe of green flame, moulding it with the care of an artisan, coiling it to maximise the kill power of the molecular inferno; but in the next instant his concentration was broken by a strident, noiseless warning that struck at him from out of nowhere. The fire guttered and ebbed.

An alarm cried in Khaygis's machine-mind. Resonating instantly down the quantum linkages of the necron communication network, a sudden cacophony of alerts were being broadcast to him from the automated systems up on the Obsidian Moon. He looked up on reflex, glaring out through the fallen roof of the chapel and into the sky. The satellite was visible up there, a pale ghost of visible light, but seen through necron eyes, in frequencies of radiation and energy, ripples of deadly invisible force shimmered all around it.

The core. The warnings screamed at him. *Something was amiss in the singularity core.*

He swung back towards the human female, for the first time deigning to grace her with words in her own tongue. 'What have you done?'

She answered by firing at him, laying two close-range bolt impacts in his torso. Khaygis howled at the pain-analogue feedback through his synthetic nerves and rushed at her. Before the woman could disengage, the nemesor was on her, and he closed the talons of the fire gauntlet around her bolt pistol and the fingers that held it.

Bright flame surged, enveloping the weapon and the human's armoured hand. The ancient metals of the bolt pistol grew white-hot in an instant, and the woman grunted in pain, struggling to free herself.

Khaygis intensified the fire and the gun exploded, the last rounds in the near-empty magazine combusting with the heat of it. The human screamed and fell, her arm now ending at the bloody stump of an elbow, her chest and face peppered with fragmentation wounds. The nemesor's gauntlet was damaged, and it jerked as the motivators within it malfunctioned. He was unconcerned, however. All that mattered was making the human suffer.

Before she could recover, Khaygis found her fallen sword and broke it in two with a stamp of his foot. She managed to scramble to her feet, cursing him.

He gave her the grace of another arrow in the chest, the kinetic force of the dart impact throwing her over the battlements of the hovering Monolith. She clattered into the rubble below, leaving trails of blood across the broken stone.

Bolt-shells cracked off the black stone crenels around him, but he paid them no heed. The clarion of alarms in his thoughts was growing louder and more insistent by the second, and he struggled to maintain his focus. The nemesor's mind needed to be here in the battle-zone, not torn between this place and the unfolding situation in the orbital complex.

He leapt down from his vantage point and went after the human commander on foot. To kill her in brutal fashion would break the will of her troops to fight on, and the necrons would be able to complete their cull of this place swiftly. This time, it would be done correctly, and with thoroughness.

Khaygis sent a meme-signal back through the network as he advanced on the injured woman, a terse command to the cryptek to deal with any human infestation on the Obsidian Moon. A null response returned to him, and the nemesor immediately knew that Ossuar's functions had been terminally halted. *The fool had let them destroy him.* Had the moment not been so critical, Khaygis might have been amused by the irony of the event.

Command trains broadcast from the tomb complex inside the moon were breaking down, and the sensor relays from the central nexus were losing parity. The irritating, galling tenacity of the humans drew out what little emotion Khaygis still retained, and fury rose in his mind-frame.

With a silent summons, the nemesor sent a directive into the necron thought-web, ordering every active unit within the complex to disembark immediately. He sensed the dimensional corridor housed in the heart of his Monolith as it became active, opening a pathway between the shimmering gateway to the portals within the tombs. Sickly light splashed over the ruins and fallen pillars as Khaygis stalked forwards through a hail of weapons fire, finding his quarry slumped against the base of a wide stone altar. The alien glow framed him, casting a sharp-edged shadow over the woman.

Several of the great tapestries still hanging along the walls of the chapel had caught fire, and the thick cloth burned with a cloying smoke that churned about the chamber, mingling with the acrid tang of cordite discharges, the windblown sand and the ashes of the burnt dead.

Verity stood and fought with the Battle Sisters as best she could, in the shadow of Canoness Sepherina's single combat with the necron general. But to her untrained eyes, the fight seemed like anarchy and she had

nowhere to focus her righteous anger. The smoke smothered her and robbed the hospitaller of her momentum. She became lost in the melee.

She met Sisters and necrons in equal measure, staying out of the way of the Sororitas, daring to engage marching warriors and scuttling scarabs where she could. A half-melted immortal tried to cut her open with the war-blades clustered around the barrel of its gauss blaster, and she shot back with the gun the canoness had gifted to her. Verity was keenly aware of her dwindling stock of shells, and she thought of the single loose round she had hidden in the pocket of her duty armour.

The immortal was sluggish, half its motivators damaged by melta blasts, but it retained the relentless manner of its kind, resolutely limping after her. Too late, the hospitaller realised the alien machine had been trying to herd her, backing her up towards the thrumming shape of the Monolith. Panic gripped Verity, and she expended all the rounds in the bolt pistol's magazine. By the grace of the God-Emperor, the necron tottered – and fell. Lightning crackled over its twitching form, and it gave out the now-familiar death shriek as a cowl of energy reclaimed it. The flash of light seared Verity's retinas and she spun away, eyes watering.

A shape trailing blood tumbled from above and crashed to the stones. She heard the crunch of cracked ceramite and broken bones at the point of impact.

Surprise hit Verity like an icy wave as she came to the fallen woman's side and saw Sepherina's face there, beneath a mask of blood. The hospitaller's training took over and she activated her medicae glove, injecting the canoness with a cocktail of drugs designed to keep the woman alive.

Sepherina gasped and her back arched as the medicine-load shocked her back to full awareness. 'Nursemaid...' she said thickly. 'It's not over yet.'

'I know,' Verity told her, and put her shoulder under the canoness's weight. It was a great effort to lift the woman and her heavy armour back to her feet, but the hospitaller managed it. Together, they staggered and stumbled away. Sepherina was dazed, her eyes unfocussed. Verity knew the signs; the woman had suffered severe loss of blood and concussion. She had to get her to safety.

But battle raged all around them. Nowhere on Sanctuary 101 was safe now.

'It comes,' Sepherina managed.

Verity heard the crunch of iron-clawed feet on broken stone, and she dared to glance over her shoulder. A gaunt, spindly figure was casting around, nothing but an angular shadow made of rods.

The canoness gave her a shove and pushed away. 'Stand aside,' she growled, the effort hard on her. 'I will not meet my final enemy upon your shoulders.'

The necron commander stalked through the wreathes of smoke, its complete focus now on Sepherina. Behind it, other tall forms were gathering, making their last advance towards the altar. Verity backed away, fumbling at her pockets. She was suddenly very aware of the tempo of the battle; the gunfire and the cries of the wounded were tailing off, the air humming with the resonance of the Monolith's anti-gravs. At last, Verity found her bolt shell, and with trembling hands, she loaded it into the pistol.

The xenos heard the snap of the breech locking closed and turned its malignant gaze on her for a moment. She froze. Verity saw nothing in those soulless, glowing eyes that could connect to any human experience. It was not the blank gaze of an animal predator, not the madness of a witch or the ruined of mind. It was *alien*, in the ultimate sense of the word.

It twitched, as if in reaction to some distant sound only it could hear. Then, with cold dismissal, it turned away again, ignoring her in favour of its target.

'Come, then,' Sepherina called, pain threading through her voice. 'Bring your army to the foot of my Saint and my God. Do what you must, creature, but know their eternal wrath will find you!'

New, unearthly light blazed across the chamber, illuminating the necrons gathering around them. The watery glow spilled from the strange doorway in the Monolith's face, and Verity knew what it meant. More of them were coming. If an army had not been enough, there would soon be a swarm, a multitude of machine-life overwhelming everything human on this blighted world.

If someone comes to seek us, as we sought those who perished before, Verity thought, they will find no trace. The xenos will leave nothing but dust.

In the haze, new shapes formed out of the glowing portal, but they moved differently, in random and chaotic paths, running as if the Ruinous Powers themselves were at their heels. Cloaks trailed behind them, revealing night-black power armour and human faces.

‘Miriya?’ Her friend’s name fell from Verity’s lips in disbelief. She had counted the Battle Sister lost, and all her squad along with her.

And then, high in the sky, a new star was born and died in a blinding pulse of light.

The nemesor had barely processed the datum of the new transit when the collapse event entered its terminal phase. Even within a synthetic intellect capable of collating information at near light-velocity, he was unable to parse all the conflicting streams of sensor data at once.

The reinforcements he had called for did not arrive. Instead of triarch praetorians, more of the foul humans spilled through the dimension corridor he had opened to the tomb complex. In that instant, he understood the meaning of *hate* again. The organics were like the viral codes used by some of the more honourless necrontyr dynasts, endlessly replicating, hiding and striking, hitting and fading, seemingly impossible to eradicate. And now Khaygis understood what had transpired inside the Obsidian Moon. Ossuar’s failings had been the doorway to let these parasites into their realm. His laxity had allowed them to steal the scroll-tool and turn it to their advantage.

If only he had killed them all this would not have come to be!

But the matter of the humans was dwarfed by the magnitude of what they had done to the Sautekh’s prize, the complex taken by force of arms from the Atun Dynasty. Khaygis did not for one nanosecond consider the fact that his eagerness to hammer the humans into the sands had left the singularity core underprotected. He was incapable of conceiving of an error on his part. The nemesor was the perfect soldier; his past had been erased and he had been built anew in gleaming steel form. A perfect reflection of his infallibility. He did not experience shock or surprise, but he kindled the newfound hate as he looked up into the Kaviran sky.

The shrieking alarms fed him the last few instants of the complex’s existence, deluging him in reams of data that showed the moment in flawless detail. Every necron, from the lowliest of scarabs maintaining the tombs to the exalted lordship of Great Imotekh himself, carried in their braincase a communion link. The device allowed signalling over near-infinite distances, the ability to transmit data instantly through the arcane control of quantum entanglement phenomena.

Khaygis knew of some lesser species that spoke of ethereal cords connecting their physical forms in the real world with their spiritual ones in the phantasmal. That was idiocy, of course, but the Stargods had gifted the necrontyr with many technologies when they embraced biotransference, and this link was one of them, a near-literal expression of that mystical ideal. Each necron was connected in part or in whole to an invisible network that spanned the galaxy, broken only by lines of dynasty and fealty. When their physical structures suffered critical levels of damage, it was the quantum link that was the means by which their digital consciousness and their damaged forms were reeled back to the closest World Engine or Tomb Planet.

And through that link, the nemesor watched the Obsidian Moon die.

The singularity core, so dutifully maintained by the worker-drones of the Atun since the age of the Great Sleep, distorted and fractured. For one infinite second, the space-time event concealed within it was exposed as the electromagnetic barriers that surrounded it were broken. Mass from this reality was acted upon by gravitation akin to that at the event horizon of a black hole, and the orbiting complex was torn inside out by the collapsar in its heart.

But the effect could not sustain itself. It was unnatural, not the product of a sun’s slow death and fall to darkness. It had been forced into existence, the rules of nature twisted violently by the necrontyr who had built it with Stargod knowledge so many millennia ago. Now, reality wanted it expunged, and it crushed the anomaly. Massive sheets of radiation sloughed off the crumbling singularity, ripping into the exospheric layers of the colony world’s atmosphere, dragging on the planet’s heavy iron core with sudden gravitation. It did not die quietly, lashing out with such force that Sanctuary 101’s orbit was shifted by several degrees.

Then the Moon was gone, falling into a pit of itself, imploding. Violent blasts of light marked the last expenditures of energy as the vast complex – with its billions of slumbering soldiers, its mammoth storehouses of weapons, battlecraft, its databanks packed with ancient knowledge – was utterly obliterated.

Khaygis felt a terrible emptiness open up in his thought-space as all the quantum filaments binding him back to the complex were suddenly severed. He saw it happening all around him, every necron losing their connection to their point of origin. In the web of the network, the phantom cords that bound them were flailing in the void, severed and bleeding.

Too late the nemesor realised what would come next. The torn dimensional links had nowhere to go, nothing to anchor themselves upon. With no terminus, the communion links entered a destructive feedback loop. The single driving impetus of the connection – to never be broken, to never allow a necron to truly *die* –overwhelmed all other functions of his army.

Like a wave of lightning, a cascade of green sparks advanced over the torsos of each necron on the planet's surface, every warrior and war machine suddenly caught in the wake. The dead-man's switch in their heads tripped, and the nemesor's horde began to phase out, sucked into a dimensional non-space that existed in the voids between realities.

As one, the necrons emitted the same piercing death cry, unable to stop themselves from being dragged into the undertow of the moon's destruction. Khaygis struck out, reeling from the effects. He was aware of other high-level warfighters trying to resist the compulsion of dissolution, the lychguards trying desperately to rewrite their own mind-code to ignore the recall order, failing and vanishing in flames.

Khaygis saw his command Monolith consumed by a shrieking bolus of jade fire, and watched his phalanx of immortals shudder into their own personal storms of self-destruction. He would not fall like this. *He could not.* He was chosen of the Stormlord, soldier of Eternity, the nemesor and meatkiller.

The necron general reached into his own digital matrix and found the compulsion-code dragging at him, begging him to submit to the recall command. An ordinary necron, one left after biotransference without the higher mental functions of a high born, would never have been able to hold it off – but Khaygis did. He perceived the communion links stretching away into the void, at last finding some unknown Tomb World hundreds of light years away. But he would not go, not yet. He could not. There was still a deed to be done.

'How does it taste, xenos?' spat the human commander, sensing his distress. His optic sensors penetrated her armour and her flesh. Her wounds were so grave she could not even rise to offer challenge to him. All that was left to her was to goad him with words, as useless as that was. The female nodded towards the halo of remains in the sky, the flecks of debris already catching fire as they entered the planet's atmosphere. 'My Sisters broke open your spider nest, shattered it! We have killed you! This is the God-Emperor's will!'

Khaygis set his emotive-emulation of anger into a repeat cycle and allowed it to shiver through him. He unshackled his logic blocks and let himself *feel* for the first time in aeons 'We are necrontyr,' buzzed the nemesor, 'We are undeath.' He raised up his damaged gauntlet and brought forth the fires. 'And this galaxy belongs to us, not the corpses that you worship.'

'No!' The scream distracted him from the moment of execution. The nemesor glimpsed the other female, the ineffectual one reeking of panic and fear-sweat, daring to raise a weapon towards him. A gunshot rang out and the bolt shell slammed into Khaygis's chest, shattering the chains of ornate rank and high office dangling about his metallic neck.

He edited the pain-sense out of his experience, deleting it along with the recall command string. All around him, his soldiers were disintegrating or falling useless, rendered broken by the destructive meddling of these human animals. Fire rose all around, casting a hellish glow over his gleaming steel epidermis.

It was then that Khaygis saw the organiforms had surrounded him. The pitiful remnants of the human defenders, the females in their crude powered battle armour with their primitive ballistic firearms. All of them had hate in their eyes, oceans of it drawn up from fathomless depths of fanaticism. The nemesor understood what that was, now he had allowed himself to experience the same thing. It only confirmed what he had always believed: that flesh was worthless, a lesser thing that infested space like a disease. They had cursed him with their malaise, just as they had the foolish, arrogant cryptek.

A moment before, and the war had been in the necrons' favour, but now his army were ghosts and it was Khaygis who found himself overmatched. Some distant part of his long-dead flesh-self wondered if this was the Stargods exacting their payment from him, reaching up from the grave for the betrayals of the necrontyr.

He recognised one of the organics, a female with a scarred face, black hair and a heavy, bladed weapon in her grip. 'I am undeath,' he told her, glaring at the woman and her cohorts drew into a ring around him.

'We will put that to the test,' said the Battle Sister, and without a word of command, all the humans

came in to attack the nemesor at once. He gave them fire and arrows in return, but like his soldiers, they were ceaseless and fought as if they were beyond pain and injury. They were fuelled by madness, by faith, by something the xenos could never quantify.

With blades and war-axes, with clubs and stones torn up from the fallen masonry all around, they fell upon Khaygis and destroyed him.



EPILOGUE

‘Once, a Novice Cantus came to me, troubled and uncertain. A slip of a girl, only a few strides down the eternal path leading her to the Golden Throne. She asked me a question. She asked me how we can ever truly understand what faith is.’ The words carried in the cool night air. *‘I told her that there is no coin to measure what we feel in our hearts. There are no scales upon which we might weigh the faith of one woman against another. There is only duty and blood. There are only deeds and words. There is—’*

Lightning flashed in the clouded sky and deep thunder growled, as a spear of yellow sunfire lashed down from high above and struck a point far distant, out in the desert. A low rumble echoed over the landscape as the lance barrages fell from orbit.

As the echo faded, the reading continued. *‘There is only the service to the God-Emperor, and the price that demands from each Sister can only be known by Him. But know that whatever fears must be faced, whatever hardships endured, that price is forever worth its full cost.’*

With great reverence, Sister Miriya closed the cover of *The Hammer and Anvil*, and bowed to the book. She handed it to Pandora, who took it and wrapped the holy volume in a silk shroud. It was unusual that a woman of only a Sister Militant’s rank be allowed to speak in such a ceremony, but the memorial service had been at the express command of the canoness, and she had ordered it so.

Sepherina nodded from across the memorial garden, standing stiffly among the lines of tiny statues, cradling her ruined arm. She was still recovering from her fight with the necron general, and it would be many months before she was fully healed. Now that the starship *Tybalt* had returned with a support fleet from the Seltheaus system, there had been talk that she might be taken off-planet, to a world with a better valetudinarium, but Miriya knew better. Sepherina would never leave Sanctuary 101 again. She had sworn it so among the ruins of the Great Chapel on the day they had endured the necron invasion, sworn it on the names of all the dead.

Another streak of fire punched through the cloudbase and on the horizon there was a smoky flash as a far-off mesa was obliterated. The Imperial Navy had taken to the task of erasing all trace of the xenos from the outpost with lethal precision, bombarding every site in Adept Ferren’s records from low orbit with lance cannons and megalaser salvos. The pulverised rock kicked up into the atmosphere would forever alter the ecology of the planet, but it was a small price to pay to expunge the necron taint.

In the weeks that followed what the women were now calling ‘the Second Battle of Sanctuary 101’, survival had been difficult. Only a handful of them had remained, and some died from their wounds as they waited for rescue. But as their creed commanded, the Sororitas endured. *This was the full cost.*

Transports came with new cohorts of Battle Sisters, and the cycle began again. The daughters of Saint Katherine did not give up their ground. They had come to this world to rebuild, and they would do so. To conscience anything else was to admit weakness.

Others came, too. Delegations from the Adeptus Mechanicus in search of Tegas and Ferren, who feigned horror at the so-called ‘unauthorised works’ being undertaken by their adepts, as if they knew nothing of them. Miriya had been there when those men had arrived. Sepherina did not even allow them to step off the ramp of their shuttlecraft. She told them to turn around and return to Mars. She invoked ancient rules and

declared Sanctuary 101 to be *Mausoleum Valorum* – a war grave world. She told them that nothing on this planet belonged to them, and if they ever dared to come grubbing in its sands again, the Order of Our Martyred Lady would see them all die for it.

The Mechanicus were not the only ones. It was rumoured that stealth craft from the Ordo Xenos – perhaps even the personal ship of Inquisitor Hoth himself – had passed close by and gone on their way, unwilling to test the patience of the Sisterhood any further.

A single, final lance beam flickered, casting white light over the faces of the assembled Battle Sisters, and the low rumble washed across the tumbledown walls of the convent. The replacement workgangs had been ordered to cease their reconstruction while the ceremony was taking place.

It was the last deed, the closing of the book on the horrors that had happened here. Nothing of the alien enemy was to remain. Every fragmentary scrap of necron metal that had been left behind, even the ink-black voidblade wielded by poor Decima, all had been loaded into a cargo pod and shot into the Kaviran sun under the eyes of the Sisters.

Sister Verity had been the one to pull the lever that sent that pod into the star. It was right and fitting for the task to fall to her, as the capsule contained something of far greater importance than alien debris. Decima's body, forever marred by the machine-implants that had been forced upon her, was buried in the solar fires. There, her flesh would find liberation to join her soul at the God-Emperor's side.

Miriya looked down at the votive statuette before her. Like many of the memorial stones, it had been damaged in the fighting, but the names etched upon each one were still clearly visible, and the eternal lights burning inside them glowed strong. Decima's name had been joined by others – Imogen, Thalassa, Xanthe and Kora, and many more. She looked up and searched the faces of the women around her. Ananke and Danae both gave her solemn nods in return; Pandora was silent in her role as warden of the book; her steadfast kindred Cassandra and Isabel inclining their heads in a semblance of salute to their former commander; and Verity, who stood unafraid to present her tears of sorrow, showed her friend a rueful smile. Miriya gave silent thanks to the Golden Throne for preserving their lives along with hers.

So many of her Sisters had fed the sands of this remote world with their blood, and why? For faith? Could such a prize be worth that sacrifice?

That price is forever worth its full cost. Saint Katherine's words echoed in her thoughts. 'Aye,' she whispered to herself. 'It is.'

Sepherina spoke. 'I told you all when we came to this place that the God-Emperor's Light has never left this world, that the breath of His divinity never ceased. I did not lie to you then.' She looked around, taking them all with the sweep of her remaining hand. 'That we are here is that truth made real. That we persist is proof.' The canoness bowed to the memorial stones, concluding the ceremony with the motion. 'We endure through our faith. We ever will.'

Miriya remained as the others filed away from the garden. They all had tasks to occupy them, but something made the Battle Sister dwell a little longer.

'We both came here for the same reason,' said a voice. She did not turn as Verity walked up to stand beside her, before the flickering lights. 'To seek peace.'

'The God-Emperor had other plans.'

A long moment passed before the hospitaller spoke again. 'I had doubts, Sister,' she said. 'After Neva, after my dearest Lethe's death and all that followed... I had hoped this mission of reconsecration would give me time to think.'

'And did it?'

Verity nodded. 'I began to wonder if my faith was still strong.'

Miriya sighed. 'You were not alone in that. For a time, I feared that I would never be able to serve the Church again, as I was meant to.'

'As a warrior?'

'As a soldier of faith. It is not the taste of blood that I need, Verity, though for a time I believed it might be so. It is the knowledge that I strive to fight the enemies of humanity and our creed.' She looked down at Decima's memorial. 'I was reminded of the price and the duty. The oath we give cannot be broken. Decima proved that.'

'A Sister's faith never perishes,' said Verity, quoting the Saint's words. She was silent again for a while. 'Do you think... that we have beaten them?'

'The necrontyr?' The Battle Sister's eyes narrowed. 'On this world, aye. But there will always be other worlds. And if need be, I will kill those enemies again.' Miriya turned away and looked up at the dark sky. 'We should have died here, Sister. All of us. Why do we live now? Because of a fluke of battle? The hubris of the alien enemy?'

'Because the God-Emperor wills it?' offered the hospitaller. 'That is what the preachers would say.' She took a breath. 'It fills me with sorrow that Decima did not live to see this day.'

The Sororitas watched as a break in the clouds revealed a scattering of evening stars beyond them. She found herself searching for the one that Sepherina had showed them on their arrival, the light of Sol and Holy Terra.

'She had faith,' Miriya told Verity. 'As do we. And that will always be enough.'

Acknowledgments

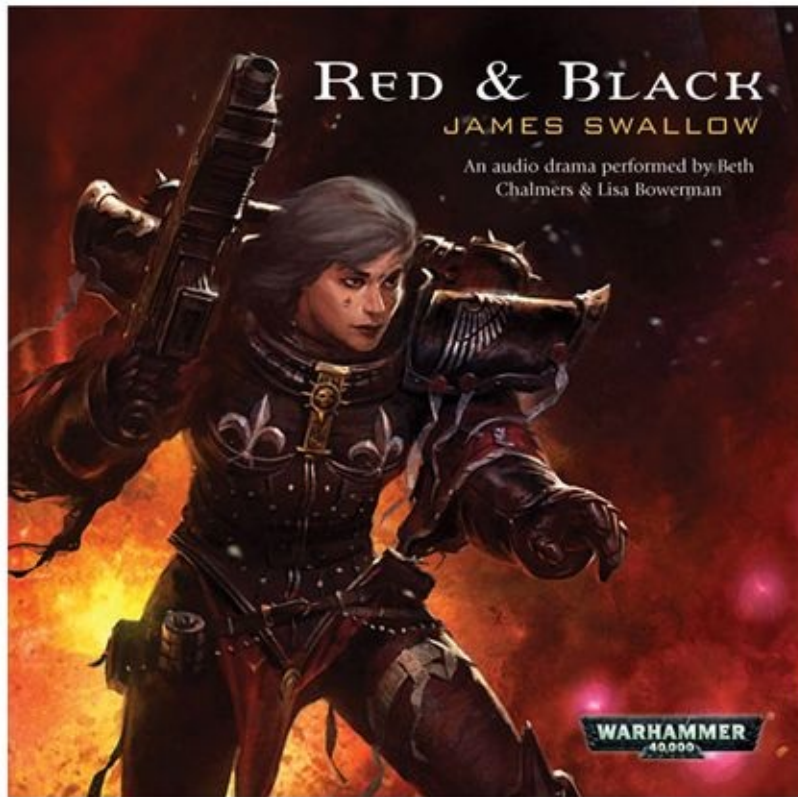
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When a mysterious messenger contacts the Orders Militant, Celestian Miriya must travel to Hollos and pass judgement on the world. Will she find a world embracing the Emperor's truth or one in need of cleansing? Her decision will liberate or condemn an entire planet.

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